How to photograph architecture

BY G. E. KIDDER SMITH*

Nearly everyone interested in buildings takes pictures of them—but not very good ones. Here are 13 suggestions for making finer photographs with a 35-mm. camera

**An architect by profession, G. E. Kidder Smith is noted for his architectural photographs and his richly illustrated books and lectures on Brazil, Sweden, Switzerland, and Italy. Although he claims little of the skill, know-how, and equipment—and none of the lights—of the professional photographer, his architectural photographs are acclaimed here and abroad. On these pages he reveals the simple secrets of his success, illustrated by some of the best photographs from his world-wide collection.*—ED.

Although a 4 by 5 in. architectural camera with rising front, tripod, and other paraphernalia can obviously accomplish considerably more than a hand-held 35-mm. camera, the smaller machine can bring home a lot of architectural bacon if its limitations are realized and anticipated. All the illustrations for this article were printed from 35-mm. Kodachrome originals.

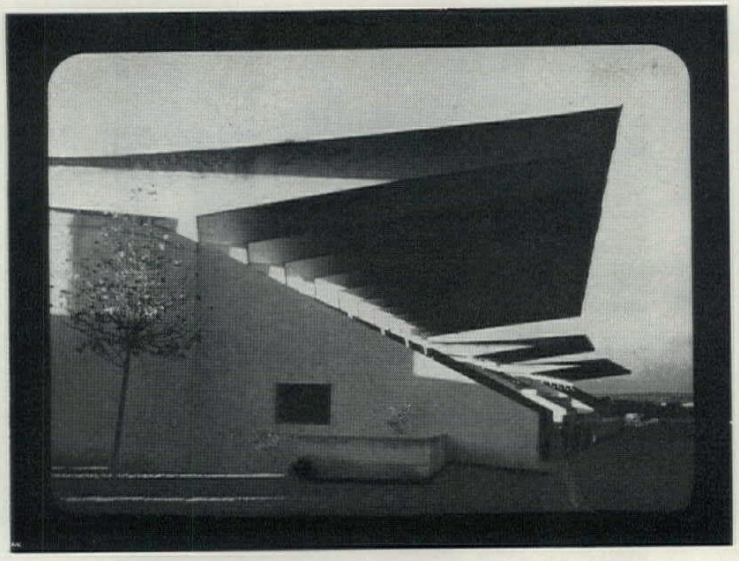
It should be emphasized at the beginning that all methods of approach and all techniques of the medium will mean little unless one can "see" photographically, imagining how an unlimited view in three dimensional space will appear in a flat picture. Architects in particular should be able to do this.

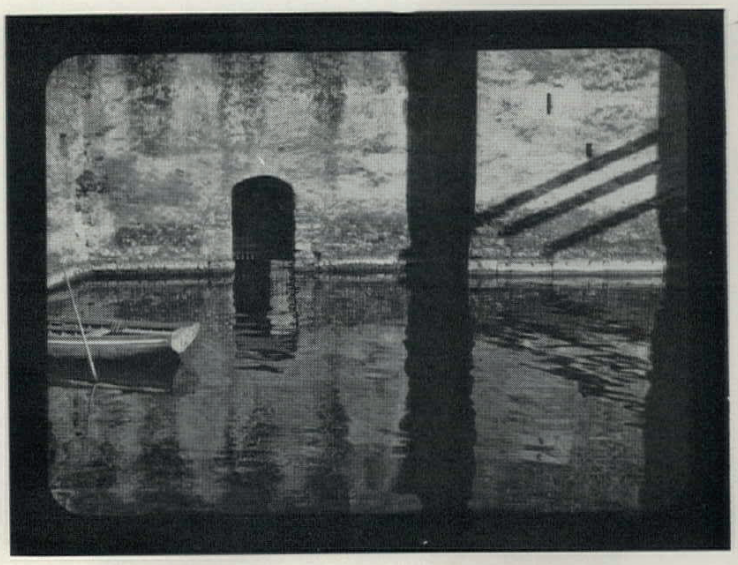
To reduce three difficult dimensions into two more manageable ones, I first of all squint while searching for what I hope will be the proper point of view. Squinting looks ridiculous and causes friends to wag their heads, but it suppresses the unessential and lets me concentrate on the prime composition elements of the picture. Second, I use only ground glass cameras: a 35-mm. single lens reflex, twin lens reflex, and an aged (21-year-old) Zeiss film pack camera. A 35-mm. single lens reflex is far superior to the range-finder camera for architecture. The greatest shortcoming of any miniature camera is, of course, the lack of a rising front by means of which vertical lines can be kept parallel (or walls from "leaning backward"). However, a great deal can be done with a fixed lens camera, if the camera is kept level. This, as will be seen later, involves using the foreground as an important composition element.

A word about exposure: for virtually all outdoor pictures set the shutter at 1/100 of a second and forget it. This speed stops people in motion, which is much better than using posed figures, and minimizes body vibration. The only unknown then is the diaphragm opening, the focus being taken care of by the ground glass. Using 1/100 second and Kodachrome film, four out of five exposures in sunlight will range within a half-stop plus or minus of f.5. By thus standardizing, one builds up an empirical knowledge which is often more reliable than an exposure meter. With other films the process is similar. Even if a longer exposure is required because of poor lighting conditions or because of the need for greater depth of focus, think at first in terms of the shutter at 1/100, and then adjust to meet local conditions. For interiors (and very important work outdoors) I do as the professionals do and bracket exposures. If, for instance, the meter estimates 1 second exposure at f.8, make additional exposures at f.6 and f.10, and then choose the best result. Bracketing is particularly important with color film, for it has little exposure latitude.

There are two general points of approach in architectural photography which I always try to follow. The first of these is to plan a sequence of pictures in space before beginning to shoot. Frank Lloyd Wright has given us a new horizon of space in architecture; to interpret this we need a new photographic approach. The one-position "Renaissance" viewpoint is no longer adequate. Do not take a dozen random shots *hoping* that a few will come out; take a sequence of half a dozen (from the over-all to the particular), bracket the exposures, and *know* that a useful set of photographs will result. The second major point is to seek a picture *in* the subject rather than *of* the subject. Search for composition first of all. The building will take care of itself, especially if a sequence has been followed. If the aim is merely to get a picture of the building, the result will rarely be worth looking at.

The illustrations which follow have been broken down into various categories to illustrate specific photographic points. Each picture or group of pictures, of course, combines a number of these points, but the primary emphasis in each case is on one.

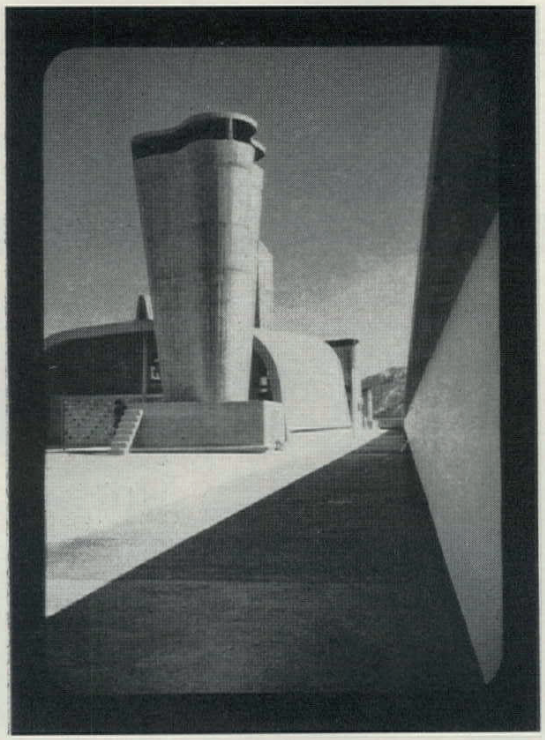


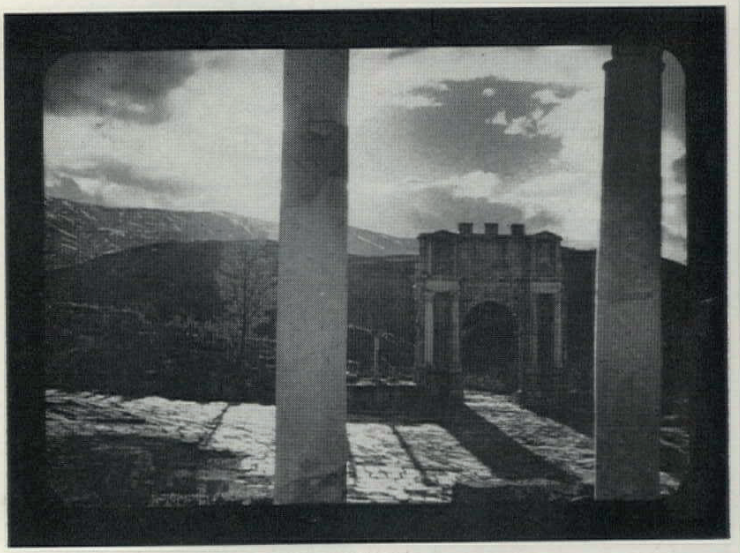


1. *Le Corbusier has written that "The elements of architecture are light and shade, walls and space." In photographing architecture it is essential to express a brilliant play of light and shade because through them a building is revealed. Note how they are used in the two pictures above: in the first—of Eduardo Torroja's Hippodrome in Madrid—the low light not only brings out the form but emphasizes the roof's elegant floating quality. In the second—at Sirmione on Italy's Lake Garda—light and shade reveal the castle's plasticity, while the strong vertical and diagonal shadow bands are themselves main elements of the composition.*

2. *Capturing an expressive play of light and shade generally means that the sun must be on one side of the building and not on the other. As the sun is rarely on more than two sides at once, the photographer has only to move his camera until it is roughly at right angles to the sun. In the picture of Corbu's Unité at Marseille (below), just as much architecture would have been shown by shooting from the other end of the roof, but the form would have been washed out by uniform lighting. (Later in the day the reverse would, of course, be true.) With sun on one side and shade on the other, fuller expression and substance is given this extraordinary architecture.*

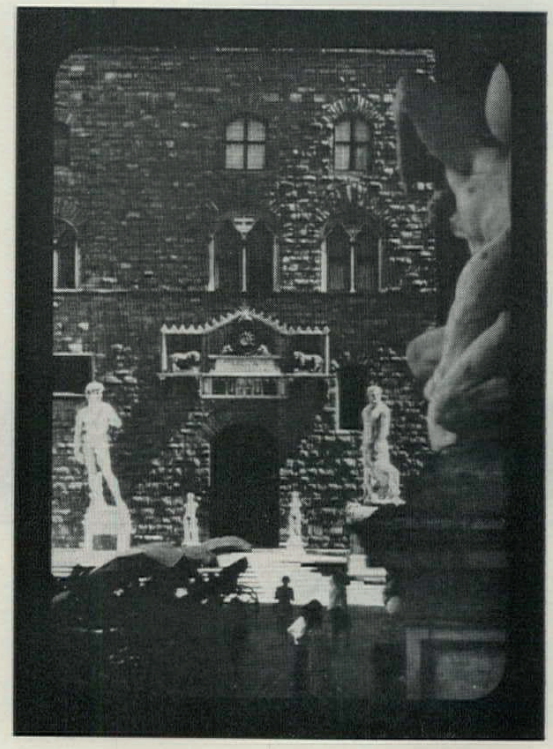
3. *To add variety and to be more interpretative, the photographer can shoot into the sun, or against the light, if he shields the lens with a hood or, as in the picture of the Arch of Caracalla at Djemila, Algeria (below), with an element of architecture.*





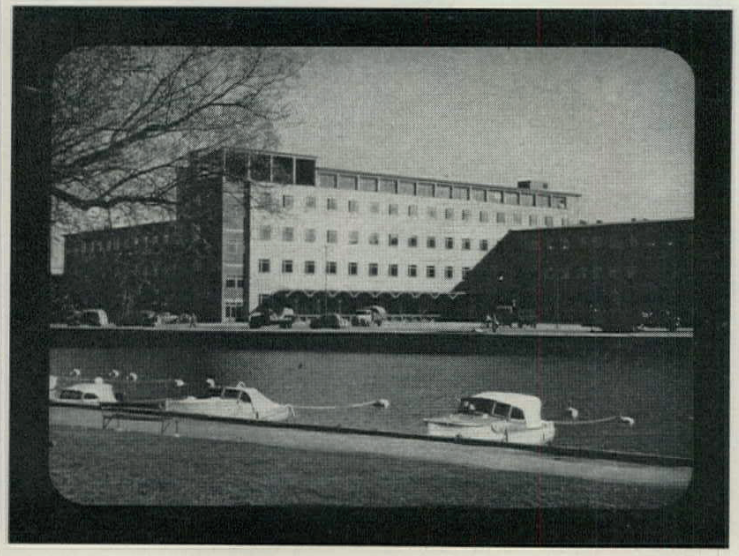
Composition must be "felt," but lighting can be analyzed. Given reasonable sunshine, the two main determinants are where *one stands and* when *one stands there. Both aspects are usually closely interconnected, but in some cases one determinant can be of prime importance (see next page).*

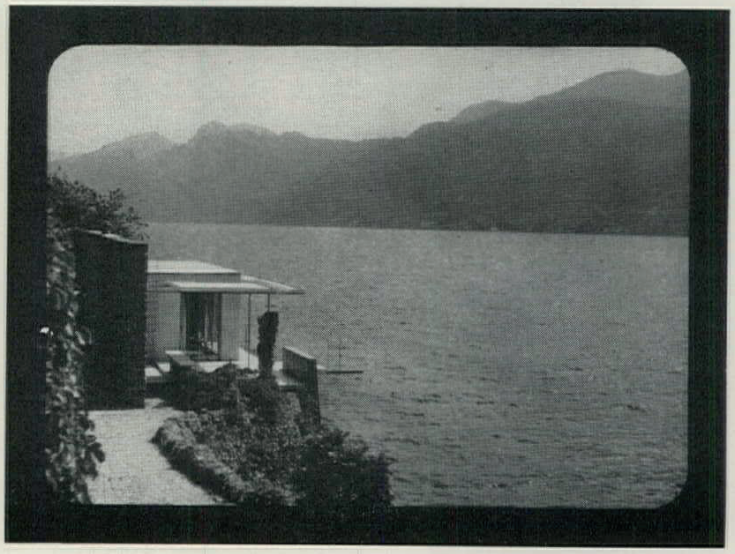
4. *Where: In this picture of poplars in Italy's Piedmont, the camera position was all-important; lighting was secondary. A shift of only a foot to right or left would have made a marked difference in the composition. In photos 2, 3, 5, and 9, a shift of a few* inches *would have upset the compositions.*

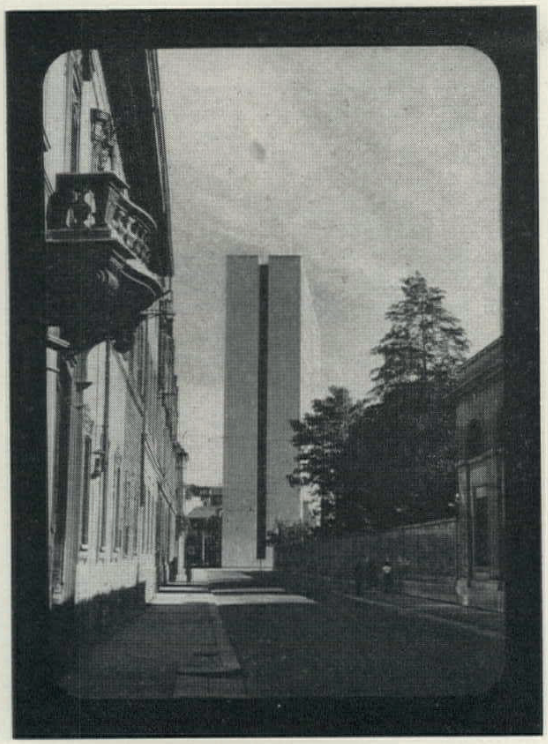


5. *When: Use the sun as a private spotlight while taking photographs. In the early morning or late afternoon the sun obviously can pick out a building with particular emphasis. However, even in the middle of the day a subject can be highlighted by the sun when it bursts through a hole in the clouds, or, as in the picture of the Palazzo Signoria in Florence (above), when it starts to creep around the corner—as it does once every day. With the light source almost parallel to the façade of this building, all the rustication and all the importance of the statues in front were forcefully brought out. Flatter lighting would have been far less interesting.*

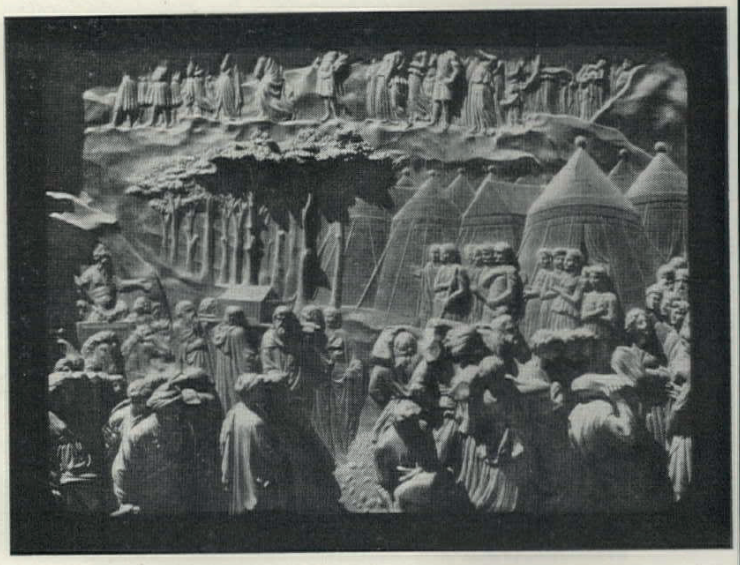
6. *After considerations of light and shade and "where" and "when," the first photographic task is to relate the building to its setting. Start from the over-all and work around the building, closing in until the sequence of pictures ends up with details and interiors. The picture of the Railway Post Office in Stockholm (below) shows that the building's location is pleasant, and, in addition, reveals something about Swedish town planning. In the photograph of a week-end villa on Lake Como (below, right), the whole rationale of the design was generated by the lovely location. If the picture did not show this, it would not explain the architecture.*





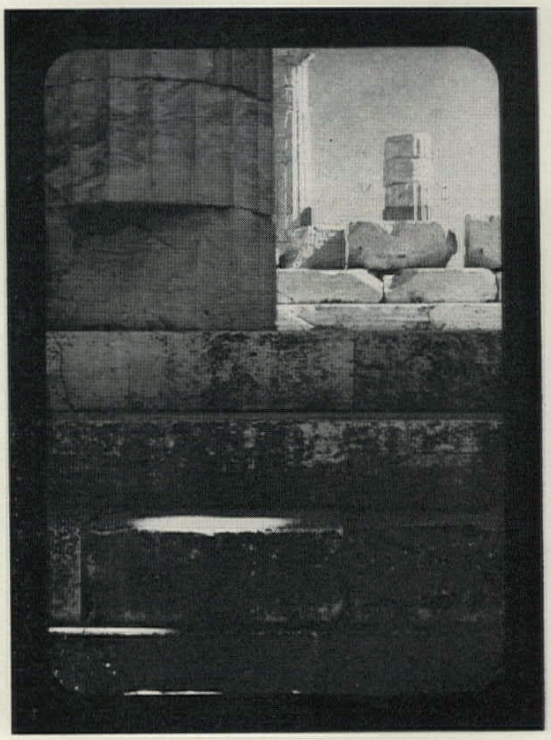


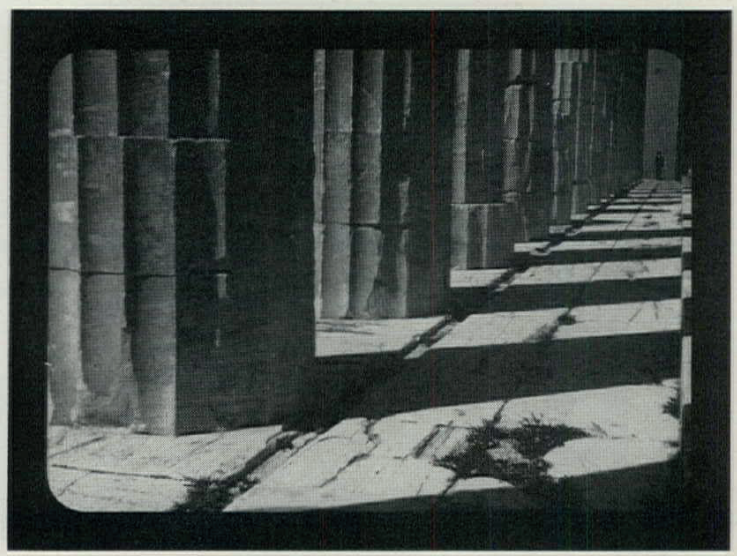
7. *After the building has been established vis-a-vis nature, relate it then to its neighbors. This can be most effectively done by using a neighbor as contrast. In the illustration above, the clean simplicity of a modern apartment house in Milan is counterpointed by the elaborateness of the Baroque street front. Another method of relationship is shown in photos 4 and 9 wherein a foreground "detail" is played against a background entity.*

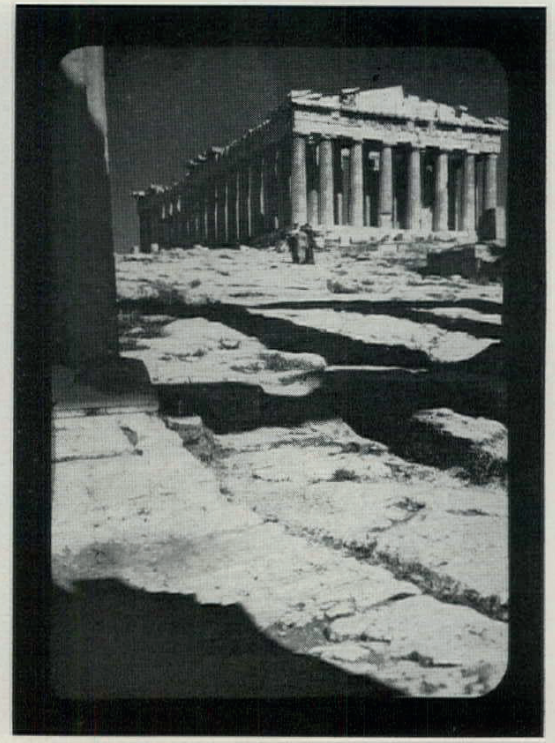


8. *Next, move in and concentrate on those sections or details of the building which reveal the main character, the essence, the spice of the building—as do Ghiberti's bronze doors in the Baptistery of Florence (above). Most buildings say as much—sometimes more—in a well-chosen section as in the over-all. Seek this photographically. Always take one picture no more than 10 ft. from the subject.*

9. *One of the cardinal rules for use of 35-mm. cameras is to keep the camera level; otherwise, most annoying distortions will result. This means use of much more of the foreground than is theoretically desirable, and it generally means that the photographer must back off farther than planned. However, if the "excess" foreground is consciously pulled into the over-all composition, much of the limitation of having no rising front on the camera can be overcome. Note how the foreground was brought into the photograph of the Parthenon in Athens (right). Similar examples can be seen in photos 2, 10-right, and 12-left. Using the foreground as an active composition element can also be done with wide-angle lenses, if one is doubly sure the camera is level. In many cases the composition will have to be adjusted to fit the limitations of a 35-mm. machine, as in photo 13 (following page).*

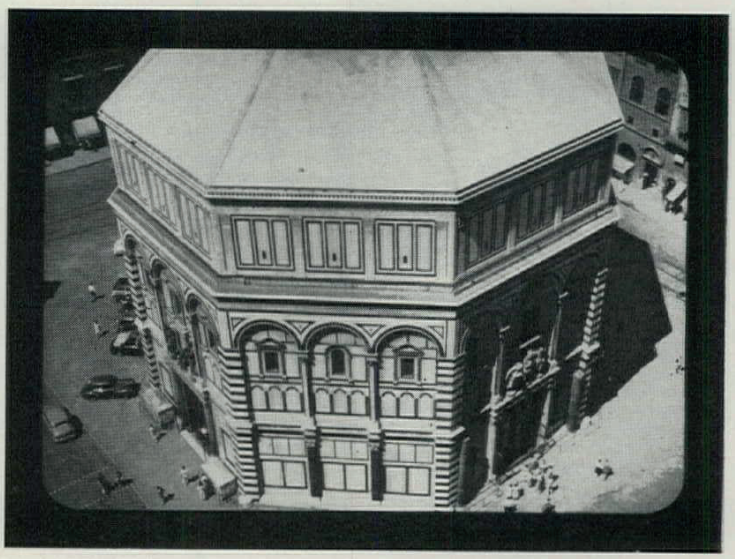


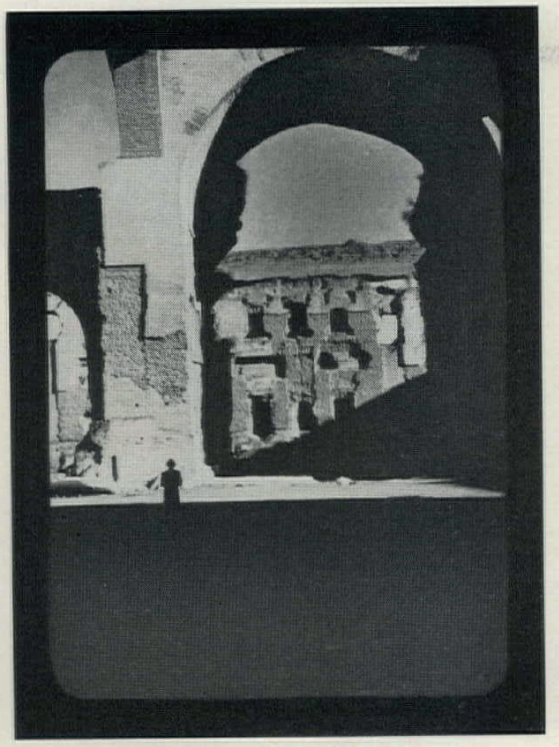




10. *Sometimes a low camera viewpoint will be more informative or expressive than a high one. In these two pictures, both of the Parthenon, the low camera brings out the skill with which Ictinus and Callicrates joined column to stylobate (above) and emphasizes the superb crowning quality of the Parthenon on the Acropolis (left).*

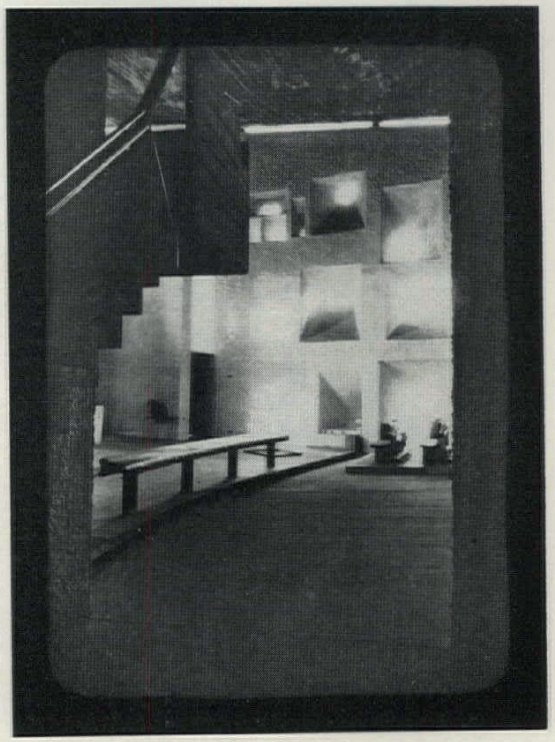
11. *At other times a high vantage point will reveal more or give a better comprehension than an eye-level shot. The handsome paving at Vällingby in Stockholm (below, left) is spirited and delightful at eye level, but it can be best grasped from above. A photograph of the Baptistery at Florence taken from Giotto's Campanile shows an entire building, not just a street façade. Note that when this picture is combined with the detail in photo 8, much of the impact of this building and its art is revealed in just two photographs.*





12. *Human figures, singly or en masse, are almost universally desirable in architectural photographs if they are gracefully, or anonymously, worked in. Not only can figures give scale and vitality to the picture, they also can have an important effect on the composition, as above, in Rome's Baths of Caracalla. If the figure here is covered up, the whole composition falls apart. Scale figures are often best in silhouette; backing a friend against the wall is photographically fatal. In the view of the Pieve di Santa Maria in Arezzo (above, right) the lovely little square would be doleful without the market animations.*

13. *The last category, interiors, might seem the most difficult of all. I personally know nothing about lighting architectural interiors; I own no lights and would not know what to do with them if I did. But a great deal can be done by natural daylight, especially with large-scale rooms such as Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp (right). And in many instances the use of natural light will result in a less artificial impression than flooding the place like a stage set. A tripod is, of course, called for in most interior work, and a wide-angle lens is useful (but not essential) if the camera is kept strictly level.*



In recapitulation: plan a photographic sequence in space; seek compositions in the subject; have sun on one side and not the other—or occasionally shoot against the light; be careful where you stand, and when you stand there; relate the building first to nature about it, then to its neighbors; close in and seek the character-giving parts; keep the camera level always; consider the low viewpoint vs. the high; use scale figures; and remember that much can be done indoors with existing natural light. END