

Introduction to:

SHELTER FROM THE STORM: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF KIRK GITTINGS

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Mystery and Meaning

In its landscape and architecture, New Mexico is a place layered with meaning, animated by the powerful presence of the past. Like entranceways framing deeper doorways, contemporary structures echo the forms of earlier edifices built by hand from mud and stone, the materials offered by this high desert land. In turn, these centuries-old structures, sanctuaries of spiritual and family shelter, are the echo of an even deeper past, a time when the embrace of earth and sky was an integral part of daily life. To be aware of these layers of meaning is to see the continuum of New Mexico's rich history within a simple architectural element - the end of a viga, for example, as it projects from an exterior wall.

Kirk Gittings has long been intrigued by hidden treasure, secret meaning, mystery - the rewards of looking beneath the surface of life. From boyhood on he has gathered experiences and tools that allow him to lend us his eyes, to see some of these things as well. Born in 1950 to an army radar technician (who later transferred to the air force) stationed in Alaska, Gittings spent his childhood in isolated, exceptionally beautiful landscapes: the wilds of Alaska, the coast of Maine, and the expanse of high desert central New Mexico terrain. At the age of eight he was exploring mounds from ancient Indian ruins and petroglyph-covered volcanic rock walls. He studied photography and art history at the University of New Mexico, and acquired his first large format camera in 1978.

Gittings' earliest important photographic subject was Chaco Canyon in northeastern New Mexico, a place whose ancient Anasazi stone structures - and the very canyon walls themselves - are imbued with the presence of a powerful

spiritual past. The experience helped establish his aesthetic vision and eventually resulted in a book, *Chaco Body*, with poetry by V.B. Price. Between UNM and graduate school, Gittings took a break from the camera, immersing himself in less solitary aspects of Northern New Mexico life - as a Volkswagen mechanic, welder, Vista volunteer in the village of Tierra Amarilla, and hanging out on weekends with the post-hippie crowd in Taos. When it was time to return to his true passion he earned an MFA in photography from the University of Calgary, in Alberta, Canada. Back in Albuquerque in 1983, he considered possible careers in which he could use the large format equipment and skills he'd been mastering. Having gained extensive experience in what was essentially architectural photography at Chaco Canyon, he decided to turn his view finder in the direction of contemporary architecture. It proved to be a fortuitous choice.

In the past 20 years, Gittings has earned a wide reputation for his astute and sensitive photographic interpretations of New Mexican architecture. Riding the ongoing wave of interest in Southwestern design style, he has been able to work largely in his home state, while his award-winning photography has been published in publications and books on architecture and other subjects, nationally and around the world. For many years he has taught photography as well, as an adjunct professor at the University of New Mexico, a visiting artist and instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and at photographic workshops. In addition, as an articulate and thoughtful writer, Gittings has contributed articles on photographic technique and aesthetics to a number of periodicals, including *View Camera Magazine*, *Camera Arts Magazine*, and the *Journal of American Photography*. He continues to use an all-manual, 50-year-old Calumet widefield 4x5 camera for architectural work, and a 20-year-old Zone VI (4x5) field camera for landscapes. And, being "pickier than the average photographer," he does virtually all his own printing, both in color and black and white.

As he travels around New Mexico on commercial shoots, Gittings takes advantage of the opportunity to experience and photograph the state's extraordinary landscapes and architecture for his fine art portfolio as well. Among the structures - often aging and sometimes abandoned - that capture his imagination are churches and chapels: repositories of faith and spirit where human aspirations, hope, and humility speak in a timeless, wordless language through the architecture itself. As revealed through the images in this book, there is a coherence in Gittings' sensibility, vision, and style that runs through both his commercial and fine art photography. From ancient to ultra-modern, the architecture of New Mexico - rooted in the earth, graced by the craftsman's hand, and offering a sense of continuity in materials and form - has much to tell about who we have been and

who we are. “There’s something about continuity that embodies a kind of hope of progress for mankind, and there’s an implied hope in aesthetic beauty,” Gittings reflects. “That’s part of what I try to do with photography: to share this sense of order and hope and meaning and mystery.”