



PHOTOS COURTESY MADAN MAHATTA

(Left) Fabindia's John Bissell speaking with two women; note the modernist furniture. (Far left) Mahatta's photograph of the NDMC Building makes the most of its monumental scale

Structural vision

The architectural landmarks, and a few interiors, of Delhi from the 1950s to 1980s, captured when they were crisp and new

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It is a landmark most Delhiwallahs must have passed many times on their way to Connaught Place, but few will have seen the NDMC Building on Sansad Marg in quite the way that Madan Mahatta saw it in 1983. Captured through the wide-angle lens of Mahatta's Linhof camera, the exposed concrete structure fills the frame of the photograph currently displayed at an exhibition of his architectural photographs at the PhotoInk gallery. Its flanks shrinking sharply in a clean curve to form two conjoined towers that rise to kiss the clouds, while two ornamental lampposts and a group of men below give a sense of its monumental scale.

This is just what photographs do — force you to look at the familiar with new eyes and notice things that you hadn't before. In the case of these photographs of public buildings constructed between the 1950s and mid-1980s — the IIT Delhi campus, the Hall of Nations permanent exhibition complex at Pragati Maidan, the LIC Building, Parliament Annexe, India International

Centre, Asian Games Village, DDA apartments and the NDMC building — what stands out is a consistent architectural vocabulary made of clean, bold lines, a minimum of ornamentation, facades of exposed red brick or concrete and lots of *jaalis* and *chhajjas* to let in the light and keep out the sun. This style has now become the hallmark of those early post-Independence decades when Jawaharlal Nehru was building his “temples of modern India” — a phrase that comes often to mind when viewing Mahatta's images. Indeed, as Ram Rahman notes in his curator's note, “Nehru supported the new architecture [and] sometimes actively intervened in the design process.”

As leading partner in Delhi's well-reputed photographic studio, Madan Mahatta knew the architects who were designing buildings in this new style — Joseph Allen Stein, J K Choudhury, Habib Rahman, A P Kanvinde, Kuldip Singh and Raj Rewal, among others. Most of these architects had studied abroad where they had been influ-

enced by the Bauhaus design approach, and related well with Mahatta, who had trained at the Guildford School of Arts and Craft in Surrey from 1951 to 1953 and then worked at several prestigious studios in Europe. All the photographs in this exhibition were commissioned by these architects — barring, perhaps, the one interior shot of John Bissell, the Fabindia founder, chatting with two women. But note the same design sensibility that imbues the buildings translated into interior design — the play with texture (jute and wood), the straight lines and the simple elegance. It's a variety of *desi* chic that you see even now in many Delhi homes.

“He was close to many of the architects, especially Stein,” says Devika Dault-Singh of PhotoInk, pointing to a rare image of the American International School where the architect can be seen in the foreground with a camera slung around his neck. “Very often present on site with the architects, he learnt from them the time of day or year when the light was just right for photographing certain

parts of the buildings,” writes Rahman. The results are evident. The photographs, though a little too pristine, because they are uncluttered by human presence, capture buildings at their best, and manage to evoke, through the play of light and shade over curving staircases and textured walls, the structural vision that inspired their architects.

Seen in the present, Mahatta's photographs stand as documentary evidence of a time when architects, urban planners and state departments came together to decide on a building style that reflected a certain image of the city and nation that they wanted to project, when the whole business wasn't left to private developers who clad buildings with stone or granite. They stand as archival records of Delhi's development as the leading Indian city and an architectural style that attempted to blend home-grown building motifs with international modernism, with the objective of responding better to the challenges that the then newly independent nation faced.

“Delhi Modern: The Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta” is on until July 2