

## **Asphalt Jungle**

**25 acres with over 2,500 sculptures made from discarded bits and pieces**

by Rob Shuster

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Utopian fantasies come and go, but if you want to make sure yours sticks around for a while, build it with concrete. That's exactly what two visionaries did, in the 1950s in northern India, for their quixotic projects—extreme opposites that, as it happened, progressed side by side. The first, public and super-rational, came from the theory-mad architect Le Corbusier. The second, secret and improvised, originated in the daydreams of a road inspector named Nek Chand, whose sculptures are the subject of this small but charming show.

The story of the projects plays out like a fable. Le Corbusier, mostly thwarted in attempts to impose his authoritarian communities on France, finally found a receptive government in newly independent India. Officials there invited the architect to complete the construction, from scratch, of the country's first modern city, Chandigarh. The government bulldozed two dozen villages; divided the area into numbered, functional sectors; and built Le Corbusier's massive structures of exposed concrete, which stood like stern behemoths landed from another planet.

Meanwhile, Nek Chand, a young civil servant, had decided to preserve, in his own peculiar way, the disappearing local culture. Secretly, at night, in a nearby forest (trespassing forbidden), he began to assemble figures of the people and animals he knew from the villagers and their tales—women in traditional garb, musicians, wedding parties, queens, princes, elephants, monkeys. He built their forms with homemade concrete, copying basic techniques he saw in the new city, and adorned them with found objects, such as rocks, foundry slag, and bottle caps. For 18 years, Chand labored alone, without detection. In 1975, the city finally discovered his alternate world, called it illegal, and planned its destruction. But miraculously, under public pressure, the officials not only relented, they embraced the vision; they kept Chand on the government payroll, appointed him supervisor of what they called the Rock Garden, and gave him 50 workers. Ever since, Chand (now 82) has overseen the development of the area, which has expanded to 25 acres, with over 2,500 sculptures—all of them still made from discarded bits and pieces.

The site claims that its popularity in India ranks second only to the Taj Mahal's.

Like Ferdinand Cheval's Palais Idéal in southeastern France—another decades-long project carried out by an obsessed government employee—Chand's Rock Garden is bizarre, delightful, eerie, and magnificent. The sculptures, ranging from two to six feet, bear the simple grace of quick sketches, with spare (Picasso-like) expressions that seem to contain both fear and defiance. Swathed in colorful glass bangles, slag chunks, or mosaics of broken plates, the figures often resemble oversize dolls or 3-D versions of drawings from a children's book. In fact, most of the sculptures in the exhibit come from a similar garden (now dismantled, alas) that Chand created for the Capital Children's Museum in Washington.

The sculptures are transformed by their number. What seems innocent in the individual figure becomes a force when it's repeated en masse in the Rock Garden. Photographs of the place (too few) on the gallery wall provide some sense of this power—columns of duplicated human figures and animals stand like guardians, protesters, markers for graves, or indicating regional beliefs, the multiple habitations of the Hindu soul. There's an otherworldly strangeness to the place, particularly because it's put together as if by a conjurer's trick, from trash. It must be a little unnerving to stroll past a phalanx of monkeys.

Le Corbusier, had he lived to see it, would not have approved. Yet the architect's influence on Chand seems to have gone beyond concrete. Chand not only planned the Rock Garden in three separate phases, just as Le Corbusier had planned Chandigarh, but divided the forest into clearly defined zones, segregating figures and species. It would have helped in envisioning such parallels if the curators had included more than just a single, small photograph of Le Corbusier's work. A video tour of the garden, too, is frustrating in its narrow scope. All the more reason, then, to make a trip to the place itself—a rare example of a utopian fantasy that succeeded brilliantly.