



Mirror with a memory

Exhibitions about architecture are rare in India; a recent exhibition in Delhi, titled *Delhi Modern: the Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta* (late 1950s to the mid-1980s) curated by Ram Rahman brings forth an incredible photographic archive of Indian modernism. It presents a wonderful opportunity to think about not only how a photographer represents architectural modernity in post-Independence Delhi but also how a curator in the 21st century presents that story as a visual document to a Delhi that in many ways is quite different

Curator

Ram Rahman

Text

Annapurna Garimella

Photos

Madan Mahatta

Recently, Photoink Gallery in New Delhi hosted an exhibition titled *Delhi Modern: The Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta* (late 1950s to the mid-1980s) curated by Ram Rahman, a renowned architectural and street photographer, who is also widely recognised as a graphic designer, writer, activist and curator.

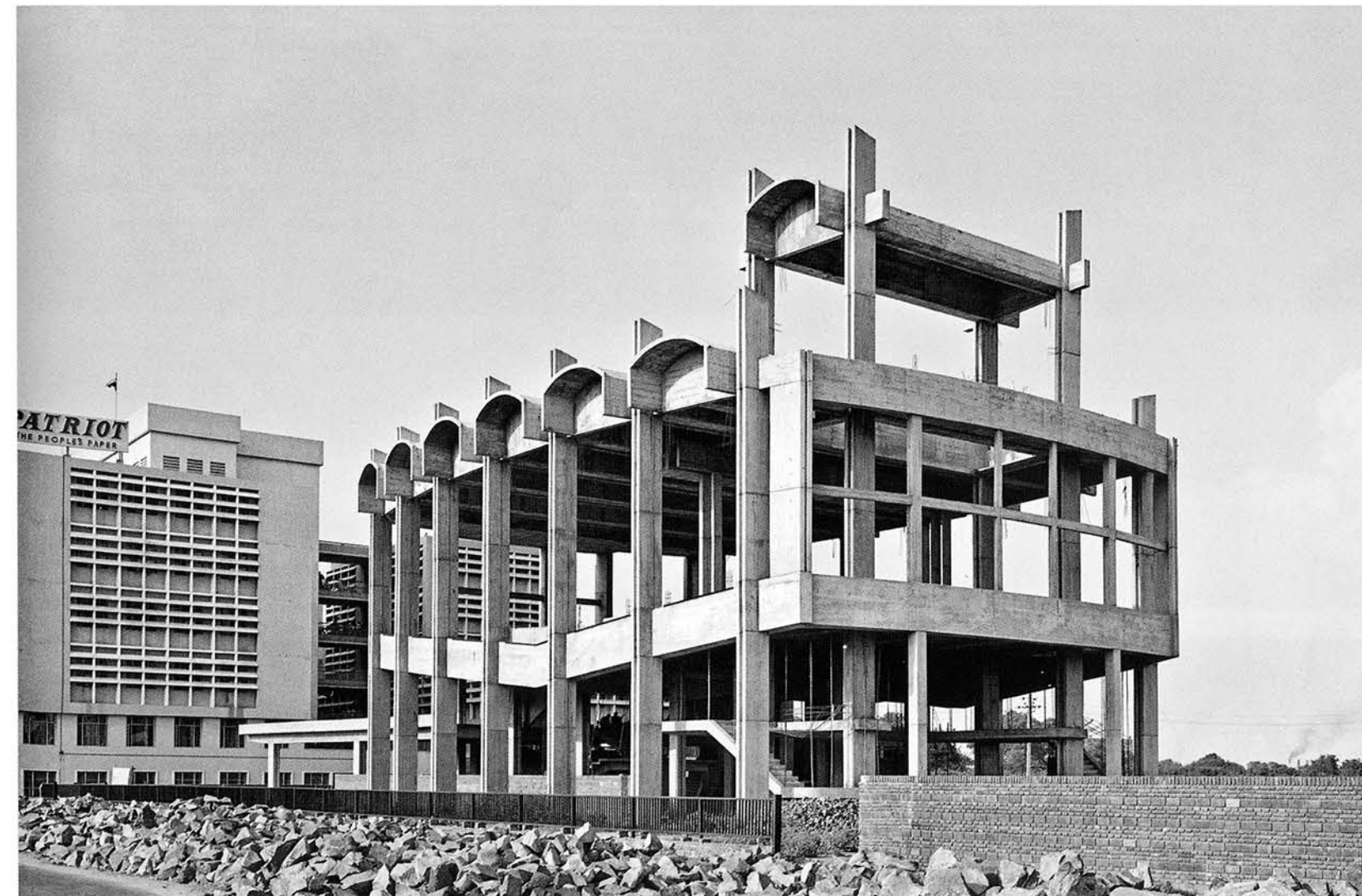
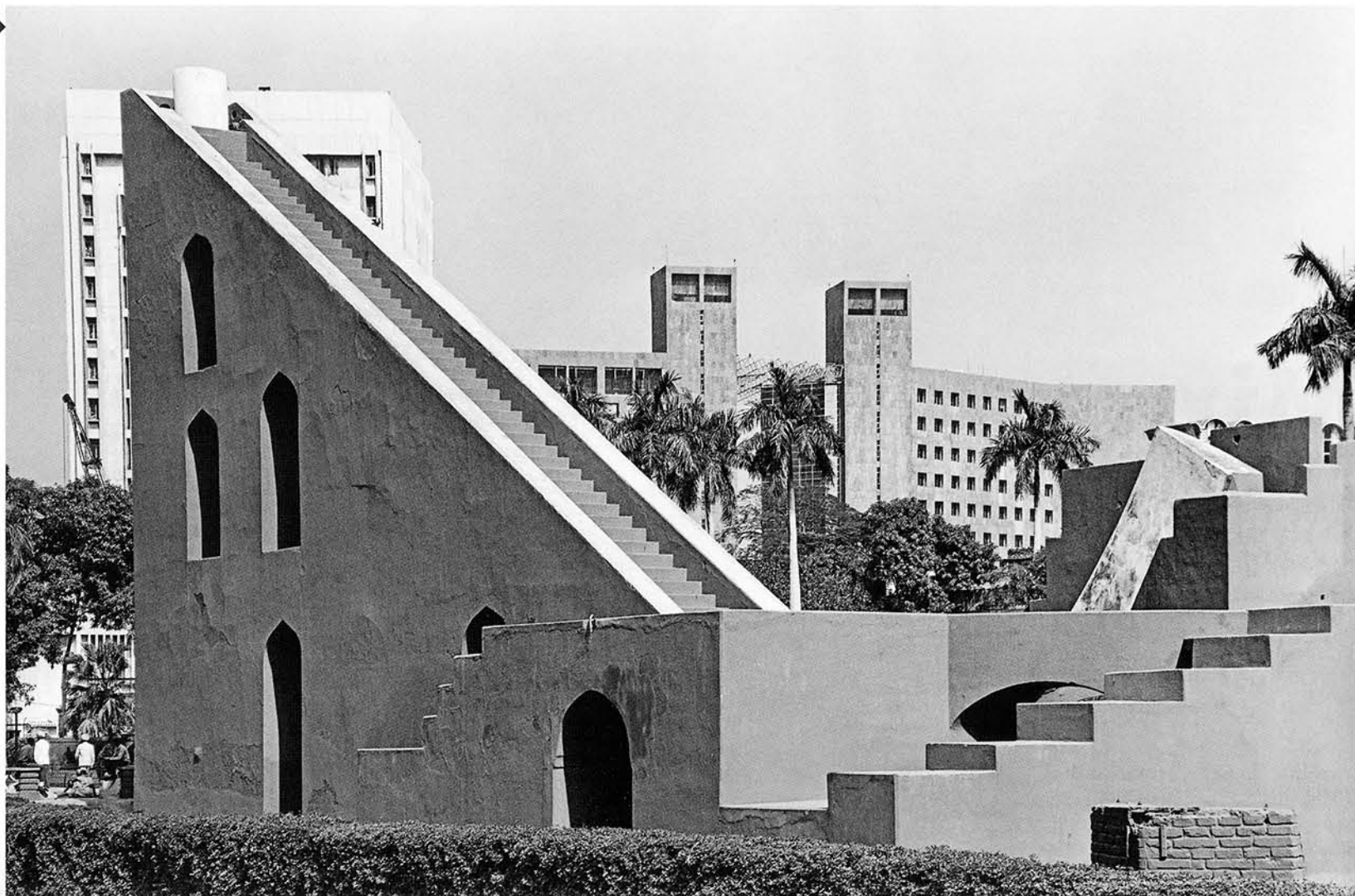
These various roles come together in the exhibition very satisfactorily, as Rahman in collaboration with Devika Daulat-Singh, head of Photoink, created a warm experience of a once new Delhi that now feels familiar, sometimes even far away and perhaps literally cracking at the seams. The contrast between the carefully orchestrated exhibition, with its eye-level installation of the prints, the guided motion of the viewer's body into different sections of the gallery in ways that echo the contents of the photographs and the reticent use of text, belie quite evocatively the experience outside the exhibition's doors. Photoink is in Jhandewalan, quite distant from the South Delhi commercial gallery scene. It sits in the MGF Hyundai building, in a mixed-use setting full of functional cacophony that presents an entirely different picture from the contents of Mahatta's photographs. To go into the gallery and see the Delhi Mahatta photographed, which Rahman reintroduces to us, is to contemplate the changing architectural landscape of the nation's capital over 30 years as well as the changing status of the citizens residing in its spaces. Rahman's thoughtful curation also allows us to think about the role of the photograph in

imagining architecture and urbanism as well as in shaping the subjectivity of the people that view and inhabit them.

The architects whose work is included in the exhibition form a list of some of the most important projects in the history of post-Independence India. At the beginning of the 1960s, when many of the architects returned to India after studying and training under the great masters of Euro-American modernism, they saw recently constructed Modernist buildings such as B E Doctor's Ashoka Hotel, which displays a continued allegiance to Edwin Lutyens vision of Delhi in the corner *chattris* or bears the stamp of the JJ School's Claude Batley. Given that International Modernism had arrived already during British rule and India became the place in which a renowned Modernist such as Le Corbusier actually could build his grand urban vision at Chandigarh (plan commissioned 1952), the Ashoka Hotel represented a kind of regressive architecture for them. They wanted to build a new kind of architecture, one that was unabashedly modernist and Indian, and they found their patrons among central, state and municipal governments and wealthy private clients — all of whom invested considerable resources to create a large variety of buildings, from those designed for governance, entertainment and education to those for residential (individual and mass housing) use. At the same time, many European, American and Canadian architects also arrived in India to practise and teach

architecture in a newly independent country whose ruling and bureaucratic classes had decided that building new forms of architecture and creating indigenous architectural institutions was important work for the nation.

Mahatta's photographs show a variety of architectural modernisms.¹ There is of course the Modernist Revivalism of E B Doctor, Art Deco (Kothari Associates, Claridge's Hotel, 1958), Neo-Classicism (Edward Stone, American Embassy, 1958) the Empiricism (Joseph Allen Stein, India International Centre, 1962) and others, the Rationalism of Habib Rahman (multi-storey flats at Ramakrishnapuram, 1962 and the Hindustan Times building, 1975), Achyut Kanvinde (Gandhi Memorial Hall, 1962) and Shiv Nath Prasad (Shriram Centre, 1968), the Corbusier and Kahn-influenced forms of Jugal Kishore Chowdhury (IIT, Delhi, 1968), the engineering-driven structures of Raj Rewal with the assistance of engineer Mahendra Raj (Hall of Nations, Pragati Maidan, 1972), mass block, Neo-Traditionalist housing (the Design Group, Yamuna Apartments I and II, 1981, and Raj Rewal, Asiad Games Village, 1980-82), the point blocks/towers (Kuldip Singh, The Civic Centre, 1983), building as urban street interface (Charles Correa, Jeevan Bharati/LIC Building, New Delhi, 1975-86) and Neo-Traditional and sculptural architecture (Fariborz Sahba, The Baha'i House of Worship, 1986).² All these structures, as the pictures vividly indicate, grew in parts of New Delhi that had very little architecture or were filled with low-rise buildings. If the rise of the

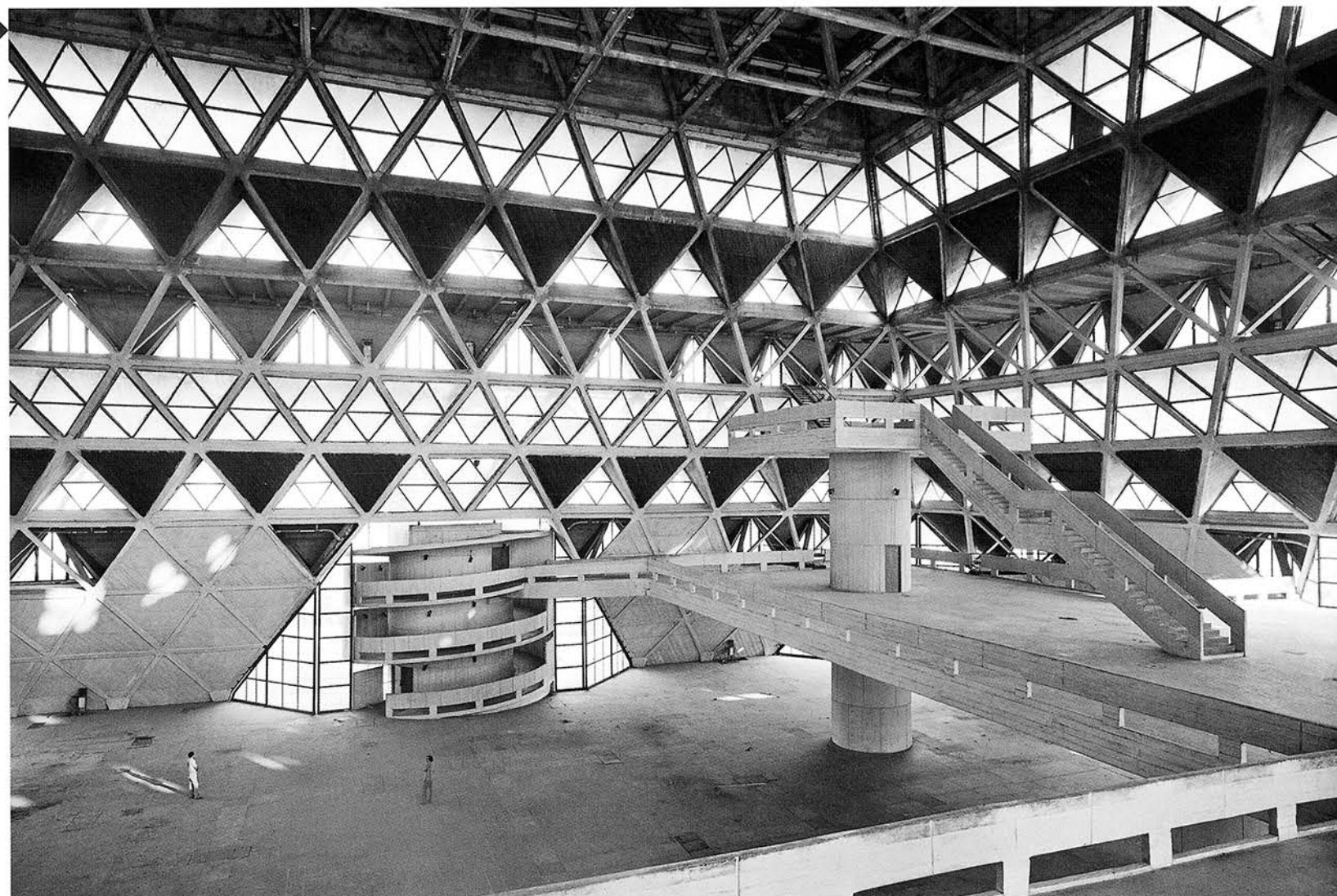


- 1 New Delhi Municipal Council building/Palika Centre, 1983
Architect: Kuldip Singh
- 2 Jantar Mantar (foreground), Life Insurance Corporation building (right background), Bank of Baroda (left background), 1990
- 3 Gandhi Memorial Hall (formerly Pyare Lal Bhawan), 1962
Architect: Kanvinde & Rai
- 4 Hall of Nations, 1972
Architect: Raj Rewal
- 5 Hall of Nations, 1985
Architect: Raj Rewal
- 6 India International Centre, 1962
Architect: Joseph Allen Stein

¹ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *The Atlantic* (June 1859); accessed at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/3361/> on July 9, 2012

² The exhibition can be seen in its entirety at <http://www.photoink.net/>

³ These categories are in part adapted from Jon Lang, *A Concise History of Modern Architecture in India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002)



tower and the factory indicates the expansion of the nation and indigenous industrial production, the swell of housing projects indicates the need to house the new cadre of employees, migrants and refugees that flooded the city in the years after Partition and Independence. These pictures demarcate an India and a Delhi that few of us know with any intimacy; certainly it is an India that has been criticised as Nehruvian material culture or as elite cultural modernism. Is this the only way to understand this period? What do Mahatta's photographs have to contribute to the debate over the post-Independence legacy as we begin to re-evaluate our modernist, counter-modernist, anti-modernist and post-modernist histories? I use the word "begin" because we are entering a new phase of archiving (hopefully) in our country; though the contents and contexts may be disparate, many institutions and private archives are showcasing what is now palpably a different era. All we need to do is recall the number of recent publications and exhibitions that document royal families and their lives, colonial cities, the modern history of women's lives, twentieth-century Indian classical dance, the impact of the Bauhaus, etc. Very often these archives do not have the artists', designers' or photographers' signatures; when we do, as in the Raja Deen Dayal exhibition or now in the Mahatta exhibition, it allows us to think and look at how a particular eye and a set of hands along with a class of patrons created a whole world through the

views they rendered of it. These projects also remind us that we desperately need to acknowledge the power of the archive to endow the present with a future and a past and act on that knowledge. Architectural photography is as old as the modern history of the profession. Two major publications, released only in the last 15 years, one by an architectural photographer-art historian team and the other by a curator at RIBA give those of us reading in India a good sense of the relationship that photography and architecture have shared in the related but separate architectural cultures of America, Britain, Europe and Japan.² As architectural photographer Cervin Robinson writes in *Architecture Transformed*, from the 1930s, and especially after World War II, photographers through their work emphasised two divergent aspects within the built environment. The first group continued an earlier trend of taking awkward, artistically progressive photographs but switched their focus from skyscrapers to older and vernacular architecture while the other group continued to take skillful photographs of new buildings, forwarding architects' own idealistic visions, in what Robinson and Herschman call a "propagandizing style," especially in countries which imported the new modern architecture. This schism divided photography between professionals who took images for their clients and amateurs, including those who photographed for themselves. There were also magazine editors who took some occasional pictures

for their publications while most of the other images were hired work.⁴ Mahatta's oeuvre, given that he ran a studio, is both amateur and professional; his work was not widely circulated but he did do work for hire and his work is imbued with a personal artistic agenda even as it caters to his clientele. A modern architect's craft was once based on a division of labour. Imaginative work was done with drawing while constructive work was done with men and machines. The photograph developed at first as a recording device for communicating new built forms and was an ideological tool to propose new attitudes toward architecture and new relationships within old and more contemporary built environments. Here I think of Alfred Steiglitz and Eugène Atget in New York and Paris. But soon an architect such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, in his remarkable *Intermediate Version of a Competition Entry for a Skyscraper on Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse, Berlin (1921)* began to use extensively the technique of photomontage to propose a new kind of building in a pre-existing landscape. What this did was give the photograph the currency of drawing in imagining a building and its environment. If earlier the workflow went drawing > building > photograph, gradually architects used photographs of historic buildings and the work of their contemporaries to think through their practice. In the design process, the workflow became more like photograph > building > drawing > building > photograph and so on. As this cycle of image making and building developed, a whole





new kind of representational practice developed in modern architecture. Le Corbusier repeatedly used photographs to develop his architectural ideas, as exemplified in *Towards a New Architecture*. Pictures taken of his Villa Savoye by Claude Gravot taken in 1929 include the architect's personal objects; Robinson observes that "clearly Le Corbusier had set these significant Phileban forms or object types in front of the camera, where they could upstage his building, in order to tell us how we should interpret the forms of the house that are the nominal subject of the picture."³ Corbusier's awareness of the photograph's power to ratify, circulate and modify his architectural ideas transformed his buildings into something that represented architecture, not just something that enclosed shape in artistic ways.⁴ The purpose of the photograph was in part to further consolidate the architect's authorship of architecture. Ram Rahman has stated that Madan Mahatta, who ran a successful studio in Connaught Place, was commissioned by these new architects to record their work and that architects did not often see each other's work through these photographs. Since India never had a wide range of architectural publications, there was no steady medium through which architects or a wider public could view or discuss these buildings or Mahatta's work. The photographs then became a private dossier that was known in its entirety only by the photographer. In this situation, the images functioned both as private commissions that may or may not be released to the public and as a personal archive of architectural portraits.

Nevertheless, there is a clear sense that Mahatta and his clients intended these photographs to present modernist architecture as the most valid form for a modern nation. It is possible to see in his pictures a range of perspectives that represented a new kind of architecture in India. There is the modified worm's eye view (e.g. The Civic Centre) that photographers initially developed to take pictures of tall buildings that bridged the overall view with the image of the detail. Such a perspective literally projected desire upward in photographs of skyscraper cities. There is also the modified bird's eye view (Asiad Games Village or construction of parking in Palika Bazaar) that borrowed the technical excitement of aerial photography, initially made possible by the new hand camera and air flight. Mahatta's photographs of exteriors offer full disclosure of buildings, their details and their location. They are well-crafted yet straightforward images of virtuous endeavours.⁷ In the India of this period, this is the kind of image which best indicated that modern architecture could belong, even make a place; thus the images had a didactic as well as a propositional function. Mahatta's images of interiors offer more drama perhaps because he came to them with a great deal of experience in studio photography. The images of architects' houses (Kanvinde, Rewal) or of a client at home (Mazumdar) or the interior of a building (the staircases in Stein's Ford Foundation) have a kind of Hitchcockian glamour. Everyone is dressed to belong in the spaces they inhabit (Mini Boga furniture).

His artful lighting and embedded perspective accentuates modernist sophistication, qualities which a developing nation such as India was not always allowed to possess or even desire. Ultimately, some of his images, for example the inside of Stein's Escorts factory, which show workers engaging in various tasks, even reference other iconic images of iconic architecture, in this case the well-known image of workers at their desks in Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax building. A now familiar criticism emphasises the detachment from everyday Indian life and in many instances the epistemological violence affected by the "new modernist temples" that Mahatta shot. Such censure is justified in many instances. But his images might also lead us to contemplate another, more sub-rosa history of national aesthetics, one in which we, as middle- and upper-class Indians, also once collectively desired the transformation of our habitus that technologies and the aesthetics of modernism promised. Across the nation, very few chose traditional forms of building for their new urbanised life. With whatever means we could afford or aesthetics we could embrace, Indians have wanted the new, especially in architecture. Modernism, disavowed as it often is, is part of us because we built it and we imagined ourselves working and living in the sorts of spaces that Mahatta photographed.

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ANNAPURNA GARIMELLA
Designer and art historian

- 7 Yamuna Apartments, 2, 1981
Architect: The Design Group
- 8 Inside the Escorts factory, 1, 1964
Architect: Joseph Allen Stein
- 9 Staircase of a teaching block with the main building in the background, IIT-Delhi, c.1968
Architect: J K Chowdhury
- 10 Joseph Allen Stein walking up the staircase, Ford Foundation office, 1968
Architect: Joseph Allen Stein
- 11 A.P. Kanvinde at home, 1966
Architect: A P Kanvinde
- 12 British Council, 1995
Architect: Charles Correa

³Two important publications which document and analyse the history of architectural photography are Cervin Robinson and Joel Herschman's *Architecture Transformed: The History of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present* (New York and Cambridge, Mass: The Architectural League of New York and The MIT Press, 1988) and Robert Elwall's *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography* (London: RIBA and Merrell Publishers, 2004)

⁴Robinson and Herschman, p. 110-120

⁵Robinson, p. 115

⁶Lorens Holm, "Reading through the Mirror: Brunelleschi, Lacan, Le Corbusier: The Invention of Perspective and the Post-Freudian Eye/I," *Assemblage* 18 (1992), p. 26, caption for image 4 of the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau*

⁷Robinson, p. 120