



# MODERNISM: CONCRETE NATION BUILDING

by Matthew Maganga

“Nation building”—a well-known yet very mutable term. A state conceptualizes and seeks to construct a national identity with methods that encompass both the theoretical together with the more concrete and practical. Enter the modernist architectural project, an architectural style that swept the world, one deeply entangled with colonialism, capitalism, and liberation—contemporaneously. Modernist government commissions for architects were lucrative, headed at times by more obscure architects, and at other instances by modernist titans.

Governments looked to modernism to chart new paths, sometimes to make the most of new technologies, or to signal the beginnings of a postcolonial age. Concrete—rough, tactile, affordable—became ubiquitous in modernist societies, with architects caressing and refining the material to design buildings monumental in scale. From South America to Asia to Africa, institution building from the mid-20th century was intertwined with the modernist rationale, existing as markers of neutrality, but more frequently as symbols of nationalist pride.

In Africa, the decolonization period across a large number of African countries in the 1960s was enmeshed with modernist state architecture. Governments saw the style fit for an independent era, and reached out to European architects who had established themselves on the African continent, such as French architect Henri Chomette or the English duo Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. On the other hand, this was also the period when less-established architects were able to secure commissions for state projects—as in the cases of Abdel Moneim Mustafa in Sudan and Anthony Almeida in Tanzania. Governments, however, endeavoring to create sweeping statements of new identities, did favor turning to the principal architects of the modernist canon, such as in the Indian and Brazilian cities of Chandigarh and Brasília.

In 1947, India gained independence, a development that saw the territory divided into two—the predominantly Muslim state of Pakistan and the mostly Hindu state of the Republic of India. This partitioning was a violent event, as ethnic tensions caused casualties and the displacement of millions. People residing in the former British state of Punjab were knotted in this detachment, as Punjab’s Muslim population migrated to Pakistan’s land of West Punjab, while 4.5 million Sikhs and Hindus moved to East Punjab, now part of India. The established city of Lahore thus became West Punjab’s capital, while East Punjab, lacking a city of similar stature, needed,

in the eyes of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, a new capital city built from scratch: Chandigarh.

From the aesthetic to the programmatic level, Chandigarh bears the identity of the seminal Le Corbusier—who in effect attempted to synthesize the culmination of his architectural manifesto in this environment. Following the departure of American planner Albert Mayer, Le Corbusier was appointed by Nehru to be the architect and planner for the new capital city. It was a match made in heaven. Here was an architect obsessed with building for the city of tomorrow. And here was a prime minister envisioning the construction of a city that would be an “expression of the nation’s faith in the future.” Chandigarh’s governmental structures—placed in an area named the Chandigarh Capitol Complex—are the result of this optimistic dream, visualized by a postcolonial state looking to turn its back on two centuries of colonial domination.

In Chandigarh’s subtropical context, brutalism found a home. Imposing, monumental, and stately, this government compound is arguably the most explicit manifestation of Chandigarh’s aim to become an integral part of a modernized India. The Palace of Justice, home to the High Court, features colorful pylons in the grand entrance hall, the rectilinear interspersed with the organic, and a building designed to be forward facing. The Secretariat Building is a concrete slab, its heavy, 804-foot-long (254 meters) facade softened by square balcony perforations. The Palace of Assembly is sculptural, a halved concrete cylinder gently resting on punctured concrete walls. The goal of the Secretariat Building was to revolutionize the modern office structure, and the Palace of Justice was the result of structural innovation, featuring the climate-responsive inclusion of brise-soleils and rainwater harvesting. At the Palace of Assembly, the door to the assembly chamber depicts a Nehru-consulted, Corbusier-designed stylized mural of what was contemporary India. These three landmarks are very much in spatial and visual conversation with one another, with brutalism seen as the appropriate stylistic choice that aimed to establish Chandigarh as a national, not only a regional, city.

In 41 hectic months, from 1956 to 1960, the city of Brasília in Brazil’s geographic center was built. This was not a post-independence undertaking, but rather the fulfillment of a campaign pledge by the newly elected President, Juscelino Kubitschek. Nevertheless, in a similar vein to Chandigarh, it was planned as a progressive modernist utopia, where the difficult colonial legacies and informal settlements of the coastal →





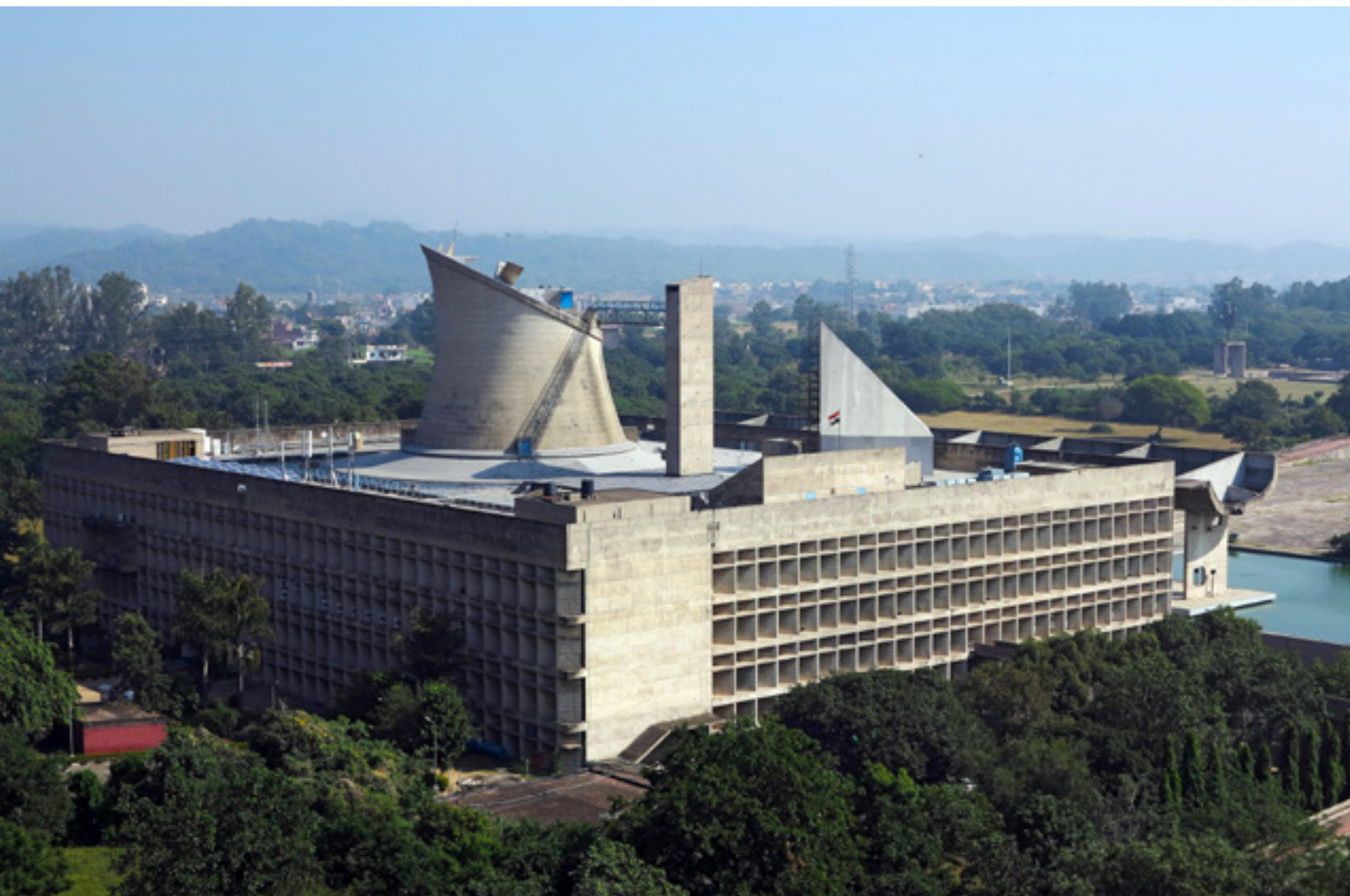
**INSTITUTION BUILDING WAS INTERTWINED WITH THE MODERNIST RATIONALE, EXISTING AS MARKERS OF NEUTRALITY, BUT MORE FREQUENTLY, AS SYMBOLS OF NATIONALIST PRIDE.**

capital Rio de Janeiro would be done away with by building a new capital formed from scratch. The chief architect was Oscar Niemeyer, a figurehead of the modernist movement who was part of the jury that selected his former mentor, Lúcio Costa, as planner. Niemeyer designed commercial, residential, and government buildings for the futuristic Brasília, a city that, from an aerial vantage point, roughly resembled an airplane. Among these government buildings were the presidential residence (Alvorada Palace), the president's official workplace (Planalto Palace), the Supreme Federal Court, and the National Congress of Brazil.

There are common visual threads that tie these buildings together, with each seeking to outline Kubitschek's mantra of Brasília as the "dawn" of a "new day" for Brazil. The Planalto Palace is striking but has a certain lightness to its form; this approach is mirrored in the simplicity present in the articulation of Alvorada Palace. Almost-floating marble columns that support the white concrete roof interrupt the glass facade in these buildings. The National Congress is more intimidating, with twin 27-story towers and two cupolas. A longitudinal facade that rests on thin plinths reduces this heaviness. Niemeyer's Brazilian modernism in Brasília was the outcome of the "Plano de Metas"—a vision to accelerate economic growth through, among other elements, the development of light industry. The dynamic forms of Brasília's governmental icons, such as the Alvorada Palace, Planalto Palace, and the National Congress, are very much the concrete results of a modernist titan in his prime, but also the results of an age of national economic optimism.

Alternatively, also in Brazil, there is also a modernism borne less out of governmental directives and more out of the individual will of the architect. Lina Bo Bardi's 1968 São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) is one such example. Upon commissioning the architect, the local legislature instituted a democratizing requirement for the art museum: the scenic views from the site to the lower-lying parts of the city needed to be maintained. But even with requirements like this, cultural sites such as art museums can easily lend themselves to becoming elitist venues. MASP's ground level was thus left open, creating a publicly accessible, all-purpose communal space. The structure itself was elevated 26 feet (8 meters) above ground, anchored by thick red pillars. Whereas Niemeyer's Brasília was very much a national project, MASP was a project built independent of the state, with Brazil's political status as a military dictatorship meaning that Bo Bardi and her husband, →





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a frequent collaborator, sought to self-start larger cultural objectives, which included buildings such as MASP.

MASP—with its paintings hung on glass panels rather than walls—was very much a modernist, nation-building project not comprehensively steered by the government, but rather guided instead by Bo Bardi's ethos that a successful building is one populated by everyday people and a deeply engaged community. A comparative analysis of state-commissioned modernist projects versus privately initiated projects is a difficult affair. What is evident, however, is that even governmental commissions, often seen as having an air of permanence, can be fickle as a consequence of political developments. Niemeyer would have likely added to Brasília's institutional footprint immediately following

the city's inauguration in 1960, but the military coup of 1964 meant that it would be years before he would build again in the capital.

What are the legacies of these tropical modernist structures and ways of thought? Assessing these buildings decades later takes us on a varied route, where Brasília's government buildings still function relatively well but Brasília's overall viability as a working city is questioned. Or, furthermore, how the city of Chandigarh continues to be the subject of fierce debate, as Le Corbusier's buildings are appraised for a 21st-century India. It also takes us through discussions on the legacy of the architects involved in these projects, how these developments further established their presence in the global canon, or how for others it launched their career. Lina Bo Bardi's MASP sits in her oeuvre as one of her most significant and radical commissions. Niemeyer's work in Brasília—partly due to the symbiosis between his roles as city planner and architect—is seen as defining his portfolio. Le Corbusier's Chandigarh Capitol Complex can be viewed as the last of his truly expansive projects, but it was a vision supervised by Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi, who would later go on to design the who's-who of India's modernist landmarks, including Ahmedabad's Tagore Hall and Bangalore's Indian Institute of Management.

Gestural, evocative, majestic, and rarely dull, the concrete structures that came to establish the style loosely defined as tropical modernism were frequently conceptions of the state—bold formulations toward wider societal aims. □

[above] Jawaharlal Nehru hoped to establish Chandigarh as a national city. [opposite] The concrete columns of Itamaraty Palace shimmer in the reflecting pool.

