

The Art of Space Architecture

Source: *The Santa Fe New Mexican*

Publication date: 2005-09-09

In his foreword to *Shelter From the Storm: The Photographs of Kirk Gittings*, V.B. Price tells us that Gittings grew up a "desert rat" who most enjoyed knocking around the isolated lands of Albuquerque's West Mesa. Part of that childhood experience, the book's subject tells us, provided the foundation for his photographic investigations into architecture. "I grew up with an interest in ruins because I lived within hiking distance of some ruins on the Ro Puerco west of Albuquerque, and my brother and I used to explore them," Gittings said in an interview. "From there it led to an interest in historic buildings like churches."

But first he would fully indulge his fascination with American Indian ruins. That's the subject of the first chapter of *Shelter From the Storm*, just out from *New Mexico Magazine*. Gittings, who earned his master's degree in photography at the University of Calgary, Alberta, made captivating photographs of surviving remnants of New Mexico's earliest architecture at Chaco Canyon, Aztec, Kuaua, and Gran Quivira.

In these visions of fitted-stone structures under dramatic skies, we sense why Gittings has a reputation for portraying the spirit of a place along with its materiality. "Often, ruins appear to grow out of the earth that quietly reclaims them," writes Gussie Fauntleroy, the book's author. "This earth/sky embrace presents a metaphor for the concept of balanced duality that runs through the ancient American Indian world-view: the balance of female and male, material and intangible, earthly and the divine."

The book's second section, "Enduring Forms of Faith," examines Spanish church forms, bridging the gap between decay (dilapidated churches at Guadalupe and Picuris Pueblo) and endurance (La Iglesia de San Jose de Gracia, Las Trampas, and San Miguel Chapel, Santa Fe).

Gittings recently returned to New Mexico from his summer gig teaching a class in historic-architecture photography at the Art Institute of Chicago. He recalled that the National Endowment for the Arts awarded him a grant in 1986 to photograph churches. The pictures appeared in an exhibit titled *Monuments of Adobe* at the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History and in a book of the same name.

Fauntleroy complements Gittings' emotion-heavy photographs in this section with the observation that aging, hand-built churches and chapels "are like sealed and timeless vessels. They contain every silent or softly uttered prayer, all the devotion, humble entreaty and hope found in each song, and all the stillness that have filled them over the years."

About the buildings, she notes that "the muscular swell of buttresses and gently rounded adobe walls suggest both masculine and feminine traits, as did the Pueblo's earlier architecture with circular spaces and strong, straight walls."

Gittings' expansion into more modern forms is represented in the final two chapters. In "A

Gracious Past" we see his interpretations of an abandoned gas station in Los Ojos and of the old Santa Fe Railroad facilities in Albuquerque, plus exterior and interior details of 19th-century homes.

"Contemporary Visions" presents examples of updated "Santa Fe style" buildings and beyond to structures by turns elegant (Westwork Architects' McOlash residence), palatially monolithic (the Beach Apartments by Antoine Predock), and organic fantastic (the Bradford Prince house by Bart Prince).

The Camino Real International Heritage Center in Socorro, scheduled to open this fall, also is featured. With its prominent wall and spire, the structure earned an American Institute of Architects award for Dekker/Perich/Sabatini, a firm based in Amarillo, Texas; Las Vegas, Nev.; and Albuquerque that employs nearly 80 architects. Among its hundreds of projects are the Zocalo condominiums and Santa Fe Imaging Center in Santa Fe and the Canyon Village Apartments in Los Alamos.

Westwork Architects, by contrast, is a small, local company, now 26 years old, with principals Glade Sperry and Cindy Terry. One of the firm's standout public buildings is the little, futuristic Del Norte Credit Union branch in Espanola (1998). The McOlash residence in Shelter From the Storm won an AIA award in 2002.

"I probably have the longest working relationship with Westwork of any of my architecture clients," Gittings said. "Twenty years ago they were doing what was known as postmodern architecture, I think the first architects in New Mexico that were doing that, and it was very distinctive and very interesting to me.

"From my efforts to find a way of looking at their buildings that would really bring their designs to life, I sort of invented a personal philosophy: my job is to bring to life the architects' mythologies about their buildings."

That aspiration is manifest in Gittings' work, according to Price. "The exacting detail he brings to his photographs of buildings, combined with his intuitive openness to the 'patina' of meaning hidden in their forms, allow viewers to partake of the mysterious and intimate exchange between photographer and subject for themselves," he says in the foreword.

Gittings continues to enjoy the contemporary buildings designed by Westwork. In describing their work, Sperry invoked the writer Gertrude Stein, who, when she couldn't find her childhood home on a return visit to Oakland, Calif., said, "There is no there there."

"We really try to have 'there' in our projects, and it's kind of unconscious," Sperry said. "We can't do a building that doesn't have some kind of emotional content. Our work has always been about efforts to capture a sense of place in New Mexico. That's something that's almost overwhelming if you're an architect around here: the history of the place and the topography and geology combine for a powerful sense of place I don't feel in other parts of the country."

"I have a feeling that our work is more about an investigation of the future, in a way," Terry added. "We're not trying to reiterate the past, but we are trying to keep it placed here."

Terry said the range of architecture represented in Shelter From the Storm made her think about the evolution of building materials and the temporal nature of buildings. That underscores a rule of photography for Gittings, who said some of the remarkable buildings he had photographed had

since disappeared from the landscape, whether by neglect or demolition. "One of the lessons in my work is to take every image seriously," he said.

The photographer has two more book projects afoot. One is about mythological landscapes -- places like Mount Taylor and Route 66 that are pregnant with stories. In the other, tentatively titled "Points of Departure," Gittings will make photographs from prominent points in the New Mexico landscape and recruit people from various disciplines, such as geology and history, to comment on each perspective.

(Sidebar)

The Albuquerque Museum holds an exhibit, Kirk Gittings: Shelter From the Storm Photographs, from Sunday, Sept. 11, to Dec. 4.

details

*Shelter From the Storm: The Photographs of Kirk Gittings

*Book signing and opening of Kirk Gittings: Shelter From the Storm Photographs 1 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 11, Albuquerque Museum, 2000 Mountain Road N.W., Albuquerque; exhibit through Dec. 4

*Book signing 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 15, Bookworks, 4022 Rio Grande Ave. N.W., Albuquerque

* Book signing 5 p.m. Sept. 23, Garcia Street Books, 376 Garcia St., Santa Fe; 827-6365