An Interview with Ezra Stoller

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Ezra Stoller's 'first photograph that ever amounted to anything' was of Alvar Aalto's Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Aalto was just forty-one years old at the time and soon he - like Gropius, Breuer, Mies, Mendelsohn and so many other German architects and artists - would escape the war in Europe by moving to America. Most of them stayed on, preaching their message in major universities, and finding in this 'land of hyper-reality' fertile ground for the manifestation of their architectural beliefs. They and their followers -together with the immigrants Saarinen and Kahn and, most importantly, the all-American master Frank Lloyd Wright - furnished Ezra Stoller, himself the son of immigrant parents, with an architecture and a 'way of seeing' comparable to his abundant talent and intelligence.

Through Breuer and Josef Albers, through Hans Hofmann, Walter Gropius and Moholy-Nagy, Bauhaus vision changed the way a new generation of Americans saw things. Their efforts gave birth to an always well-behaved but insistently modern American 'expressionism'; and it is within this ethos that Ezra Stoller's photography matured. 'My real learning about architecture started when I met Marcel Breuer,' Stoller claims, 'not when I was in architecture school (there I just picked up some lingo).'

Stoller subscribes to the morality of modern architecture, to its commitment to honesty and directness, to its abhorrence of a superficial prettiness. 'If I cannot resist making a pretty picture, I'll make it,' he admits, adding, 'but then I'll make the documentary one besides - which, I think, is the one more pertinent to the architecture.' As an artist, he eschews artistic interpretation of the art of modern architecture. 'Some people love the distortion, well these are the people who want to express something. I don't want to express anything; I just want to be honest to the subject. If anything is expressed the architect expressed it, I don't express it.' His subject, however, insisted that he document, while his medium demanded that he express; for how to create without expressing? Stoller adopted a style that would permit him to do both at once: the highly disciplined abstract expressionism disseminated by displaced Bauhaus masters. With a mode of expression synonymous with that of his subject, he could legitimately claim to be honest to that subject and at the same time assert without contradiction that if anything was expressed it was the architect who expressed it, not him.

Modern architecture in the postwar era thought itself to be about space, and space is what it offered as a subject for photography. Stoller photographed the space of architecture, but like the best of the abstract expressionists, he conveyed a sense of space by complementing represented space with the space of representation. His is seldom a perspectival 'tunnel' space, but rather the sensation evoked when the space of the subject coincides or is in some way aligned with the space of the medium. The illusory and the real are for a moment joined, and the irreconcilable distance between the two is made known. This dialectic is durational. It gives presence to time as well as to space. Stoller enlarges this sense of time with light. A consummate composer, he frames the most revealing view in his camera and awaits the

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1 This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in History of Photography in 1998, available online: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03087298.1998.10443866.
moment when light will transform it. He photographs not a building, but the instant of awakening, the moment of transition from dark to light. The photograph, if only briefly, is not of architecture, but of light, time and space. Such transcendence is what modernists always sought. To have captured it in his photographs is Stoller's greatest achievement.

'Ezra, you are a wizard!' So read Frank Lloyd Wright's telegram, sent to congratulate the photographer on the images he had made of an important but poorly executed Wright building. Certainly, Rye, New York is no Oz, and the interstate highway that connects my home in Philadelphia to this quiet suburban town is most definitely not paved in yellow brick; but when I went to interview the omnipotent magician who had, for such a long time, transformed so much of American architecture, I was greeted not by a remote, enigmatic presence but by a gentle, modest man, who generously spent his day talking to me in the past tense about the art that had occupied him for some fifty years. What follows is a transcription of some of that conversation, conducted in the Rye, New York home of Ezra Stoller on 6 August 1996.

You were born in the US in 1915, but weren't both of your parents immigrants from Europe?

Yes. My father was born in Russia in 1890 where early on he was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Peter Kropotkin, an influence which stayed with him his whole life and affected us all to various degrees. After short periods in France and England, he settled in the US where he met and married my mother, an immigrant from Warsaw. I was born in Chicago. Because of my father's labour union activities he was black-listed and we were forced to move to New York where my brother Claude was born in 1921.

I know that you studied architecture at New York University. Did your early education emphasize visual design and how was it that you came to take up photography?

My early education was pretty chaotic - a mélange of ultra-progressive private school and the strict rigidity of the public school. It's a wonder that I ever learned to read. Because of my lack of enthusiasm for academic subjects, I ended up in a trade school where, under the influence of a sympathetic and sensitive drawing teacher, I first experienced the phenomenon of depicting space on a two-dimensional plane. But it wasn't until much later that photography became a serious consideration even though I had been playing around with cameras and an amateur dark room.

While at architecture school I started taking on photography assignments and realized that it was much more fun dealing with finished buildings - and many of them - than sweating over a drafting board trying to bring someone else's concept to fruition (not always the greatest concept at that).

Were there specific photographers or artists whom you admired and who influenced your photography at the beginning of your career?

The most important influences? At the head of the list would be Helen, my wife, an accomplished artist who is mainly responsible for forming and informing my taste. It was she who, in 1935, introduced me to the work of Atget. Later, I spent hours in the library studying Dell & Wainwright's photographs in The Architectural Review as examples of professionalism. Still later, I was fortunate to become a friend of
Paul Strand who showed me that photography could be a fine art stripped of all its phoniness. While that is not precisely my attitude, Strand's dedication and respect for the medium was awesome. He was a great artist and it was interesting to see the functional requirements which he set for himself.

**Your career spanned from the 1930s through the 1980s and you are widely recognized as this century’s most important American architectural photographer. Do you have some sense of the ways in which photography has impacted modern architecture?**

Actually the business of photography and modern architecture is a little awkward because what constitutes good architectural photography - I don't know how to define it - it's not pictures of buildings, just as architecture is not just building. But it goes back, way back. A couple years ago we went to Rome, stayed at the American Academy in preparation, I thought, for doing a series of photographs imitating what Piranesi had done. I discovered later that somebody had already done that and that it was kind of an impossible task. But in looking at the Piranesies I realized that a lot of the elements of architectural photography were there. Piranesi was a great photographer, he just didn't have a camera.

It is useful to remember that Piranesi was a Venetian and that perspective and the stage set originated in Venice. And so you have that composition of the stage set, which occurs over and over again, you know the depth of the figures in the foreground and things like that, strong perspectives. You could hardly make better pictures than Piranesi did; not only that, but he didn't have to worry about where he was going to stand. He would decide to make a view from fifty feet up and he would just do it. And he didn't have to compete with tourists. If you want an idea of classical Rome, better look at Piranesies than to go there.

**Like yourself, Piranesi was an architect as well as a master of representation. In what way has your training in architecture affected your photography of architecture?**

There is an attention and worry about details that one learns as an architect that extended into my work in photography. I was one of the few photographers that the magazine could send out without having to send an editor. We were really concerned with a lot of things. Most photographers just go out and take a picture of it. That's all. They don't bother re-arranging the furniture. They don't bother to do this; they don't bother to do that. Consequently, they don't satisfy the client's needs.

The notion of an editor overseeing your work brings up the point that like an architect, your work was done largely on commission and for clients that must have had very specific needs. Your clients were magazines, corporations, advertising agencies, museums and architects. To what extent did these clients influence your work? For instance, did architects ever go with you when you went to photograph their work?

My expertise involves a photographic solution. I made photographs that did a job, photographs that solved the various problems of various clients.
Architects very often went with me, but they didn’t stay long. They didn’t have the patience. It takes time and you have to wait for the light. They just didn’t have the patience. Many architects will decide fairly early on that I know what I’m doing and there is nothing they can contribute.

Richard Meier was the only architect who really stayed around and he didn’t stay around very long.

Gordon Bunshaft went with me once. We went to the American Can Building and, as Bunshaft was showing me around, I'm looking and thinking, 'Jesus, how are we going to get that truck out of the way? When is the light going to be good on that? And is the landscaping going to be finished over there? And what time of day?' I am preoccupied with all of these things while we're wondering around and there seems to be no spark of any kind in me. Finally Gordon said, 'God damn it, Ezra, going around a job with you is like taking a cold shower.' And I couldn't explain what it was that I was preoccupied about.

So an architect has never come to you requesting a specific view or a certain shot, or, after you give them a photograph of their building, they push for something a little bit different, something from a specific angle, or without this or that in it?

Yes, and I listen, but not seriously since good architects are generally poor photographers. But one must be polite. When he sees the finished pictures, he's glad I did it my way.

If a journal hires you to photograph a building, do you need the architect's approval?

I assume that they have gotten the approval. It used to be that one of the reasons a journal hired me in the first place if it was a notable building was that they promised the architect that they would have me do it and that seemed to carry some weight. Frequently magazines were competing to publish first. A magazine would not publish a job that another one had published. And so they would say they would have me do it and then that would tie it up for them, that would give them the job.

There were some magazine people that I did work for who would much rather have had somebody else, but in order to get the architect on their side they had to hire me. The big problem of the magazine editor is to find stories, to find subjects, and very often the reason many of these magazines employed me was that I always seemed to photograph for the best architects, so they could get the inside track. I once had four magazine covers at one time: House Beautiful, House and Garden, Fortune and Interiors. That was unusual though.

Did you ever have the opportunity to design the page layout or to dictate how your photographs should be edited?

Never. That is a territory reserved by the art director. Magazines are always up against a time limit. And if my opinion was considered, and I said it should be redone, then it would cost more and take more time. It would delay the whole thing. So I guess they've learned not to bother.
As long as I worked with the magazines—and I worked with them more than most people—never was I called in to explain or to tell the reasoning behind the photographs. They all had that down pat; and I was told more than once that the photographer's job is just to 'illustrate our ideas'. The best writers were people like [Lewis] Mumford. But Mumford never discussed matters of aesthetics. His was a sociological criticism, and very valid, very true. He steered clear of aesthetic judgements as far as I could see.

Another thing that always happened—because the magazines were in such a hurry to get there first before another magazine could—generally, I'd have to do the job before the building was really finished. Which sometimes wasn't too bad. In my photograph of Saarinen's Milwaukee building there is a man still working on it, and in that case he becomes a part of the picture.

That short duration from substantial completion to 'move in' is critical in the making of architectural images. Le Corbusier, for example, never wanted his buildings to be photographed until they were finished. But at the time most of the buildings were houses and he also wanted them photographed before they were occupied. This left a very small window for the photographer.

But you mentioned that you often rearranged furniture before photographing, so I suppose you had a licence that French photographers in the 20s and 30s were denied, or perhaps such arrangements were more acceptable in the postwar years. Were there no objections to your 'furniture compositions'?

Alvar Aalto's pavilion for the 1939 New York's World Fair was the first picture that I took that ever amounted to anything. I remained friends with Aalto until the day he died. I never saw him very often, though, but he was a really good friend.

There was a funny instance in France. Aalto had designed a house outside of Paris for Louis Carré. Carré was a very tough guy. As an art dealer I suppose you have to be. Once, in Finland, Aalto told me, 'You must go to France and photograph that Louis Carré house'. He didn't offer to send me down. Well, when I was in Paris a couple of years later on a House Beautiful assignment, I called Carré, but he refused permission for us to come to the house. So I phoned Aalto—he never answered letters, you couldn't write to him- and obviously he called Carré and Carré sent his limousine into Paris. 'But you mustn't move anything in the house,' Carré warned us, 'Mr. Aalto had set it around.' Well, the living room was all wrong for photography. The furniture just wasn't right. And so we assured Carré that we would put it all back exactly where we found it and we moved all of the furniture and took the picture. And then, as we were about to leave, we started to move the furniture back and he said, 'No. Leave it.'

Did Aalto ever commission you directly?

No, but he got his clients to commission me, by the time he got through hypnotizing them.

Was that standard procedure?

Well, for Skidmore [Skidmore, Owings and Merrill] I would photograph for Skidmore. One time Gordon Bunshaft told me that they had decided at a partners' meeting that they were going to have me photograph
everything that they did. I didn't want to do that. Not everything was that good and then it would have tied me up so that I couldn't have done anything else. Fortunately that went by the boards very quickly. I didn't do it all, but I did manage to do most of the best jobs.

It seems to me that you managed to give a credibility, a sense of purpose and seriousness, even a sense of inevitability to the work of SOM that their buildings often lack in reality. Were you ever conscious of your ability to imbue a building with a kind of dignity that it did not actually possess?

I was asked by SOM to photograph the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC which had been savagely attacked by Ada Louise Huxtable and other people. And I thought it was unfair. I didn't think it was a great building, but an interesting one and a challenge. Bunshaft was a friend of mine and I felt a sort of sense of duty to emphasize his intent. I managed to get some definitive pictures of it, I think.

I was thinking of the very wonderful image of the Lever House that you made. I had seen your photograph before I saw the building itself. I was terribly disappointed with the building when finally I did see it. It has a green glass which looks cheap and ephemeral in reality, whereas the photographic image makes it look very elegant, lighter and more permanent.

Of course, the green didn't matter in black-and-white photographs. I eliminated all of the reflections on the glass so that you could really see the structure of the building. Maybe I should not have done that. I'm still not sure. I'm sorry I didn't do it both ways.

Glass, of course, was one of the most important materials in modern movement architecture. Visually, it is a material that is constantly in a state of flux. The photographer has the means to render glass in many different ways: as a void, as a mirror of the surrounding environment, as a taut plane, as a sheet of light, as a translucent veil. The same glass plane can be rendered in any of these ways, each revealing, I imagine, a different 'architecture'. In a way, glass is light itself, and photography, as Moholy-Nagy defined it, is 'the manipulation of light'.

Exactly. Because all you have to define space is light. Light is all you are working with because that's all the film is sensitive to. It's difficult enough in black and white, but when you get into colour the difficulties are increased geometrically. This again affects what you're going to do, when you're going to do it, and what you're going to shoot.

I photographed gardens in Bucks County for a long time for The Ladies Home Journal. They'd call me in the morning and say 'it looks pretty good here' and they'd send a little airplane to take me out there and I'd photograph the gardens. A few years later I realized that gardens are much better photographed in a subdued light—in the rain if you can. The shades and shadows don't dominate. It took me a long time to realize that, and then I had to use a special film and filters. I had to work all those things out and it was not reality that we ended up with, but it was a much more real feeling of what the garden was like. So you do have to use all the tools available.

It seems to me that there is an inherent dichotomy in architectural photography at least as it has been practised in the second half of this century, that is, since photo-journalism has made the
documentation of 'reality' an art form. Do you believe architectural photography is objective documentation, or more of a subjective, artistic interpretation of architecture?

In my work? I'd just show it straight, without trying to make art photography. They're pure documents, I hope. Occasionally I get run over by a powerful aesthetic statement, but mostly they're pure documents. I'm an historian in a way.

For strong reasons, I've always considered architecture akin to music. I once asked an orchestra conductor—because I felt, if anything, that I might be considered the interpreter of the art, although I'm leery of that term, too—I said to him, 'What is the difference, the artistic difference, between the creator of a work of music and the interpreter of a work of music, an instrumentalist for instance?' He said, 'These are two different levels of art completely'. And I often think of photographers that I know who overdramatize things, and conductors who are accused of overdramatizing. Leopold Stokowski was supposed to have popularized the famous Bach fugue by taking it out of context. Well, my taste, being kind of low class, I appreciated what he did and liked it. But I could see where it might bother serious musicians. Stokowski's rendering of a Bach fugue was probably not the way Bach had intended it. And so it is with so many architecture interpretations.

You frequently have the choice. If I cannot resist making a pretty picture, I'll make it. But then I'll make the documentary one besides—which, I think, is the one which is more pertinent to the architecture. And when I see 'pretty pictures' and the people who have made them to sell magazines, and people tell me how great they are ... well, to my mind, they're really pretty bad and it tells me something of their taste.

As much as we struggle, photography is not reality. It's never reality, and how far from it you are depends on the individual and on the circumstances. But to think that when you're looking at the photograph, you're looking at the real thing, it's not so. The only real thing is the thing itself. So go look at the building.

Often, 'seeing' is done a disservice by photographic images. Through photography, a building can be experienced vicariously before actually visiting it. Photography instils certain expectations that might not be fulfilled in reality.

But sometimes the architect's idea stumbles and a sensitive photograph can salvage the idea. But then, too, occasionally the visitor runs around trying to look for the point from which the photograph was made.

Or he or she thinks the building is considerably larger than it is, or much smaller, or more dramatic.

With human vision, actually what we see sharply is only an angle of about two degrees. We may be conscious of as much as 150 degrees, you know, and so in effect we do see 150 degrees, but in essence we just see it in small bits. What they call a normal lens is the diagonal of the film so that for a Leica it would be roughly a 50 millimetre lens and for a 4 x 5 it would be a six-inch lens. The normal lens in architectural photography is about a 90 millimetre lens, which is three-and-five-eighths inches for a 4 x 5
format. It keeps varying with what you see. Of course, when you're looking at a photograph, you're seeing it all at once. So when you're looking at a photograph and comparing it with reality, not always, but most of the time, the place is going to look smaller in reality because you're not accustomed to viewing it in that wide-angled vision which has been captured by the lens. And so I say, photography is not reality, but only an interpretation of reality.

**If you are an interpreter, then are your photographs documentary?**

They're not; they never are. Try as one will, the mere presence of a human consciousness tends to distort.

**Then they are an artistic interpretation of a building, even if you exercise restraint and tend toward the factual and straightforward.**

Much depends on your idea of what constitutes art. You have to be conscious of that and try not to distort it. And how conscious you are depends on the individual. Some people think distortion is wonderful. There's one man who does interiors. He'll shoot over the back of the sofa and he'll get these big cushions in the foreground and that wall in the distance looks about 100 yards further on and the place is just tremendous and distorted and very popular.

Each point of view is different. Your point of view is different from mine. The only thing that you can hope for is that mine is being honest, that the building really does look that way; it may have differences, but hopefully it is not too distorted. It remains a true representation of the architecture.

Some people love the distortion. Well these are the people who want to express something. I don't want to express anything; I just want to be honest to the subject. If anything is expressed, the architect expressed it, not I. If I can understand what it was—and architecture being a language, I'm fortunate that I understand the language and at least can speak it to the same extent as the people who created that architecture speak it.

That's why famous fashion photographers can say to me, 'How do you photograph a room? What do you do with the lights?' They have no concept. So I can say, 'Well, how do you photograph fashion? I have absolutely no idea.' And they told me, 'It's all sex.'

And I'd say here that a photograph is much more telling than the word. Essentially photography is a sensing medium. It certainly is not connected thoughts, but to me architecture is really just a manipulation of spatial relationships.

**Yes, and in this sense your photographs are the perfect medium for the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, a true master of space manipulation.**

For Wright architecture was the mother art. Everything revolved around it. And he could make a pretty convincing case of it.
Your work as a photographer seems almost synonymous with the late architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, the works completed in the 40s and 50s.

Apparently I hit the right button when it came to Wright's work. I photographed Florida Southern College for him, well not for him, I did it for a magazine. The campus buildings didn't always turn out the way he liked; much of the work was done by the students. A lot of things were haphazard and weren't carried forth the way he would like to see them. It was in really rough shape. I didn't know what to do. Ken Lockhart, Wright's man, was on the job and he went out and cut branches and stuck them up in these places, just to soften the thing up. But there was one domestic science building that had a great sloping window on one side and that window faced west. In Florida you could literally bake bread in that room. And so the kids put wrapping paper up on the windows to make the place habitable. When I photographed it, I spent a lot of time taking all that paper down and got a pretty decent photograph. I got a telegram from Wright: 'Ezra, you are a wizard!' I never kept those things. I should have.

We spent hours at Wright's home, Taliesin, setting up a picture and getting the lights right. Wright was fascinated; he never thought of a photographer doing that. He came around and kept talking and talking. And when I think of him now, I should have stopped work and listened to him. Instead, I was just wishing he'd get out of the way so I could get on with my work. He came in and he sat down at the piano. And he obviously wanted to be in the picture. But the film was slow and he was moving. So the photograph shows Wright at the piano.

I asked him one time—after I'd been working around Taliesin for a while—'Mr Wright, there are so many wonderful things around here. Why is it that people who leave here aren't able to design like this?' His very lame answer was, 'They're not here long enough'.

Wright used perspective drawing extensively while designing and it seems that he often employed photographs of his work to assist him with landscape design and to visualize variations on completed works. For example, the circular house that he designed for his son, David, in the early 50s in Phoenix, spirals up from the desert floor. Photographs taken before its completion revealed the odd spinning effect of this corkscrew-like design. After seeing these photos, Wright corrected the situation by adding the long, low horizontal wall that leads from the street to the house. Visually, the wall stabilized the design.

With the Johnson Wax headquarters in Racine, Wright wanted to know if I could make the tower narrower at the bottom and broader at the top. He had an idea that he wanted that tapered structure to get broader as it went up, like a tree. And he wanted to see what this would look like if I could make it look that way. This can be done by tilting the camera in reverse, by tilting it down, and therefore reversing the perspective. But I photographed the tower before there were really good lenses around and one didn't have much latitude to play with. Had I tilted it down, the tower would have been truncated.

When I'm on a job, there isn't time to think about other things and I really wanted to finish with this. My photograph of the tower is a curious one. I couldn't get the quality of the building as I saw it that day, and then during the night—I don't sleep very well when I'm on the job—it occurred to me that maybe I should shoot it backlit. And that's how that came about. My lens barely covered the whole tower.
In the archive at Taliesin, I found photographs of Wright's LA concrete block houses. These images were made before the landscaping was begun and before all of the retaining walls were built around the house. Wright had drawn over the photographs of the houses, using them to work out where the retaining walls would be, locating these walls so that they appeared to extend the building out into the landscape.

Paul Grady, the art director of *The Architectural Forum*, told me that Richard Neutra used to send pictures of his buildings in to the magazine and that he used a black grease pencil to draw foliage into the photos to cover mistakes and revise compositions.

I suppose certain darkroom procedures could be considered a more legitimate means of modifying photographs. To what extent are your images dependent on darkroom procedures for their effect?

I had a darkroom man working for me one time who claimed that everything I did was accidental. Anything creative was done in the darkroom. And, I have another friend who is a very successful stockbroker who agrees that it is all accidental, but adds that the same people seem to have all of the good accidents.

Everything that lends itself to human rationale is subject to the same laws, including the fact of what film to choose, what you're going to take a picture of, where you are going to put your camera, what size camera you are going to use, how you're going to develop the negative, how you're going to print it, how you're going to crop it. Some photographers take great pride in never cropping. Henri Cartier-Bresson never liked to crop anything. Well, in his pictures that's fine because the pictures are his creations. But, I have a three-and-a-half inch lens and I have a four-and-a-quarter inch lens, but I don't have a three-and-three-quarter inch lens. So, if you get closer it means you change the perspective, that you change everything. So you have to crop. That's part of the whole thing. People who say they never crop, well, maybe that's just the kind of pictures that they take.


Not with him.

*They just married the photographs?*

No. What happened was that I was called by Howard Barnstone about this project to document what remained of nineteenth-century Galveston before it disappeared entirely and while there was still some semblance of it left. He had gotten some money and wanted me to photograph it.

I said yes, thinking it would be an interesting thing to do. What with one thing and another, it took me a couple of months to get my schedule straightened out and I was working in Florida and I was heading for Galveston when this phone call came from Barnstone. He said, 'It is really out of my hands
and I am very sorry and very apologetic but it seems that they want Cartier-Bresson to do the photographs.' Well, OK. So what do you do?

About six months later I got another call from Barnstone and he said, 'You can tell me to go to hell if you want and I'd understand. Cartier-Bresson took wonderful pictures but they just Me not of the city of Galveston. And we must have your touch. Would you be willing to come back in on it?' So I said, 'Well I'll have to call you back.' What does one do? There's my pride and there's a chance to do something interesting. The hell with the pride. So I called him and said, 'OK, I'll come back and do it'. Then he said, 'Do you want us to show you the pictures of Cartier-Bresson?' And I said, 'Absolutely not'. I wandered around and did mine.

That's the way it happened. But, when publishing the book they managed to get each of us on a cover and use the exact same number of pictures from each of us.

I've never spoken with Cartier-Bresson. I don't know him, but we collaborated on the book, a sort of shot-gun affair. I think he's a wonderful photographer.

Well, Cartier-Bresson made a great deal out of capturing the 'decisive moment', and in his work this essential instant is almost always defined by human action frozen by the camera. It is a recording of the passage of time in which the human figure is critical. It occurs to me that architectural photographs might include people for a similar reason: to animate the composition with a sense of life and movement while simultaneously underscoring the architectural object as a static frame. People can also serve to reinforce the uniqueness of the recording. A particular moment of alignment—figure and frame—is captured. Your architectural images occasionally include both people and sculpture and I'm curious how you decide whether or not to include these in your photographs?

To use people or not to use people? My criterion is that when you have a scale so unfamiliar that you have no idea what it is, you've got to use a familiar object in it. But to say arbitrarily that you must always get people in pictures, that's ludicrous. For one thing, the picture that contains people is a picture of people. They are the first thing that you see in looking at a photograph. You always see the people first and not the architecture. Then, you relate it to the architecture. And if you know that there is, for instance, a window or steps or a chair or furniture, then you know the scale and you don't need a person for scale anymore.

So people serve only as scale indicators?

No. Sometimes there's interest. But, in general, the editors will tell you, you have to have people in it. Or the wife of the owner of this magazine doesn't understand why you don't use people. She says there must be people 'to humanize the architecture'. This is often said and it is really a criticism of an architecture which they don't understand or are not sympathetic with. If it takes getting people in to give the architecture interest, what sort of architecture is it?
I think in Le Corbusier's early work in the 30s, the people in his photographs were in part intended to show how the building was supposed to be used. The living spaces in his buildings were very different than what one normally found in Paris at the time. The apartments, for instance, had all glass walls. He would stage people conversing at a table, or smoking, or reading a newspaper.

So what does that do for how it is used?

It tells us how to furnish and how to inhabit a living room with a floor-to-ceiling glass wall. It also conveys some sense of a new lifestyle that was to come, encouraged, of course, by modern architecture. He had a lot of people looking out the window. Observation is portrayed as a contemplative, leisure-time activity. It also serves to direct our view, the view of the 'reader' of the photograph, out of the window, thus establishing a continuity between interior and exterior space. In most of his populated photos, his people are seen from behind. There are exceptions, but one hardly ever sees a frontal view.

That was his way of establishing anonymity. Because, as I said, a photograph with people becomes a photograph of people. When I have to use people, I always do that. Because you want them for what they represent, but you don't want the picture of the people.

In most cases, people just happened to be there. I wouldn't have minded more people as long as the strength of the composition dominates. Sometimes, I used to wait a long time for a figure to show up. And then you do it kind of unconsciously. I think a posed figure is an embarrassment and I try to avoid them as much as I can. Especially now that film is faster and the camera's smaller.

This photograph of Mies's Seagram Building was done without good light, but I like the view and I like the whole thing, plus it reminded me of the Swiss sculptor Giacometti. It is almost a picture of the people. I liked getting that little guy there. I like the reflections in it. I like pictures that nobody else likes very much.

Some of your photographs of Louis Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, have a person or two in them. These images seem to capture convincingly what I feel is the essential and distinguishing quality of Kahn's work: the permanence of architecture conjoined with the eternal presence of light. The building seems to track the sun as it descends into the Pacific, providing a sense of 'cosmic' or universal time. Your photographs capture this sense of time.

This picture of the Salk is printed much too dark. But, when I talk about space, at first it would be a simple room like Le Corbusier's Ozenfant Studio. But then as I worked on, the fourth dimension of time became for me an essential element of architecture and architectural photography. And it is not mentioned anywhere here. And time is—it's infinite—you know you have all of these vistas. You have this vista. You have that one. And you have this one here. There are all of these vistas and it takes your eye a while to get around to all of these things. And that's a definition of space. It's a time thing. You can see all of these things in two seconds. But that's enough. That's a whole other dimension.
One of the really nice things about Kahn's Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth is the quality of light. The artificial light is reddish. And the light comes in on the domes as bluish, and it gets kind of silvery. That silvery and golden quality was quite interesting, a great tempering of the concrete of the structure.

There are also the small interior courtyards with vines as canopies. And when the light filters through this umbrella, it has a greenish tint to it.

When I was there, those courtyards were too bright. And we got to talking and I suggested stretching tobacco cloth up there. That would give you a filtered light. And I think they took the suggestion seriously. But apparently they did something else. They got the vines to do it. Those courts were initially too bright, though.

Yes, but it is interesting that your 'reading' of the light in this structure alerted Kahn to this condition and offered a solution. You also photographed Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp. The high contrast of those small, intensely lit stained glass windows and the otherwise dark interior must have been difficult.

Ronchamp replaced a much older, almost prehistoric chapel, on a very important hill that overlooked the whole countryside. The townspeople didn't like it at all. So they refused to bring water or electricity up there. There was nothing there, nothing. Whatever light I had to use, I used flashbulbs. It was very difficult to photograph because the windows were stained glass. If you photograph them by their own light you don't see anything else in the church. But if you let them bum out, then you could see the church. But you could never get both together, which visually you get. Film wouldn't capture that; it doesn't have the range.

The only way I could get anything on the interior was to use lights. Again, the problem of using lights is how do you use them and still have the scene believable. It is very hard with this stuff, because the minute you use them you get shadows which destroy the illusion of where the light is coming from. I use them at very low intensity, or bounce them off other things.

I could tell you frankly that I had always looked at Corbu's work and I wondered why he never got any good photographs of it. Somebody else asked me about this. One thing was his mediaeval approach to photography. It would be hard for a guy who was not completely captivated by him to tolerate this man. You know, if the photographs were too good it might be a threat to his own sense of importance in this situation.

One thing I meant to tell you, I happened to meet Frank Gehry several weeks ago and he was telling me that he's never been able to take very good photographs. I had to tell him, 'It only proves that you are a good architect'. It is a different way of looking at things. As a photographer, your concern is with a sense of depth that you have to capture, to put on that flat piece of paper. As an architect you make a drawing on that piece of paper which represents depth, in other words, you are doing the opposite thing in a way. And architects don't have the same sense, fortunately.
As a photographer, I know that I'm going to put this in the foreground and that in background, and there is a certain scale. Architects don't see that way. You really have to learn to see the way the camera sees. I mean, people ask me what camera I use or whatever. I can only tell them that I spent the first half of my career learning how to use my camera and the second half modifying it to do what I wanted it to do.

You know you always wonder, if only I could go back and do that again. And on several occasions I've gone back to do it again and it is no better than the first time. There is a certain freshness with a new approach. But again, it is quite different. I mean, that fourth dimension of time … nobody says that there is any real time elapsed. In about two seconds you may have seen all of the six vistas that are involved in that picture, but that time is something else from this kind of time. And the point is that it is there, and it is what gives the picture depth. I think there is a sense of time … that's why films have never worked. Not enough is left to the individual viewer's imagination. Have you ever seen a good film on architecture?

Not on architecture. I've seen good directors who are doing a film on something else in which architecture plays a prevalent role and they capture something interesting about building or about habitable space or urban space. I can view Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*, for instance, as a visual record of the urban space of late twentieth-century Los Angeles: a fragmented, collaged space that is both real and psychological, a four-dimensional version of David Hockney's montaged, mosaic photographs. There is also Reggi's *koyaanisqatsi*, a kind of latter-day version of Strand and Sheeler's 1921 *Manhatta*. Both Cassavettes and Frederick Wiseman describe architectural space by assuming an almost fixed point of view from which to reveal the action of the inhabitants of space. Such films seem to me enriching, descriptive interpretations of architecture. But documentaries intended to detail architecture never capture it as such.

This is what I think happens. You view a photograph or you view a building in your own time frame and at your own pace. In a photograph, you can also do that. In a film, somebody else has set that time pace for you. It just doesn't work to have somebody lead you around by the nose.

**I think that is part of the problem; some directors do lead us around.**

And I think it is the nature of the medium. I think if I had to make a film, I would do the same thing. It would be *my* time frame. But you don't view a work of art through someone else's eye. If you do, your reaction is not going to be a genuine one. You read all of these critiques and go to all of these museums and you look at this and look at that. That isn't the way you look at art. I don't think.

Really, to be honest, there is no way of viewing architecture without viewing architecture. You cannot do it from a photograph even, although I think still photography is as close as you can get. It is a statement. And if the photographer can subdue his own reaction, his own contribution enough, then it will be a valid statement. In other words, I think the reason I managed to hit it off with M.r Wright is because I got the point of what he was trying to do and I worked to that point — and sometimes, even exceeded it a little bit, which you can do. So I'm sorry he died when he did, because I never had a chance to think about photography, I was too busy taking pictures. But, I can tell you, I'm still taking pictures now. When I go
to a concert somewhere, I'm 'taking pictures' of the hall even though I've no camera with me. You know, after fifty years, you just get that way. You're always mentally making photographs. There's no rest.