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Judith Turner: Seeing Ambiguity. Photographs of Architecture

With a foreword by Robert Elwall and an introduction by Joseph Rosa. 96 pp. with 99 illus. in b&w, 280 x 300 mm, hard-cover, English

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In 1980 the book *Judith Turner Photographs Five Architects* was internationally recognized by architects who admired and valued Turner's unique way of seeing and photographing architecture. This new book contains photographs taken between 1974 and 2009 of buildings designed by 17 well-known architects including: Peter Eisenman, Louis Kahn, Fumihiko Maki, Norman Foster, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Alvar Aalto, Shigeru Ban and Renzo Piano. From the beginning of her career, Turner has used architecture as subject matter.

Ambiguity has always been a hallmark of her work where solids become voids, causing positive and negative to reverse. The photos are small fragments of architecture taken out of context. Through her eyes, the subject is decomposed and recreated, assuming a new meaning. The photographs are quiet, yet dynamic, beautifully framed compositions. Architects have commented that she exposes elements of their work they never imagined existed. Thus, while using architecture as subject matter to invent her own worlds, Turner is also revealing some of its inherent complexities.

Judith Turner resides in New York where she began taking photographs in 1972. She has had solo exhibitions in various cities in the United States, Europe, South America, Israel, and Japan. Turner has been awarded several grants and fellowships. She received an Honor Award from The American Institute of Architects in 1994 and a Stars of Design Award in Photography from The Design Center of New York in 2007.

Her prints are in public and corporate collections including: International Center of Photography, New York; Brooklyn Museum, New York; George Eastman House Collection, Rochester; New York State Archives, Albany; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; Architectural Association, London; Royal Institute of British Architects, London; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; University of Leiden, Leiden; Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki; Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo.

Robert Elwall is photographs curator at the British Architectural Library of the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. Joseph Rosa is the director of the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) in Ann Arbor and a noted scholar on architecture, design, and photography.

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»The question is not what you look at but what you see.«
Henry David Thoreau

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Judith Turner

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Books of her photographs include: *Judith Turner Photographs Five Architects*, Rizzoli, New York, 1980; *White City: International Style Architecture in Israel*, Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv, 1984; *Annotations on Ambiguity: Judith Turner. Photographs of Architecture*, Axis Publications, Tokyo 1986; *Parables & Pieces*, Vincent FitzGerald & Co., New York, 1990; *After*, Vincent FitzGerald & Co., New York, 1992; *Judith Turner: Near Sitings. Photographs 1975–1995*, City Arts Center, Oklahoma City, 1995; *Between Spaces*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2000.

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Joseph Rosa

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1. Untitled, 1992. Frank Lloyd Wright, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York.

All photographs were taken using a film camera and printed without any manipulation at David Wong Custom Photo Lab in New York, New York.

Robert Elwall Abstract relevations

The photography of architecture has customarily been portrayed as a limited genre in that the subject matter is given and the possibilities for creative expression correspondingly circumscribed. It has too to be said that much of the practice of architectural photography has reinforced this opinion. During the 19th-century professional photographers were required to satisfy the demands of their clients by providing sharply defined documentary views that aimed to provide as much information as possible on a single plate. Unsurprisingly architectural photographs were largely seen as inimical to the quest to raise photography to the status of art and condemned to languish in the technical sections of photographic exhibitions. This situation changed, however, with the advent of Modernism in the late 1920s impelling the British critic Philip Morton Shand to declare that whereas architectural photography had previously been undertaken by »men with the cultural equipment of beach photographers« walking »round buildings at a respectful distance like policemen on their beat flashing lanterns on the impeccably obvious« now »the new sort of architects had their buildings taken by the new sort of photographers. A revolution in the technique of architectural photography resulted ... «¹ This revolution, which ushered in a more dynamic mode of representing buildings with the frequent use of unconventional viewpoints, disorientating changes in scale, vivid tonal contrasts, radical cropping and a partiality for geometrical abstraction, rendered architectural photography a more protean genre. This process was continued after the Second World War where it came to embrace townscape at one extreme and lifestyle at the other. More important was its subsequent attraction to a new generation of photographers who came not from the photographic or architectural milieus as their forbears had done but from the world of art. Among these was Judith Turner whose training was as a graphic artist.

Shand had highlighted the empathy between Modernist architecture and photography by contending that both were based on abstract form and this has been the dominant motif of Turner's work since she first started photographing in 1972. Turner has freely admitted that her pared down approach would not suit other architectural styles such as Postmodernism and her exploration of Modernism has remained undeviating whether it be the sinuously smooth forms of Tel Aviv's »White City« or the harshly angular geometry of Zaha Hadid. This predilection for abstraction is already evident in her first book *Judith Turner Photographs Five Architects* (1980), a groundbreaking study of the oeuvre of the New York Five, where the architecture is deconstructed into a series of often ambiguous fragments that force the viewer to think afresh about the works portrayed. Turner's photographs always have this quality of making demands of their audience. Nothing is given. The book title, too, is significant. Turner is fond of quoting Henry Thoreau's maxim, »the question is not what you look at but what you see« and this is very much Turner's personal vision, her own unique way of seeing. In this respect her photography is at odds with much mainstream professional practice where photographers were often required to be self-effacing midwives to their commissioners' intentions and aimed at what one 19th century photographer termed »the genuine presentment of the object under consideration.«² As this current book beautifully demon-

strates, Turner's aesthetic has been aided by the fact that she has worked closely with a relatively small number of architects and has not been bound by the bidding of magazines and advertisers. Indeed the principal outlets for her photography have not been professional journals but exhibitions and books, continuing and aiding a process by which since the 1960s the photography of architecture has gradually achieved artistic respectability and become fit for gallery presentation.

Influenced by the architect John Hejduk, Turner has held firm to her belief that the essence of architecture can be conveyed through a fragment or detail from which the viewer may glean an idea of the whole. There is thus an intimation in Turner's pictures of something happening beyond the frame which gives them a great sense of fluidity. The photographs are not self-contained but part of a gradually unfolding narrative. This is not architecture as »frozen music« but as dynamic and kinetic, the pictures being as much about what is absent as what is present. This sense is further heightened by the way in which nothing seems certain or fixed. Scale and perspective are distorted, solidity is dissolved and voids rendered corporeal. This hallucinatory quality renders Turner's photography not one of irrefutable statement but probing suggestion. Assurance and certainty are banished; all is nuance. Again this subverts the norms of architectural photography as most commonly practised where the emphasis is very much on literal transcription and legibility. Turner's chosen palette also heightens this aura. Her prints do not have that robust, high contrast intensity demanded by magazines but rather are muted symphonies in grey. Although in recent years she has begun working with colour, for most of her career she has remained a steadfast adherent of black-and-white. Ironically when she started photographing, colour was for the first time becoming a major factor in architectural photography prompted by a revolution in reproduction techniques and the demands of advertisers who considered it more seductive. This in turn had the effect of rendering black-and-white the perceived medium of both documentary authenticity and, paradoxically, artistic expression – the latter status one that Turner's work has contributed fully to establishing.

In his *Photography and Architecture* (1961) the critic and photographer Eric de Maré paid tribute to the burgeoning diversification of the genre by positing three types of architectural photography. The first he called the »Record« or the »Survey« which sought to provide »as much accurate documentary information as possible«; the second he termed the »Illustration« which made »a satisfactory record« but also »a pleasing picture in itself«; and finally, and most importantly, the »Picture«, which he defined as »the architectonic design which is not concerned at all with the record but attempts to create a work of visual art in its own right. The subject may, or may not, have architectural value in itself; it is the picture which matters.«³ This is the magic of Turner's photographs. They manage at once to be beautiful, haunting images whilst also seeking to reveal the architects' intentions. Such duality and ambiguity are at the heart of her art.

¹ *The Architectural Review*, vol. 75, 1934 January, p. 12.

² William and Mary Howitt, preface, *Ruined Abbneys and Castles of Great Britain*, A.W. Bennett, London, 1862.

³ Eric de Maré, *Photography and Architecture*, The Architectural Press, London, 1961, pp. 25–26.

Joseph Rosa

Tracing ambiguity – the photography of Judith Turner

Judith Turner is a noted American photographer whose subject matter is mostly architecture. Her signature style consists of highly abstract black-and-white compositions that play with the ambiguity of light, shadow, and tonality to heighten the aesthetic character of her subject matter and reveal visual relationships not readily apparent. Tonality is a very important aspect of her illuminating compositions. An example of this can be seen in the way she employs the sky – above or beyond an actual building – as a monochromatic surface that then becomes part of an overall composition, a planar component brought into the frame of the photograph. This sensibility is furthered by a strong sense of light and shadow that allows elements of a building to be seen as abstract surfaces heightening its architectural essence without having the entire structure completely illustrated. Hence, this methodology is the foundation for all Turner's work – which now spans over three decades – and is essential to understanding her own ideology, which explores the ambiguity of flatness within these well-composed photographs.

Since its inception, photography has always had an ambiguous relationship with the representation of architecture. While 20th-century art photography elevated significant modern architecture to represent the heroic vision of the photographer – as seen with Margaret Bourke-White's stylized photographs for *Fortune* magazine in the mid-1930s – more often it was used to showcase the architect's intent or for commercial purposes. After the Second World War, modern architecture in the United States became a metaphor for the better life that had long been promised. Architectural photography in popular consumer magazines reflected this value. Modeled after American fashion photography, the new architectural photography created seductive statements about a comfortable lifestyle and the architecture through which it could be achieved.¹ Variations on this style can be seen in the works of numerous well-known postwar commercial architectural photographers such as Julius Shulman, Ezra Stoller, and Bill Hedrich of Hedrich Blessing.² In addition, since the late 1970s, many successful commercial architectural photographers, such as Paul Warchol, Timothy Hursley, and Tim Street-Porter, received formal training as fine art photographers.³ Prior to this period, commercial architectural photographers were largely self-taught. However, this representation of avant-garde architecture was rarely equated with high-end art photography – or its subject matter – and basically operated in a parallel discourse that was taking place in architectural trade journals and university lecture halls. By the end of the twentieth century, a shift occurred in this thinking, with the representation of avant-garde architecture making its way into the discourse of art photographers and video artists as subject matter. This is apparent in Thomas Ruff's 2004 photographic series on noted buildings by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Todd Eberle's 2002 photographic *Untitled* series that focuses on gridded surfaces from well-known modern buildings. Video artists are also employing avant-garde architecture as subject matter. This can be seen with Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's 2004 video *Le Baiser* which features Mies' 1951 Farnsworth House and Dorit Margreiter's 2004 film *10104 Angelo*

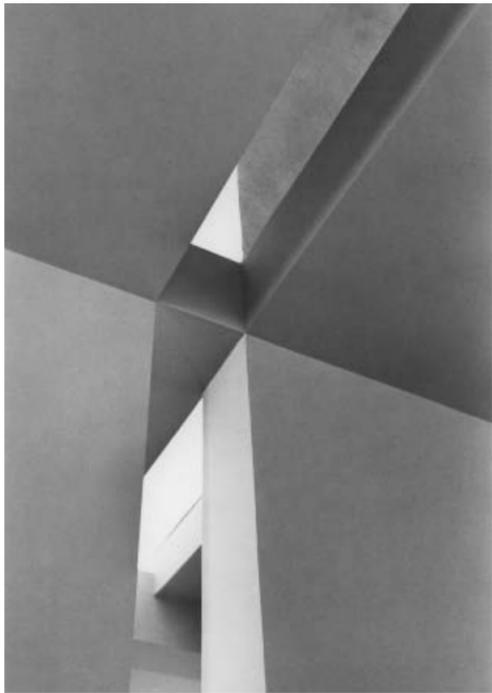
View Drive which depicts John Lautner's 1963 Sheats House.⁴

However, since the mid-1970s Turner's photography of avant-garde architecture has always operated outside the realm of commercial architectural photography and is visually more aligned with the art photography – specifically that of Florence Henri and Alexander Rodchenko.⁵ The American-born Henri was trained at the Bauhaus as a painter – not a photographer – and this background had a significant influence on her later work, as can be seen in her use of mirrored surfaces in photographs that fracture the figurative compositions and engage spaces beyond the framed image. Rodchenko, a leading figure of the Russian Constructivist movement, was also trained as an artist and worked in numerous media from painting and sculpture to graphic design and photography. Henri's and Rodchenko's education outside of the medium of photography allowed their later photographic works to be encoded with an aesthetic ideology that was foreign to that medium. Turner's training as a designer and not a photographer allowed her to visually understand an architect's intention and to reveal it in compositions that she constructs and edits through the viewfinder of her camera. Her photography can be seen as a metalanguage of architectural intention and as an artistic expression that is inseparable from the representation of this built work.

Turner's compositions reflect her training as a graphic designer.⁶ Her aesthetic development also explains the ambiguity in the depth of her photographic work, which relates more to the flatness of an abstract two-dimensional construction than it does to the reality of her given subject. In addition, Turner worked professionally as a graphic designer, and in the mid-1970s started to explore the camera as another realm of artistic expression. One of her first architectural subjects was Peter Eisenman's House VI, photographed in 1976. It was through Eisenman that Turner was introduced to the world of architecture and started photographing some of its most significant buildings. Yet it was her first book, *Judith Turner Photographs Five Architects* – published in 1980 – that truly solidified her reputation as the photographer of this emerging, avant-garde voice of architecture.⁷ Turner's volume came out eight years after the seminal publication of *Five Architects: Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier* which contained critical essays and drawings along with an assortment of photographs by numerous individuals that left the visual record of these architects' built work the book's weakest aspect.⁸ In sharp contrast, Turner's timeless black-and-white photography – and a selection of some color images – connoted the formalist qualities of these architects, furthered their aesthetic ideology, and defined each architect's personal idiom.

Whether her subject matter is contemporary or historical in its origins, these timeless poetic framings communicate an aesthetic quality that is purely hers. An example of this can be seen in even a small selection of her photographs.

Turner's 1976 photograph of Eisenman's House VI, for example, is a study in tonality that captures a definitive detail exemplifying the architect's notion of an »absence of presence in architecture«.⁹ The simple framed view depicts a geometric condition at the junction of wall and ceiling where a void in the ceiling plane (and the floor above) is displaced into an adjacent space (illus. 2). Turner captures this gesture in an abstract image that



2. *Untitled*, 1976. Peter Eisenman, House VI, Frank Residence, Cornwall, Connecticut.

3. *Untitled*, 1979. Columbia University, New York, New York.

visually reads as a composition of contrast and tonality, ranging from pale to dark. The framed view is further heightened by a strong diagonal – where the vertical wall and horizontal ceiling planes meet – that bifurcates the vertical composition, forcing the viewer's eye into the center of the image.

An example of how complex Turner's framings can be is seen in her 1979 series entitled *Columns*. In one vertical image (illus. 3) there are four bands of varying width and tone. To the left is the darkest one, while to the right of this is a portion of a Doric column that appears to have been collaged into the overall composition. This becomes apparent through the presence of a narrow vertical white strip that interrupts the base of the Doric column on its right side, separating it from the last vertical band of medium tonality. Collectively, this photograph reads as a study in tonal range and collage that renders the figurative quality of the columns ambiguous in relationship to the other vertical elements. This photograph is not a collage of disparate images, but instead one that depicts conditions found at the site. Two of the tonal bands are Doric columns from a colonnade and are in different degrees of shadow at one moment. The narrow white band is actually the glare of the sun shining on the adjacent right column, which is in the immediate foreground of the composition. The simple position of this column in the foreground visually cuts off the base of the most legible column – the one that is most »in focus« and that is farthest from the camera.

A study in tonality and line can be seen with Turner's 1998 photograph of Hillside West in Tokyo by Fumihiko Maki (illus. 21). This horizontal composition is bifurcated by a strong diagonal that separates the frame from dark to light. This gradation, coupled with shadows from exterior balconies that are integrated into the overall composition, renders the depth of surface articulation ambiguous. In reality, the darker triangulated surface is one of the façades of the building, while the light horizontal lines are from the metalwork on the adjacent façade. Turner photographs the building's corner at a horizontal angle, conceptually flattening the building and visually allowing the two façades to read as one contiguous surface.

Turner's 1999 photograph of Smith-Miller+Hawkinson's Corning Glass Center is an example of ambiguity and clarity (illus. 63). In this vertical photograph the focus is on an assembly of metal elements that compose a railing for a parapet wall. The framing of this view; however, is mysterious and renders the collection of metal pieces ambiguous in its purpose and location. The photograph is taken from beneath a balcony and focuses upward, visually terminating on the vertical metal support of the railing. Turner's rendering of the underside of the balcony as a dark, monochromatic surface adds mystery to its location, while communicating the architectural aesthetic that is purely Smith-Miller+Hawkinson.

Turner's photographic discoveries of buildings reveal their aesthetic attributes as well as their complex visual relationships – from the building's Cartesian structural grid and palette of materials, to its engagement with the sky beyond. An example of this can be seen in Turner's 2008 photograph of Renzo Piano's Modern Wing for the Art Institute of Chicago – a beautiful vertical study in the range of tonality and the ambiguity of flatness (illus. 83). Upon close examination one perceives the repetitive pattern of Renzo's horizontal »flying carpet« –

bathed in light – that fills the left frame of the image. At the right side of this composition is a compressed view of the vertical window mullions that cast a gradation of shade and shadow onto the adjacent vertical limestone wall of the building. An important aspect of this photograph is the plane of the sky that fills the center portion of the image and becomes the third element in the composition. Turner has taken these three discrete aspects of the building – the horizontal, the vertical, and the sky beyond – and has visually collapsed them into one ambiguous figure-ground composition possessing a range on tonality from light to dark. Her ability to see, edit, and record – through the camera – allows us to witness the rich aesthetic qualities of Piano's Modern Wing – from its »flying carpet« to its walls of limestone with vast spans of glass. It is simply that brilliance in seeing-beyond the actual building's normative character – that allows Turner to produce such timeless black-and-white compositions highlighting the underlying beauty of whatever it is she views.

¹ Cervin Robinson and Joel Herschmann, *Architecture Transformed: A History of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987; Robert Elwall, *Building with Light: An International History of Architectural Photography*, Merrell, London and New York, 2004.

² *Modern Architecture: Photography by Ezra Stoller, with commentary by William S. Sanders*, Abrams, New York, 1990; Robert A. Sobieszek, *The Architectural Photography of Heidrich-Blessing*, Holt Rinehart & Winston, Austin, 1984; Joseph Rosa, *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman*, Rizzoli, New York, 1994.

³ Akiko Busch, *The Photography of Architecture: Twelve Views*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1987.

⁴ For more information on the modern house and its depiction in video art, see Joseph Rosa, »Architectural Photography: A Modern Portrait in the Making«, *Revisiting the Glass House: Contemporary Art and Modern Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2009.

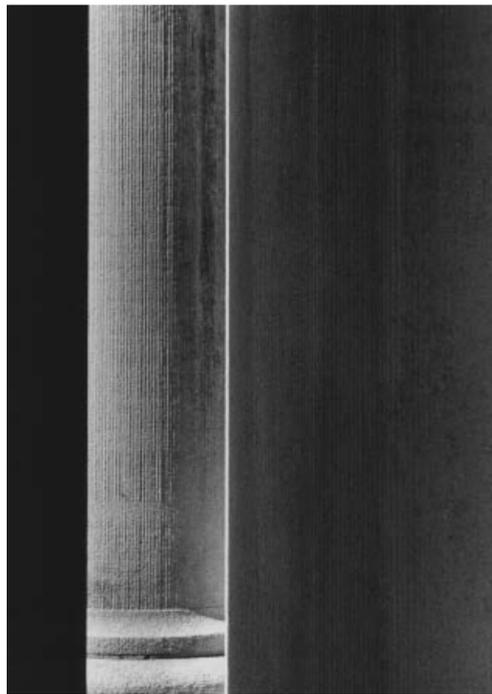
⁵ Diana C. du Pont, *Florence Henri: Artist-Photographer of the Avant-Garde*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 1990, and Jean-Michel Foray, *Florence Henri*, Electa, Milan, 1995; Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1983, and Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987.

⁶ Turner received her degree in graphic design from the School of Fine Arts, Boston University.

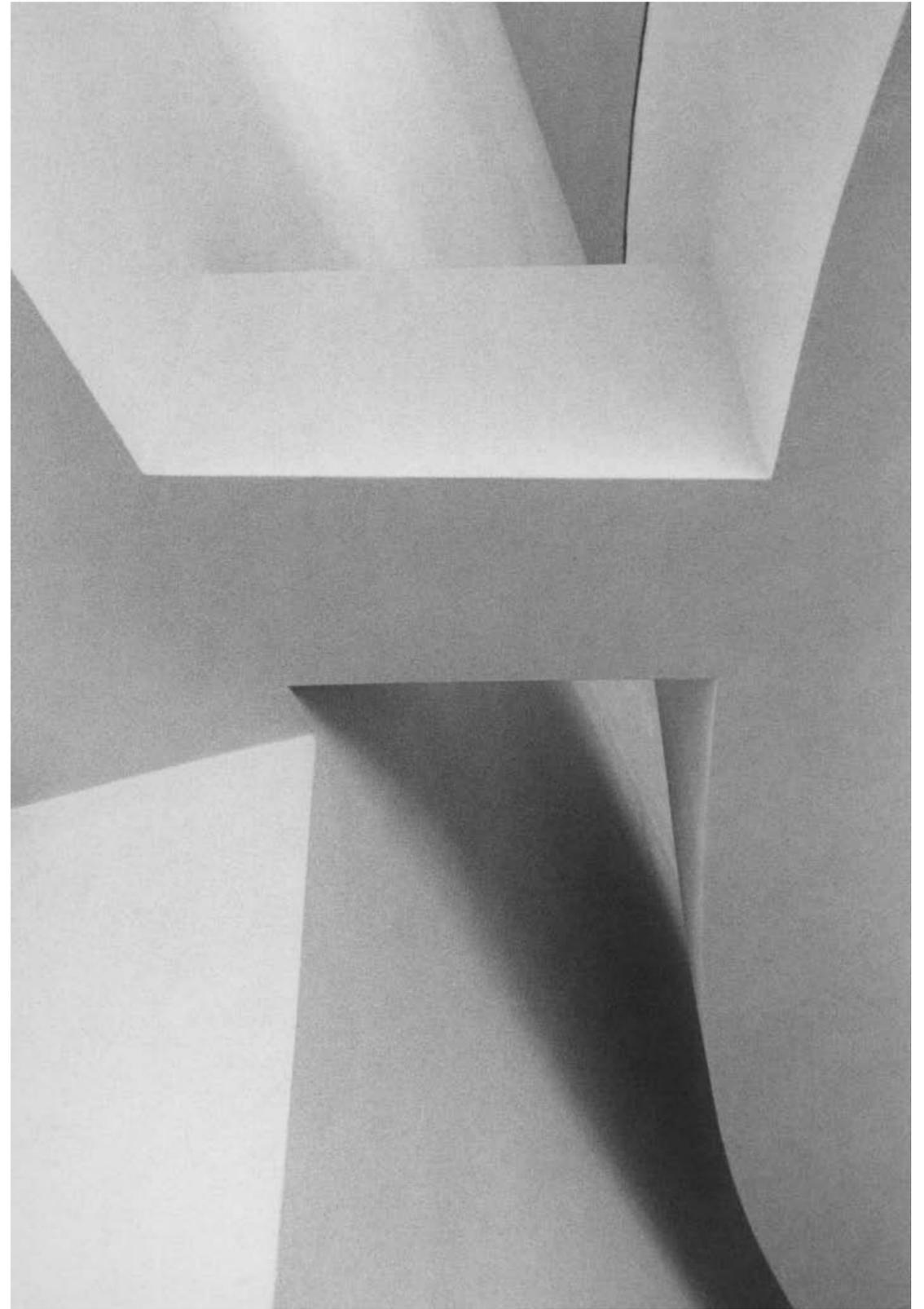
⁷ See Judith Turner, *Judith Turner Photographs Five Architects*, Rizzoli, New York, 1980.

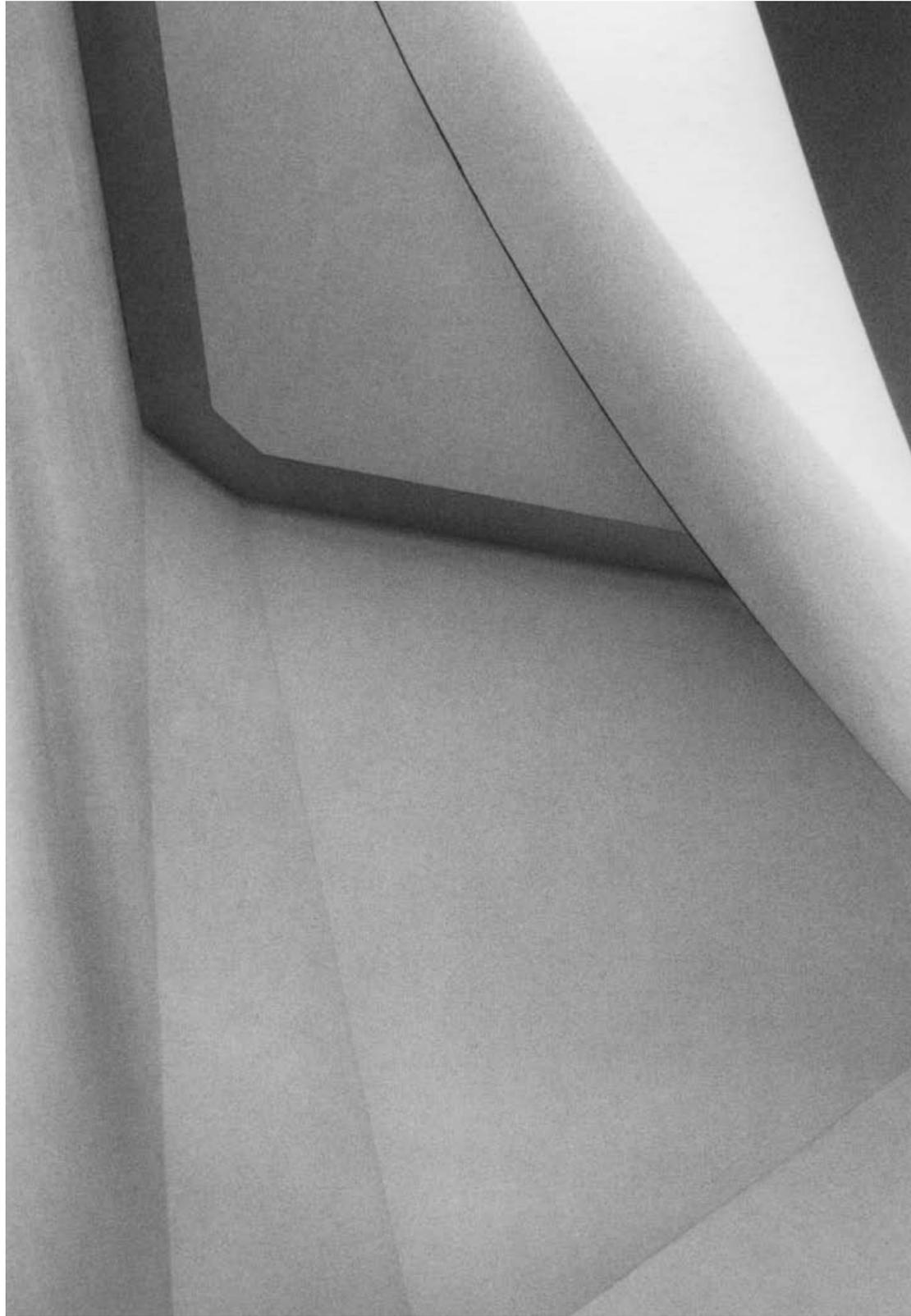
⁸ This volume was published in New York in 1972 by Witteborn in response to a 1969 meeting by the Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment (CASE) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

⁹ For more on Peter Eisenman see *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings 1963–1988*, edited by Mark Rakatansky, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2004.

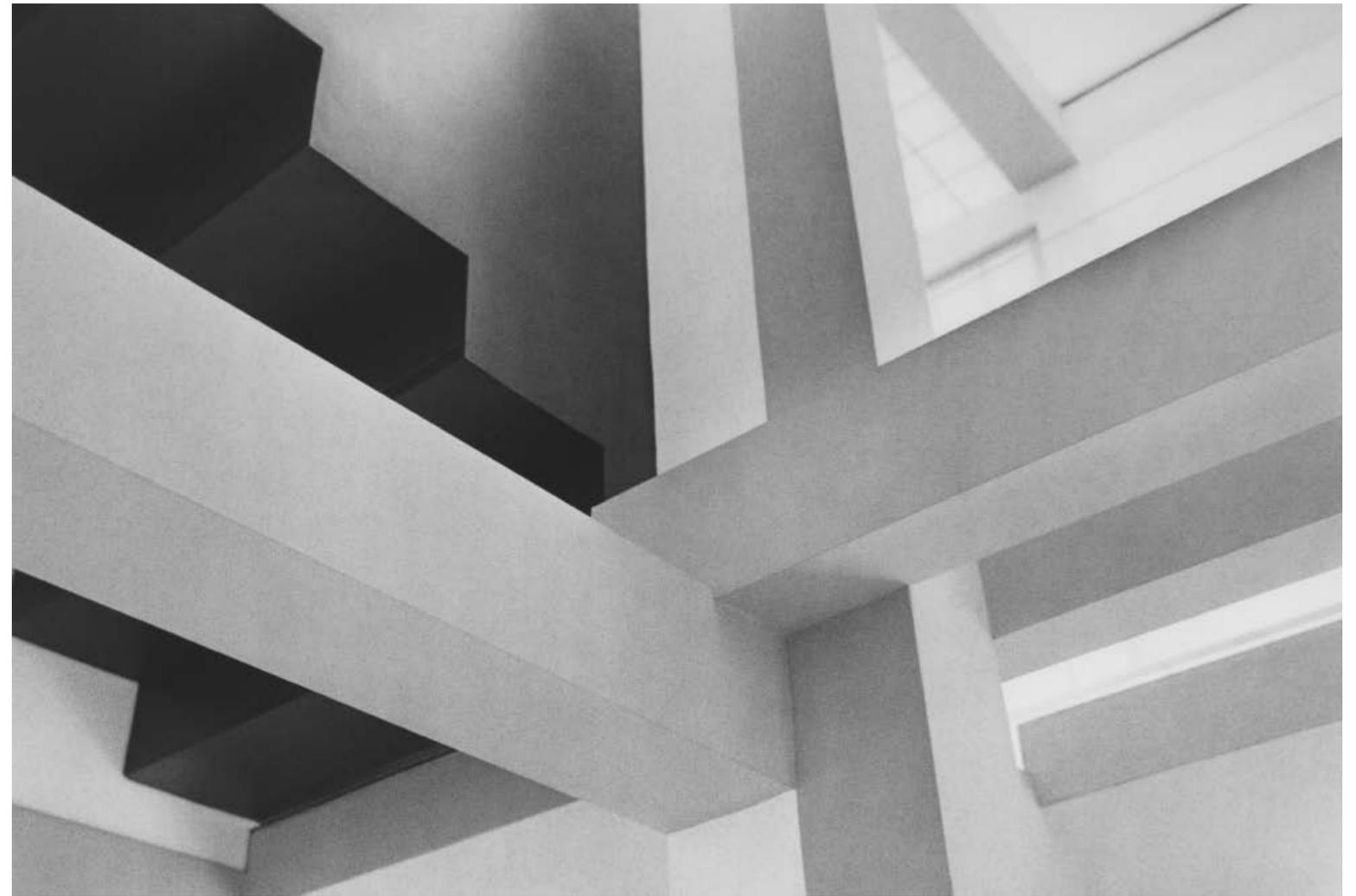


4. Untitled, 1975. John Hejduk, The Cooper Union, New York, New York, renovation.
5. Untitled, 1974. John Hejduk, The Cooper Union, New York, New York, renovation.





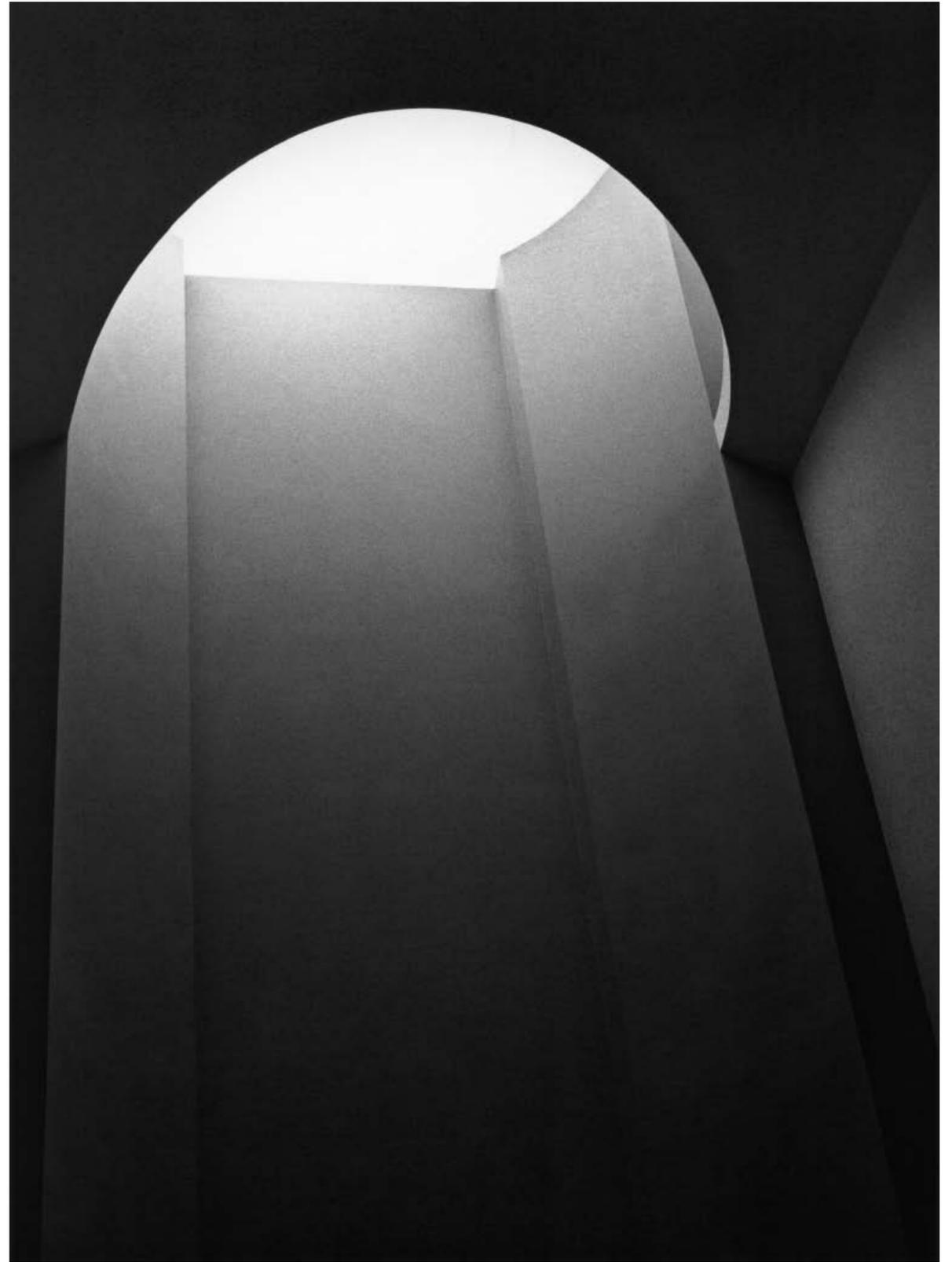
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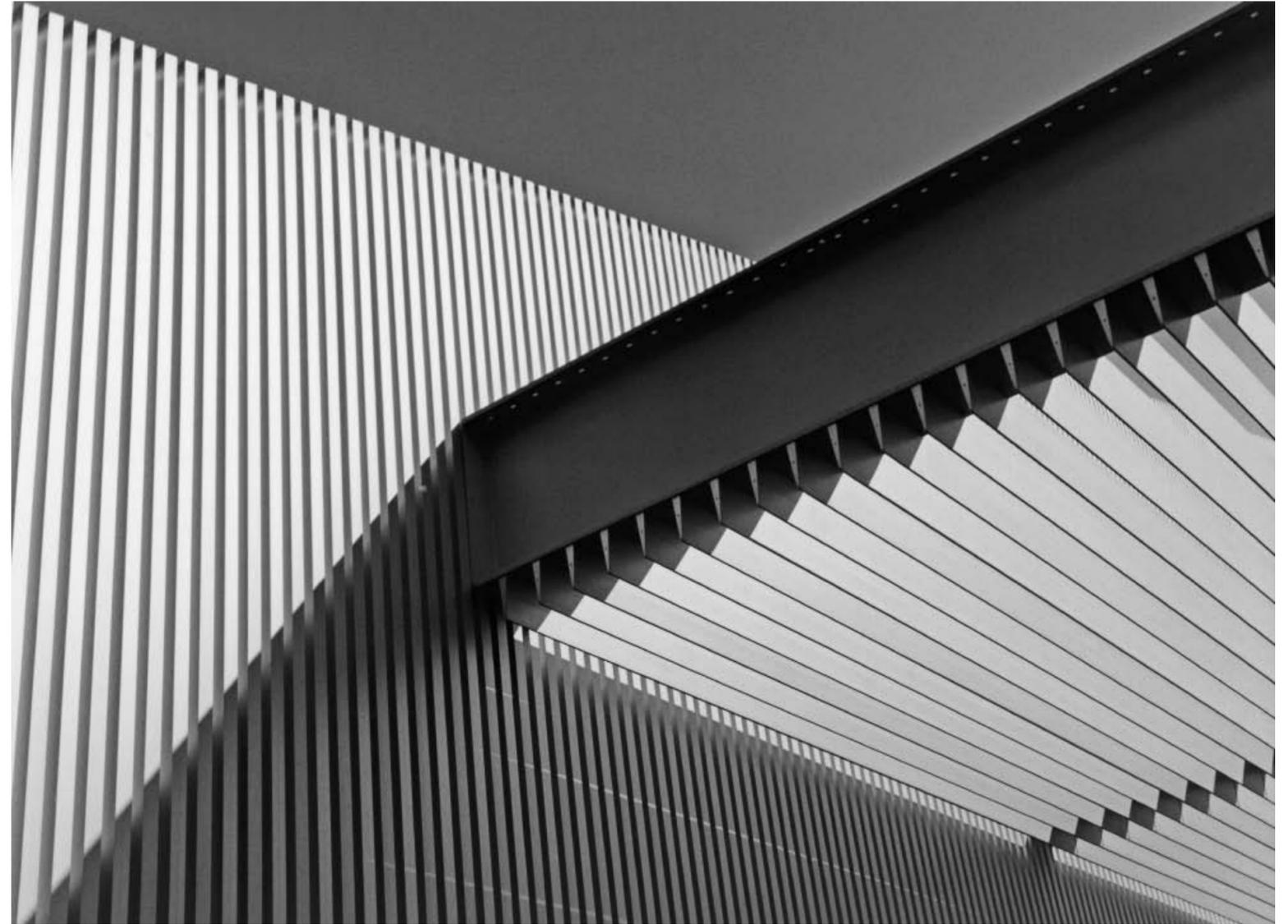
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27. Untitled, 2003. Maki and Associates (Fumihiko Maki, principal), headquarters of the TV Asahi Corporation, Tokyo, Japan.
28. Untitled, 2003. Maki and Associates (Fumihiko Maki, principal), headquarters of the TV Asahi Corporation, Tokyo, Japan.



72. Untitled, 2006. Alvar Aalto, Church of the Three Crosses, Imatra, Finland.
73. Untitled, 2006. Alvar Aalto, Church of the Three Crosses, Imatra, Finland.



74. Untitled, 2006. Alvar Aalto, Church of the Three Crosses, Imatra, Finland.
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