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The DLF Centre in Delhi designed by architects Ranjit Sabikhi and Hafeez Contractor

Distilled Elegance

The architects and designers of the DLF Centre in Delhi are proving that beauty is not just glass skin deep.

Text: Mina Singh Photographs: Samar Jodha



*Left:
Gridded concave facade
of imported reflecting
glass, framed in grey
Indian granite edged
with black marble.*

*Right:
Black, white and grey —
colours of the entrance
to the DLF Centre — are
given a distinctive touch
by decorative panels of
exquisitely grained
Italian marble.*



One of the founders of the modern movement in western architecture, Mies Van der Rohe, said 'less is more'. In less wealthy nations like India his dictum has meant paying more for what are assumed to be uncomplicated, modern movement buildings—skyscrapers with glass walls and a geometric simplicity of plan and form, representative of the so-called technological age in India.

New Delhi's spankiest new office building, the DLF Centre, has cost more than most (above Rs 24 crores for the construction alone). Its gleaming, gridded, glass-walled, geometric aesthetics reflects the profligacy of the 1990s.

'We wanted a showcase building which would compare favourably with any corporate office building abroad,' says K P Singh, Managing Director of the DLF conglomerate, India's largest in real estate





*Facing page:
Entrance lobby of the
DLF Centre: a
magnificent chandelier
sheds its glow on the
inlaid Italian
marble flooring.*

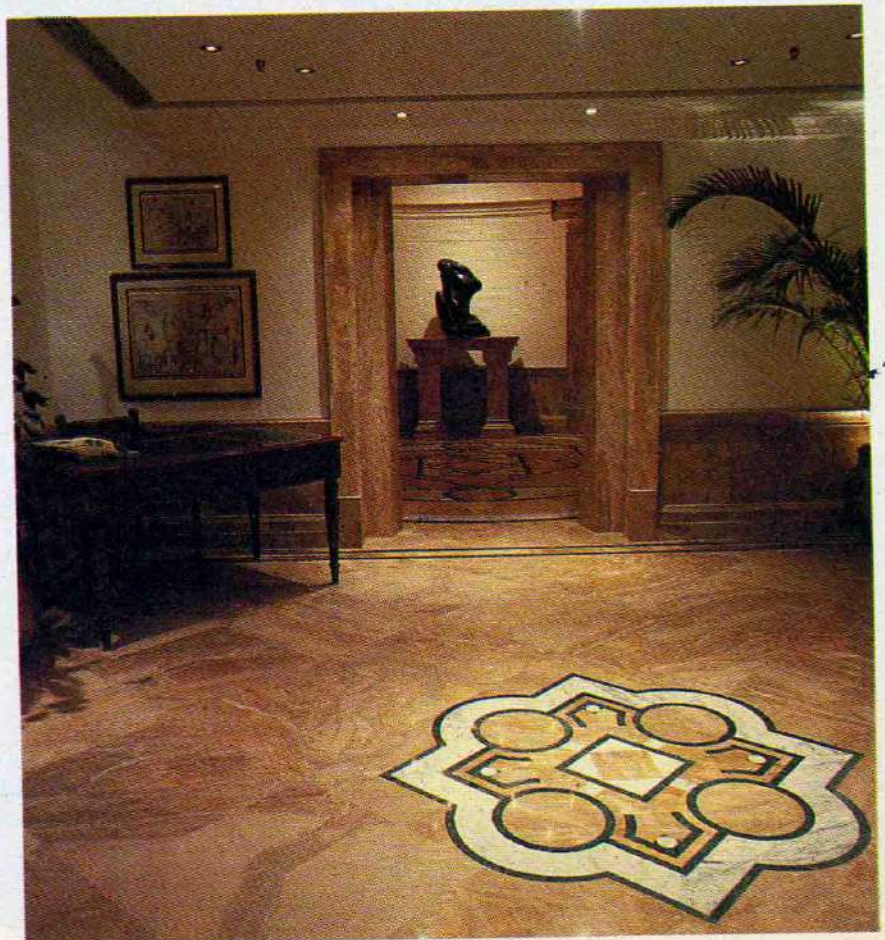
*A narrow passage to the
inner lobby is enlivened
by inlaid marble
flooring, an antique
sculpture, a Lutyens-
inspired console and
prints by M F Husain.*

*Below:
Reception area in the
inner lobby. Prints
dating back to the
British Raj, antique
brass planters and a
contemporary sculpture
by Seema add class.*

and land development, pioneered by Delhi's legendary land developer and coloniser Chaudhary Raghvendra Singh.

The 1.14 acre plot, adjacent to the historic Jantar Mantar and in close proximity to the LIC Building designed by Charles Correa, once housed DLF's barrack-like white-washed office called Narindra Place. It was demolished in 1988, and by 1991, when the ten floors of the new building were clad in reflecting glass, Delhiites groaned—the Onida slogan said it all: neighbour's envy, owner's pride.

Some envied and others felt like hurling stones—it seemed to be a mimicry of the assumed high-tech look of the adjacent 1986 LIC Building: a jump on the glass wall bandwagon. It was impossible that any machine image, of prefabricated and standardised building materials such as glass and steel, could sit easily next to the curious structures of the 18th century Jantar Mantar. Moreover, its assimilation of its surroundings would have to include



the circular, colonnaded, colonial Connaught Place—no small task for DLF and its team of architect Ranjit Sabikhi, designers Sunita Kohli, Deepak Hazari and Rajiv Shroff, and that master of a 101 dazzling 'looks' for corporate and residential towers, Hafeez Contractor.

'DLF is poised for new and even bigger developments in Delhi, Haryana and UP—we wanted that our corporate office should express our new profile. Each detail of this building, from the selection of the

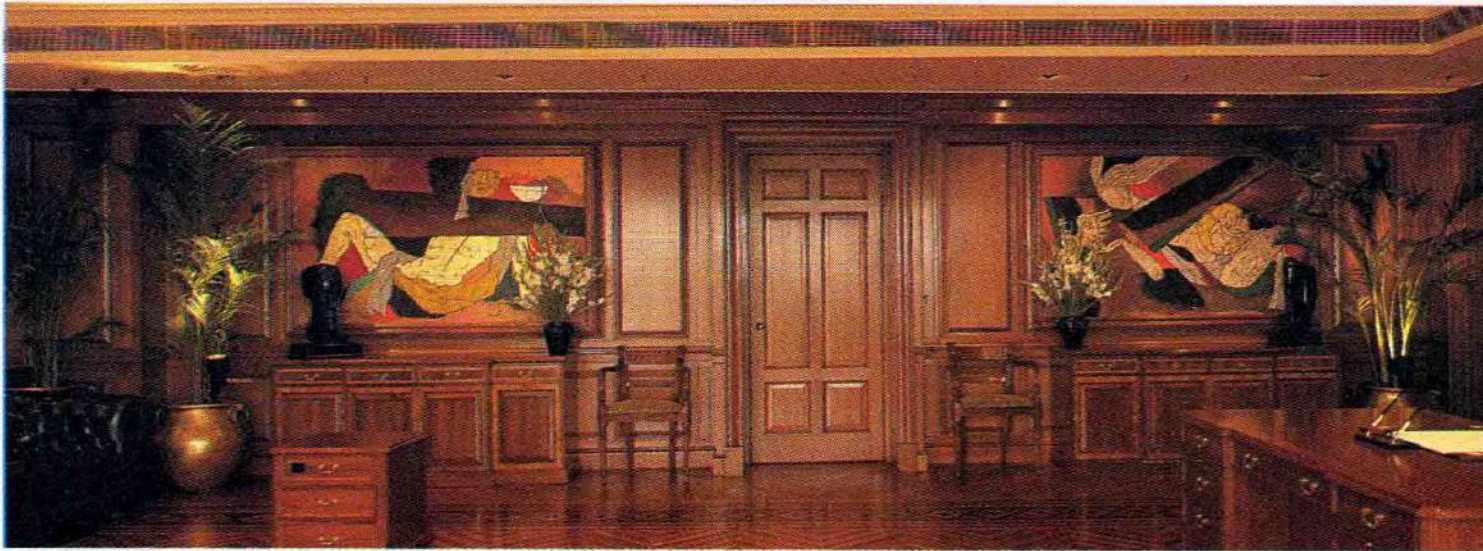
materials used in the facade to the layout of each of the 12 offices in the building, was supervised by us to show what we are capable of building,' adds K P Singh, who is the Honorary Consul-General of Monaco. The in-house team included his son, Rajiv Singh, Deputy Managing Director and a whole host of DLF personnel led by Senior Project Manager, Rajiv Malhotra.

At the top of the building, above the Who's Who of the corporate world—Rolls Royce,

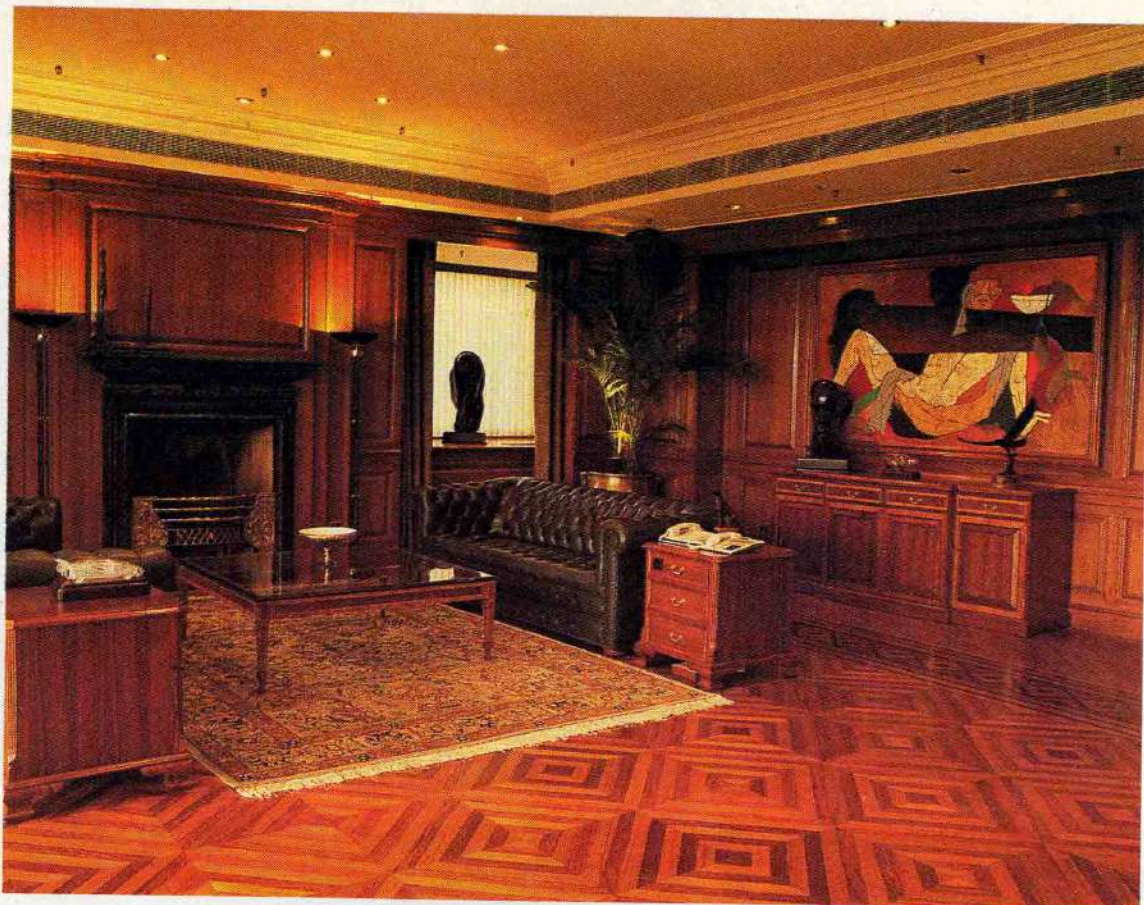
The office of the Managing Director and Consulate of Monaco, K P Singh, who is also the Consul-General of Monaco, has been provided a stupendous view of New Delhi south of Connaught Place and of the Jantar Mantar, by architect Ranjit Sabikhi. The furniture is designed by Sunita Kohli.



Two of M F Husain 's best paintings of the '90s adorn the Burma teak panelled walls of the office. They depict scenes from the life of Christ and Buddha. The sculptured heads are by Vobra.



*Informal seating area
in the Managing
Director's office.*



Nestle, British Airways, ABN-Amro Bank—are the corporate offices of DLF Universal and the Consulate of Monaco. This position of grandeur is topped by a magnificent 10 m x 10 m ceiling mural in oils by M F Husain above the reception. It is titled 'Delhi', and depicts, in the figure of a beautiful woman who is surrounded by Delhi's familiar architectural landmarks, the story of Delhi's mingled culture and co-existing religions.

Bay-width, ceiling-height, glass walls provide a stunning view of Lutyens's Delhi, south of Connaught Circus. The new crop of high-rise office buildings are tucked away out of view in this magnificently planned outlook. The dark dome of the Rashtrapati Bhavan and the gold dome of Gurudwara Bangla Sahib shimmer in their own auras—vertically, the eye moves from the sky to the sun-dial of the Jantar Mantar, giving the Chairman and the MD an exhilarating view of the observatories, such as was denied even Maharajah Jai Singh.

In this location, the interior has been made meaningful by period furniture bearing

Sunita Kohli's stamp of refined detailing and finishing. Burma teak panelling, exquisite parquet and inlaid marble flooring and two large oil paintings by Husain, drawing their inspiration from the lives of Christ and Buddha, perhaps Husain's current best, combine to create an office of rare, if traditional, distinction.

The most successful offices and buildings are those in which the design and furnishings are restricted to a selected range of materials, finishes and colour. This gives a certain visual clarity and consistency as in the case of the DLF Centre. The use of grey, black and white throughout the facade and the reception and lift lobby areas gives the building its distinctive character.

'You see how the grey trunks of the palm trees in Jantar Mantar are reflected in the grey granite and the glass of the building—that's the kind of fine touch I wanted,' pointed out K P Singh. And that's what he got, illustrating Mies's other dictum 'God is in the details'. □