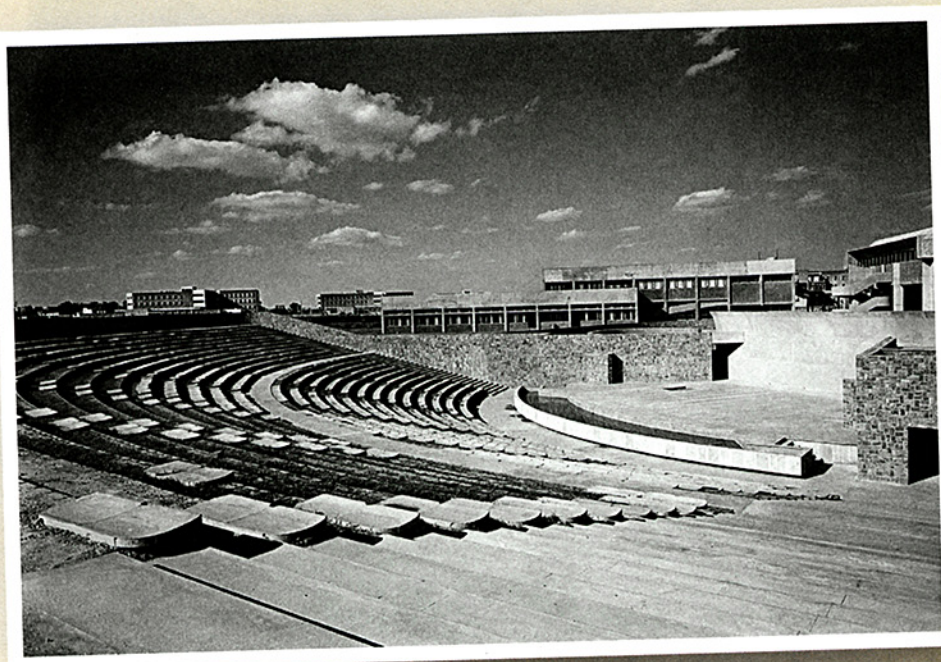


Steps in the Right Direction



Madan Mahatta. *Open Air Theatre, IIT, Delhi*. Architect: J.K. Chowdhury. 1968.
All photographs courtesy
Madan Mahatta/PHOTOINK.

Photographs by Madan Mahatta, taken in Delhi between the late 1950s and the mid-1980s, document an extremely important period in our architectural history.

Many architects relocated to Delhi in the early 1950s. This generation of architects was developing a vocabulary of modernist practice suited to Indian conditions. Joseph Allen Stein has commented on how the Gandhian spirit still prevailed, especially in the 1950s, and how that spirit meshed perfectly with the 'less-is-more' slogan of Modernism. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru supported the new architecture in Delhi being conceived by this generation and gave a fillip to the massive building projects in the city, which was in dire need of new infrastructure.

The Mahatta studio opened in Connaught Place in 1948, becoming one of the important photography studios of its time. Madan Mahatta returned from his studies in England and started work there in 1954. The timing of his return and the fact that he started photographing architecture seriously was fortuitous. Mahatta was the only photographer in Delhi who was working with a Linhof camera on medium format film and using an extremely wide-angle lens. Playing with all the camera's tilts and shifts, he was able to compose his pictures with undistorted perspective and the wide lens enabled him to shoot in tight areas

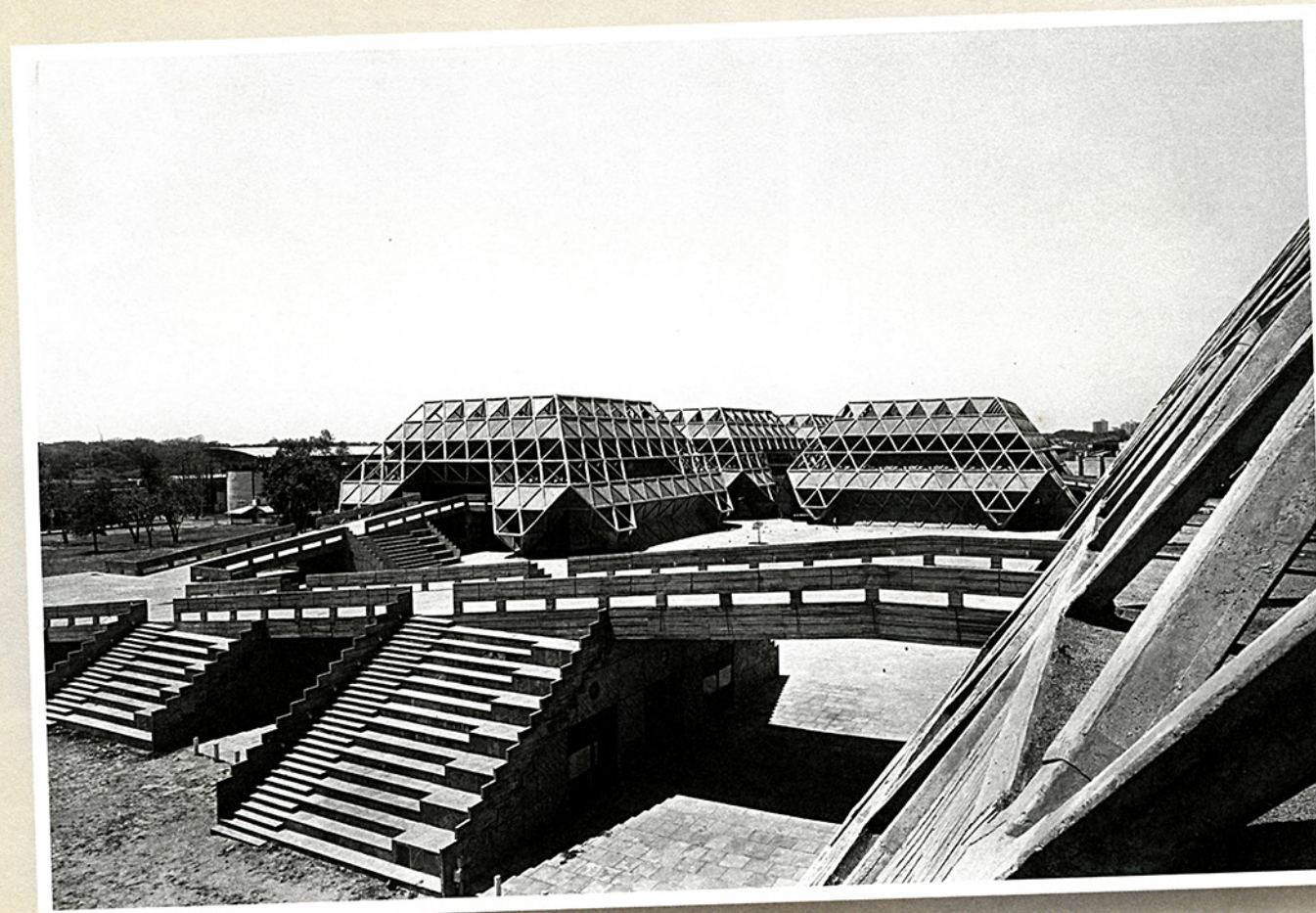
and capture the sense of space within these structures. He also understood the importance of light as it shifted over volume and form. His clean and clear Modernist vision matched the Modernist architecture these architects were helping create in Delhi.

In the 1950s, many of the buildings were simpler, more cheaply constructed and functional. In the early 1960s, they started becoming more expressive with the use of cement, ceramic jalis and rough granite (Joseph Allen Stein's India International Centre and Habib Rahman's Rabindra Bhavan, for example). An entire exhibit could be made featuring the staircases that



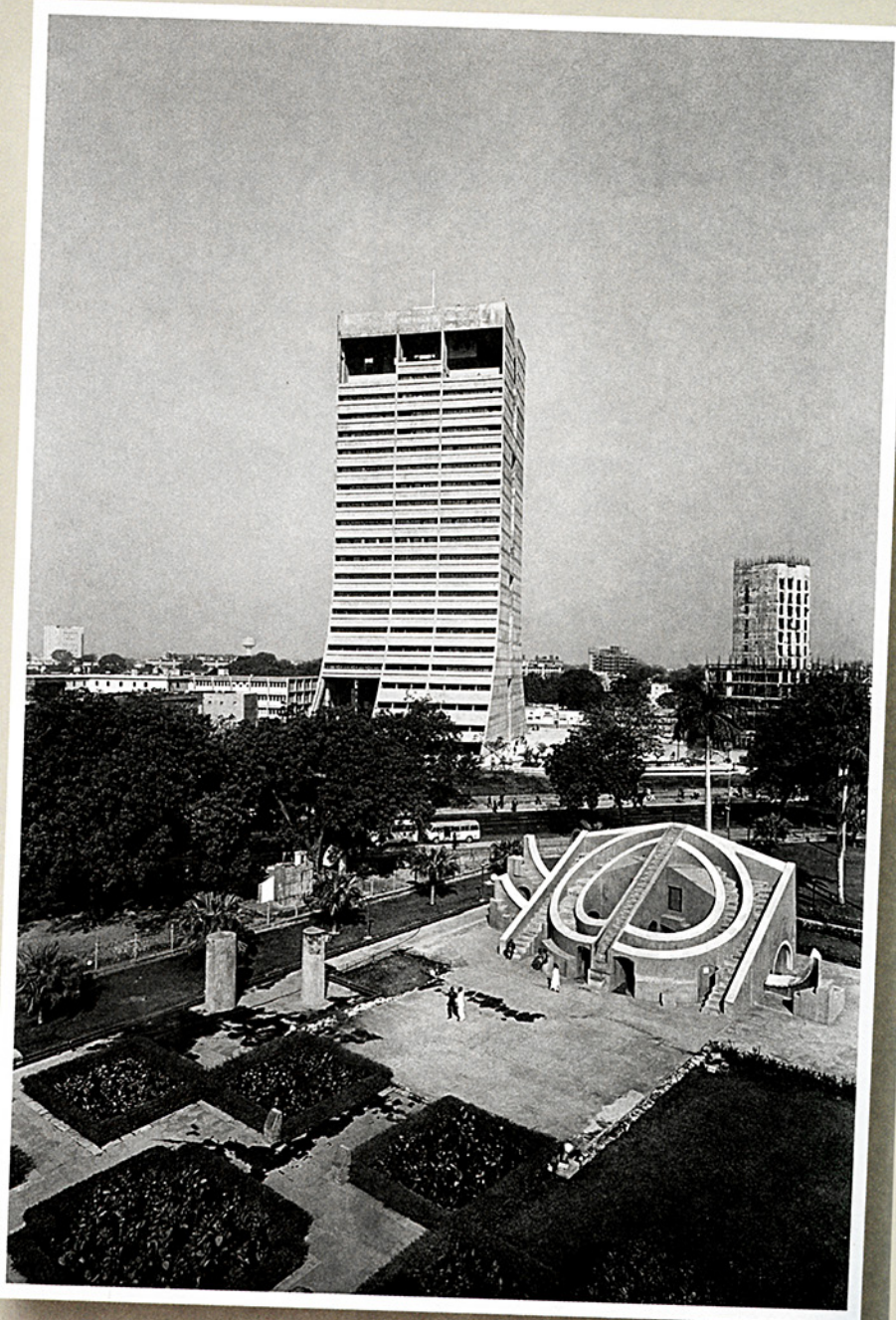
Madan Mahatta.
Photograph by
Ram Rahman. 2012.

Madan Mahatta. *Hall of Nations*.
Architect: Raj Rewal. 1974.



Mahatta photographed. The ensemble of steps in J.K.Chowdhury's Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi is beautifully captured in all its graphic, sculptural vitality by Mahatta's lens. The staircases allowed the architects to push their structural visions to their limits and express their philosophy that practical design can go beyond the mundane into an aesthetic realm. See the stairs in Kuldip Singh's NDMC headquarters, Raj Rewal's Hall of Nations, J.K. Chowdhury's IIT buildings, Joseph Allen Stein's Ford Foundation and Habib Rahman's WHO buildings. Indeed, Rewal's Nehru Pavilion with its pyramid structure is almost all stairs, an integral part of its spatial configuration.

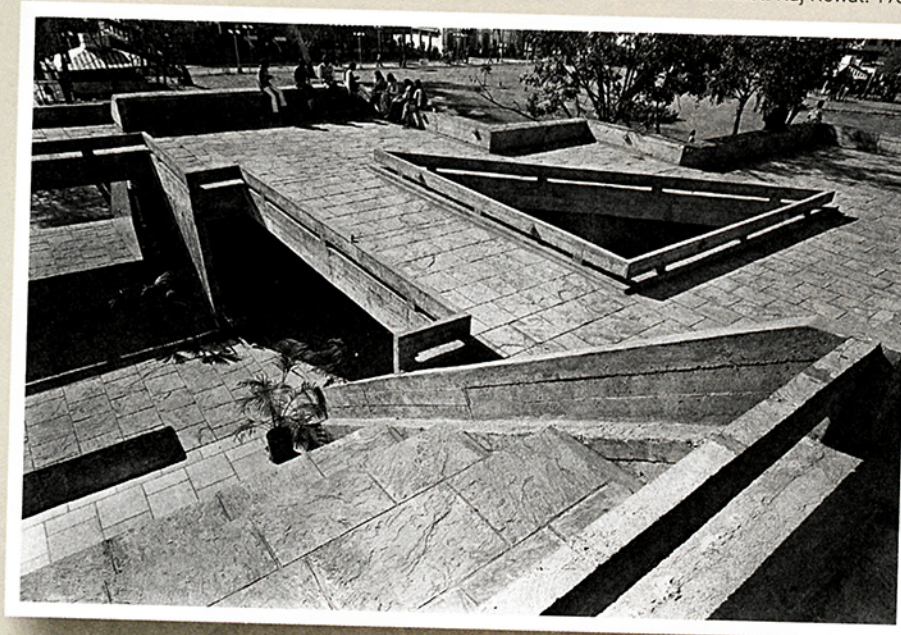
Mahatta's archives are a vivid reminder of a time when the government (many of the buildings were commissioned by state agencies) and the political class believed that architecture had a symbolic and a hugely important role in creating and embodying the visionary dreams of a new nation aspiring to build a democracy with Indian



Madan Mahatta. New Delhi Municipal Council building/ Palika Centre (in the background) with Jantar Mantar in the foreground. Architect: Kuldip Singh. 1983.



Top: Madan Mahatta. Joseph Allen Stein walking up the staircase, Ford Foundation office. Architect: Joseph Allen Stein. 1968.
Bottom: Madan Mahatta. Nehru Pavilion. Architect: Raj Rewal. 1985.



roots. This is in stark contrast to our recent past, where not a single structure built for the enormously expensive Commonwealth Games was designed by an Indian architect. Gurgaon – the newest of the Delhis – is probably the crassest example of the physical manifestation of corporate greed and its globalized multi-national ambition so clearly visible in architecture today.

Excerpted from the essay *Delhi Modern: The Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta* © Ram Rahman, 2012. Photoink Gallery, New Delhi.