

An abstract architectural photograph featuring concrete pillars and geometric forms. The scene is composed of various planes and volumes, with light casting soft shadows. The overall aesthetic is minimalist and modern.

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ELEMENTS OF CONSTANT ENDEAVOUR

Hand-Crafted Furniture by Phantom Hands, Bengaluru

Authored by Ankit George; Photographs Courtesy Phantom Hands; Martien Mulder, Xander Vervoot, Leon van Boxtel and Sudhir Ramachandran



A furniture design and production studio, Bengaluru-based Phantom Hands thrives on the idea of bridging a collective of artisans and craftsmen with contemporary designers, to create furniture reminiscent of an aesthetic that emanated from a newly Independent India.



Left: Based on the chair originally designed for the Punjab University in Chandigarh, the Armless Dining Chair was one of the first re-editions from Phantom Hands, as part of Project Chandigarh

Facing Page (Below): The handcrafted Tangali Bench, designed in collaboration with INODA+SVEJE, pushes the local weavers to create patterns that are not traditional to Indian furniture. The collection gets its name from the local Kannada word "tangali" - meaning monsoon breeze - which was prevalent during the time of design prototyping

Founded by Deepak Srinath in 2013, Phantom Hands began as an online platform; catering to the sourcing and restoration of vintage furniture from the 1950's and 1960's. A better understanding of the intricacies of handcrafting furniture grew with the experiments and procedures involved in the refurbishment of these antiques. Inspired by the aesthetics of the Modernism and Art Deco movements, the idea to re-imagine these pieces for the contemporary world emerged.

This thought was the stepping stone of Project Chandigarh, a collection featuring re-editions of furniture designed by Pierre Jeanneret and other notable designers for Chandigarh in the 1950's. This collection portrays the design story of India: focusing on the pivotal role played by Chandigarh in this narrative as a symbol of evolution and progress. Embracing the new era of design – now an indispensable part of the movement which generated India's Modernity – Project Chandigarh re-interprets these pieces by analysing them through a contemporary lens, while maintaining the traditional methods of craftsmanship as well as celebrating the hands-on approach to the idea of 'making'. A design undertaking of such a nature remains extremely challenging: staying viscerally connected to the traditions of an influential, nascent India all the while juxtaposing a present-day aesthetic sensibility on the same.

This vision was realised upon collaboration with Italy-based

designers INODA+SVEJE, who lent their expertise in the pursuit of this philosophy. Although a partnership with a foreign collaborator may seem counter-intuitive to the process of manufacturing furniture rooted in the idea of an Indian Modernity, it turns out to be an intelligent approach. Drawing a parallel to famous designers such as George Nakashima and Le Corbusier (some of the international designers originally tasked with formulating this Modernity in the middle of the 20th century), Phantom Hands create a link back to the process that generated the erstwhile designs. The fresh perspective and design awareness from the Phantom Hands' collaborators allow the creation of pieces which subscribe to an aesthetic, while retaining a distinct design identity unique to itself.

A collaborative approach to design forms the crux of the practice at Phantom Hands. In the furniture collections that came after Project Chandigarh, Phantom Hands aimed to design more 'Indian Modern' furniture with the only criteria being an experimental, craft-based approach. The other design collaborator working with Phantom Hands is the X+L design studio based out of Amsterdam, Netherlands – the creators of furniture which now makes up the X+L catalogue. The name Phantom Hands itself is a metaphor for collaboration: a nod to the multiple workers – from traditional weavers, craftsmen and carpenters, to the contemporary designers – involved with the design, manufacture and production of every piece.



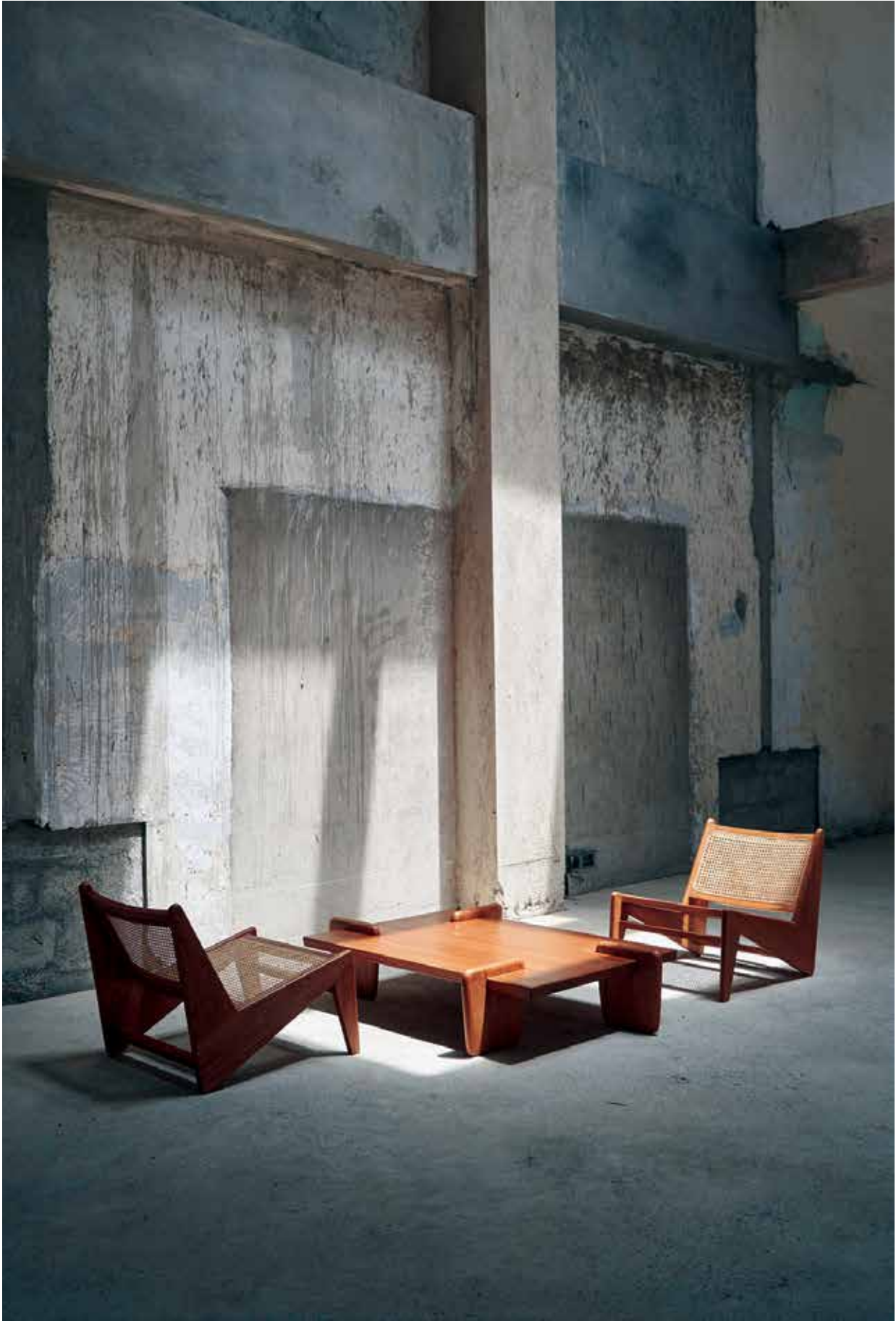


Facing Page (Above):
Chair designs from Project
Chandigarh. The Office V-leg
chair (top) was originally
designed for various
administrative offices in
Chandigarh. It's re-edition
preserves some of the rustic
elements from the original -
the bowed backrest, gentle
rounding of edges, uncoloured
and exposed cane-work
knots, etc

Facing Page (Below Left): The
Kangaroo Chair or Armless
Lounge Chair - designed using
two parallel flowing Z-shaped
teak wood assemblies that
form the leg and back frame -
remains true to the proportions
and dimensions of the chairs
made for Chandigarh in the
mid-1950s

Facing Page (Below Right): The
re-edition of the Easy Armchair,
originally designed for offices
and residences. Handcrafted
and hand-polished without
using paint, the natural colour
and texture of the wood is
celebrated

Right: An assembly composed
of Kangaroo Chairs and the
X+L coffee table





This Page and Facing Page (Below): Images of the craftspeople working at the Phantom Hands workshop - a culture of making that involves the hand

Facing Page (Above): An assortment composed the Tangali Modular Sofa Set, X+L Coffee table, and X+L Lamp



Craft remains at the core of the design philosophy: a hands-on approach to manufacturing furniture thus occupies top priority. A team of local weavers and carpenters are trained and employed at the workshops to ensure a high quality hand-made output. Although Phantom Hands does not claim to be the saviour or reviver of traditional craft, the practice helps disseminate the values and formal identity of the craftsmen and their work.

Such a design approach can be chaotic and turbulent, as the nuanced design concepts from the designers must meet the practical skill of the people involved in the process of making. However, this is handled with sensitivity and astute attention to detail, where the designers spend months working with the craftsmen in the workshops, systematically resolving challenges that arise with every new object. A design environment that fuels research and growth is thus curated and the skills of the craftsmen are constantly negotiated with by designers and vice versa. This back and forth process enriches the eventual product.



The uniqueness of this design approach is reflected in the furniture thus produced: every piece acquiring an esoteric aesthetic in varied scales. Some pieces, such as the ‘Tangali Bench’ and ‘X+L Coffee Table’ inhabit a larger area, lending character to the space around them. Other pieces, such as the ‘Mungaru Side Table’ or ‘X+L Table Lamp’ are small-scale interventions that complement the space adding and at times, reacting to the other things in the context.

“Our focus is to create contemporary objects which are greatly inspired by modernism, which was why we call our design philosophy a ‘contemporary modern’,” says Deepak Srinath.

No piece is overdone with embellishments or decorative surfaces; crafted with simple ornate lines, clarity of proportion and clean lines of construction stand out as the characteristic features – drawing rudimentary parallels to the principles of early Modernism. The allure lies within the seemingly simple construction: capturing a glance from a wandering eye with uncluttered, elementary lines – only to further advocate it’s elegance, when the observer begins to enquire more from the furniture’s visual identity. The details are resolved with harmony and care - soft curves sometimes breaking the linear lines with organic edges, articulated with a fluidity that seems to impart every piece with a sense of individuality.



Right: Designers Nils Sveje and Kyoko Inoda of INODA+SVEJE, inspect a prototype in the process of making the Mungaru Lounge Chair at the workshop

Below (Two Images): The assembly process (left) and the completed Mungaru Lounge Chair (right), inspired in equal parts from the modernist legacy of Chandigarh’s mid-century furniture, as well as the skill of the craftspeople





Left and Below (Left): The X+L Room Divider designed by the Amsterdam based X+L Studio (Xander Vervoot and Leon van Boxtel); The divider is constructed using smaller pieces of teak which are left behind as wastage during the furniture manufacturing process. Each block is shaped and polished individually by hand, making it a labour and skill intensive process

Below (Right): The X+L floor lamp, constructed using upcycled teak wood and hand-spun raw silk fabric

Facing Page: The Armless Dining Chair from Project Chandigarh





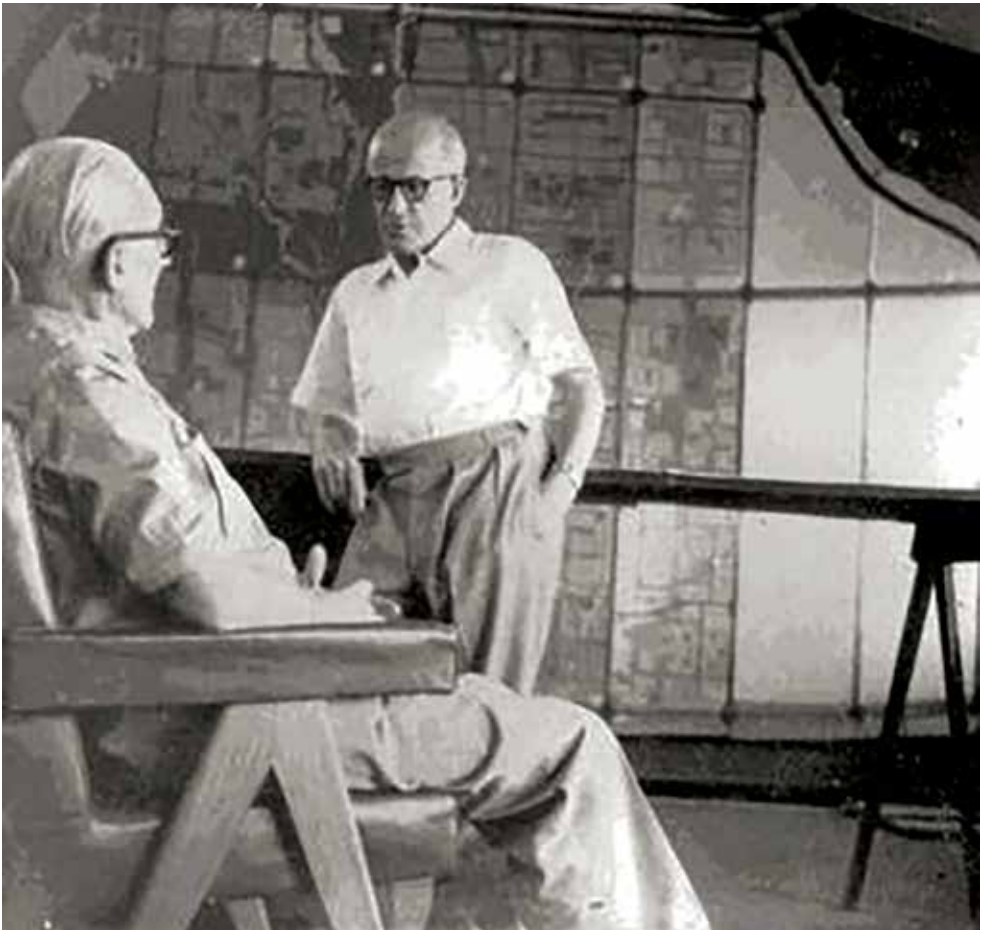
Facing Page (Below): Two of the original Indian modernist designers, Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier, having a conversation while sitting on an original V-Leg Office chair at the Architects Office (now Le Corbusier Centre) in Chandigarh

Left: Inside the Phantom Hands workshop

The materiality is the fundamental tether which links the pieces to its more traditional (Indian) roots - timber and cane being the primary materials ones. Wood allows dexterity and conceptual flexibility in the designs – malleable enough in assembly to produce fine edges, smooth curves and interesting textures (as seen in the Mugaru and Tangali Collections) – while retaining a robust strength and durability.

Every piece of furniture presents a unique set of design and construction challenges, and undergoes multiple iterations and prototypes before final production. From materiality to assembly, Phantom Hands formulates furniture of continuous endeavour – never treating any piece as absolute or complete, but instead searching for the aspects which can be improved or made more efficient and enduring.

The work of Phantom Hands occupies a niche – a middle ground between contemporary and mid-century modern furniture. The importance of their design lies in not just chronicling the design story of India, but also allowing it to progress further, by commemorating India’s modernity that resonates with the echoes of our past. Just as the story is allowed to evolve and grow, so does the studio, constantly searching for challenging new ideas ■



Founded by Deepak Srinath, PHANTOM HANDS is an artisan collective of traditional woodworkers, cane weavers and upholsterers from different parts of India. At the centre of the practice lies an unrelenting commitment to, and celebration of, fine Indian craftsmanship, and upholding these standards in a contemporary world where the economic and cultural landscape make it very challenging to do so. Their first collection, Project Chandigarh was launched in May 2015, and since then the Mungaru, Tangali and X+L Catalogues have also been released. PHANTOM HANDS continue to collaborate with designers and add to their catalogue.

Deepak Srinath began the studio after running Viedea Capital - a financial advisory firm - for nearly 10 years. With a background in technology, finance and management, Phantom Hands is his third entrepreneurial venture and is a platform to combine his interests in furniture, history, design and the digital world.



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