

Trash to treasure, The Journey of Chandigarh Chair

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Abstract— The design history of Chandigarh is linked to Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret due to the urban planning of the city of Chandigarh. In addition to buildings, Jeanneret also designed furniture, both independently and in collaboration with Le Corbusier. In this paper, one of the well-known pieces by Pierre Jeanneret is considered and researched using a system of selecting and comparing pieces by different designers from the same era. Pierre Jeanneret experimented with minimalist design, including a wood-and-cane chair, which became famous across the world and still exists almost 70 years after its origin. The author talks about the origin, design history, and journey of the Chandigarh Chair. Based on the research, an overall conclusion is given to the existence of the Chandigarh Chair in the 21st century and how the chair designed for government workers of Chandigarh found its way to the households of well-known celebrities across the world.

Index Terms— Chandigarh Chair, Chandigarh, Heritage Furniture, Pierre Jeanneret, 1950's Furniture, Mid-century Furniture, Pierre Jeanneret Furniture.

1 OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the present research was to trace the origin and existence of the Chandigarh Chair in the 21st century. The author's major interest lies in knowing the chair's journey, its design, why the Chandigarh Chair became famous, and why it still exists. The aim is to create awareness about the chair and to research and compare the Chandigarh Chair with the other well-known chairs of the same era. Also, an objective was set up to look at factors to understand the present scenario and, as a conclusion, to establish an evaluation of its significance and general characteristics.

2 METHODOLOGY

The methods used are researching published articles about the Chandigarh Chair; selection of other chairs of the same era; analysis and comparison in chronological order. A detailed study was done to understand the design history of the Chandigarh Chair. A survey was conducted to discover why the Chandigarh Chair is timeless. The works of particularly well-known designers are considered and compared to their protagonists. Visual information is organised into tables, where the following information is gathered: the name and picture of the chair, the designer, the year of manufacture, and a short description and morphological features are systematized. Important features are highlighted and conclusions are

the survey are organised in the form of pie charts and bar graphs.

3 INTRODUCTION

Shortly after Independence, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, envisaged Chandigarh as the face of modern and independent India. The futuristic city's blueprint, which would include highways, streets, sectors, parks, and feature residential buildings and their interiors for government administrators and furniture as well, was to be drafted by Swiss architect Pierre Jeanneret and his cousin Le Corbusier. The result was a well-planned city studded with iconic structures.

A group of architects led by Jeanneret created an original design for furniture that could be found in offices, residential buildings, and libraries all around the city. In the 1950s, Pierre Jeanneret is credited with creating the Chandigarh Chair, a practical creation. The people needed chairs, was Pierre Jeanneret's straightforward justification when he created a teak and cane chair in the 1950s. It was just one of the thousands of designs prepared by Jeanneret for Chandigarh, India, the utopian city built by his cousin Le Corbusier.

4 DESIGN OF THE CHAIR

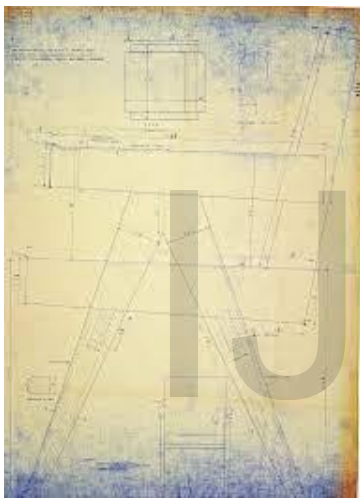
The Chandigarh Chair's design is geometric in form, with elegance, simplicity, and functionality as its hallmarks. It was simple and made of teak and cane. The Bridged armchair's V-shaped legs have earned the reputation of being iconic designs. The chair derives its name from the modern architecture

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drawn. The inferences are drawn based on the literature study, comparative analysis and survey where the results of

of the city in which it was designed. With fuss-free functionality, the teak and cane chair was designed to create humidity and bud-resistant furniture.

The chairs were manufactured in large quantities due to their high demand. In terms of design language, the chairs represented a practical, functional, and modern approach that allowed them to be easily created by local artisans. The chair represented a modern perspective on architectural development in India that became a postcolonial symbol, making its way into government buildings and homes.



Jeanneret's original sketch of Chandigarh Chair
Source: Vincent and Uysen



A restored V-leg armchair
Source: Courtesy of 1stdibs

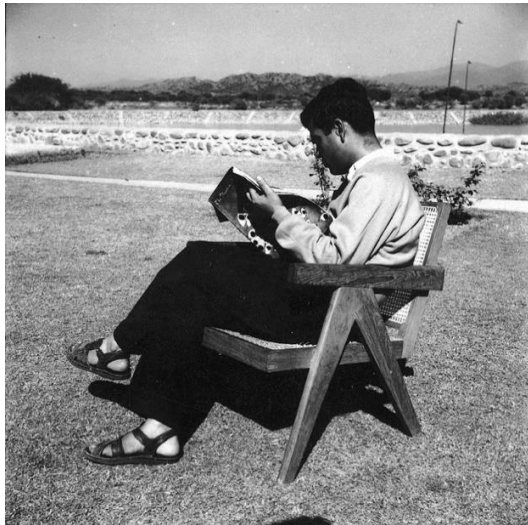
5 History

There was nothing particularly special about what is now known as the "Chandigarh Chair." As the massive Secretariat building designed by Le Corbusier prepared to welcome its new occupants, a simple problem arose: where was the furniture to fill the rooms and seat the babus? Jeanneret then created a simple but sturdy teak and cane chair. The vanilla cane version wasn't very comfortable. A more padded leather version of the same design was created. However, in the interest of promoting workplace democracy, Jeanneret provided the same chair to all bureaucrats in the Secretariat hierarchy, from the top-ranking Secretary to the Superintendent to the clerk to the peon.

The chairs were nothing special at the time when they were designed. Most bureaucrats used to bring a cushion from home to rest their bum on those chairs from 9 to 5. The chairs were very 'government-ish, and were an integral part of the 'Secretariat look.' Jeanneret's original wicker was gradually degraded by penny-wise babus to plastic cane in white or cream. The chairs were handled roughly. The chairs had been mass-produced in the thousands and then distributed to other government offices and institutions as well. As a result, no one valued or thought highly of them.



From the CCA Jeanneret archive
Photography Credits: CCA



A Chandigarh resident seated in a V-leg armchair
Credits: Hannah Martin

As government offices evolved and moved to more modern designs, the 'Chandigarh Chair' began to be discarded, and they began to pile up on the rooftops of the High Court exposed to the sun, wind, dust, and rain, as well as on the Secretariat's balconies and the University's musty corridors. Most departments eventually began to sell them as worthless scraps for a pittance of Rs. 20 or so.

The 'Chandigarh Chair' then kind of vanished and receded from active memory for a while in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Sometime in the late 1980s, Eric Touchaleaume of Galerie 54, Francois Laffanour, Phillippe Jousse, and Patrick Seguin... all well-known names in the world of design, began making trips to Chandigarh to snag the junked treasures. Laffanour then showed off his expensively restored Chandigarh furniture collection at Design Miami. Pierre Jeanneret's humble chair, long forgotten, has suddenly become a cult object. And there has been no turning back for nearly two decades.

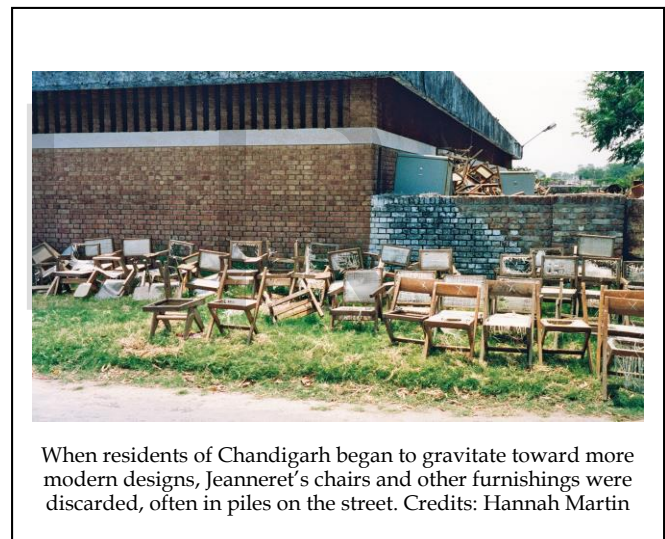
6 How the Jeannerets designed for government workers of Chandigarh reach the European markets?

Even as debates over the city's design continue, its modernist furniture has long piqued the interest of Europe's and America's rich and elite. Decades later, the chair has evolved into a luxury statement, appearing in the homes of the wealthy and elite, including the Kardashians! American celebrity Kourtney Kardashian is said to own 12 Chandigarh Chairs.

The furniture continues to appear at auctions held by Rago Arts, Christie's, and others, where it commands exorbitant prices. According to various newspaper reports, Bonham's auction house sold ten pieces of Chandigarh furniture including the Chandigarh Chair for INR 2.11 crore in October 2020.

The 'Chandigarh Chair' has become a favourite of Belgian designer Axel Vervoordt and French fashion guru Joseph Dirand since its rediscovery.

According to a 2008 New York Times article, the chair that had once presided in respectable corners of the city began to lose its lustre and was strewn across the city as people switched to swankier designs. The Chandigarh administration and its employees lost interest in the furniture. The old furniture ended up in government storage rooms after being replaced with more gleaming items. The chair began to be sold as scrap after ruminating on abandoned roofs and neglected museums. From 1990 onwards, a slew of antique dealers from France and other countries, such as Eric Touchaleaume of Galerie 54, began visiting Chandigarh and purchasing furniture from government auctions.



When residents of Chandigarh began to gravitate toward more modern designs, Jeanneret's chairs and other furnishings were discarded, often in piles on the street. Credits: Hannah Martin

The original users of the government-issued chairs in Chandigarh never placed much value on them. When global designers came calling in the 1990s, some city officials conspired to have even used chairs declared scrap. Containers containing furniture were reclassified, declared broken or unusable, and sold to Europeans. Only in 2011 did the city administration wake up and realise its mistake and pass legislation prohibiting the export of Jeanneret's furniture. Much of the furniture had already reached foreign shores. To save the remaining ones, the government halted the auction. But, as the saying goes, the horses had bolted by then. While the City administration turned a blind eye to the pilferage and looting, some petty officials pocketed crores in the chair racket.

It now appears that not only the chairs were taken to foreign shores, but also tables, racks, screens, and other items. Authorities in Chandigarh are now attempting to halt auctions where Chandigarh furniture is sold in India and abroad, but they are rarely successful. There is now a thriving market for Chandigarh

furniture copies and replicas. Nowadays, everyone who claims to understand design wants a Jeanneret chair in their office or home.

The Paris-based auction house Artcurial held the first ever auction dedicated to Chandigarh furniture in 2006, selling 42 pieces for anywhere between US\$5000 and US\$21000. To date, the team has examined 1500 auction lots, yielding a data set of 2000 individual pieces sold at Christie's, Sotheby's, Saffronart, and Rago Arts auctions. They use custom-built software that provides them with real-time auction data to keep track of the latest auctions featuring Chandigarh furniture. This data can shed light on how the furniture was designed, built, and repaired and provide solid evidence on how the current dominant narrative of Chandigarh Chairs was constructed. The team also examined the materials used by the dealers who removed the furniture from the country.



7 Conclusion

Iconic easy chair from the 1950s, with A-shaped legs that are unique to many Chandigarh items, is sturdy, raw and minimally processed. That is possibly why it embodies the nonchalance, simplicity, and beauty of Indian architecture. It's so simple, so minimal, and yet so powerful that it transforms into a sculpture when placed in a room. Clean lines and a geometric, modular construction—make it easier to mass-produce.

The Chandigarh Chair is iconic due to its efficiency in terms of construction, functionality and use of materials and importantly, its strong presence.

In today's world, the once-discarded junked treasure has become eerily familiar, with refurbished versions hitting the auction circuit and adorning celebrity homes. It's important to remember that the prestigious chair has far more value than its monetary value because it represents the modernist narrative it brought to an

Indian perspective on architecture and design.

8 Comparative Analysis of 50s Chairs:

	Chair 1	Chair 2	Chair 3	Chair 4
Chair Name	Chandigarh Chair	Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman	Egg Chair	The Hunting Chair
Chair Picture				
Manufacturer, Country	Chandigarh, India	Herman Miller, USA	Fritz Hansen, Denmark	Fredericia Furniture, Denmark
Year of Design	In the early 1950s	1956	1958	1950
Designer Name	Pierre Jeanneret	Charles and Ray Eames	Aarne Jacobsen	Børge Mogensen
Picture of Designer				
Materials	Teak and Cane	Plywood and Leather	Steel Frame with Fabric Cover	Exposed Wooden Frame and Saddle Leather

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of 50's Chairs

Structure, Visual Features:

9.1 Chandigarh Chair

Jeanneret designed a chair for government workers of Chandigarh which was simple and sturdily made out of teak and cane and the justification given for this design was people needed chairs. With fuss-free functionality, the teak and cane chair was designed to create humidity and bud-resistant furniture. The chairs represented a practical, functional, and modern design language that allowed them to be easily created by local artisans.

9.2 Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman:

The traditional English club chair inspired this luxury item. The concept to design this chair was that chair should look "comfortable and unique". This chair is a combination of wood tones and leather that not only creates opulence but also brings out pleasing natural textures. The chair is made up of three veneer-covered curved plywood shells: the headrest, backrest, and seat. Under heat and pressure, the layers are glued together and shaped. The shells and seat cushions have the same basic shape and are made up of two curved forms that interlock to form a solid mass. The proportions of the chair back and headrest, as well as the seat and ottoman, are identical. An original Eames chair has a five-legged base that is slightly angled. They are neither too flat nor too steep to visually form a cone.

9.3 Egg Chair:

To design this chair the Danish architect took a holistic approach. It was designed as part of a commission for the Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) Royal Copenhagen Hotel in Denmark. Jacobsen sculpted an unusual, cocoon-like shape out of polyurethane foam, allowing jet-setting guests to swivel and recline. Because the foam was so light—a chair weighs only 17 pounds—the Eggs were also easy for the hotel's cleaning staff to

move around.

The egg chair is a modern version of the timeless wing chair design. At the back, the chair is a smooth, rounded oval that opens into a winged, organic armchair that nestles the occupant. It has the curve of an egg from certain angles, but it's a flexible interpretation of the shape — the chair also owes some of its characteristics to the classic wing-back chair.

9.4 The Hunting Chair:

Borge Mogenson designed this chair, which was manufactured by Erhard Rasmussen in Denmark in 1950. The frame is made of oak, and the seat and backrest are made of leather. The leather is fastened with a series of buckles that are visible only from the back and underside of the chair.

This model was created as part of the furnishings for a hunting lodge displayed at the 1950 Copenhagen Cabinet Makers' Guild exhibition. Finmar Ltd., the company most responsible for bringing Scandinavian furniture to Britain between the 1930s and the 1960s, imported the chair. The chair was previously owned by Finmar's director, who allegedly purchased it from the designer.

10 Inference

10.1 Chandigarh Chair

The Chandigarh Chair is a past invention that has now become a discerning collectable in the present. It is classic in its status, insouciant in demeanour, and dextrous in construction. The geometric shape of the Chandigarh Chair exudes elegance, simplicity, and functionality. The Bridged armchair's V-shaped legs have earned the title of iconic design. The chair was named after the city where it was designed.

10.2 Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman:

In comparison to the 1950s traditional lounge chair, the Eames chair is designed in a very different manner. This modern design icon has outlasted both times and changing interior design trends. The Eames lounge chair has survived 6 decades of constant change in the decor and furnishing world because of the blend of style and function it provides. The chair has striking curves that stand out in modern spaces dominated by straight lines. The chair offers an unrivalled balance of perfect form and practicality, blending seamlessly with any style and colour scheme. Its variety of colours and shades also works to its advantage.

10.3 Egg Chair:

The term "Egg Chair" conjures up images of a sleek, round, pedestal seat shaped exactly like the eponymous egg, but with a cushioned hollow in the centre. Today many chairs exist either inspired by the Egg chair or are lookalikes of the chair. To distinguish it from the many mid-century lookalikes, it is now trademarked as the Egg™ Chair. Fritz Hansen, the original manufacturer, still manufactures it in Denmark. This enduring classic chair was crafted with fervour and made for life and it has never been out of production since then. It will always remain a recognisable symbol of mid-century modernism.

10.4 The Hunting Chair:

The Hunting Chair, made of solid wood and saddle leather, is a one-of-a-kind modern piece with a strong masculine edge. This chair exemplifies visual tranquillity, simple lines, strong construction, and natural materials that add an extra dimension of beauty and longevity to a design.

It's a modern classic that's easy to imagine in hotels, restaurants, homes, and countless other upscale settings around the world. It's a function-driven design that's durable and simple with a declarative style.

11 Conclusion

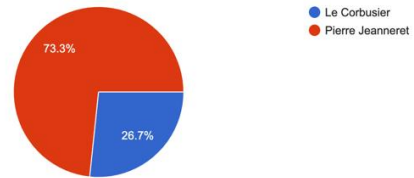
These chairs are iconic and still exist because they served as a model for others to emulate. These are ground-breaking designs in terms of material combinations, and they set new standards for quality, comfort, and style. Their design has withstood the test of time, remaining popular over the years. The design of these iconic 1950s chairs inspired other designers to create similar chairs or even copies. These chairs have a design that will go down in history or even help change it.

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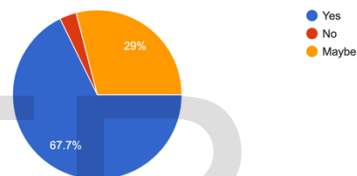
According to the responses from the survey most people recognize the chair by its visual representation otherwise when it is stated by its name people aren't aware.

Who is the designer of Chandigarh Chair?
 30 responses



Since the design history of Chandigarh is linked to Le Corbusier many people aren't aware of the contribution of Pierre Jeanneret to the planning of Chandigarh city and the heritage furniture of Chandigarh designed by him.

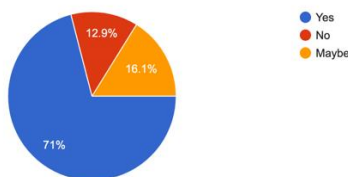
Do you think the design of the Chandigarh Chair is sustainable and can be used in present times?
 31 responses



Chandigarh Chair Survey Analysis:

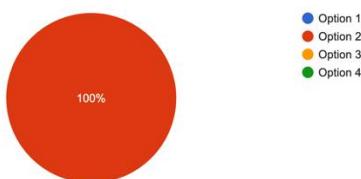
A survey was conducted to check if people know the iconic Chandigarh Chair.

Do you know what Chandigarh Chair is?
 31 responses



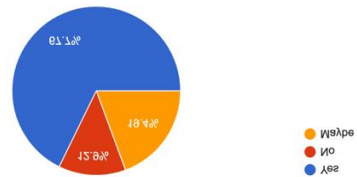
Being one of the most iconic chairs in India still few people aren't aware of the Chandigarh chair.

Which of the following do you think is Chandigarh Chair?
 31 responses



Based on the survey the chair is sustainable because of the materials used and because of its perfectly balanced aesthetics.

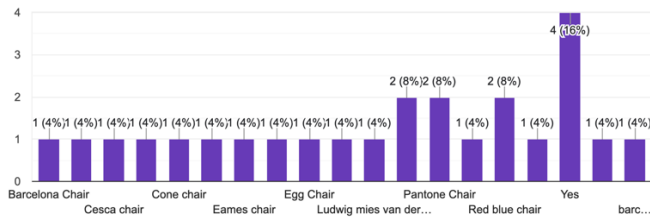
Would you buy this chair?
 31 responses



According to the survey many people would like to buy the iconic Chandigarh Chair because of its simple and modern design which makes it timeless.

Do you know any iconic chairs?

25 responses



Conclusion:

According to the survey, the Chandigarh Chair is timeless and ahead of its time because of its modern and simple design. Its balanced form, materials and effective construction make it functional and iconic. Its design is not specific to a single time/design period. Even with the simple teak wood, its joinery and cane weaving for the seat the chair makes an imposing presence within a space. Moreover, the material used makes it durable and long-lasting.

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