



## Architectural Photography — Creative Empathy

by Kirk Gittings

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Amongst commercial photographic specialties, architectural photography confronts unique aesthetic challenges. These challenges revolve around the central point that *no other genre in commercial photography is so totally preoccupied with the interpretation of another art form*. As a result a common tendency amongst students and novices is to shy away from highly personal interpretation, opting instead for documentation. However, mere documents are rarely effective at truly illustrating the spirit or essence of architecture. To be successful the architectural photograph must recreate not just a visual representation of a structure but *recreate the essential experience of three-dimensional form and mass within the seemingly limited confines of a two-dimensional rectangular image*. The photographer must translate one aesthetic language into another. This is certainly not an easy task.

Such translation cannot be effectively achieved mechanically through a distanced documentary or literal description of a building, which "lets the architecture speak for itself." The results are either lifeless or awkward, much like what happens when someone in a literal manner attempts to translate poetry into a foreign language. The power of the original piece is lost.

Students learning architectural photography (particularly students of architecture) often argue that in interpreting design one runs the risk of misinterpreting the design according to one's own whims and creating images which more reflect the pre-occupations of the photographer than truly reflecting the intrinsic strengths of the design. They say it is better (safer?) and more ethical to distance oneself and let the architecture stand on its own. Seemingly without exception, students representing this argument turn out the duller work. Their images emasculate the spirit of architectural form and metaphor. Certainly documents are useful and necessary, but the most successful images of architecture, the "quintessential images" are those that are the most visually interesting—reflecting a photographer's personal vision of design.

There is, of course, a danger in going too far with personal interpretation. It is possible to create an image which is simply too far removed from the subject to effectively illustrate it; successful perhaps as a photographic work of art, but a failure at illustrating the essence of a particular work of architecture. In capturing the essence of a structure one must maintain what Richard Pare has called "empathy" between the architecture and the photograph<sup>1</sup>.

Empathy can largely be seen in images where the photographic style is *formally resonant* of the architectural style. In other words, if the building is Modernist, premised on the orchestration of abstract masses and geometric form, then the image must photographically emphasize that by addressing the formal qualities of the image in a like manner. Only by focusing in on the central aesthetic issues of the architecture, emphasizing or even exaggerating them, can one photographically animate those issues. Therefore, for an architectural photograph to be genuinely effective it must fulfill two seemingly contradictory imperatives—passionately interpret while remaining aesthetically faithful to the design. The power of the interpretation is dependent on the sensitivity and creativity of a photographer's vision, whereas empathy is achieved by aesthetically premising the style of the photograph on the style of the architecture. A few images from my files may serve to illustrate the above points.

## A Modernist Approach

From a photographer's perspective it may be said that Modern architecture is largely a formalist pursuit.<sup>2</sup> That is, a pursuit in quest of powerful form for its own sake abstracted from human, historical, or metaphorical reference. The key here is *abstract form*, and the photographer's task is to transform the spirit of the subject's form and mass into a photographic equivalent. The form of the subject must be conceived as essentially *plastic* in that it can be manipulated photographically by careful editing (selection of

camera position, framing, etc.) lighting (choice of time of day, etc. to emphasize planes or create negative space), and controlled distortion through choice of lens. One starts with what exists but is not dependent on it. This manipulation is not only possible but necessary if one is to create exciting images.

Figures 1 and 2 are some of the more successful images of Late-Modern architecture in my files. The design is by Harry Weese and Associates of Chicago. Distinguished by exaggerated angles and "extravagantly sculptural" form and mass, this firm's designs can be a sheer joy to work with photographically.<sup>3</sup> This joy is found in the simple revelation of exciting form on the ground glass.

Figure 1 was first attempted from a greater distance with a 210mm lens (on a 4x5), but the forms were compressed and static. By moving in with a wide angle lens (90mm), the curve of the rim of the pool became a great sweeping gesture against the expansive planes of the building. More than just a simple device to lead the eye into the image, the rim of the pool and the dark plane of water it contains became a key formal element in the overall balance of the image, *assuming much more significance than in the actual building design*. However the exaggeration of that rim is valid because it accentuates the *spirit* of the design. It visually forces a recurrent theme in the building curve vs. angle. Through exaggeration and distortion, i.e. interpretation, a more effective illustration is achieved.

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## Photographing Post-Modern architecture is as much an emotional and intellectual exercise as it is visual.

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Though somewhat different in feel, Figure 2 takes a similar approach as Figure 1. With the perspective exaggeration of a wide angle lens (90mm), the structure of the atrium becomes a dynamic overlay on the building. The effect is a series of powerful trapezoidal shapes framing equally powerful fragments of the exterior. It was possible in a literal manner to frame the same segment of the exterior from outside the atrium, but the overlay of the grid heightens the Modern vocabulary of the image, creating a much more dynamic and graphic view of the exterior. Again, through a unique photographic translation of the building, an image is created which vivifies the feel of the design rather than just documenting its outward appearance.

## Post-Modernism

A contemporary style of architecture which demands a very different photographic response is Post-Modernism. Post-Modernism has commonly been described as architecture with historic style reference and period metaphors.<sup>4</sup>

As opposed to Modernism's pre-occupation with pure abstraction, Post-Modernism relies on references to human experience and scale. The photographer, in attempting to effectively illustrate Post-Modern design must then use the medium to evoke the ambience of the suggested historic references and related metaphors.

Figure 3, of the offices of Holmes, Sabatini, Smith and Eeds Architects, is an effective example of Post-Modern architecture. With rather whimsical references to Greek architecture, this interior space exudes a lively Tongue-in-Cheek ambience of classic grandeur. Photographically it called for theatrical lighting and symmetrical framing. The lighting adds to the mystery where the symmetry hints at Greek order. The necessary ambience is created in the image by paying attention to such nuances. However if the image had been left at that, without some intimation of humor, it



would appear pretentious. Hence the palms and directors chairs are included to secondarily relieve the heavy drama and add a touch of humor.

In a related vein is Westwork Architect's "Duncan House," an example of Post-Modern architecture with regional historic references; specifically Pueblo Indian art motifs and architecture. Again at issue here is not abstract form (though details of the house can be and were dealt with in that way) but the ambience of ancient ritual suggested by the architects through an imaginative blend of those ancient motifs.

In Figure 4 the doorway is derived from a weaving motif and the overhang from the thunderbird symbol. By juxtaposing the two in one image, the overhang takes on the anthropomorphic presence of a guardian spirit protecting the entrance to some enigmatic and perhaps ritual structure. Hence an appropriate ambience is created in the photograph by treating design details as interacting entities. The historical references are enlivened by that ambience.

Photographing Post-Modern architecture is as much an emotional and intellectual exercise as it is visual. In addition to paying attention to effective composition, etc. one must also bring to life the ideas in the architecture. This requires a qualitatively different mindset than when photographing Modern architecture. Students in particular have extreme difficulty shifting rapidly between these different styles of architecture. This is particularly acute when they do not consciously proceed from an understanding of a central aesthetic premise of a particular architectural style.

## Conclusion

As the illustrations in this article suggest, architectural styles today are rampantly diverse. The resulting aesthetic demands on photographers are great. Not only must one have a unique personal style, but that style must be flexible and adaptable to be sensitive to diverse and changing architectural styles. While all commercial photography requires flexible vision, architectural photography seems to be unique because it requires from us both creativity as well as empathy for the *art* that is our subject. As a starting point we must understand the aesthetic concerns of our clients work. This understanding begins in discussions with the client and from thorough knowledge about the history and current practice of architectural design. But that initial knowledge merely sets the tone, establishes the basic syntax of the photography. From there in each particular situation an exciting photographic solution must be found. These solutions don't just magically erupt from ones imagination, more often they are drawn from past visual experience. The greater and more diverse that experience, the better prepared one is for solving new problems. In this regard it seems that students with a firm foundation in the history of visual art are the best prepared. Carrying around in you head images by the likes of artists such as Turner, Joseph Stella, Mondrian or Michaelangelo would certainly help one solve diverse visual problems, as they arise. More often than not there is always a historical precedent, which can be adapted to both the situation at hand and one's individual vision. When most effective this adaption takes place on a largely subconscious level, and is not used in a cookbook fashion.

What has always separated the run-of-the-mill architectural photographer from masters like Ezra Stoller, Ken Hedrich or Julius Shulman is a balance of creativity and empathy with the design. (These sentinel figures are largely associated with Modern Architecture). In addition to that balance, today's situation requires a tremendous flexibility coupled with an extensive visual knowledge base. Perhaps as no time in recent history has architectural photography been as challenging or stimulating. K.G.



### Footnotes

1. Richard Pare, *Photography and Architecture 1839-1939* (Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1982), p. 26
2. Charles Jencks, *Architecture Today* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1982) p. 16
3. Robert Sobieszek, *The Architectural Photography of Hedrich-Blessing* (Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York 1984), p. 8
4. Jencks, *Architecture Today*, p. 16

*Architectural Photography: Creative Empathy*, by Kirk Gittings.

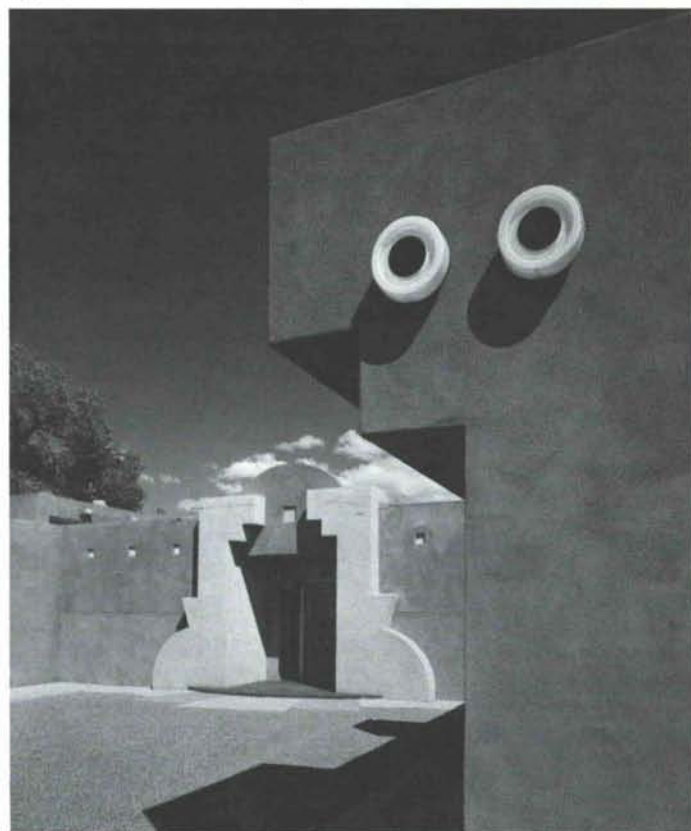


Figure 1, Page 10. First National Bank by Harry Weese and Associates, Chicago (from color original). © 1980 Kirk Gittings/SYNTAX.

Figure 2, Left. View from the atrium of First National Bank. © 1984 Kirk Gittings/SYNTAX.

Figure 3, Above. Offices of architects Holmes, Sabatini, Smith and Eeds (from color original). © 1985 Kirk Gittings/SYNTAX.

Figure 4, Below. The "Duncan House" by Westwork Architects. © 1984 Kirk Gittings/SYNTAX.



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o. Kirk Gittings, owner/photographer of Syntax Productions, is one of the  
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