

ARTFORUM

Balthazar Korab (1926–2013)

By John Comazzi

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Jørn Utzon, Sydney Opera House, 1973, Sydney. Photo: Balthazar Korab, 1988.

WITH THE PASSING of Balthazar Korab earlier this year, we have lost one of our most sensitive and acute chroniclers of our designed environments. I had the honor of conducting almost thirty-six hours of interviews with Balthazar over the past fifteen years, as I worked on my monograph about his work. Our conversations often wandered through the extraordinary experiences underlying each of the images we discussed. “The story” he would often say, “prevails in my approach to photography; the feelings, responses to a place, the message... Photography is a very important way of creating a record of the transformations experienced throughout the cultural life of a place.”

Having experienced powerful transformation firsthand during his formative years, in the form of the devastating effects of war on his home city of Budapest, Korab understood both the power and fragility of architecture. These early experiences, along with his later travels through war-torn Europe in the mid- and late-1940s, heightened his sensitivity to the complex lives of buildings and compelled him to include (where others might omit) the fullest range of expressive, atmospheric, and even melancholic qualities in his imaging of architecture.

His work is thus full of intriguing contradictions—perhaps appropriate for a photographer with no formal training, who in fact studied architecture, and who, when once asked to characterize his work in a single sentence, simply responded “soft-spoken with a bite.” His professional images of architecture are recognized for displaying a precision befitting their Modernist subjects, but they are often layered with the idiosyncrasies of atmosphere, weathering, and activity that confound an otherwise

“disciplined” picture. And while he has been widely celebrated for a career producing images of iconic Modern architecture, he often preferred to photograph vernacular buildings and anonymous industrial sites. This preference seems to have stemmed at least in part from the exuberance that he experienced when emigrating to what he called the “unique cultural timezone” of the postwar United States in 1955. Landing a job in the office of Eero Saarinen, Korab joined an exceptional team of designers from around the world and began working as the in-house photographer for the firm, a role that ultimately helped him launch his own studio as a professional photographer of architecture in 1958. There, his work quickly expanded beyond the outstanding modern architecture that he was charged to document. As Monica Korab, his wife and studio partner, noted: “Balthazar, a perpetual foreigner in a strange land, was often more enthusiastic exploring vernacular subjects than many of his other projects, because they offered a much broader expression of a particular culture. Everything was new and worth examining to him, and I think he saw something in America—an explosive push to build differently from his European roots—that was fascinating and yet unsettling in some respects.”

We are fortunate that Balthazar’s entire photographic archive was acquired by the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division in 2011. His adopted nation (Korab became a US citizen in 1964) has thus secured his contributions to the disciplines of both architecture and photography. I will miss him and our meandering conversations dearly, but I find solace in the fact that the treasure trove of images housed within his archive—beautiful, heroic, complicated, and often contradictory—will continue to offer a compassionate portrait of our cultural heritage while also provoking us to reflect on ourselves, a fitting legacy for work that is indeed “soft-spoken with a bite.”

John Comazzi is an associate professor of architecture at the University of Minnesota and author of *Balthazar Korab: Architect of Photography* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2012).

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