

A STRUCTURED LIFE



by Kirk Gittings

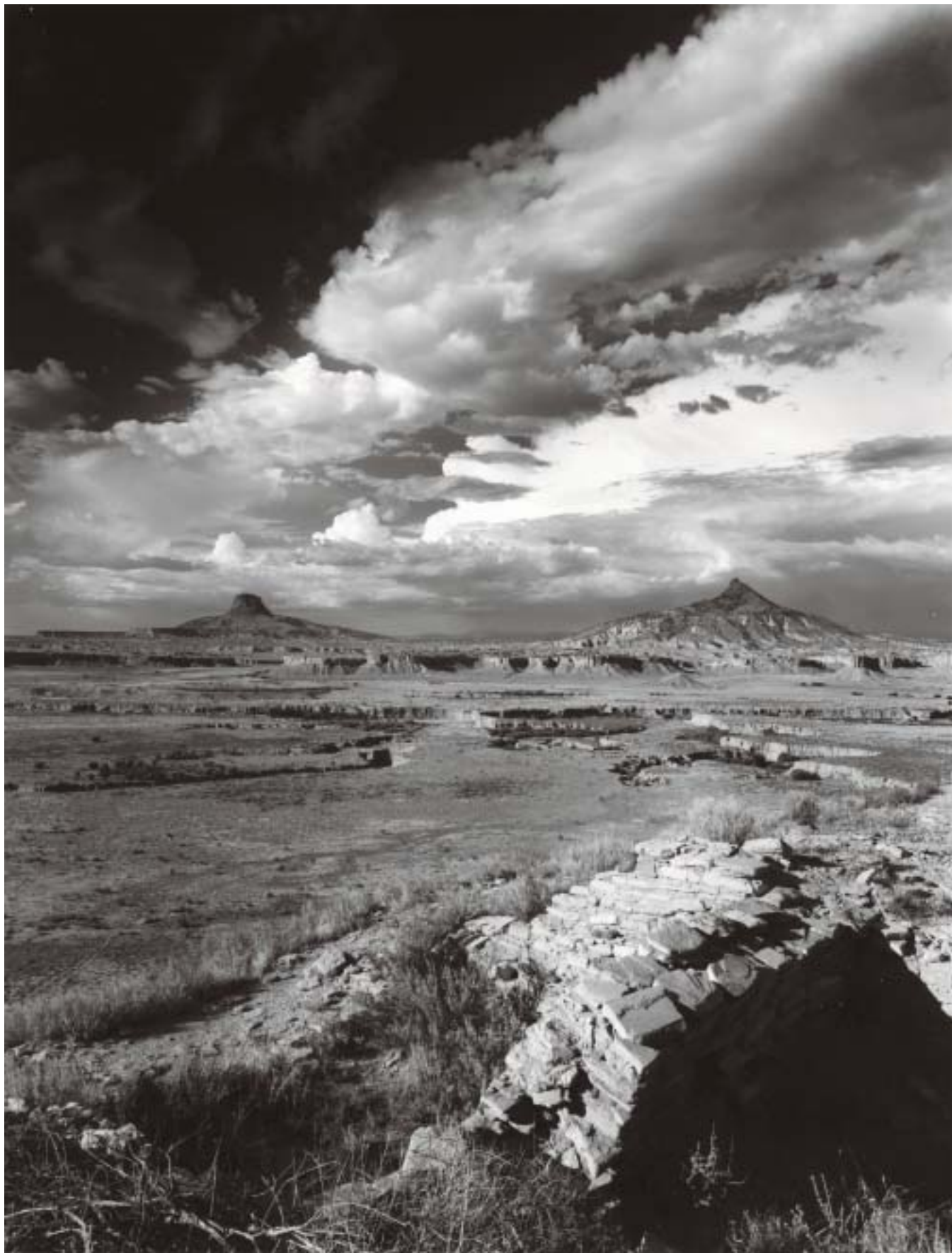
Note: Kirk Gittings has been photographing the prehistoric, historic and contemporary architecture of the Southwest since the summer of 1973, where as a Vista volunteer in Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico, his interests in structures as icons of the cultural landscape began to evolve. Since then his architectural photography has regularly appeared in publications around the world and widely collected and shown by museums. This year, New Mexico Magazine and The Albuquerque Museum will present a 32 year retrospective book (in June) and exhibit (in September) of his photography entitled "Shelter from the Storm: the Photographs of Kirk Gittings". As a visiting artist and instructor at the Art Institute of Chicago and many other institutions and workshops he has shared his knowledge and experience with countless students. This article summarizes his personal evolution in the genre of architectural photography from the 1970's to the present day.

My entrance into the world of commercial architectural photography was more an act of economic desperation than career planning. For years after graduation in 1972 from the University of New Mexico, my black and white landscape and architectural images had shown in small photo galleries around New Mexico and the west

coast, but making a real living as an "art" photographer had eluded me. Meanwhile I supported myself with jobs as diverse as a Vista volunteer, sawmill worker, construction worker, plumber, union organizer, welder, photo lab grunt and even a Volkswagen mechanic. The starving artist myth was wearing thin. In desperation (and despite my art school prejudices against commercial work), in 1978 I took a good hard look at my Tachihara 4x5 with a 90mm and 210mm Fujinon lenses and asked myself what I could do with this equipment to actually make a living.

I had long been a fan of the architectural photographs of Charles Sheeler, Walker Evans and especially Paul Strand who's "Time in New England" still stands today as a masterpiece of the genre. I was aware of Ansel Adam's and Morley Baer's commercial photography but had dismissed it as "mere" commission work. I had even had a

Above - The "Bosque House" in Albuquerque by Jon Anderson, 1992. Kodak daylight transparency film with 4 halogen accent lights, 90 second exposure at f22 with no filter.
Right - "Emanations of Cabezon", at Cabezon Peak in New Mexico from the Anasazi Guadalupe ruin, 1993. Kodak T-Max 100 film with No. 23a red filter, developed in T-Max RS developer.



show with Laura Gilpin and talked with her about everything but the architectural photography she had done for John Gaw Meem. Now with the clarity of necessity I took a fresh look at that work and began reading everything I could find on the subject, which turned out to be very little. There was an Amphoto book (that I no longer can remember the title of) and Julius Schulman's 1977 book "The Photography of Architecture and Design" which was full of excellent but (by the time of its publication) already technically dated material. For instance Shulman described in detail how he lit interiors with flashbulbs which by 1978 were already hard to find and basically obsolete. In New Mexico in the 1970's there were no technically oriented workshops or knowledgeable people who were willing to share information. The three existing architectural photographers were potential competitors and not willing to help a novice. My path to mastering the technical and aesthetic challenges of architectural photography became the school of mistakes, misadventures and experimentation.

Except for a three year detour to Canada to work on an MFA degree, the subsequent years were defined by an ever growing and demanding client list dominated by high profile architectural firms and magazines. The career defining moment was the mid-1980's when I began doing assignment work for Architecture (Washington DC) and Architectural Digest (New York) magazines. In the face of the seemingly overwhelming demands of a national caliber commercial clientele, the biggest struggle over the years has been to find the time and energy to maintain the personal black and white photography and after a few years I turned my attention more to the local market for the sake of my personal work and my blood pressure.

Surprisingly the Tachihara 4x5 proved an adequate camera for architecture. Once broken in, the bellows allowed for extreme rises with a 90mm lens, which are the most common lens and movement required for architecture. It also was great for travel as it was so compact when folded. While not the most rigid of cameras, one had to be very careful that extreme movements did not force the camera out of alignment, but never-the-less I used it for years even during the time I traveled for the national magazines. Stolen in 1992, I replaced it with an even older and more unlikely camera, a 1940's vintage Calumet Wide Field which I have used ever since. The Wide Field was actually designed to shoot architecture and with a few modifications functions perfectly fine. Its advantages are the very flexible bellows and stepped back standards which allows one to use even a 47 XL Schneider without a recessed lens board or bag bellows. Powder coating the parts black and along with some modifications to the knobs and a longer bale make it a perfectly adequate looking and functioning camera today. Many well meaning clients look at it and ask if it is a Hassleblad? I of course say yes.

In the spirit of keeping it simple, for years I used four lenses for 4x5 mostly Fujinons including a 65mm, a 90mm, a 120(Nikkor) and a 210. When I needed a "longer" lens I used a 6x7 Calumet roll film back so I could give clients a "full frame" longer view. When the Tachihara





"Aztec in Fall", at the Aztec ruins while teaching a View Camera Magazine workshop, 2002. Ilford FP4 film with No. 16 yellow/orange filter in T-Max RS developer.



was stolen, I purchased a whole new array of primarily Schneider lenses, 47XL, 65, 90, 120(Nikkor), 150, 210 and 305. To ease the burden of travel photography, I switched to roll film over the years for commercial work with Calumet C2N 6x9 roll film backs. Loading 4x5 film holders in motel bathrooms after a long days shooting got very very old!

Lighting interiors is perhaps the most difficult thing to learn in architectural photography. I wasted the better part of a year chasing Shulman's outdated flashbulb technique, before I gave into the method practiced by my local competitors who were lighting interiors with strobe and checking their setup with Polaroid. After trying to do flash lighting on the cheap a very knowledgeable Calumet salesman told me that I needed at least two 2000 watt power packs with three flash heads and some halogens. Over the last 25 years that has grown into four 2000 watt and three 800 watt Norman power packs with ten flash heads and nine halogen lights. Assistants to help carry everything became a necessity and I have been blessed with some great ones over the years notably Anthony Richardson, James Burbank, Alan Labb and cur-

rently Jim Hunter. We don't always need that much power but it provides back up in case of equipment failure. Sometimes though, we need that much power and more. Because of depth-of-field issues we try never to use an aperture larger than F/22. By using self-cocking press shutters on all your lenses, one can multiply that much flash power exponentially by breaking an exposure down into multiples. For instance an exposure that looks pretty good at 1/2 second at F/22 but still needs more shadow fill from the strobe can be exposed twice at 1/4 second at F/22 for double the flash power but with the same ambient light exposure or four times at 1/8 second at f/22 for quadruple the flash power. Eight exposures on one frame are very common. We use self-cocking Prontor press shutters because we find them the most durable but unfortunately they are no longer made and are more difficult to get repaired than the more common Copal press shutters.

Above - John Gaw Meem's "Hollenback House" (1932) in Santa Fe with architectural woodwork salvaged from 17th century missions photographed 1989. Kodak daylight transparency film with 3 strobe accent lights, 1 second exposure at f22 with no filter.



"Overview, Santa Fe Rail Road Yards", in Albuquerque, 2002. Ilford FP4 film with No. 16 yellow/orange filter in T-Max RS developer.



"La Purisma Conception", at Quarai (1633), Salinas Pueblo Missions , New Mexico photographed 2002. Ilford FP4 film with No. 16 yellow/orange filter in T-Max RS developer.



What has changed most over the years? Film is much more forgiving now with mixed light sources. In these situations we used to have to correct fluorescents with colored gels to keep them from going green. Now films like Kodak EPN and Fuji NPS and Fuji Velvia 100F are so forgiving that we don't worry about the fluorescents in a mixed light/strobe fill lighting situation. Films also have less reciprocity color shifts with long exposures like twilight shots. We also worry less about balancing interior and exterior light as we can do two exposures and blend them in Photoshop. Digitals main impact so far has been on the lab side. Like me most architectural photographers including major national players like Hedrick-Blessing and Timothy Hursley are shooting film and then scanning it. Most magazines still want film originals. Most architectural firms want digital files. Scanning film satisfies both types of clients. This may change in the next couple of years as digital capture solves some lasting concerns like industry calibration standardization, exposure speed (with scanner backs), file size, noise etc. (with chip cameras), equipment dependability and cost.

Since 9/11 I don't fly to jobs anymore. It's too much

hassle with so many cases of equipment. If I can't drive to it, I probably don't need the job anyway. That limits my range to an area encompassing Denver, El Paso, Phoenix, Las Vegas and Lubbock. But there is plenty of work that close to home. Architectural photography is physically very demanding and I wonder if I can keep this up into my 60's. Roaming the landscape with a field 4x5 and a few lenses and film holders making images for myself always seems effortless compared to commercial shooting and I hope to spend more time doing that in years to come completing some personal book projects that have been on hold too long.

"Shelter from the Storm: The Photographs of Kirk Gittings" is available from New Mexico Magazine at 1-800-711-9525 or www.nmmagazine.com. Signed copies are available directly from the artist at 1-505-344-5436 or www.gittingsphoto.com

Above - "Window on the Cabezon Shrine", from the outlying Chacoan Guadalupe site, contemplating the mythic Cabezon Peak, 1988. Kodak Tri-X film with No. 16 yellow/orange filter in HC-110 developer.



The McOlash residence, in the Albuquerque foothills, by Westwork Architects AIA, 2002. Kodak EPN 120 daylight roll film with 2 halogen accent lights, 90 second exposure with no filter at f22.