

Architectural photography in Chicago : a conversation with Ron Gordon

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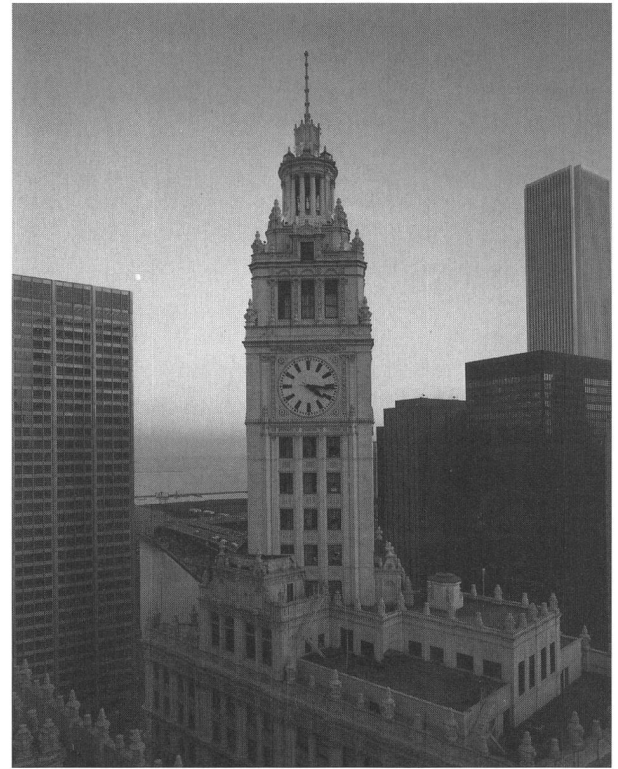
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Architectural Photography in Chicago

A Conversation With Ron Gordon

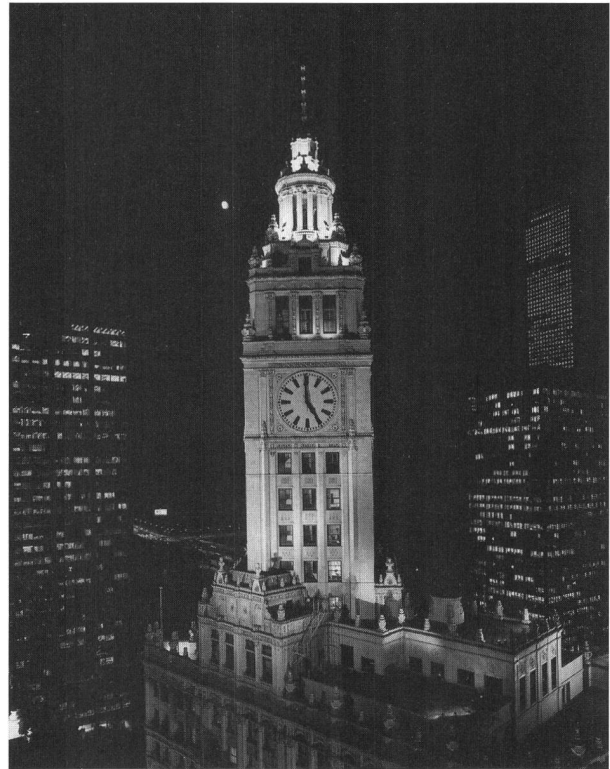
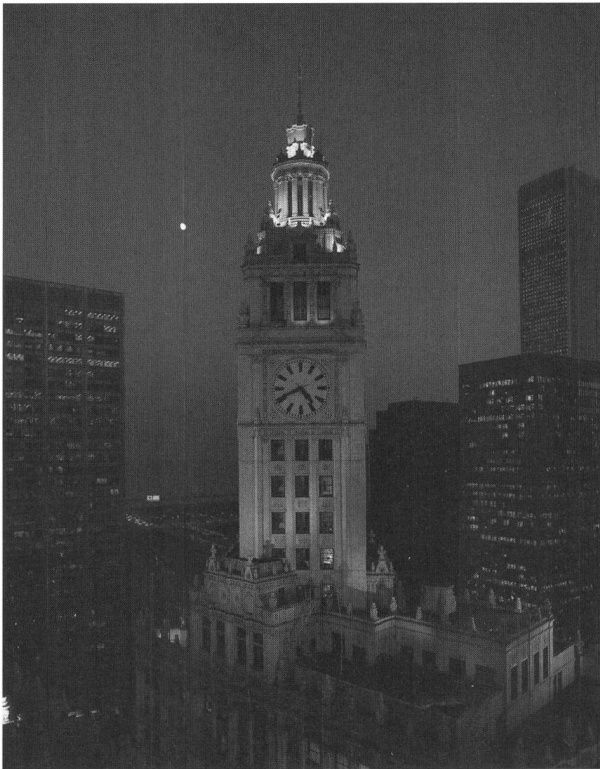
Tipje Behrens

trans: Ron, you are a photographer specializing in architecture and preservation. How did you become an architectural photographer? What interested you in the field of architecture? What kind of training or education did you have?

Ron Gordon: Originally, when I went to college, I studied literature and language. I always liked the notion of telling a story. Let me go back even earlier. I grew up in a working-class community and had a whole bunch of different jobs. I worked in restaurants, as a bus boy and short order cook and as a tire changer at the Firestone store. I did all of these jobs but I didn't know what I wanted to do long term. I did know that I wanted to go to college because I didn't want to work at something that would get my hands dirty. So I went off to college and I was studying French as a requirement and I kind of enjoyed it. I just kept advancing and then I got an assistantship in France to teach English. I spent a year in France when I was about 21 which influenced me greatly because of all the amazing architecture and classic

scenes. It was my first time in Europe and I learned a lot that year about so many things, including eating and drinking. I lived in a small town about two hours from Paris and I got to know many kinds of people who were so different from the people I knew on the south side of Chicago. I came back to Chicago and I earned a master's degree in French and was teaching basic elementary French. And, well, how did I get from there to here? That's the question. My brother is an architect. After a few years of being in the French Department at the University of Illinois I got married. My wife's brother was a commercial photographer in Chicago and he gave me a camera. I had a son and I started taking pictures of him but I wanted to learn more about it. So I went to the Art Department at the University of Illinois in Urbana. I met a lot of interesting people there; some were photographers.

The longer I was in graduate school studying language and literature, the more I felt it wasn't really me. It was a little too intellectual for my background. Let's put it



Wrigley Building, 1980, Photography: Ron Gordon

this way – as I was discovering photography I found that it had a lot of elements of things that I was destined to do, like working with machines and chemistry as well as the aesthetic and philosophical principles. And since I was in literature it was interesting to me to work on the storytelling aspect of photography.

When I came back to Chicago and decided to start working as an architectural photographer, I talked to my brother a lot and photographed the projects that he was working on.

trans: How old were you at the time?

RG: I was in my late twenties, close to thirty. I had been married and when I got divorced, it freed me up to do whatever I wanted. At that point I felt I had nothing to lose. I had to pay child support but I didn't have to maintain a household. I came to Chicago and lived in a very inexpensive apartment and built a dark-room in a closet and started working.

My brother-in-law had been a commercial photographer and photographed a lot of products and models and fashion. I liked the activity of his studio but I didn't like the product that came out. I didn't like working with art directors and advertising people. I really preferred working on my own or one to one with other artists who wanted their products photographed.

Architects are great to work with sometimes. They are also difficult. But they are great to work with because they are the creators of what we are photographing. I found that architectural photography was probably the most dignified form of commercial photography. I didn't feel like I was selling out. I felt more like I was promoting another kind of art with and through my skill or craft.

How did I get into preservation?

That just happened by accident. I guess I have always been a little bit nostalgic. I like older things and I think it's a waste to destroy things so that new things can be built that aren't as good as the things that they are replacing. That happens a lot.



Illinois Central Station, 1974, Photography: Ron Gordon

I moved into an area called Printer's Row in Chicago which had been an abandoned neighborhood. That's a long story. It was abandoned because the trains in America were replaced by trucks. It was a transition between the transportation of goods by train to transportation by truck and highway. So there didn't have to be a central location because trucks can go anywhere whereas trains go to one point and you have to bring your products there. All the printers were located near the train stations in Chicago. And when they didn't need that anymore they dispersed to the suburbs and areas where they could have bigger buildings that weren't as tall, so that they could move their products around without going up and down elevators and stairs. These beautiful old mill / loft buildings were abandoned and many of them were empty for eight or nine years. One of the architects who I had gotten to know and had done some work for asked me if I wanted to be in this one building down there that had 2600 sq ft with windows everywhere. I had a street on both sides of the loft and it had really tall ceilings with wood everywhere and diagonal maple floors. It was really beautiful. My brother helped design it and we actually won an AIA award for the studio. All around me there was a movement towards preservation and I started photographing the old spaces and some of the people who were in the buildings. It was as much my personal life as it was part of any kind of plan to photograph something. It was what was happening around me. Actually most of what I do is like that. All of my personal work is about things that are in my day to day life.

I got to be fairly well-known for that kind of work and so I became known as a preservation photographer. I get a lot of work with landmarks like the Chicago City Landmarks Department and the Illinois State Historic Preservation Agency.

trans: How did you get known as a preservation photographer? To take a photograph or to make a photograph as you say is one thing. To become known is something else.

RG: The Printer's Row photographs were seen by a lot of people because there was a lot of attention given to that area since it was the first neighborhood in Chicago to use loft buildings as residence/work spaces. In fact we had to struggle through a lot of red tape with the city because we were the first to try to have that set up in an old industrial building.

trans: What year was that?

RG: That was in 1978-1979. But it got a lot of press because it was visible. There were about ten buildings

on that street that were undergoing the same kind of rehab. Everybody in the city was looking at it. I asked the developers to let me into their buildings and I traded photographs for being allowed in. I sold photographs to them to support this expensive habit. I had an exhibit at the AIA in the 80s. I had done some commissioned work for architects and then there was a big article on me in the Chicago Reader. It was about us being pioneers in the neighborhood and my photographs were used for that. The publicity seemed to have a life of its own, although I showed the photographs to people who knew people. I had a show at the Museum of Contemporary Photography and also the Art Institute bought the photo of the Wrigley Building clock which they used as a poster for an exhibit called "Chicago The Architectural City". I had a lot of publicity from that but I thought the work was good and that it was important to get the message out that buildings could be used and not just thrown away.

That picture over there of the Illinois Central Station was the first one that I took and when I did, I didn't quite understand its significance. If you look at it, there's a man at the bottom painting at an easel. That's what attracted me to it. I just grabbed this photograph and later as I looked at it, I realized that it had all the elements of what I was talking and thinking about. It's a railroad building on a railroad line and they tore that building down. In the background you can see the Hancock Antenna which is a symbol of the new age. I realized that this moment was "the" moment when we changed from an industrial age to a communication age. When you think about the railroads and how they were used for coal and steel and all of that and then you think about the Amoco Building and the Hancock Building - what are they used for? Who goes into those buildings? They are huge, like small cities. The Hancock Building is probably bigger than most cities in Illinois. It's all in that photograph. See that little car is just sitting there and then the other car is moving out. On one hand time is standing still and on the other hand time is moving. Then you have that Roman arch, which is one of the oldest construction concepts of holding something up and they are knocking it down. That picture has come to be so meaningful. Even the painter who is recording it. I am taking a photograph of it but he is recording that moment as well in a centuries-old medium - paint.

trans: Have you talked to him about this?

RG: No. I didn't know what I was doing when I made that picture. I was attracted to the building and I was attracted to the painter and I probably said, "interesting scene" or something like that. We didn't talk philosophy. I'd like to see that painting.



C+A Tap, 1980, Photography: Ron Gordon

trans: When you take photographs of a building, do you talk to the architect beforehand? If yes, how much in your photographs comes from the architect and how much from you – the photographer?

RG: I always talk to the architect if I can or at least the architect's representative. Mostly I work for small firms so I can talk to the architect. Even when I do the preservation work I talk to the historian or work with the historian and see what they are interested in.

I work in two ways. I work for the client and try to interpret what the client is looking for; what they feel is interesting or innovative and different about their project and try to concentrate on that. I also work for myself and look for the best way to show that, even if it's a picture that they haven't mentioned. If I see it, I make that picture anyway and sometimes they want it and sometimes they don't. But it doesn't matter because I collect them anyway. So it's usually a combination of the two.

I have worked with architects for 30 years and when I began doing official preservation work, I worked with an archeologist, an urban archeologist. He directed me in a field that I had been in but didn't know exactly why I was in it. On my first project there were archeologists and historians and in a way it was like constructing a building because they studied the history of the site, measured it, and photographed it systematically inside and out. I found that to be really fun, you know, getting involved in the history of a building. It made it much richer. But, often when I photograph a building like that, it means the building is going to be torn down. That's the other concept. I am the last guy to see it and photograph it and I am responsible for it's last breath being documented for the rest of history.

trans: I guess architectural photography also gets more important as lifetimes of buildings get shorter all the time. So together with the drawings the photographs that are taken are somehow the only thing that preserves a building for the future. I think photographs always give a better impression of a building than sections and plans because they show the atmosphere.

RG: It also shows the transition, the condition of the building at the time of either its demise or of its transformation into something else. I keep going back to preservation but you can see where my sympathies lie. There was an interesting incident. On my block there were two buildings on the corner. When I first moved in, one of them was a bar with a couple of apartments above it. It was called the C+A Tap and next to it was a restaurant called Reno's.

Someone decided they would tear these two buildings down – this was 1980. I decided to photograph their transformation or deconstruction. It was next to my studio so I could easily run out and photograph it. In fact the demolition foreman would ring my bell when something important was going to happen because he was interested in the documentation too. One day a little boy came up to me and asked me why I was taking pictures and I realized it was the first time I actually articulated why I was doing it. I told him that if I didn't do this, then no one would ever know what had been there. In fact last year, I gave a talk to the residents of Printer's Row and I showed them pictures from that series and they had no idea what had been on that corner. The strange thing was that it was a historic district and they weren't supposed to have torn those buildings down. Nothing has been built on that corner in 22 years. So that corner is just an empty lot now. Had they had the foresight and the intelligence to rehab those buildings, they would have been profitable, tax-paying, useful structures instead of being a burden and an eyesore. It was so irresponsible on the part of the land-owners and ironic because they thought they would be able to build something and make more money, but as a result they all lost money.

trans: In comparison to most architectural photographers who photograph buildings just after they have been finished and before the people move in, you mostly photograph them just before they are torn down.

RG: Well, I do both, I photograph new buildings too.

trans: With the Park Hyatt Hotel I had the feeling that architectural photography can turn directly into art. You were asked to document the erection of the Park Hyatt Hotel on Michigan Avenue and now your photographs are exhibited in the building. Did you know that when you started photographing and did you have the exhibition on your mind when you were taking the photographs?

RG: I did know that they would be used in the building and I worked directly with Nick Pritzker who is the development partner of the Pritzker family. I've known him for 20 years or so and he knows my work. I suggested it to him and he thought it was a good idea. I was allowed onto the roof of another building that I could shoot from. The project took two years from the first photograph to the last. I knew that they would use the photographs somewhere. There were six photographers who created pictures for the hotel and were commissioned to go around the city and make photographs that are now all over the hotel and in the conference rooms which is a great location.



Park Hyatt Hotel on Michigan Avenue, 1999, Photography: Ron Gordon

trans: So it was actually your idea to propose that you could document the whole erection?

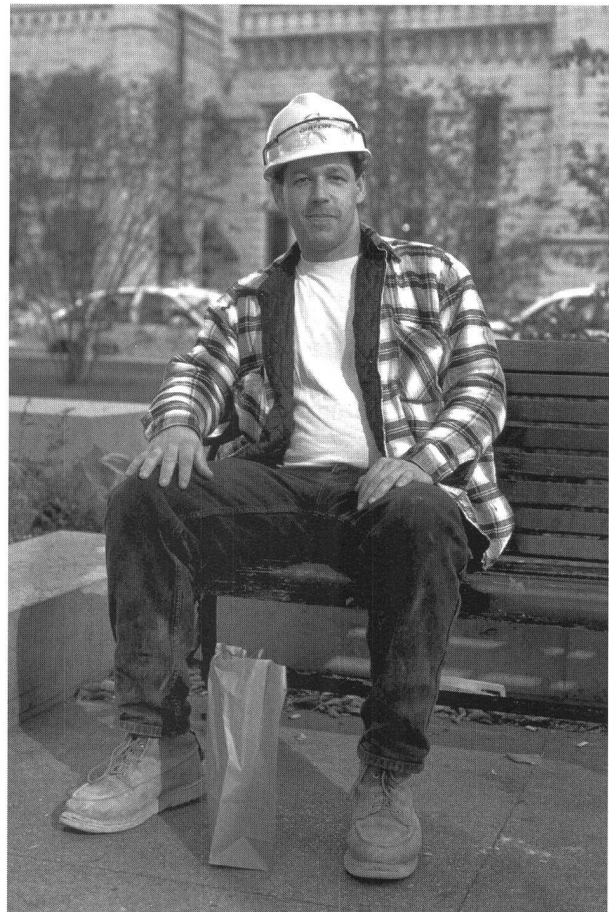
RG: Right. I presented it to him and he thought it was a great idea. It is kind of an amazing project to watch. We kept going back all the time, looking at the techniques and everything.

trans: Well, when you asked us for our class to take photographs of people we didn't know, I went in there – because I lived just next door – and took photographs of some of the construction men. But at the time I didn't know that you were actually taking photographs of the entire building process.

One last question:

How do you see architectural photography in relation to architecture and in relation to photography?

RG: I have given a lot of thought to that question. I think photography is a tool, it's a medium. I was just talking about that today. Nobody takes a class in pen or a class in paint-brush or a class in t-square. A camera is a tool and photography is like writing. In fact it is writing. That's another thing I try to point out to my students. Photo means light and graphy means writing. So it means writing with light. You should teach people how to use a camera and how to work well with it but you also have to teach them what to say with this communication tool. I don't believe much in photography as an end in itself – it's more about content. I admire photographers who are trained in something else and use photography to tell a story – even if it's language and literature. Photography can tell a story with a body of work – either over a lifetime or over a short period of time, perhaps the life of a building. That's why I like my students to do a story when they do their in-depth architectural project. When they photograph a building it should be in context with the usage of the building as well as the details of how the building is made. I like students to show how a building is being used by the people who inhabit it. I think the relationship of the photographer to the architecture is to tell the story of it. And you can do that in one picture as



Construction man working on the Park Hyatt Hotel on Michigan Avenue, 1999
Photography: Tipje Behrens

you saw with the picture of the Illinois Central Station. You know that's what the tool is for. It's not just to create a beautiful image; for some people that's enough, but for me that's not enough. I need the content. For me the content is architecture, which is really life. What's a building for? You can't just build a building and set it there and walk away. The second you, as an architect, walk away from it somebody else is walking into it and seeing how the light comes through the window. And how it feels to stand on the floor and to sit by a window and eat breakfast, I mean it's all alive. The whole thing is alive. Architecture doesn't exist without the people who create it and the people who inhabit it afterwards. Otherwise there would be no point. And I feel the same way about photography. It's for the people who inhabit it, the people who look at it, the people who think about it.

The conversation took place at Ron Gordon's studio in Chicago on September 16, 2002.

Ron Gordon is a photographer in Chicago specializing in architecture and preservation. He teaches architectural photography at Illinois Institute of Technology.

Tipje Behrens, editor of *trans*, is a student of architecture at ETH Zurich. She spent one year in Chicago studying architecture and architectural photography at Illinois Institute of Technology.