

Capital's landmark buildings well captured and preserved....

Shubhomoy Sikdar

NEW DELHI: "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us...." So said Winston Churchill.

For a city which has been built and rebuilt over centuries, Delhi's architectural landscape offers a rich history and a glorious range of designs to be explored by photographers. Surprisingly over the years not many works on "architectural photography" have been publicly displayed.

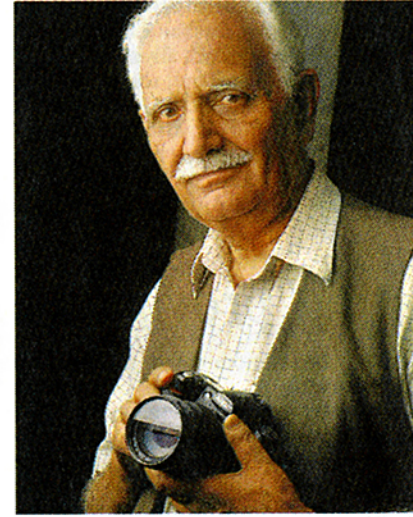
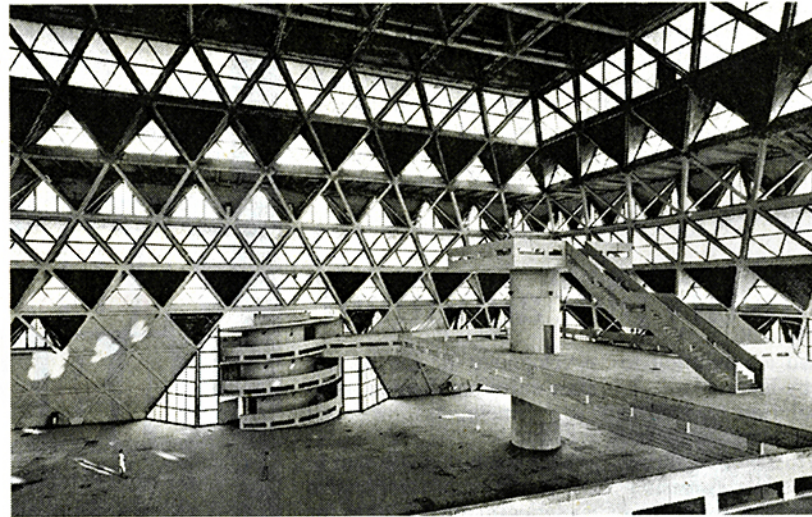
Now there is one in the genre by veteran photographer Madan Mahatta, who has captured a host of buildings constructed in the Capital between the late 1950s and the mid-1980s. Titled 'Delhi Modern: The architectural photographs of Madan Mahatta', the exhibition at Photoink in Jhandewalan that opened on April 26 will continue up to June 21.

Ram Rahman, the curator of the exhibition and a photographer himself, believes Mr. Mahatta's photos "...are not only a landmark in our

photographic history, but also possibly the best document of an extremely important and fertile period in our architectural history".

The photographs, according to Mr. Rahman, are a vivid reminder of a time when the government (many of these were commissioned by State agencies who were one of the biggest builders at that time) and the political class still believed that architecture had a symbolic and hugely important part in creating and physically embodying the visionary dreams of a new nation aspiring to build a democracy with Indian roots.

Even at the ripe age of 75, Mr. Mahatta, the owner of the famous Mahatta Studios in Connaught Place, is palpably excited about the public display of his works. He shares the experiences he accumulated while capturing through his viewfinder angles and avenues of many a concrete landmark. Though only his architectural pursuits are going to be on display, the seasoned photographer is as



PRESERVED FOR POSTERITY: Veteran photographer Madan Mahatta's fascinating black-and-white pictures that bring alive Delhi's architectural beauty from the late 1950s to mid-1980s are on display at Photoink in Jhandewalan.

animated about the moments of history that he lived through, capturing their images in his camera for posterity. He recalls how he climbed on top of India Gate to shoot Jawaharlal Nehru's funeral procession in 1964,

and when he was invited to Bhutan to photograph the coronation ceremony of the king.

Mr. Mahatta's enthusiasm is as catching and fetching as the 70 architectural photo prints that will be on display

from this week.

All black-and-white, with tones that speak of an expert hand, the snapshots include buildings such as the New Delhi Municipal Corporation, the Life Insurance Corporation of India, the World

Health Organisation, the Hall of Nations, India Habitat Centre, and even the interiors of the Escorts factory.

His work from the '50s to the '80s features other interesting structures like Asiad Village, the Syrian Orthodox

church, an aerial view of the Palika Parking spot, various blocks of IIT-Delhi, and some residential areas.

Reminiscing about his early days, Mr. Mahatta goes back to the early 1950s and recounts his close association with the buildings that he photographed and the architects who designed them. "Most of the publicity was through word of mouth". He fondly remembers architects of iconic buildings: Joseph Allen Stein -- who conceived India International Centre and India Habitat Centre -- and others including Edward Stone, Habib Rahman, C.P. Kukreja, Kuldip Singh, Raj Rewal, Ram Sharma, and Charles Correa. His close association with some of the architects reflects in the exhibition where photographs show J.A. Stein climbing up the stairs of the Ford Foundation building, architect Raj Rewal's house and a picture of Ram Sharma.

Though Mr. Mahatta is known for taking photographs of buildings only after

they were completed, he has taken a few when they were under construction. One of the toughest challenges he faced was while shooting high-rise constructions. "Tilting the camera made the buildings converge with the skyline, resulting in an exaggerated view," he explains.

On how architectural design has changed in Delhi over the years, the septuagenarian says, "It's all vertical now. Earlier it was mostly horizontal. The spaces which were earlier spread out have shrunk." However, he does not take on architectural assignments anymore. The last major project he handled was the Parliament Library for architect Raj Rewal.

Although he has been using colour in photography since the very start of his career, it is black-and-white that he finds more fascinating to work with. "Black-and-White photography is the translation of colour using light and doing that needs a lot of skill." And this is one of the many skills Mr. Mahatta displays.