From the debris of demolished villages—scrap metal, oil drums, fabric, pottery, jewelry, and more—Nek Chand created a kingdom of immortal beings: the “Rock Garden of Chandigarh.” The Arts Center’s presentation of Chand’s work captured the experience of that garden environment in India’s Punjab region, emulating its enclosed canyons, dense compositions, and dramatic vistas.

In 1958, Nek Chand (1924–2015) charted a path leading to the creation of an art environment that would transform a physically and spiritually damaged region of India. The results of his tireless efforts, spanning more than five decades, are seen today in the Rock Garden of Chandigarh.

Chand worked as a roads inspector for the massive urban development project to build the city of Chandigarh. French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier had been engaged to design a comprehensively planned capital city for the region that would serve as a showcase for India’s new modernity.

By day, Chand collected uniquely shaped stones and rubble from the villages destroyed during the construction. By night he transformed and arranged his collections illicitly on government land.

In the early years of building his garden, Nek Chand cleared land as he needed, creating chambers as a real city in India might have developed; it was a dialogue of contours, textures, and colors suffusing the natural landscape. He filled his kingdom with courtyards and plazas, and populated it with soldiers, schoolchildren, workers, camels, dancing bears, and brilliant peacocks. Nek Chand’s garden is home to gods and goddesses, Hindu deities such as Shiva and Krishna, animals, musicians and folk dancers, lepers, water carriers, and even folk figures described as “angels of death.” Occasionally, his imagery is abstract; triangulated shapes with tiny faces are intended as figures wrapped in saris and blankets, and “footless” figures as animated dancers. Rather than simply imitating nature, Chand invites viewers to see with their imaginations.

Hundreds of constructed figures and collected rocks filled the first part of the garden, densely nestled within a six-acre patch. In two later sections, an additional six acres each, Chand employed traditional elements of Mughal architecture including domed pillars, curved roofs, and pointed archways, as well as vernacular architectural motifs typical of his childhood home.

Over the years, the garden has been threatened by demolition, closure, and vandalism. But through perseverance of vision and with the support of family, community members, and ultimately government officials, Chand’s garden prevails. In the late 1990s, Chand aided the Arts Center in becoming home to the largest body of his work outside of India.

Dr. Iain Jackson, an architect and historian at the Liverpool School of Architecture, UK, collaborated with the...
Arts Center to create an ambitious exhibition installation exploring Chand’s expansive environment from a new perspective. Jackson’s PhD research catalogued Nek Chand’s work at the Rock Garden of Chandigarh and positioned it within a broader canon of Indian Modernism.

“I first encountered Nek Chand’s work as an undergraduate student, whilst watching a late-night arts documentary called Journeys into the Outside, presented by Jarvis Cocker,” said Jackson. “I was familiar with Chandigarh from my architectural studies, but was completely shocked and delighted when I saw Cocker exploring Chand’s work and comparing it to the stark brutalism of Chandigarh.”

That television program inspired Jackson to spend the remainder of his student grant money on airline tickets to India—to see it with his own eyes. “I found the place intriguing and perplexing, delightful, ugly, and provocative, occasionally beautiful, frequently humorous, and full of architectural wit,” he said. “It was an encounter that changed and challenged me.”

Upon returning to the UK from India, Jackson and his tutor, Soumyen Bandyopadhyay (who was from India), agreed he should further research the garden and that Chand’s work needed to be carefully catalogued.

“I enjoy systematic documentation and surveying, and as Chand’s work had not been recorded, it seemed a sensible place to start,” Jackson said. “Nek Chand also worked without drawings or plans—it was interesting to see how the buildings and landscapes were created and formed using these techniques. I was also curious as to how large the Rock Garden actually was and how many sculptures there were....There was only one way to find out and that was to measure and count.”

The four years of work was all-consuming and exhausting, leaving Jackson with “no appetite for further study or writing.” He set aside his passion for the Rock Garden and Chandigarh until...“Almost ten years later, I was surprised to receive an email from a curator at the Arts Center.”

For THE WORLD IN A GARDEN, Jackson revisited, reconsidered, and rediscovered the materials he had so diligently completed years before. The results of that work and Jackson’s site photos, survey drawings, and a detailed catalogue of every collected rock and sculpture in the garden were combined with a constructed gallery landscape that drew on nearly 200 of Chand’s works from the Arts Center’s collection.

The Rock Garden can be thought of as a large, inhabitable artifact composed of a series of outside rooms. The smaller concrete and ceramic sculptures occupy these curated zones.

Through his research, Iain Jackson visualized the integral relationship between the objects and terrain of the garden. Public interest in Chand’s work often focuses on his endearing sculptures. Yet the topography and
enclosures are worth equal consideration. Winding paths, arches, and Mughal-style structures complement the sculptures, reinforcing a sense of discovery as visitors are guided through defined spaces that are playful, dramatic, and contemplative.

This idea of a promenade was incorporated into a gallery design that invited movement through and around the work, along a series of encounters that ranged from majestic to intimate. Linking Chand's enchanting sculptures to the architecture and landscape of the Rock Garden site in India offered a perspective that both elevated and grounded them.