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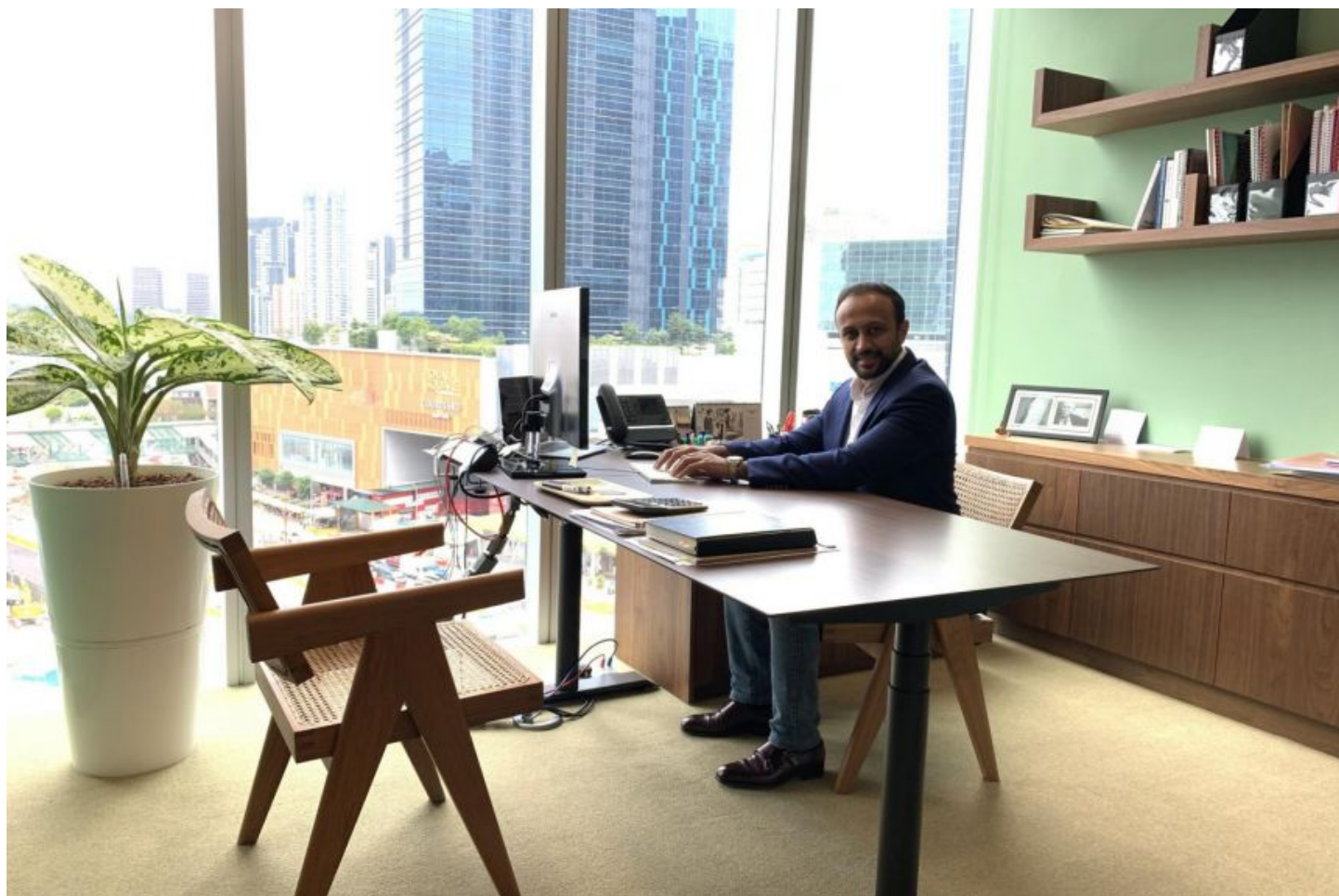
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Letter From Bangalore

Chandigarh's iconic chairs: Ordinary in India but exquisite elsewhere



Mr Laxman Vaidya bought Phantom Hands' handmade renditions of the iconic Chandigarh chairs for the long hours he works in Symphony Asia, a private equity office in Singapore. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LAXMAN VAIDYA



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PUBLISHED NOV 14, 2021, 5:00 AM SGT

BANGALORE - When shopping online for furniture these days, it is nearly impossible to miss a particularly linear wooden armchair with V-legs and a cane woven seat.

For about three years now, decor pages on Instagram and Pinterest have placed the angular chair beside plush sofas in Manhattan studios, around great Belgian dining tables or as a warm accent piece beside a French window.

The chair's geometric, modernist design is as clean as its saga is controversial.

In the past decade, what started out as an Indian civil servant's low-cost work seat has become a European art dealer's darling, been auctioned as a heritage item at six-figure prices, and found its way to homes across the world.

The design was born in Chandigarh, a city that India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru ordered to be built from scratch three years after the end of British colonial rule and a bloody partition from Pakistan.

Nehru commissioned Switzerland's rock-star architect Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret in 1951 to plan in divided Punjab a modern, utopian city unburdened by its past.

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India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and architect Pierre Jeanneret at the Secretariat in Chandigarh, India, in 1964, photographed by architect Jeet Malhotra. PHOTO: CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE, MONTREAL

With a team of Indian architects, designers and labourers, the Swiss duo created iconic modernist buildings like the Capitol Complex that is still in use. And Jeanneret, who fell in love with India, stayed on for 15 years as an Indian government employee, not only designing the Punjab University, schools, libraries, an art museum and residences, but also filling them with furniture.

“From the very beginning, Jeanneret thought of the exterior and the interior together,” says Professor Sangeeta Bagga, who heads the Chandigarh College of Architecture. “How the rooms would be used was part of the design, how people will enter, where the sunlight pours in, where they’ll lounge with a book, how they will sit to work.”

From a futuristic vision of the city, a new nation’s budget limits, and local shapes and forms, emerged the Office Chair, with its legs inspired by the architect’s compass, the upholstered Committee Chairs, sleek armless chairs to be tucked into

two-side library tables, an elementary cement mixer as a lampshade, and other utilitarian furniture.

Meant for heavy institutional use in offices, hostels and libraries, the Chandigarh furniture was made of widely available Burma teak that was economical, sturdy and termite-resistant, while traditional cane weaves made the chair seat and back airy.



Students from the 70s using Jeanneret chairs and reading tables at the Punjab University library in Chandigarh.
PHOTO: GOVERNMENT OF PUNJAB

The furniture, easily repaired and modified, thrived for over 50 years in Chandigarh. But by the late 1980s, officials began to toss hundreds out and replace them with the steel chairs and tables.

In the early noughties, when French art dealers visited Chandigarh in search of Le Corbusier's designs, they found Jeanneret's discarded chairs. They bought several pieces in bulk, refurbished and exhibited them in Paris and New York.



Government offices and universities tossed out chairs that were broken or worn out from decades of heavy use. French art dealers bought these in bulk in the 90s to auction refurbished pieces as luxury high-design modernist furniture in Europe and the United States. PHOTO: GOVERNMENT OF PUNJAB

Along with the story of the quiet genius of Jeanneret being overshadowed by his more famous and mercurial cousin, the dealers cast the chairs as modernist icons and collectible artwork. In galleries, auction houses and museums in Europe and the US, the chairs sold for up to US\$10,000 (S\$13,500) apiece.

In October last year, London-based auction house Bonhams sold 10 furniture items from Chandigarh designed by Pierre Jeanneret for £221,260 (S\$401,400). It became a design world favourite, adorning homes of celebrities like Kourtney Kardashian.

Kardashian said she "adored Jeanneret's chairs" and has 14 in her home office and dining room.

The chair is "so simple, so minimal, so strong... put one in a room and it becomes a sculpture," said French designer Joseph Dirand.

Design historians Nia Thandapani, Petra Seitz and Gregory Wittrick, analysing over 1,500 Chandigarh furniture lots sold at auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's, suggest that the narrative constructed around the chairs shifted the focus "from being Chandigarh chairs to being Jeanneret chairs, from being Indian to being European, and from being objects of functional design to objects of fine art".

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With photos of the piles of wrecked chairs in Chandigarh but not those still used in courtrooms, libraries and homes, the art dealers and media justified removing the furniture from the city. They implicitly suggested that local owners and users had little understanding of the furniture's value, and needed European aid to preserve them.

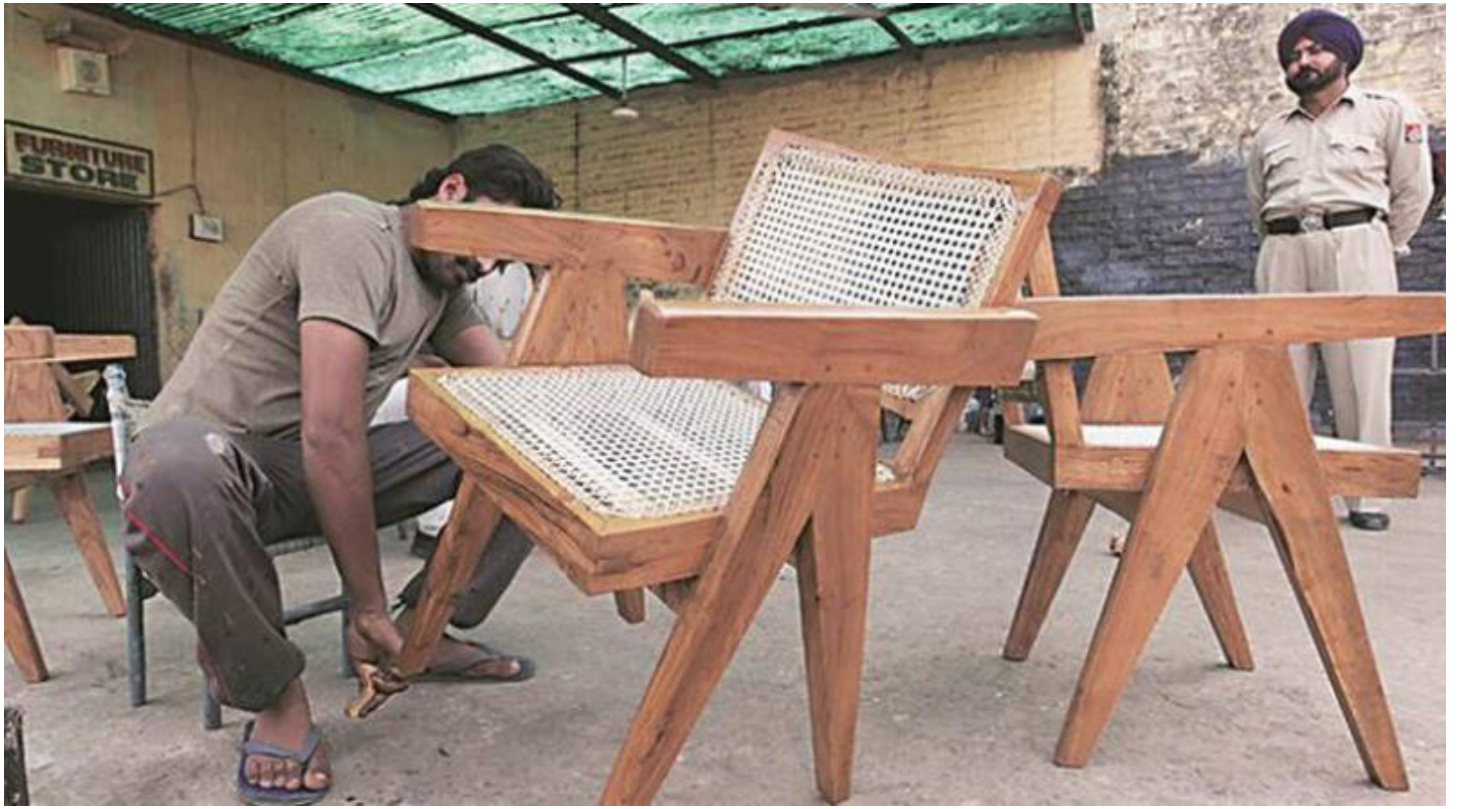
Waking up to what a senior official in India's Ministry of Culture had called "the unfair loot of our home", the Ministry of Home Affairs ordered in 2011 that none of the "original furniture" in Chandigarh was allowed to leave India without approval.

Despite their contested history, so-called "original Jeanneret chairs" still attract buyers. Mr Tony Freund, editorial director of New York-based online antiques seller 1stDibs, says that orders for items with "Chandigarh" in the title rose 60 per cent last year, trending along with a worldwide preference for warm wood and cane.

Authenticating the period or authorship of Chandigarh pieces is not easy. Jeanneret did not sign all furniture drawings, and permitted his Indian team to tweak his designs or create new ones. He gave the basic blueprint or model to a dozen local workshops, which continued to mass-produce versions for decades, adding their own touches.

The designs are widely reproduced today, in a wide range of craftsmanship and prices.

Among the earliest manufacturers were the inmates of the Chandigarh Model Jail, who make the chairs and beds as part of their rehabilitation programme, and sell them in certified government shops. They are not called Jeanneret chairs, but with the €15,600 (S\$24,200) the armchairs commanded in Paris in October last year, one could buy 442 pieces in Chandigarh.



Prisoners in the Chandigarh Model Jail have for decades been making replicas of the Jeanneret designs for government offices and universities as part of their rehabilitation programme. PHOTO: CHANDIGARH MODEL JAIL

Abroad, acclaimed Italian furniture brand Cassina also has a series of chairs and tables it dubs the “Homage a Pierre Jeanneret” collection. American and European architects favour these for celebrity homes.

“In a way, Chandigarh furniture is the world’s first open-source design project. There is no definitive version,” says Mr Deepak Srinath, founder of Phantom Hands, which remakes Chandigarh chairs in Bangalore, largely for export, including to Singapore. He analyses dozens of variants of each chair before settling on dimensions “that are most comfortable and contemporary”.

Even as arguments are waged about the chair’s nationality, design authorship, and whether it can be a vintage piece while it is still in everyday use in India, those in love are buying away.

Several Indian and Chinese e-commerce websites sell the design at around 20,000 rupees (S\$364). Only a few refer to Chandigarh or Jeanneret in the description, and modify the design for today's homes. Homecanvas.com uses acacia wood and reduces the size so the chairs can fit better in small, two-bedroom rental apartments of their millennial customers.

While the design is fresh globally, to many Indians, the beauty of the Chandigarh chair lies in its everyday familiarity, like a relic that escaped from under our stern schoolmasters and drowsy bureaucrats and travelled to the present like a faithful friend.



Delhi-based pathologist Dr Nishi Madan and his wife, business executive Virendra Kumar Madan, 76 and 80, have restrung the cane seat of her late father's "original" Chandigarh rocking chair from the 50s. PHOTO: NIDHI MADAN

"The real heritage is the design language that spread across India first and now, the world," says Mr Srinath.



Lawyer Nitin Sarin had local carpenters make Pierre Jeanneret designs with bright upholstery for his office in Chandigarh. PHOTO: NITIN SARAN

Chandigarh-based lawyer Nitin Sarin agrees. He got his friendly neighbourhood carpenter to make committee chairs in bright upholstery for his office, with one thought: "It is the design that is timeless and valuable, not particular pieces. Remaking it is my way of appreciating what I grew up with."

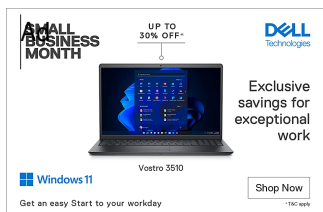
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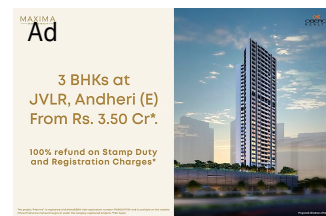
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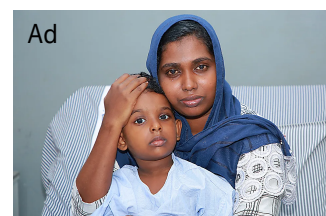
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