Make it new

A photo exhibition looks at the life and landscape of Delhi’s elites, Aayush Soni reports.

Working on assignments for Newsweek and London’s Sunday Times, Findlay Kember travelled constantly and quickly—his professional trips around South Asia never lasted for more than a week. The opportunity to spend time on a subject only presented itself in 2008, when he was posted in Delhi as photo editor for Agence-France Presse. Over the next year, Kember shot at the Metro, backstage at fashion shows, and in front of glass-and-steel buildings to chronicle the new landscape of the city.

Twenty-three of these images will be exhibited as part of New Delhi at the India International Centre. Kember tells Time Out about why he chose to chronicle the change “taking place right in front of my doorstep.”

The title of your exhibition is intriguing. How new is New Delhi?
The city is evolving each and every day. The city has historically shifted geographically south and 20 years from now, New Delhi as we know it, India Gate to GK-I, will emerge and be the old New Delhi, and Gurgaon can be the new New Delhi. Or someone can come up with a different term for another generation.

Field trip

A bus tour within Delhi will make you see red—and green, says Aayush Soni.

Around the time of the Commonwealth Games, the Delhi government started the Hop-On Hop-Off (HOHO) bus service. The idea was to take visitors on a tour of the city’s landmarks in an air-conditioned bus. One of the places it would pass was Rajghat, Mahatma Gandhi’s cremation ground, where the tour operator gave passengers a quick history lesson about the Indian freedom struggle. What he didn’t talk about was the condition of the Yamuna river right behind it.

That task will fall to Govind Singh, an environmentalist and the director of the Delhi Greens NGO. This fortnight, he conducts an eco-tour on a Delhi Transport Corporation bus, which includes a visit to the Wazirabad barrage to highlight the dire pollution of the river. Singh began conducting Urban Eco-Tours in Delhi in 2008, when he realised that participation in Delhi Greens’ initiatives was low because Dilliwalas had no sense of ownership over their city or its natural heritage. Earlier tours have visited Agrasen ki Baoli, which is now bone-dry, or the Aravalli biodiversity park, where he spotlights the region’s natural resources and ecosystems. “After they attended the tour, participants understood the problems facing Delhi’s natural resources and the response to our efforts got better,” Singh said.

This edition of the Urban Eco-Tour is limited to North Delhi, which means that even if some locations are pretty, the stories behind them will be especially ugly. Apart from the Yamuna banks, the tour will visit the Northern Ridge, where participants will go on a ramble and participate in a symbolic clean-up, and an urban farm in Majnu ka Tila, where the food the families rely on is grown in contaminated soil.

It isn’t just citizens who have responded positively to Singh’s initiative, but also the Delhi government. “Our first eco-tour was conducted with support from the government’s department of environment,” Singh said. “They advertised the tour on our behalf in the Indian Express.” Delhi Greens has now tied up with the Earth Day Network and this Urban Eco-Tour will commemorate international earth day. “Our previous eco-tours didn’t have any such associations and still 200 people signed up for them,” Singh said. “But people are more aware on certain days than on others, so while Earth Day may be symbolic, it reinforces the fact that there’s something called a planet.”

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