



True to form

Madan Mahatta's photographs present Delhi's architecture from new angles, says **Sonam Joshi**.

Madan Mahatta is best known as the owner of Mahatta and Co, the photo studio in Connaught Place that Dilliwalas have been visiting since 1948 to have their family memories captured on film. Apart from his studio duties, Mahatta, now 79, also kept busy documenting the city's built environment. *Delhi Modern*, a new exhibition curated by Ram Rahman, focuses on this little-known side of the expert chronicler, by putting the spotlight on his architectural photographs shot between the late 1950s and the 1990s.

Mahatta's love affair with the camera began at a young age. Born into a family of photographers, he got his first box camera at the age of seven. After completing a course in photography at the Guildford School of

Arts and Craft in Surrey, Mahatta returned to Delhi in 1954 and introduced colour printing in his studio – one of the first studios to do so in India. He spent the next three years in the darkroom, training technicians to handle colour. It was after this that the first architectural assignments started trickling in.

"In the late 1950s, architects came to me for getting their building models photographed," Mahatta told *Time Out*. "When the buildings were completed, they would ask me to shoot them." Through word of mouth, Mahatta found clients in all the top architects of Delhi, including the likes of Joseph Allen Stein, Achyut Kanvinde, Raj Rewal, JK Chowdhury, Ranjit Sabhiki, Ajoy Choudhury and Charles Correa, who

gave post-independence Delhi some of its defining structures. Mahatta often worked closely with the architects, several of whom also appear in *Delhi Modern* with the edifices they created. "They knew exactly what they wanted to highlight in their buildings," he said. The resulting images present familiar and forgotten structures from unexpectedly dramatic perspectives: aerial and interior shots of the triangular skylights of Stein's Escorts factory at Faridabad; a half-constructed Pyare Lal Bhawan with rubble strewn in the foreground, and the now-defunct *Patriot* newspaper's office in the background; and a bird's eye view of Rewal's housing complex at Asian Games Village.

"He has always had a natural affinity

Grey scale (Clockwise from above) "Joseph Allen Stein walking up the staircase, Ford Foundation office, 1968"; "Gandhi Memorial Hall (formerly Pyare Lal Bhawan), 1962"; "Hall of Nations, 1985"; "Inside the Escorts factory, I, 1964"

for photographing a building, and had very good equipment which no one else did," Rahman said. Mahatta frequently used his Linhof and Hasselblad cameras, which allowed him to tilt the lens and photograph vertical lines without angular distortion with a wide-angle lens that conveyed space and scale. These black-and-white photographs also deploy chiaroscuro to emphasise the dimensions and geometric forms of each building. "I like to shoot in black-and-white because it's a translation of colour," Mahatta said. "It's monochromatic but [with] the light and shade, you can do so much more in the dark room – and now of course, on computers."

Surprisingly, this is only Mahatta's third exhibition. "That's the funny thing. I wasn't one of the chaps who craved publicity. I mostly kept behind the scenes – that was the main reason, really," he said. *Delhi Modern* ensures Mahatta's place in the foreground of Indian photography and suggests a double-edged development of modern Delhi – one that hinged not only on the visionary designs of its architects, but also on their collaboration with the man behind the lens. *Delhi Modern: The Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta is ongoing at Photoink. See Art.*