

“Occasionally, I’d be standing in the middle of the road to shoot. You can’t really imagine that now. So much traffic!” The man who introduced colour photography in the country is still processing the precious E 6 film. FC2 in conversation with Madan Mahatta, about his exhibition of works, on view together, for the first time

DELHI MODERN

In his brilliantly researched note to this show, Ram Rahman reminds us of the words of HS Goodhart-Rendel, as quoted in Robert Elwall’s book, *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography: The modern architectural drawing is interesting, the photograph is magnificent, the building is an unfortunate but necessary stage between the two.* “Now when I see New Delhi, I see everything growing vertically. In those days, everything was horizontal.” Madan Mahatta, synonymous for entire generations with Mahatta Labs/Studios in CP, brings alive for us, the mood of his photographs on view at Photoink this month, chronicling the building of Nehruvian Delhi, from the 60s. Stepping out of the “noisy dark room” at Mahatta Studios (where he still goes to work, a few days short of his eightieth birthday) for our conversation one Saturday morning, Madan tells us about the old days, constructing a few memories, which

begin from his camera - the Linhof - which he employed for architectural work. “It gave me room for more movement”, he says, quite simply, “because you could change the lenses”.

When Madan returned to India from his studies in England, circa 1954, he was the only photographer in Delhi who worked with ‘a camera on medium format film, using an extremely wide angle lens’, as Ram Rahman articulates it, in his curator’s note, further stating: *Exploiting all the tilts and shifts of the camera, he was able to make his pictures with undistorted perspective; and the wide lens enabled him to shoot in tight areas and capture the sense of space within these structures. He also understood the importance of light as it shifted over volume and form. As the photographs on display reveal, his clean and clear modernist vision perfectly matched the modernist architecture these architects were evolving in Delhi.* He worked with architects such as Achyut Kanvinde, Ajoy Choudhury, Charles Correa, Habib Rahman, Joseph Allen Stein, Kuldip Singh, Raj Rewal, to mention a few, a lot of whom left the photography of their creations (and the involved process) entirely to his discretion. Madan, who emphasises on “a major study of light” for his photographs, points out today, “It was always better, though, to have the architect around. He could tell me about the feature to highlight, what angles to look at.”

The works on view, shot between the late 1950s and the mid-1980s, include iconic buildings like Sapru House, India International Centre, British Council, the LIC building, Bahai Temple, Asian Games Village, the Escorts Factory in Faridabad (“it’s the only photograph not in Delhi. Today, of course, it’s the NCR!”) among others; some of the strongest images are those of architects in their homes - a quietly reading Kanvinde in what seems like a big, well-lit house. “To give a human element to the room”, is how Madan simplifies it, “The interior of the room was more important to me, in the photograph”. ■

(Delhi Modern: The Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta, is on view at Photoink, through June. Nearest Metro Station: Jhandewalan, Blue Line.)



Asian Games Village, 1985. Photo Courtesy Madan Mahatta/Photoink



Joseph Allen Stein walking up the staircase, Ford Foundation office, 1968. Architect: Joseph Allen Stein. Photo Courtesy Madan Mahatta/Photoink



Inside the Escorts factory, I, 1964. Architect: Joseph Allen Stein. Photo Courtesy Madan Mahatta/Photoink