

Capital formation

Madan Mahatta's photographs of Delhi's architectural brilliance go a long way in adding a much needed chapter to the city's contemporary history, and that of the country

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DELHI'S ARCHITECTURAL heritage spawns almost a millennium. Through its many rise and fall, ups and downs, ruins of a heartbreakingly enthralling fairytale are sprinkled across the capital. But for the history books and even for architecture manuals, the pages end, maybe with an afterword, with the last spate of building activity done by the British to create New Delhi. The post-independence architecture of the Delhi, primarily between the 1950s and 80s, which gave flight to the Nehruvian vision for the city, and the country, is all but missing, struggling to find its rightful place in the story of Delhi and in the minds of its inhabitants. It was this sentiment that pushed photographer and artist Ram Rahman to conceive and execute the exhibition *Delhi Modern: The Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta*, on at Photoink gallery.

Madan Mahatta who? The name might not be of much recall value for art aficionados. However, for most who have grown up in Delhi of the yesteryear, the surname Mahatta rings a bell as a prolific photography studio located in Connaught Place. While Nehru's grand architectural plan of building the capital beyond what the British had done and undone was taking shape, Madan Mahatta, the photographer, was out there capturing the vignettes of an ancient country's infant steps towards a modern nation state through its new institutions. "The time frame that we capture through this exhibition is of immense importance for the city as well as the country. Delhi became the focus of renaissance in India. It was an important time for Indian modernism and nothing exemplifies it better than the kind of buildings that were constructed in Delhi at that time," says Rahman, who himself is an architectural photographer and the son of Habib Rahman, one of India's most prolific architects whose work contributed much to the city's architecture during the said period.

Spread across the walls of the

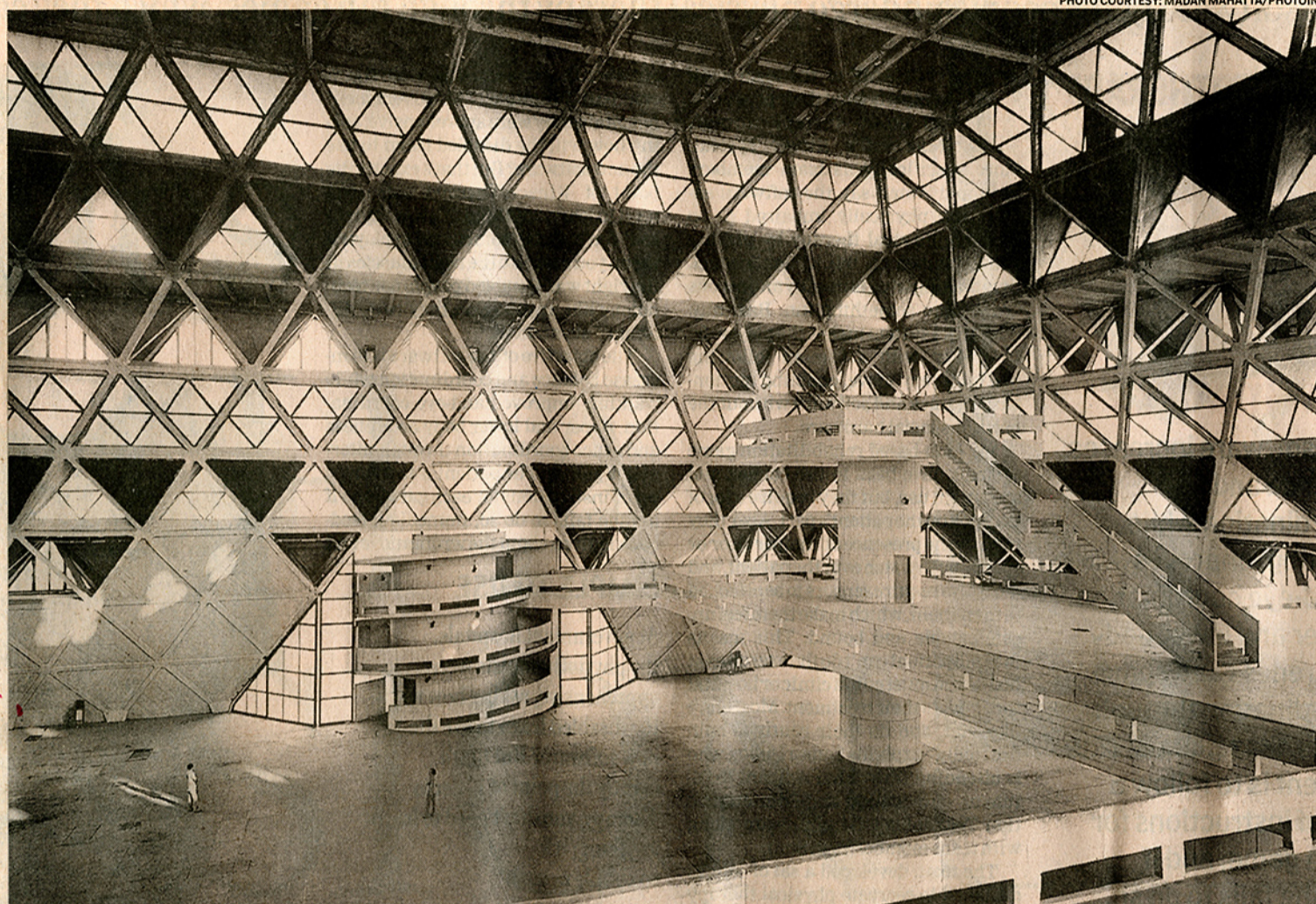


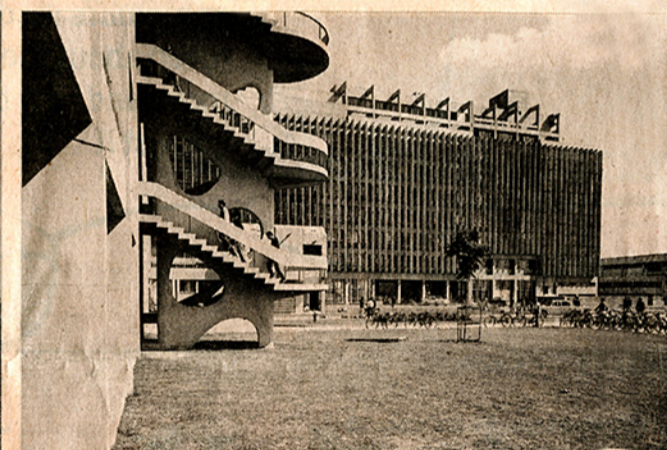
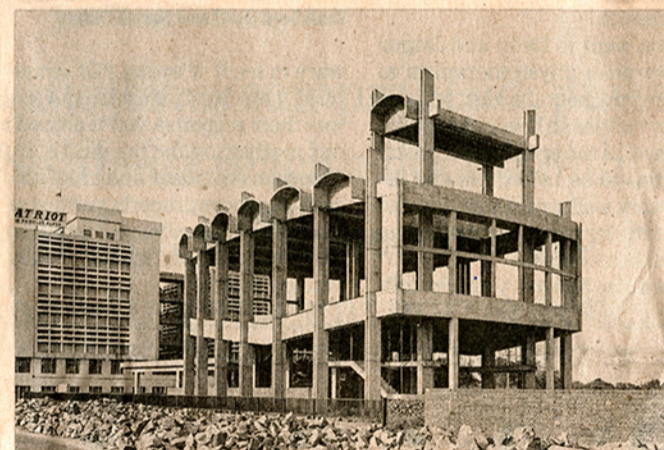
PHOTO COURTESY: MADAN MAHATTA/PHOTOINK

Kuldip Singh, and Ranjit Sabhiki. And unknowingly he was creating a large vault of negatives chronicling this brick-by-brick development. Thankfully, the negatives were well preserved. "Madan himself was surprised. He frankly never aspired to be known as a fine art photographer. But his work has been so fine, that it deserves its rightful due," says Rahman, who took months to cull out the pictures for this exhibition from the heaps of negatives that Mahatta has.

As the shades of Delhi changed over the past few decades, these buildings have stood witness to the transformation of a city, at times being transformed with it, at times being left behind only to be invoked as retrospective thoughts. But in that course, the architecture that was once Delhi modern hasn't got its due. "We don't recognise these buildings as part of our architectural heritage, in spite of them being inspirational works of art and the role they played and still do in the life of the city. Other global cities have recognised contemporary architecture as heritage and it's just appalling that we lack the sensitivity to recognise the cultural importance of these buildings," says Rahman.

And have we somewhere, along the way, lost that architectural ge-

Left: Hall of Nations, 1985 (architect: Raj Rewal)



Clockwise from below: India International Centre, 1962 (architect: Joseph Allen Stein); Gandhi Memorial Hall (formerly Pyare Lal Bhawan), 1962 (architect: Kanvinde & Rai); Ashoka Hotel, 1957 (architect: BE Doctor); staircase of a teaching block with the main building in the background, IIT-Delhi, 1968 (architect: JK Chowdhury)



gallery are monochromatic frames of structures that have more or less defined life in the city. They might not be monuments in public perception, but for Rahman, they're certainly monumental. From the elegant Ford Foundation office, the iconic Ashoka Hotel, India International Centre (IIC), to the outright whacky (for those times) Hall of Nations of the Pragati Maidan, Lotus Temple, Asian Games Village, and the imposing IIT Delhi, the story is of how they were built and how they once stood sans the clutter of 21st century Delhi.

Mahatta, who just turned 80, worked with the most admired names in architecture, who shaped the city, capturing their work in its formative stages. These included the likes of Achyut Kanvinde, Habib Rahman, Joseph Allen Stein, Raj Rewal, Jasbir Sawhney, JK Chowdhury,

nius that the exhibition brings to the fore? "The kind of state sponsorship that was given to young architects in the India of the '50s, '60s and '70s is non-existent now. Now people treat architecture as a commodity that can be bought. We see absolutely no cultural vision for physical infrastructure now. The way architects were nurtured by Nehru and others in those times seems like a dream," responds Rahman, who is unabated in his criticism of the way many of these structures are being altered in the name of upgrades.

There is frankly no point in guessing and second guessing the future of architecture and its identity in the time to come. But for Delhi, whose history can be seamlessly linked to its architectural heritage, there is a gaping hole that needs to be filled, for there did once exist a Delhi modern. One just needs to look beyond the clutter.