

IIT DELHI: A MODERNIST CASE STUDY

Designed by Chowdhury & Gulzar Singh

Photographs by Madan Mahatta and Randhir Singh

Preview: Saturday, 18 January 2020, 6–9 pm

On view until 20 February 2020

PHOTOINK is pleased to present *IIT Delhi: A Modernist Case Study, Designed by Chowdhury & Gulzar Singh*, a two-person exhibition by Madan Mahatta and Randhir Singh exploring the role of the photographer in relationship to architecture, history and time. The modernist site of the Indian Institute of Technology in New Delhi, built between 1961-1968, is viewed through the vantage points of Mahatta's stark and heroic buildings and Singh's contemporary perspective six decades later drawing in issues of inhabitation and architectural materiality. Designed by architect J.K. Chowdhury and structural engineer Gulzar Singh, the project was critical ground for early experiments in modernist architecture in the capital city.

Modern architecture as adopted in the Nehruvian-era was determined to break from India's colonial past and develop an Indian identity that combined modern technology and indigenous methods. A new capital in Chandigarh was conceived to heal the wounds of a partitioned Punjab and to serve as a laboratory for Indian architects to work with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. One such architect was J.K. Chowdhury. Born in Assam in 1918, J.K. Chowdhury studied architecture at the Sir J.J. School of Art, Bombay; town planning at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London, and at the University of Tennessee. After working in Antonin Raymond's office in New York, Chowdhury returned to India and joined the Punjab Government as Consulting Architect between 1950-57. In 1957, Chowdhury moved to New Delhi, along with partner Gulzar Singh, to work on IIT Delhi.

Set against this cultural and political background, the IIT Delhi campus should be viewed through the wider arc of J.K. Chowdhury's education, work experience and discourse with fellow architects including A.P. Kanvinde and Joseph Allen Stein. The project combines the international style vocabulary with a sensitivity to the landscape with buildings designed around natural topographic features. This commitment to creating ecological balance is a modernist quest which occupies many architects, even to this day.

The exhibition is accompanied by a forthcoming publication with an essay by architect and writer, Riyaz Tayyibji, reflecting on the photographs and articulating the dialogue between Mahatta and Singh.

He writes: *"It was the early modernist architectural projects of independent India where the geometry of the line, the plane and orthogonal massing expressed themselves. These seem like vectors shot out of a fractal cacophony of the bazaar into the empty space of that green-field site so intrinsic to the perception of that moment of modernity."*

Five decades later the exuberance of that moment of aesthetic confluence between the building and the photograph seems to have passed. No longer is there an innocence in that emptiness in which lay the latent possibilities of a nation still to be built.

Madan Mahatta's photographs inhabit the emptiness around the IIT buildings of a time. This emptiness accentuates a stark geometry of light and shadow, its suspended lines with the subtle hint of a vanishing point and the possibility of a perspectival eye. For perspective to kick-in to Mahatta's photographs, we are necessarily distanced from the building and its elements, which always remain as objects in his images.

Five decades later the buildings are used, worn, augmented, adapted and maintained. Vegetation grows, spaces are peopled and their movement in continuous flow. In short Inhabitation, a process by which a building belongs to someone other than itself.

In the photographs by Randhir Singh we are brought so much closer to the buildings, that a large part of them lie outside the image. The sky and ground interlock tightly with the building blocks in rectilinear compositions. Here swathes of varying planar colour and texture gain precedence over an expansive sky or receding foreground. Through subtle abstract composition these photographs search for that germinal geometric moment that is embedded in the inhabited contemporary milieu of IIT.

The play between building geometry and the compositional geometry of the image, marks a strand of the conversation between photographers Madan Mahatta and Randhir Singh, as they inhabit the site of Jugal Kishore Chowdhury's IIT Delhi across half a century."

MADAN MAHATTA (1932–2014)

Madan Mahatta (Mehta) was born in Srinagar, Kashmir and studied photography in England in the early 1950s. He joined the family's Delhi photo studio upon returning to India in 1954 and introduced negative-positive colour printing for the first time. The Mahatta studios have a distinguished history as one of the pre-eminent family-run studios in North India. A prolific photographer, Mahatta worked across all genres—portraiture, dance, theatre as well as industrial and architectural photography. He combined a sensitive eye with an extraordinary sense of light and space—all of which made him the finest architectural photographer of his generation.

Mahatta's exhibition of architectural photographs, *Delhi Modern (1950s–1980s)* curated by Ram Rahman were exhibited for the first time at PHOTOINK in 2012 to wide acclaim. The exhibition was a remarkable record of the building of New Delhi at the height of Nehruvian modernism. Mahatta had worked closely with two generations of India's modern architects including Achyut Kanvinde, Ajoy Choudhury, Charles Correa, Habib Rahman, Jasbir Sawhney, J. K. Chowdhury, Joseph Allen Stein, Kuldip Singh, Raj Rewal, Ram Sharma, Ranjit Sabhiki, Shiv Nath Prasad and designers Mini Boga and Riten Mozumdar. His photographs of their works are an equal part of the legacy of a great period in Indian modernism.

Photographs from *Delhi Modern* have been included in numerous exhibitions, notably, *Illuminating India: Photography 1857-2017*, curated by Kate Bush at Media Space at the Science Museum, National Media Museum, London (2017-2018), *Stretched Terrains* curated by Roobina Karode at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi (2017), *Urban Landscapes – Indian case studies* curated by Deepak Ananth at The British School at Rome, Rome (2012).

Mahatta's works are widely collected and reside in prominent public collections such as the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, (New Delhi, India), M+ Museum (Hong Kong, China), Pier 24 (San Francisco, USA) and the Walker Art Centre (Minneapolis, USA).

RANDHIR SINGH

Randhir Singh (b.1976) received his Bachelor of Architecture and Bachelor of Science degrees from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York in 1999. He spent fifteen years working at award winning architecture and design firms in New York. In 2013, he moved to New Delhi to develop his photographic practice focussing on architecture and urbanism.

In 2016, Singh's series exploring industrial architecture and the urban landscape, *Water Towers*, was shown at the Pondy Photo Festival. Photographed in portrait format, his project sought to connect the monumental, and often decorative, water towers to the prosaic housing colonies and parks around them. This project was included in the exhibition, *Body Building* at the Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai (2019). Continuing his interest in the urban landscape, his photographs examining waterways and hydraulic architecture were included in the publication and exhibition, *Yamuna River Project* (2017). The *Yamuna River Project* book was awarded the Deutsches Architekturmuseum Architecture Book award for 2018.

Over the last four years, Singh has been photographing government housing colonies in Delhi. This on-going project, *CPWD* explores socialist housing, typologies, modernism and national identity. Photographs from *CPWD* were included in the exhibition, *When is Space?* at Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur (2018).

Singh has been collaborating with the artist, Seher Shah on numerous projects that combine photography, architecture and drawing. Their recent project, *Studies in Form*, is a series of cyanotype prints that builds on these overlaps to further an ongoing interest into concepts of architectural scale and sculptural intent. This project was included in the exhibition, *Bearing Points* at the Dhaka Art Summit (2018) and at the Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai (2019).