

Architectural photography in Chicago : a conversation with Jack Hedrich

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Architectural Photography in Chicago A Conversation With Jack Hedrich

trans: Jack, how did your brother Ken, who started Hedrich Blessing, become an architectural photographer? Why the specialization in architecture?

Jack Hedrich: Well, first, how did he become a photographer? He actually had a job after school working at the Stevens Hotel as a bellhop. He wanted to continue doing that but in the depression days – actually the days just before the depression when things were moving – a good German father did not think that a goal for his number one son would be to be a bellhop even at a big hotel where Ken made more money after school with tips than Dad did in the coal business. But Mother went to a Roger’s Park Women’s Club meeting, as the story goes, and the speaker was a doctor, who was a phrenologist, who can read the bumps on one’s head. Later Mother went up to him and said: “I am having a terrible time with my son. We just don’t know what he wants to do.” So she made an appointment for Ken. The doctor read some bumps and talked to them for a while. I suppose it was what we would call today talent assessment by conversation and creative judgment. First he said art and Ken said he can’t draw a straight line and then he was thinking of engineering or something of that nature and Ken said no, the only thing he is really good at is the bellhopping and automobile engine repair. The doctor said: “No, there’s more than that – creative work, writing things, how about photography?” And Ken said: “Well, you know I take some pictures and I like that.” So the end result of this was that Mother, Dad and Ken agreed that he would study photography for six months. At the end of the six months, if he liked it, he could go on with it, and if he didn’t, then he could go back to his job at the Stevens Hotel.

So he went to the New York School of Photography which was really here in Chicago and he spent his six months and at the end of his six months he came out and as one of my older brothers told me, the first thing Ken did was sneak back out after graduation and try to get down to the Stevens Hotel to get his job back. But they had given it to somebody else and during the depression they weren’t hiring anybody else. So he went to work as a photographer for a man who’s name just escaped me. When business wasn’t as good as it should, the man let the newest members go and that was Ken and one of his lab technicians, Henry Blessing. This was in November of 1929. The market had just crashed and nobody was doing anything. So as long as the two of them didn’t have any work to do they decided that they would open their own studio.

They ended up going around and looking for a place where they could open their office. Again because of the depression and the crash there was a wonderful building that had just been completed by Holabird and Root at Michigan and Ohio called the Michigan Square Building. It was about an eight-story building, a nice sandstone and limestone structure. The lobby was gorgeous with marble and granite and a sculpture of the Goddess, Diana.

It had just been finished but because nobody could rent any space, the owners had told the real estate people to just let it for whatever the costs are. So the boys got about a five year lease on a mezzanine office much better than they could have ever afforded for just the cost of taxes and electricity. And so they opened it up, they got started, they got somebody to print some letterheads. They didn't have much work to do at that time. So when Ken did have some time, you know being a good German boy he would not sit around, not do anything – don't stand there, do something – he would get his camera and take some exteriors of the building, basically to show his clients where they were located. He did a couple of pictures of the lobby and the interior and then he said, well nothing else to do, so he made an appointment to show them to John Root. When Ken asked: "What do you think?" Root said: "I don't think much of them. They are not very good. Thanks very much. I am busy." And Ken, one of his big strengths was the fact that he had enough self-confidence – he would not get his back up because you had insulted him – he would say, would you tell me why? And so he said to John Root: "Tell me why?" And Root said: "First place this and second place that." And Ken said: "Thank you" and left. Over the next week he went out and waited for the right kind of sun and he did a couple of other pictures. Then he called Root again: "Would you mind if I showed you something I have done on that building? If you have a moment I want to show you and tell you how much I appreciate what you told me." So he showed him and Root said: "Yeah, that's close. But you know what would happen if I saw it this way?" So Ken did it again and Root said: "Hey, you know that's good. How much for this picture?" Thinking that Ken, of course, would say: "Oh, no charge, just for you – helping me." But Ken said: "Well, 50 dollars." Back in those days, well, that was like thousands. And Root said: "What, I practically made the picture." "Yes, – but I did." And Root added: "Right, o.k., send me the bill. Now let's take on this AO Smith Building in Milwaukee we have just finished. Now you are going to have your hands full." So it was almost a mentor-relationship. If he had moved into a brewery, we might have been the world's first beer photographers. But it turned out architecture. And, of course, being in Chicago which was a headquarter of architecture. So that is probably the longest answer to a short question that you have ever heard but that's the story.

Henry Blessing was only with him a year. Henry Blessing's wife wanted to go out to California, so they left and Ken needed help. So he asked my brother Ed, who was two years younger than he. Ed was enrolled at Northwestern University. So Ken went to Dad and said: "The purpose of somebody getting a good education is to get a good job and earn some money. If you would put Ed's college fund into Hedrich Blessing it will buy him one third interest in the business." And Dad said: "Can it support both of you?" And Ken said: "Yeah." And he said: "Well, it's all right with me but you got to ask Ed." And Ken said: "I already asked Ed and he said all right." So he did that and then a year later, Bill had started as a freshman at the University of Illinois and they did the same thing. Except that Bill then only got 28% so that Ken could keep control in interest. But that's how the three brothers got together.

In 1937 we received a call from the editor of Architectural Forum, Douglas Haskell, who told Ed: "We are putting together an issue all on one architect and have picked Frank Lloyd Wright. We have several objects that have been



Fallingwater, Bear Run, Pennsylvania, 1937, Photography: Bill Hedrich

shot but we have five of his buildings left that need to be shot. I made a mistake when I told Mr. Wright that I would send our photographer from New York.“ Wright said: “I don’t want your New York photographer. John Root told me about these couple of brothers in Chicago that are doing some pretty good stuff and I want them to do it. They are mid-western guys.“ So Haskell said: “Can you do it?“ Ken took over the phone then and said: “Sure, we will get it done.“ And the editor said: “You got to do it quick. You’ve got these five houses, two houses and a building here in Chicago, one in Minneapolis / Saint Paul and then the last one in Pennsylvania.“ He added: “You’ve only got three weeks to get it all done.“ Ken repeated: “We’ll get it done.“ So he prayed for good weather and got good weather. At that time Ken’s brother Bill was his assistant. Ken took the three Chicago buildings and the one in Minnesota. He said to Bill: “You can shoot the last one if you can ever figure out where Bear Run, Pennsylvania is.“ So Bill got the Kaufmann residence called Fallingwater for his first major all-by-himself job. He was supposed to be there for three days and make maybe six pictures. He was there for a better part of eight days and he made almost forty-five pictures and Ken almost died, because in those days the cost of film and the cost of prints... “What are you gonna do, the magazine will only pay for five pictures.“ Nevertheless, Bill printed all the shots and took them to Mr. Wright at Taliesin East, and lined them up in the conference room. Wright looked at all of Bill’s shots and said: “All right young man, what do you think?“ And Bill pointed to the one that later became famous and said: “I think that tells the story.“ Wright replied: “Young man you will not amount to a hill of beans if you don’t stop being so theatrical. This is the picture.“ And he pointed to another one that has seldom been seen again. But fifteen years later giving a speech in New York to interior designers, Frank Lloyd Wright told them: “When you get something done, be sure you get it photographed and be sure to work with your photographers, don’t let them do it on their own, be sure to tell them.“ Then he showed them Bill’s picture of Fallingwater and said: “Let me tell you the hours I spent with a young man on this job, telling him where he should shoot from.“

trans: How do the people who work at Hedrich Blessing now become architectural photographers? I read that at Hedrich Blessing you start as an assistant of one of the photographers “on camera“ as you say. What is the previous education of the assistants at Hedrich Blessing?

JH: Well, all of our photographers have been assistants. Almost all of them have a four year-bachelor’s degree in design or photography or fine arts. Many of them have an MFA, a Master in Fine Arts. But they want to work at HB. These young people want to come to work with us because, you know, there’s a Ron Gordon and there’s an Ezra Stoller and a few people like that but there’s no other organization like ours that has specialty in this area with the number of potentials that we have. So when we need an assistant, we canvas our requests and we interview some people and we have the photographer interview. It’s very important that the photographer himself has a relationship with the assistant, because they are practically married, they are practically family. The photographer goes out on a job, he goes to talk with the client while the assistant sets up the equipment, brings everything out, makes sure that they have everything, when they are all through, pack it up, help get it to the car or help get it to the airplane and fly out somewhere. You know they are out of town probably almost every other week for most of the year. We try to get them no more than one week out of town, one week in, sometimes somebody has to be gone three weeks. That gives you an idea of what goes on. That’s how the young people become assistants. Then, after they have worked with us for a couple of years, you begin to get a sense of what somebody is like. And when

the time comes, I can't say it's two years, sometimes it's three years, four years, when the time comes that we say, we need another photographer – an old photographer retires – we hadn't really have anybody leave – but we expand – we need another photographer – we can look from among our assistants and say, who do we think has the right attitude, because a photographer has to be a selfstarter, that's one of the most important things. We give a photographer a job... I give this to him, I say here's the name of the job and the rest of it... go ahead. He has to call the client, get it organized, get out there in the morning, get started every morning, get it done, get the job finished and come back. It can't be somebody who waits to be told what to do. They got to do it on their own. So by that time we know who has that kind of a personality and then we open the door and say "Yes, this is possible". That's how it works.

trans: Are there also architects who decide to become architectural photographers? Do you know of some?

JH: I can think of one right away. Balthazar Korab, in Troy, Michigan, a man with whom we had a brief partnership, was trained as an architect, came to the USA from Hungary and is an excellent photographer. I will say this, by and large most very good architects, good design architects could become fine photographers because they have the sense of seeing what they want. Good architects are very good judges of good photography too.

trans: When Hedrich Blessing photographers take photographs of buildings, to what extent do they talk to the architects beforehand? How much comes from the architect and how much comes from the photographer?

JH: Instructions as to what the building is about comes from the architect and without that you are dead. You can't take a building that an architect has sweated on for two to three years and ask somebody to come up and take a look at it and understand it. It's very important that you get the architect's input. For local jobs we ask the design architect to be with us for at least the beginning, to walk the job together, see it together and then have one of the associates with us while we shoot. If we are out of town, then the photographer might spend a great deal of time with the architect looking over slides, looking over prints, just to get an idea what we are talking about.

trans: As lifetimes of buildings get shorter and shorter, architectural photography should get more important. Together with the drawings the photographs are the only way of preserving for the future what does not exist in real life anymore. Photographs can also give a better impression of the atmosphere than plans and sections. Is that also a reason why you gave Hedrich Blessing's vast archive of photographs to the Chicago Historical Society a few years ago?

JH: I'd like to say I did it because I am so big-hearted but the truth is we had 75000 negatives and 65000 prints and we were finding it almost unmanageable. We had no space for it. We were renting space in Harry Weese's basement across the alley and if somebody would want one of the old pictures, we had to send a couple of our assistants down, across the alley to get into this open basement room where everything was stored in cardboard boxes with sprinklers above. I mean how lucky were we that nothing happened. We were not caring for them well but then again we were current photographers. I am very proud of all the things we have done. But the photographers themselves... what they did last week is less important to them than what they are going to do next week. I knew that this was something that would be a continuing burden. That's when we began looking around to see where we might get it placed and the Historical Society was the best place for it. We gave them everything. We did not keep a few of the really important images, which they offered to have us do, but we

wanted the whole thing to come as a single archive. So the work of Hedrich Blessing is archived. The original things are from 1930 to 1970 and about two years ago we gave them the 1970-79. So our files here are only from 1980 on but our basement is already crowded. You know, you take huge piles of pictures now. Originally there were like three photographers, then there were four, then there were five, now there are ten. Bill and Ken probably used to shoot the equivalent of two days a week, now our photographers shoot an average of probably four and a half days a week. Much more effective and much more busy. They turn out large quantities of work. But anyway that's the reason you can't keep and care for it. We would have had to go through it and throw away about 90% of it. As a matter of fact I even started at one point throwing away some of the stuff and a lady and a gentleman from the Art Institute came by and asked us if we had something on a certain architect. It was one of the people that we were about to throw away and they were agast. We had it appraised, I knew it was good, but I didn't realize that it would be worth three and a half million dollars. But it's not worth it to us. I mean...there's no tax advantage or no advantage other than to giving it away. So we just got it placed where it could be taken care of. They have the best facilities. Temperature and humidity controlled basement archive, rooms that they developed. That's why we gave it to them. It took them two and a half years – two people working at it full time – with three different grants – to just catalogue the first 40 years that we gave them. They haven't catalogued the second part yet. They haven't got the grants yet.

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

JH: Well, I give a talk once in a while that I title: You aren't as good as you say you are, you are only as good as I say you are. What I mean by that is architects do not have a portable product. When they want to make a presentation to somebody to show what they have done in order to try to get more work – that is the whole purpose of the presentation – they need photographs. You can't take your client to that building or the building in Cleveland every time you want to show them something. So you have to show them a picture. And that's where I come in, because if I make a picture that looks as good as or better than the project, you have a better chance of selling your client what you are doing than when you go out and snap your picture yourself. So architects need photographers. It's a very close-knit relationship, that's very important. A certain photographer and a certain architect have a vision together. They begin to see things together. They form a kinship. That's how you lock a client in. And that architect wants that photographer to shoot with again and again. We have been fortunate enough to be here in Chicago where architecture is such an important part of the city and has become a specialty of ours. When you think architecture, you have to think Chicago. We have many close relationships with architects because we need each other to do our best work. We don't have any salesman and we have no advertising budget. What we do have is the telephone and our reputation. We get maybe one or two calls a day for quotations on assignments from all sorts of places and we love it. That's how our business operates. O.K. Did I tell you all you wanted to know? More than you wanted to know?

The conversation took place at Hedrich Blessing's studio in Chicago on September 17, 2002.

Jack Hedrich, the youngest of the four Hedrich brothers, worked with Hedrich Blessing from 1953 until his retirement in 1993.

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.