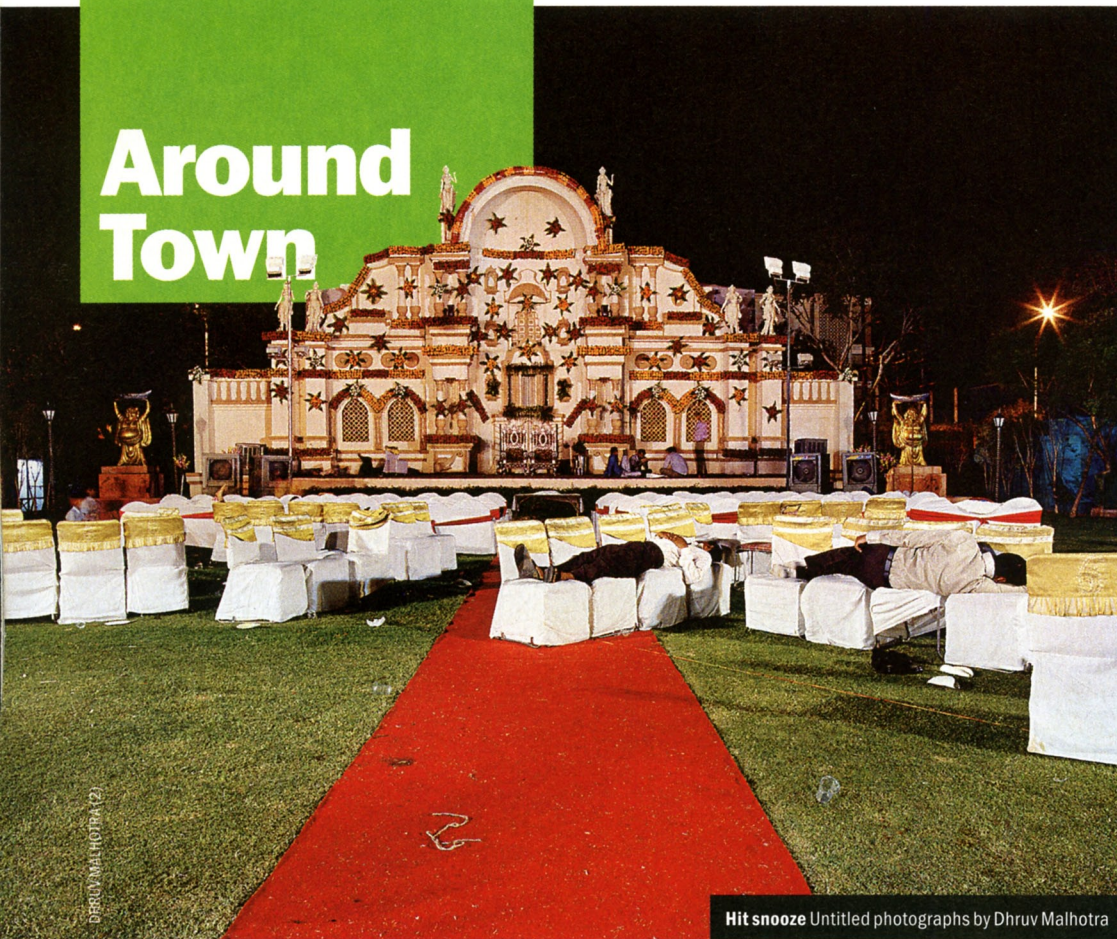


Around Town



Hit snooze Untitled photographs by Dhruv Malhotra

Dream state

Dhruv Malhotra shines a light on people sleeping outside at night, says **Sibi Arasu**.

In author China Miéville's *The City & the City*, the plot unfolds in two cities that occupy much of the same geographical space, but whose citizens live completely separate lives. The inhabitants of one "unsee" those of the other, allowing for the coexistence of both. Photographer Dhruv Malhotra, a fantasy and sci-fi buff himself, captured this idea of unseen citizens in what he calls "the null zone" in his second solo exhibition, *Sleepers*.

In *Noida Soliloquy*, his first photo exhibition, Malhotra captured the aesthetic strangeness of Delhi's suburban sprawl by photographing the empty spaces there at night. *Sleepers*, while also shot at night, is a series of images of people sleeping outside in various places and postures, most of them because they have to, but some by choice. "I had already noticed my interest in the sleeping figures when I was shooting for my earlier show.

This interest progressed continuously and after five years has now evolved into its own," Malhotra told us. "Rather than as a standalone exercise, I feel this is a progression, a logical next step in my work."

The images, which Malhotra shot in Delhi, Noida, Gurgaon, Jaipur, Goa and Kolkata, use night-time as a stark backdrop for social contrasts. For example, an image of a sleeping form beside a covered monolith of a statue in Noida lends itself to multiple readings: the juxtaposition between the vulnerability of the statue and the person guarding it; the amount of money spent on and space taken up by symbolism versus basic needs.

"Through *Sleepers*, I have tried to engage with questions of progress, modernity and what I'd like to think of as the otherworldly," said Malhotra. The long exposure times – anywhere between seven minutes and two hours – give the images a surreal quality, with great light inten-

sity never seen by the naked eye. Malhotra credits his Mamiya 6x7 medium-format film camera: "With a digital SLR, I might be able to

shoot similar images, but I wouldn't be able to push the boundaries of my compositions and exposures as much as I can with the Mamiya. Besides, even when there is movement, or if the subject awakens, the 'moments of waking' translate into film in a desirable manner," he said. "For my sort of work, a camera such as this, which demands patience and is slow and measured, fits in quite well." On assignment, Malhotra walks around with a five kilo sandbag, a tripod, his camera and pepper spray.

By casting the common sight of sleepers in a surreal glow, Malhotra succeeds in raising questions about the circumstances that force his subjects outside. "In fantasy or sci-fi books, there is a certain sense of perception that draws parallels with reality. Similarly, through *Sleepers* I have tried to draw parallels with myself," he said.

As an expert of sorts in observing those asleep, we asked Malhotra why he thought people slept at particular sites and sometimes in peculiar postures or places. "There's certainly an element of logistics involved in where people sleep. A lot of the people I photographed were guards or migrant workers who slept near their place of work," he said. "The posture, though, becomes immaterial, because if you are in deep slumber it is only after you awake that you think of anything else". Despite its semi-conscious subjects and dreamy landscapes, Malhotra's *Sleepers* is a wake-up call to observe the reality of our city with fresh eyes.

Sleepers is ongoing at **Photoink**. See Exhibitions.

