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. 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. What Chand built defies simple description. The varied terrain, lush vegetation, and cascading waterfalls create a grand theatre for a splendid cast of characters Chand termed “immortal beings of an otherworldly kingdom.”

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.

THE WORLD IN A GARDEN is one of fifteen exhibitions on view through 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center’s 50th-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center’s collection of artist-built environments.
Iain Jackson is an architect and historian at the Liverpool School of Architecture, UK. His PhD research catalogued Nek Chand's work at The Rock Garden of Chandigarh and positioned it within a broader canon of Indian Modernism. More recently he has been investigating "tropical architecture" in India and Ghana. Through survey drawings and a detailed catalogue of every collected rock and sculpture installed in the garden, Jackson explores the evolution of Chand's creation.

How were you introduced to the work of Nek Chand?

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. 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. The TV program had a profound impact upon me, and later that week I booked flights to India—spending the remainder of my student grant to see it with my own eyes. I began to collect the few magazine articles and books that existed on the Rock Garden and “outsider art,” and a few months later when I returned from India I discussed the garden with my tutor, Soumyen Bandyopadhyay, who was from India. Soumyen and I agreed it would be wonderful to undertake further research on the garden and that the work needed to be carefully catalogued. I began undertaking systematic documentation and surveying, and as Chand’s work had not been recorded, it seemed a sensible place to start. 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 garden was built slowly, over an extended period of time. Each incremental development was formed as a distinct and self-contained outdoor “room.” Nek Chand curated the flow through these rooms or chambers as a series of “events.” He arranged this series of experiences for maximum visual effect, what one could describe as an “architectural promenade.” There is an element of surprise, hide-and-seek, and glimpses of what is to come. The visitor experiences large open spaces followed by tight ravines, then framed compositions, intimate resting points, and then dramatic axes and vistas. It is a highly accomplished architectural journey full of playful anticipation.

The Rock Garden of Chandigarh


How do your own background inform your response to Nek Chand?

My own background seems so detached from Nek Chand. I grew up on the outskirts of Manchester in northern England, in a village called Mossley. Perhaps because of the Mancunian cotton mills, I had always found the idea of India attractive, from very young. I always felt some connection with India. It was a place of intrigue and exotic allure, and I was equally fascinated by the British Empire and the relationship between the UK and India. I also had a curiosity for the world and a thirst for adventure, coupled with an enjoyment of taking contrary positions and challenging the orthodoxies that defined the terms of engagement. Nek Chand’s work certainly appealed in this regard. It felt antiestablishment, even punk and a thirst for adventure, coupled with an enjoyment of taking contrary positions and challenging the orthodoxies that defined the terms of engagement. Nek Chand’s work certainly appealed in this regard. It felt antiestablishment, even punk

Has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

I spent four intense years working on the Rock Garden, including completing my PhD thesis, conference papers, a short monograph. I was exhausted by the process, and it took its toll upon me mentally and physically. When I completed my PhD I had become somewhat disenchanted with “outsider art,” and even with my beloved Rock Garden. I still sang its praises and evangelized, but I had no appetite for further study or writing. Almost ten years later, I was surprised to receive an email from a curator at the Arts Center. After some apprehension, I began to revisit and redesign my earlier work. I found that my ideas had, over time, developed more clarity and that the interlude had allowed greater reflection and consideration. It was wonderful to meet with the curator in Liverpool and to talk openly and freely about Nek Chand and his wonderful creation. It quickly became exciting again. I unraveled my survey drawings, dusted off old hard drives, and wanted to share the impact of the Rock Garden again. I think working on the exhibition has expanded my notions about what I do. It has made me think about narrative and storytelling, and it has also made me want to conduct more fieldwork and architectural surveys. Working on this exhibition has also confirmed to me that Chandigarh will be a major presence in my life, and I look forward to exploring, investigating this fascinating city further.