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Area Development Plans: Revisiting “Palimpsest Ideation”

A Special Case of the Government Press, Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT

The idea of Smart City defies segregation of scale; as universally as it impacts the territorial setting, it does on the whole region and vice versa. Evaluating the palette of proposals for one such area development plan under the Smart City Plan Chandigarh and the juxtaposed factors that govern the proposals; the paper evaluates that how the basic concept of a forthcoming area development plan may be framed so as to bring about a holistic development of the city of Chandigarh and might prove to be a prototype for such corners in the city.

Focusing on the newly acquired UNESCO status of Chandigarh, the paper further evaluates the case of the Government Press, a heritage structure by Architect Maxwell Fry and the plethora of premises; which could ideally govern its redesign for betterment under the Smart City Plan. The paper further is suggestive of a “palimpsest ideation” for all such projects to allow in-depth analysis of factors that encompass design prompts to any development plan.

Keywords: Area Development, Urban Transformation, Smart City, Chandigarh, Madhya Marg.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Pal-imp-sest: a parchment or tablet, reused after earlier writing has been erased”
(Oxford Dictionary)

The Concept of Palimpsest Ideation

The palimpsest architecture finds close connects with the concept of regeneration, as its deep-rooted philosophy of superimposition closely relates to how cities are modified and its architecture is repurposed.

Cities, old or new have their collective memories and if these collective memories can be fused with each other whilst maintaining integrity of their individual values; such a regeneration would be most suitable to further conservation of heritage. The idea of keeping the story of a place alive through the ideating an Urban Palimpsest is not new and is being widely practiced on a conceptual and digital level. The paper discusses; Palimpsest ideation on a conceptual level relevant to the project of the Government Press Chandigarh, and a more futuristic technology to help analyze the Conceptual palimpsest.

Historical Urban Landscape-Government Press

The smart city plan of Chandigarh, seemingly has given leverage to two major aspects, one being the Materiality and the other Land Use; apart from the use of technology to make the city “smarter”. The Master plan of Chandigarh 2031 (Administration, n.d.) shows a mixed-use development along the Vikas Marg. Such an experimental development may result in a boon or a bane for the character of Chandigarh. Promoting the same, is the greening of the concrete Plaza of Sector 17, to encourage pedestrians in hot summer months.

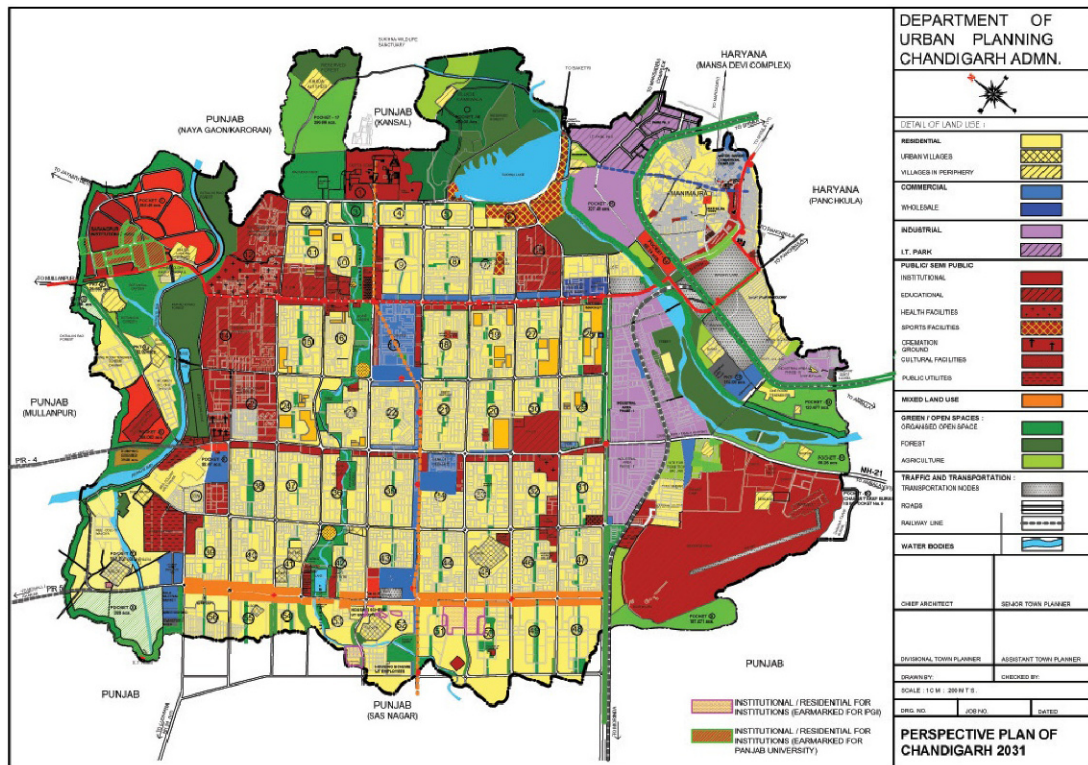


Figure 1: Shows the change of Land use as proposed alongside the Vikas Marg (lower marking) as compared to the existing character of singular use as office or Commercial along the fast traffic V2s (Source: Chandigarh Master Plan 2031)

Such projects prompt the need for well-deliberated decisions and strong process of ideation, keeping in mind the newly acquired UNESCO Heritage Status and the future of the city. Heritage has always been valued in Chandigarh, be it the character or it’s physical elements. One such zone is the array of Catalogued office buildings along the Madhya Marg belonging to the first phase of development. The Government Press Chandigarh a 2.48-acre sprawling site with a 4-storied building, 63 years old, today, sits adjacent to

the bustling core of the city as an inert corner, especially on weekends. Designed by Edwin Maxwell Fry, an English architect, who was part of Chandigarh Capital Project Team headed by Pierre Jeanneret, the building was in a sense, ahead of its time, when built, with its glass façade and louvered sunshades — an attractive method to obstruct undesired sun and heat gain while allowing natural light to stream through. Apart from its location, in the core of the city, it has volumes of potential to regenerate the core of the city, seconding the innovative proposal for Sector 17 of being converted into a culture and art hub. It has now been earmarked for an Area Development Plan of the Smart City Plan - Chandigarh. Deliberating on the process of ideation of one such building, may further give impetus to exhaustive analysis of the juxtaposed features of every such special corner in the city, and thus prompt ‘Palimpsest’ ideation as a way to regenerate smartly.

Juxtaposed Feature Study of the Government Press

The Architectural Heritage of Façade: The Government Press, with its iconic climatologically controlled façade, set a technological precedent for the first modern city of India as per its architects Maxwell Fry and Jane B. Drew. In a newly democratic set-up design of the government printing press, a building with a full glass façade, along a main road was a very bold step as well. This was countered by the planning of the campus which offers no physical or visual connect with its surrounds. The building, an introverted structure with a simple plan, has two internal courtyards which are dotted with green canopies. It is here one sees the visual connect with nature and the physical with its climate, owing to the horizontal blinds. The entire complex seemingly doesn’t qualify as the “Heritage”. The question that needs to be answered is what to keep and what not to?

The Previous ideation: Maxwell Fry looked up to Chandigarh not only as an urban experiment to use his favorite architectural palette but also as a new precedent to his learnings from the Tropical Housing. Mechanical façade of the building contributes to the industrial character of Chandigarh and gives it a path to tread on with the learnings from such technological features and new materials. Visual connections (both or one sided) and scaling of physical connections to create a complex inter relationship of blocks was a key feature in all Maxwell Fry’s buildings. As seen in all his works, the idea of connections remains prime. The focus on what happens outside is never lost. It seems difficult to actually decipher that what design process has led to the most introverted design of the press building. It remains contrary to thought of connections, which further makes us question; what part of it is actual heritage and what is an irregular procedural addition.

Understanding the city and the various precedents that have shaped the current Chandigarh hints at a more architecturally governed scenario, which is in tandem with the urban character of the building. Reimagining the humble beginnings of Chandigarh, and the past of the current structure one can’t help giving attention to detail, sustainability and the “Bernard Tschumi’s urban shock”, character of the building.

Connect with the Landscape

At the urban level, set in an institutional belt the building seems more introvert as compared to the other buildings. Though having a glass façade, it fails to have a visual connect with a pedestrian on the road. On the other hand, the rest of the institutional stock of catalogued buildings, owing to angles and outward facing, are much more interactive as compared to the flat façade of the Press.

A “Serial Vision”, a precinct overview from a pedestrian’s view highlights lack of infrastructure, presence of nodes for transit and rest, and a visual relief with ample greens. If the pedestrian connects are explored by an overlapping of the possible connects on the current building blocks to current and future nodes of public transport on the fast traffic roads V-2(Madhya Marg) and V-3(Himalaya Marg), changes to the block volumes can be made accordingly.

Activity Mapping and Use of Land

Activity Mapping (shown in Figure) clearly highlights an imbalance in activity with relation to the surrounds. Burgeoning commercial activity across the Madhya Marg but a more desolate activity can be seen in the institutional zone, ending in a dormant verge, because of introverted nature of the Press building. The use of land should not be analyzed in isolation but at a Macro and Micro level with relation to the URDPFI norms. With its manually operated louvers and the wired glass more than 6 decades old, all of which has stood the test of time, the building stands adjacent to the City Centre in Chandigarh, sans the tag of “heritage” according the current Master Plan. With more than half the floor area either having misplaced uses (storage, relocated offices) or unoccupied on pretext of structural issues, the area for the main use, a government printing press, has been reduced to a minimum.

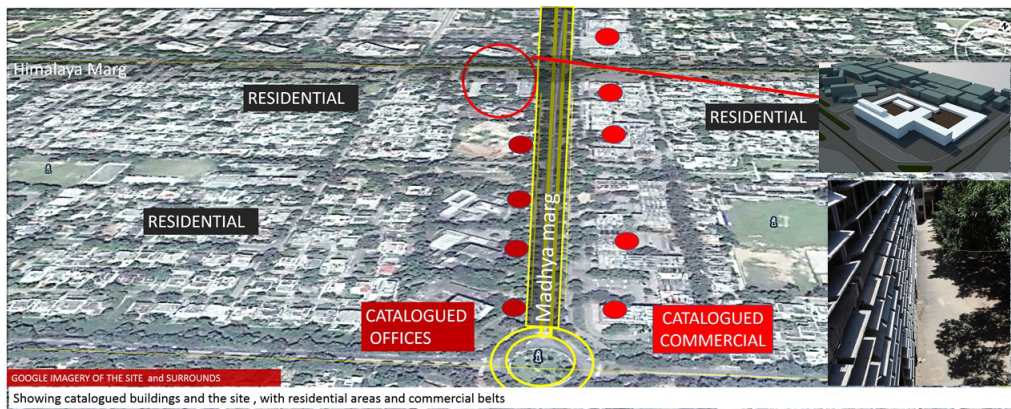


Figure 2: Showing site plan of the Government Press and the Blocking of the site and introvert Character (Inset1); the manually operated blinds of the climatologically planned facade (inset 2) (Source: Google maps, Photo credits and 3d Imagery: Tara Singla)

The Policy and the Psychogeography: Promoting a new use of this land, which is primarily Government owned further prompts us to explore the layers of policy regarding the covenants that can be provided and what would be the legal implications for this relaxation. Interviews of the Policy makers-the Chandigarh Administration, Heritage committee of Chandigarh, the Department of Urban Planning would further aid to making an informed decision. Subsequently the psychogeography of the residents cannot be ignored. What the residents want depending on their current the socio- economic profile and current needs deserves a place in these intensive studies too.

The latest in the theory of **sustainable urban development** suggests that cities should indeed be viewed as organisms, with their biotic systems integrated with the surrounding ecosystem.

The Le Corbusier’s urban model of the city is not misplaced with industrialization but the industrialization gives us a base of technology to render a fresh image of the City.

Apart from the city of Chandigarh, the area of Phase 1 has been evaluated for the qualities it possesses for the potential threats to regeneration. ‘Fully developed area and second it offers scope for analysis vis a vis their intra-dynamics and inter-dynamics with other city functions as all these compete in many respects. Each thing at every moment is a participant in the present. In defining the urbanism, awareness of the present, thus appears as a necessary tool.

The Palimpsest Ideation

“The land, so heavily charged with traces and with past readings, seems very similar to a palimpsest.” - André Corboz, *The Land as a Palimpsest*, 1983

The concept should evolve from different levels of intervention primarily based on current needs, city with a focus on a hope for regeneration for the entire city and not just the site. It is imperative to delve in a philosophy based on the pointers highlighted in the study of these individual features and come to unique disconnected appraisals. But to reach a comprehensive design proposal, a keen sensitivity towards the understanding of all features and their implications is the key to successful ideation of the same. The period we live in asks for in-depth analysis and palimpsest spurs not just rewriting design through time but “glorifies” the age and it’s needs so that each aspect finds its value in design.

Immersive technology in Palimpsest Ideation



Figure 3: Immersive technology: Application in Palimpsest technique
(Source: <http://www.interactivearchitecture.org/lab-projects/palimpsest>)

An interactive Architectural Lab by the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. (UCL, 2016) Immersive technology blurs the boundary between media and reality. With the use of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), binaural sound, and real-time 3D scanning, personal stories and local histories can be recorded, and can be layered over the city at a 1:1 scale. These techniques not only help in documenting the history of the place but also aid analysis of dramatic urban solutions. A virtual palimpsest further aims to create a more inclusive planning by using emerging technology to directly connect communities, governments, and

developers in conversation. Such an ideation process inspires empathy in a design as the perspective of past and present is never lost. The historical knowledge gained through these processes and the superimposition of future patterns on a scientific platform brings together a holistically smart design. Thus a “*palimpsestous*” ideation might be the way to a new smart without losing the story of our past.

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