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CITIES

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Life in the City

A documentary by two Swiss filmmakers, *Living with Le Corbusier*, discusses the blueprint of Chandigarh and the relationship between architecture and society.



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It was in 2015 when photographer and filmmaker Thomas Karrer, and professor in arts and scenographer Karin Bucher visited Chandigarh for the first time from Trogen in Switzerland, where they live and work in a redeveloped hospital. The two were impressed by the integrity, aesthetics and sculptural appeal of Chandigarh, from the layout of the streets to the houses, colour and design of the government district, public spaces and the green areas. Both, Karrer and Bucher, felt it could be a model for how people live together, how communities are formed

and what a good life could be.

“Few Swiss know about Chandigarh, though the portrait of Le Corbusier decorates our 10 Franc banknote. The back of the note has the Secretariat built in 1958 in Chandigarh. A conversation around it, always arouses curiosity and raises controversial opinions. Travel guides describe Chandigarh as a last-ditch attempt to colonise India. In architectural circles, Chandigarh is controversial and is described as concrete poured into a vision that is a failure for everyday life, but the inhabitants lovingly call their Chandigarh, ‘The City Beautiful’,” says Bucher.

To pursue these questions, Karrer and Bucher travelled in 2016 to Chandigarh again – this time with a camera to conduct a short research for their film. “As ambiguous as Chandigarh is perceived today, the city has raised a number of questions. We wanted answers and the idea of the documentary took shape,” says Karrer, who has made several films and is currently working on the documentary *Between Worlds*, about mind healing in Switzerland.

With an artist-in-residence grant from Appenzell Ausserrhodenn in Switzerland, the duo probed how Chandigarh is different from other Indian cities.

“The courage, vision and attitude behind the planning are still noticeable today. As part of our research, script and shooting, we strived to find answers to questions like have the ideas of Le Corbusier to form a new society become real? What remains from Le Corbusier’s vision after 70 years? Which ideas have proven to be worthy, which ones haven’t? Can cultures meet, enrich and inspire each other for further development? Can a European architect build in a sensible way for India?” says Bucher, who has worked on diverse site-specific theatre projects, installations, audio, photo and videos.

The film, share the two, is meant for a culturally-interested public, which wants to discuss the relationship of architecture with society and individuals. According to statistics, 50 per cent of the world’s population lives in urban areas and by 2050 this will increase to 80 per cent. The filmmakers are interested in finding answers to several questions – How modern cities repel human interaction? How can we

build cities in a way that takes human needs for inclusion and intimacy into account. How human beings use the streets, how they walk, see, rest, meet and interact? The filmmakers say they are interested in people, more than buildings. They aspire to find out what constitutes the soul of Chandigarh.

Bucher and Karrer describe Chandigarh as a vibrant movie set. Over numerous months, they have interacted with people from various walks of life, gathering many cinematic stories. They have filmed them at work, life in the city, perception of their personal urban geography and of their memories of places. The protagonists are people who were born in Chandigarh or who live here and have seen it develop. They come from different social backgrounds – from artists to a fine art primary school teacher, a student of art and a professor of architecture, an urban activist, a theater professor, a shop owner, a tourist guide – and are people who can talk about the master plan and Le Corbusier's ideas.

The filmmakers also address the fact that Chandigarh now has little space for low-income groups, and how it has grown far beyond the originally planned population size to accommodate 1.2 million inhabitants, pushing infrastructure to its limits. There are many questions for the future: traffic and transport, waste, population, chaotic outskirts, how should the surroundings of Chandigarh develop, what does the government do and how they involve the city residents to make them feel part of the city? "To find answers to all these questions, people should know the spirit of the town; only then can it grow and change without losing his soul," state the duo.