

BARCELONA

Portraits of the City



Photographs by *David Cardelús*

"If I knew more I would write it down."

A final sentence in a single sparse story that leaves the reader (and writer) wanting more. Beautiful black and white photographs of the public realm: architecture, streetscapes and the spaces between that offer the viewer an evocative sense of place. This book is a collaborative portrait of Philadelphia that is both recognizable and wondrous. Jerome Lukowicz, a photographer, and Sean O'Rourke, an architect, render a character to the physical and social aspects of the city they call home. With photographs that concentrate on the physicality of the city and stories that complement and elaborate on the views *Philadelphia, Portraits of the City* is a book for anyone interested in Philadelphia, photography, and the life of cities.



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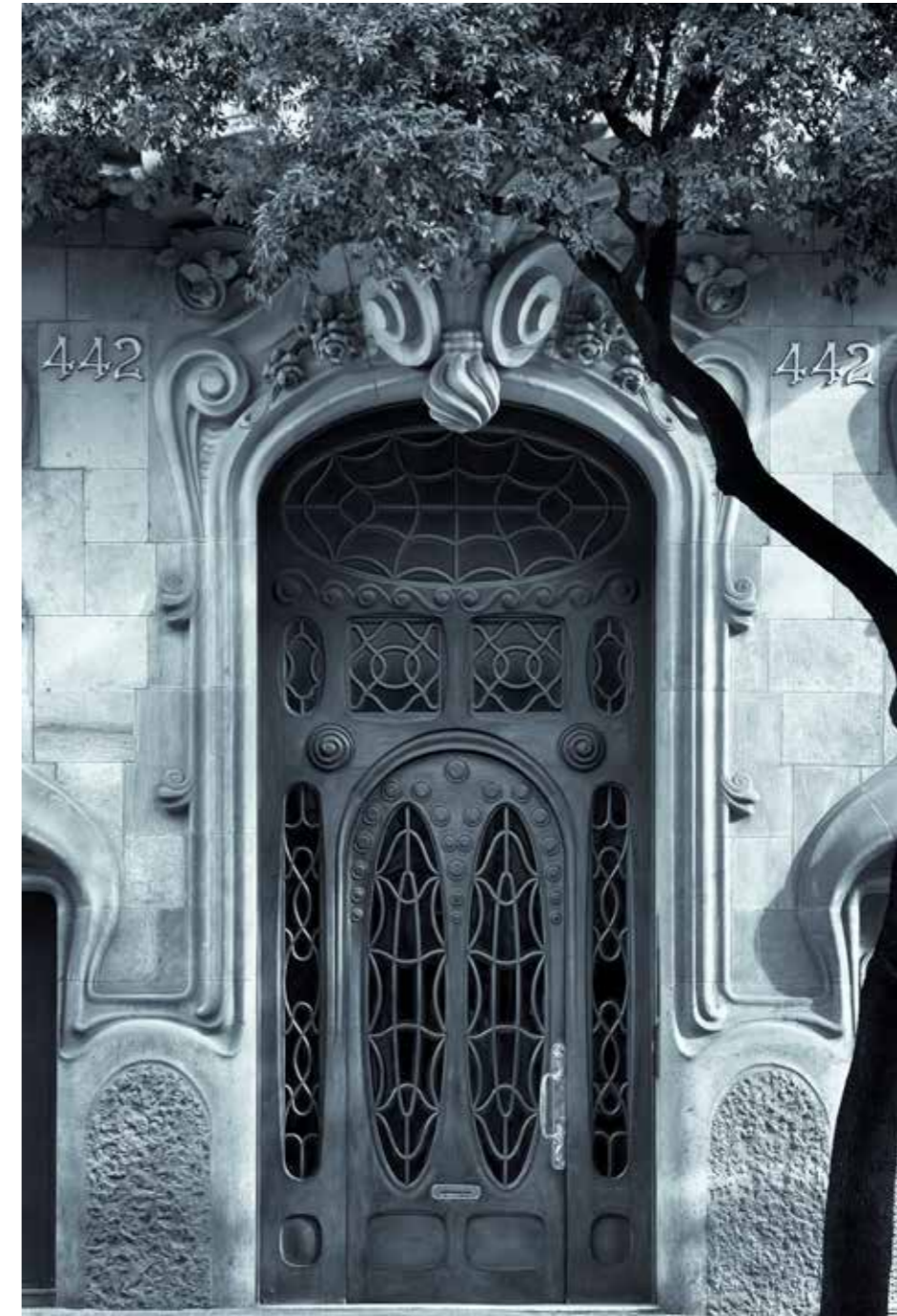
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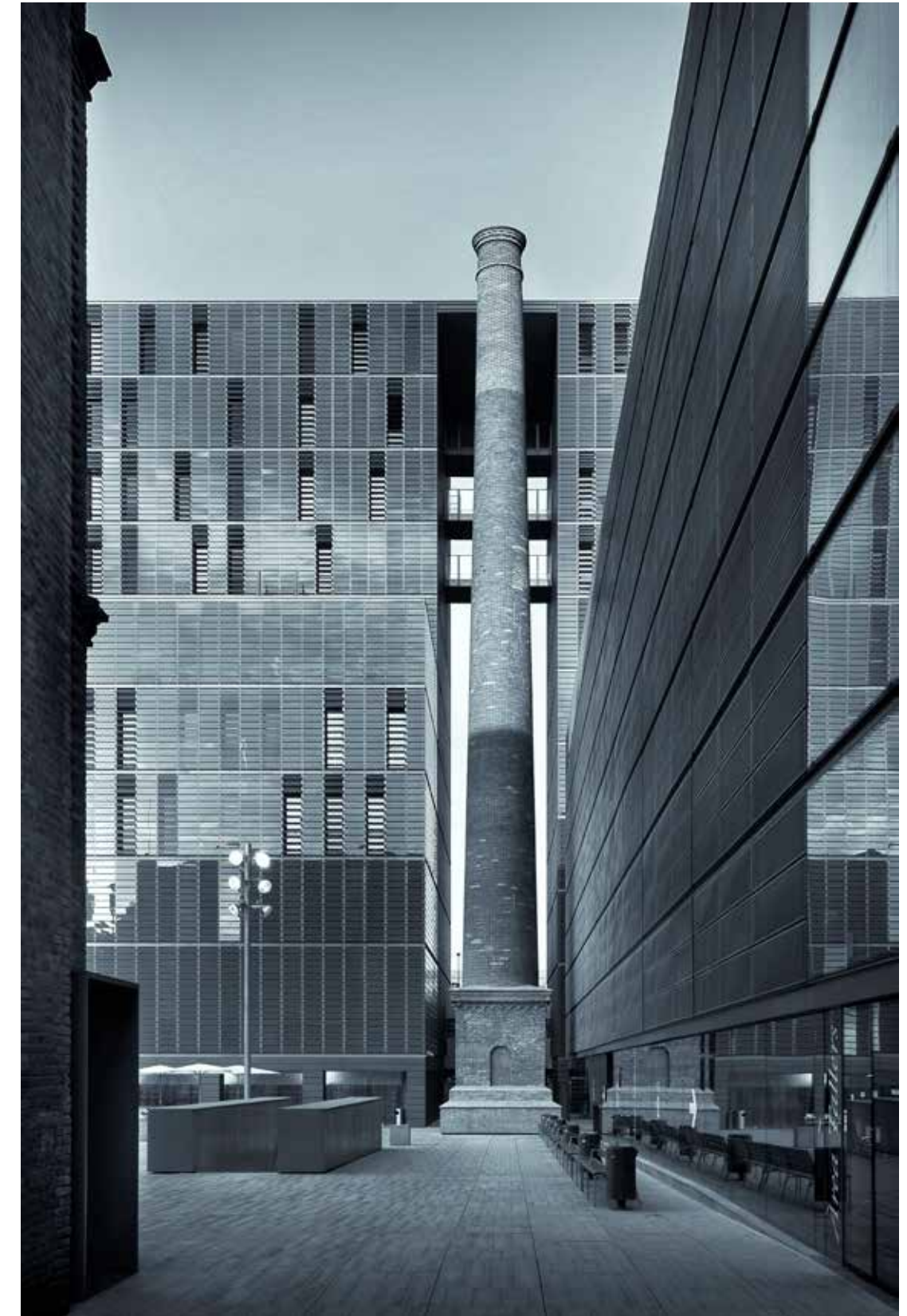
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PREFACE

How can we properly acknowledge Philadelphia as our inspiration?

Philadelphia has been around a long time, long before Jerome and I arrived here to make a living. This book was a long time coming. The seed was planted a while ago. We lived and worked for years in Philadelphia and as keen observers of this city we grew to love it with all its virtues and vices. It was just a matter of time before we looked at it as inspiration. It was just a matter of more time before we would recognize the complementary nature of our work. And yet we knew enough to recognize the folly of our ambition. Philadelphia, and probably any city for that matter, is just too complex to be rendered in a single book—no matter its size or scope. It lived a history deep in significance long before us and it will continue to grow and change long after we are gone. Professionals but not experts, our credentials were that we lived here as residents willing to allow our curiosity and craft to lead us to watch carefully, listen, and look at what most residents take for granted.

I learned early that stories rule our lives in the city, significant events once past are repeated to friends and family until they leave their own retold impressions on our memories. However continuously linear we expect our lives to be lived, the space of time and size of memory conspire to compress experiences into events. Photographs too, perhaps like stories, capture and represent lived experience as moments. Our Philadelphia, as is all our history, is made of these moments: photographs and stories. And in our effort to find and delineate these moments we also recognized that we approached a sense of place. Circling ever closer to a shared recognition of character our work attempts to define a place not descriptively but intuitively. The book, our effort to celebrate what we share with so many others in this big beautiful city, is perhaps the appropriate acknowledgement.





PLATES

ONE

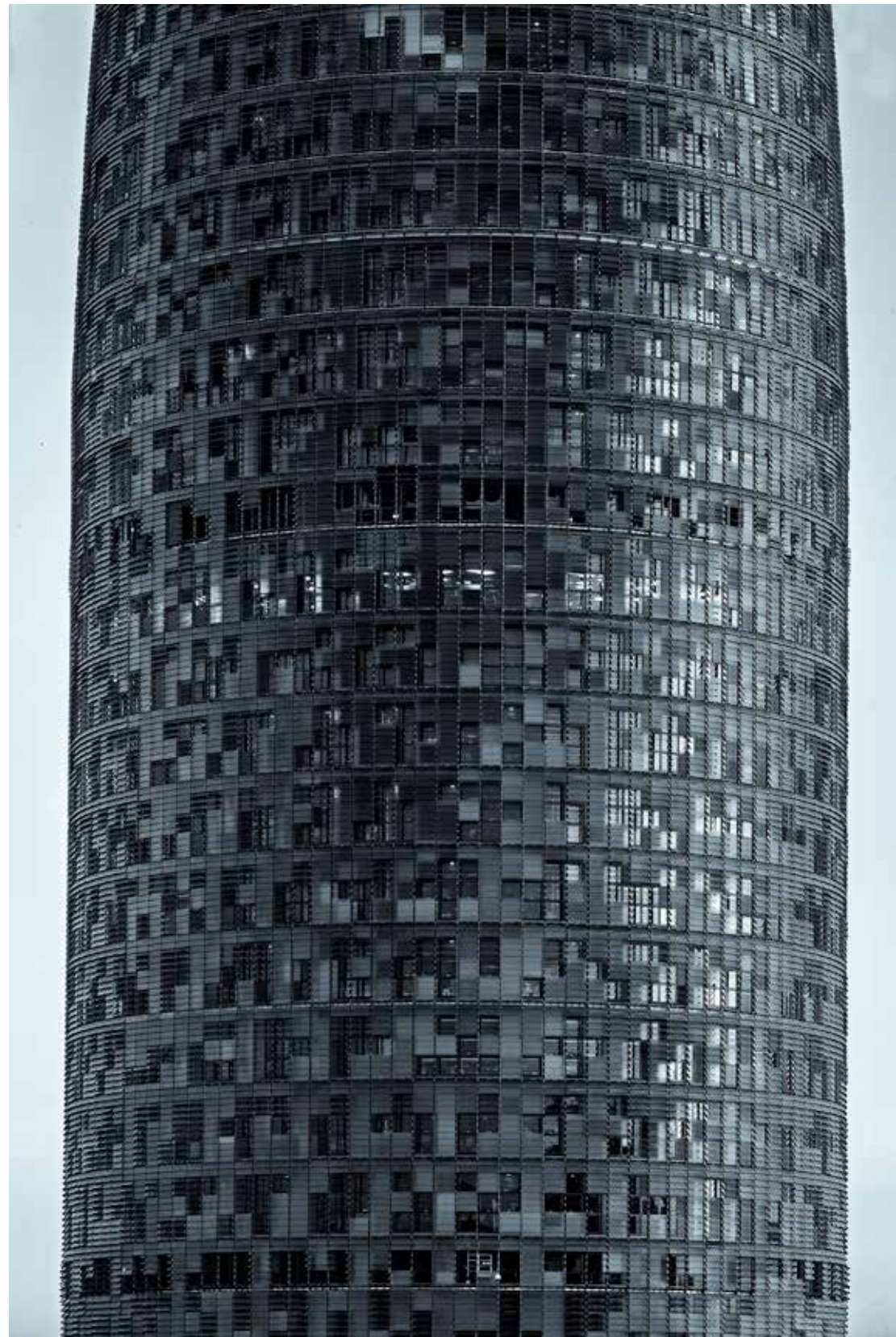
In order to see a city, it is simply not enough to keep our eyes open.

—Italo Calvino

The edge of the river is a threshold between land and water. A liminal moving manifestation of friction between the seemingly solid earth and viscous water rubbing incessantly under, over, and ever against its bank. In the city it is also the horizontal and very visible joint between the manmade infrastructure and the natural world. As important as the river was to the initial settlement alongside it, a city's survival and subsequent growth also depended on how it maintained this porous edge. Floods, tides, and wetlands could hinder growth while ferries, canals, and bridges could enable expansion. More so than other urban or natural features that moved physically as the city grew—imagine the edge of the woods or the start of the farm fields or the location of the train station—the river's edge changed in place or was displaced marginally as the threshold changed its role. Over time it offered a verve of diverse talents: docks welcoming immigrants or transporting goods, a potable water station, an industry base for refineries, slaughterhouses and tanneries, fishing and skating clubs, coal wharves, baptistry, trash dumps, and sewer outlets.

The banks of the Schuylkill River along Center City represented the common river edge response as a place to insert new means of transportation, the highway on one side and the railroad on the other, with the least disruption through the dense city fabric—expedient decisions that were commonplace at the time but with long term consequences. The highways along the river opened up the initial vistas of the city that, as a skyline, came to represent the image of ourselves. But the infrastructure displaced the river's edge, altered the ecosystem and denied access to the river's edge. This photograph offers the good and the bad, the past, and perhaps the future: on the near shore the highway congestion and the skyline vista, while on the far side a sliver of wild scrub foliage hiding the train tracks, and beyond the hint of a ribbon of recreational park squeezed in the leftover space.

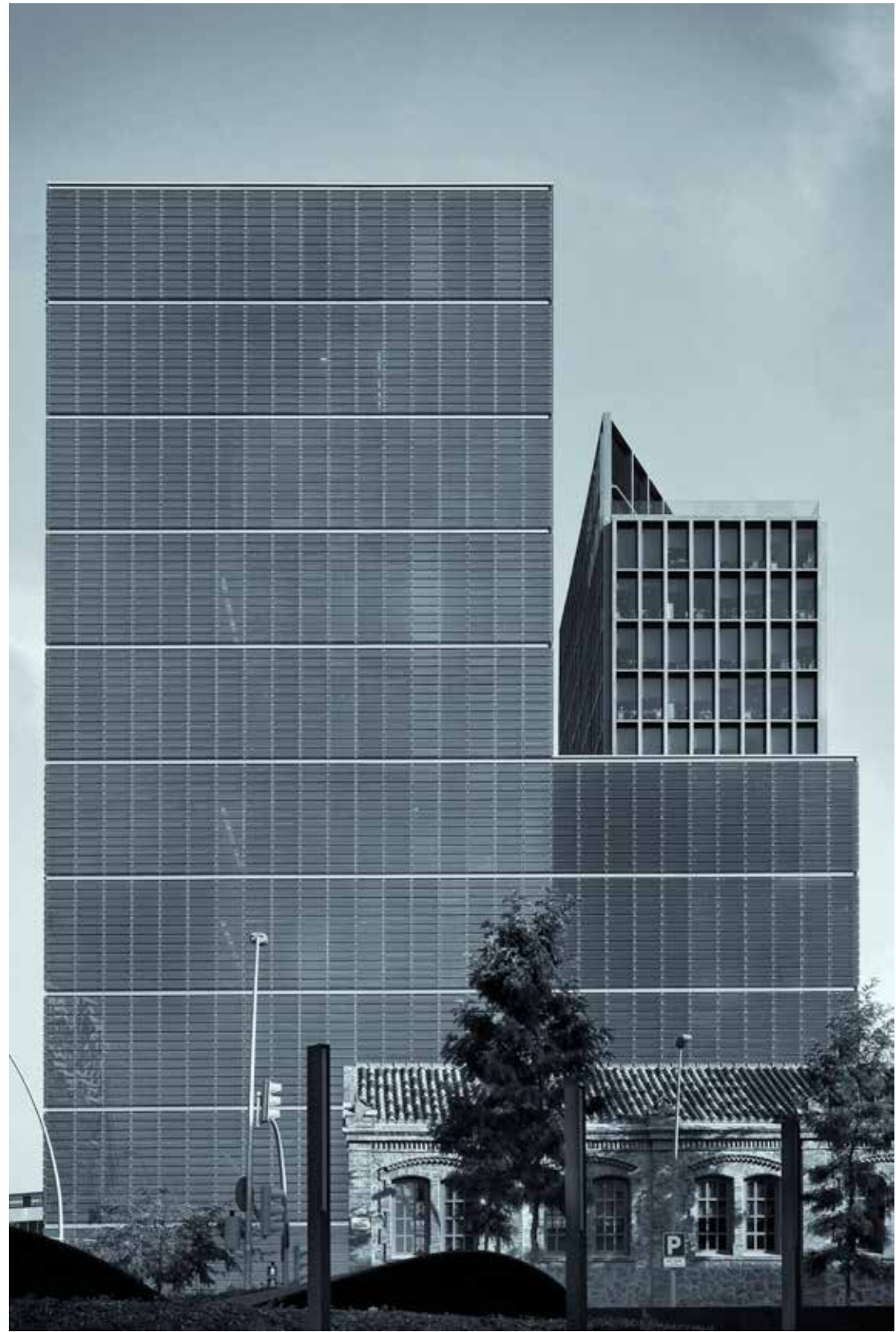




PSFS building stands across from the street from a hotel of little regard and diagonal in corner to the beautiful Reading Terminal House, the front piece that served the passengers using the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad. The new hotel, though built 70 years after the PSFS, looks dated in comparison, lacking in style what it makes up for in bulk. The Terminal building was erected forty years earlier than the PSFS tower and looks even older in comparison. The PSFS building is not of its time. It was built at the beginning of the 1930's and designed in a style new to the county. Comparative office buildings built in the same period throughout the country don't appear anything like this International Style wunderkind. And it has stood the test of time and is recognized as a first of its kind—a truly modern skyscraper. To read the building's history is to appreciate its design in a range of terms, from material selection, programmatic resolution, technological advancement, form manipulation, and urban scale. Now, even after being converted from an office building to a hotel, it hides its age well. And today the building resides in the city as decorous as the Victorian clock across the corner.

The Modern movement in architecture tried to search for universality through simplicity and abstraction, rejecting the notion of ornament and resisting references to any past styles or history. The movement wanted to transcend style and aspired to timelessness. But the thread of history is far more resilient than it seems, especially in the city. John Henry Hepp IV recounts in *The Middle-Class Class, Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876-1926*, how the Victorian clock was added by the Reading Railroad after it was pointed out by a newspaper editorial that the beautiful terminal was missing an exterior time piece. For it were the railways that standardized time and citizens expected the railroads to deal with it. Until the railways physically linked far flung places it was accepted in the nineteenth century that time was relative. New York time was different than Philadelphia time which could be faster or slower than Harrisburg, Altoona, or Pittsburgh time, by seven, thirteen even nineteen minutes. Amazing to imagine today that time could be so parochial. So even before modernity could seek to lose the strictures of time the Victorians had to find it. Ironic then that the clock and its train station, and the PSFS building, would share the same intersection.





City Hall and its tower sit in Broad Street, the north/south axis of Center City. South of City Hall twentieth century skyscrapers crowd Broad Street. City Hall's tower ends the vista as one looks from the south both as a landmark but also spatially. City Hall's six story base and tall tower make a room out of Broad Street. The tower's design, its architectural features and form succeed at a scale appropriate to the vista unlike the various office building attempts to mediate the repetitious office windows through an array of bands and cornices in the limestone canyon. For a city, like Philadelphia, that is blest by a strong organizing principle as the orthogonal grid the exceptions stand out. A building of such civic importance ending a street is an exceptional event in Philadelphia. And City Hall does it well.

The tower grounds the north/south axis at City Hall. It creates a significant landmark anywhere along Broad Street. The tower's exact location also does something nuanced to the city at this large scale. Though City Hall sits at the intersection of Market Street and Broad Street, the tower does not. It is built on the north side of City Hall's courtyard on axis with Broad Street but off the Market Street axis. On Market Street from afar the six story City Hall bases closes the street but from afar the vista is open above-the tower can't be seen. The Broad Street vista rewards one with a benchmark allowing us to locate oneself in proximity to the center of the city. While the Market Street east/west vista stretches infinitely-imaginatively from ocean to ocean, from our original colonial homes to the prospect of the frontier.

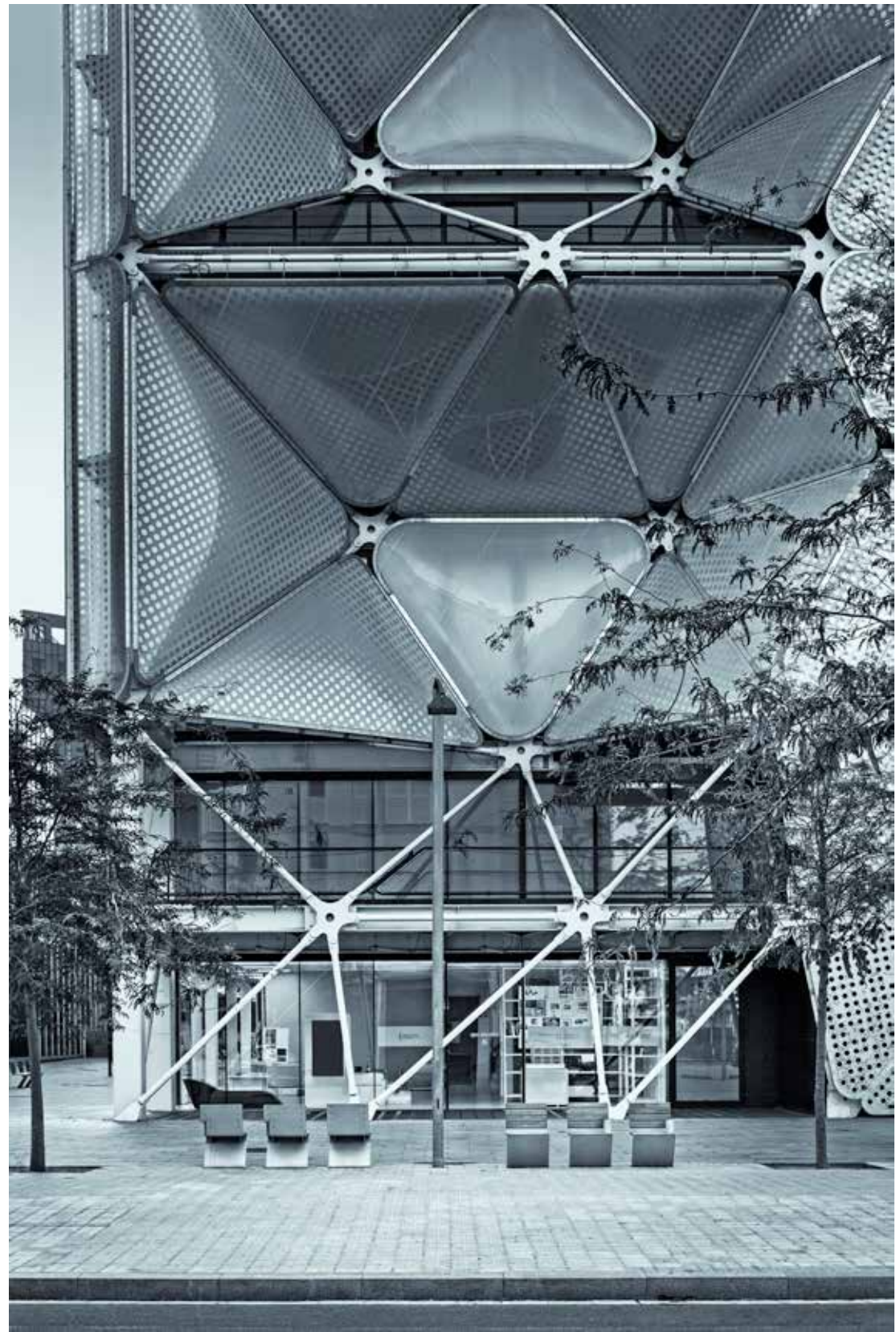
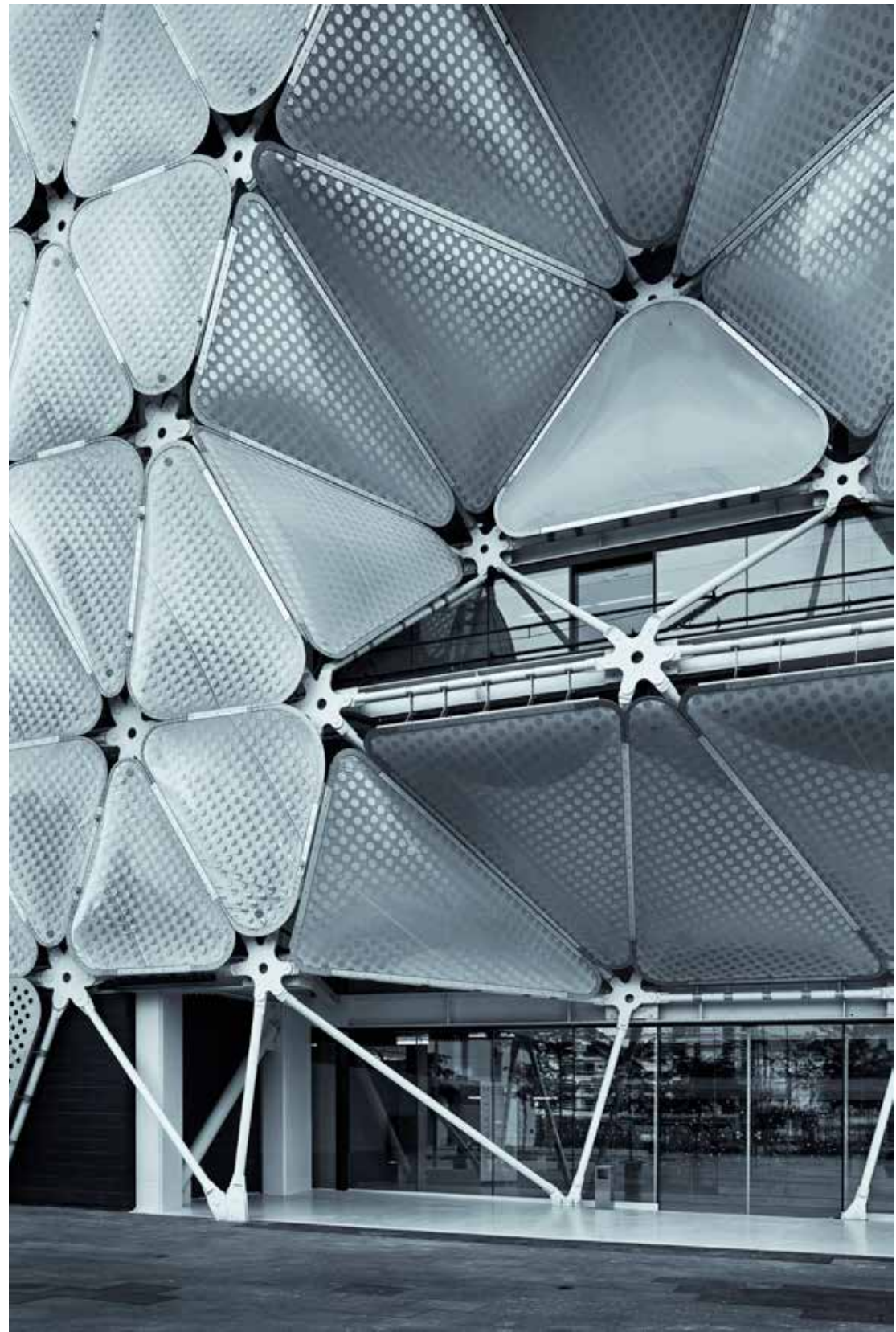


Ansel Adams' photograph "Moonrise, Hernandez" is a cultural icon. Adams described rather famously how the instant was fleetingly captured on the way home from a frustrating day of photographing elsewhere, and the serendipity adds to its allure. It is beautiful in a redolent way. For me it represents how as you travel farther west in America the scale of nature—its geographical features—overwhelm the man-made elements. For many it represents the classic image of the Southwest. When I look at the photograph of Saint Rita's I am struck by how it represents the classic northeast urban image. It wasn't until I tried to clean the speck in the sky from the original and realized it was the moon did a notion of complicity arise. The two photographs stand as complementary contrasts.

The Church of St. Rita shares but inverts many of the better known photograph's attributes. Both are frames broken down into thirds, though the emphasis is different. In "Moonrise, Hernandez" there is only a sliver of man-made artifacts, almost featureless, squeezed tight between a foreground and background of natural features. Nature is highlighted in depth and detail from the clouds and the snowcapped peaks to the scrub bush. Adams spoke too of how he worked hard to reveal and highlight the moon. It is the first and foremost element your eye catches. While in this photograph the planes are differently weighted. The church and the wall of row homes inflate to fill the frame. The plane of the building facade squeezes the cars and roadway below. While above, the empty sky is interrupted by the portico of the church. The moon is seen but almost as I did, as an afterthought, a smudge in an otherwise depthless sky. The fertile detail and texture, in contrast to "Moonrise", is in the man-made realm. For Adams the scale of the West always fascinated him—the beauty of nature writ large across a canvas difficult to fathom in size. I think the urbanity of the Northeast with its large East Coast cities present a scale almost entirely determined by the architecture and artifacts of the urban realm. This photograph is all about the scale, diversity, and grandeur of cities like Philadelphia.

Both photographs reward the careful look. Below the moon and mountains and above the plains of "Moonrise, Hernandez" tombstones glisten in an epiphany of light. Man's ubiquitous presence is hinted at even in the immensity of nature. Equivalently St. Rita's fence pinions small crosses luminous with light along the darkest deepest shadows on either side of the radiant church, though I am not sure they are the tombstone's reflective complement. Maybe the smudge of the moon really is. The enormity of the city as an artifact we first create and then inhabit is watched over by the moon, nature's silent witness to our daily endeavors.





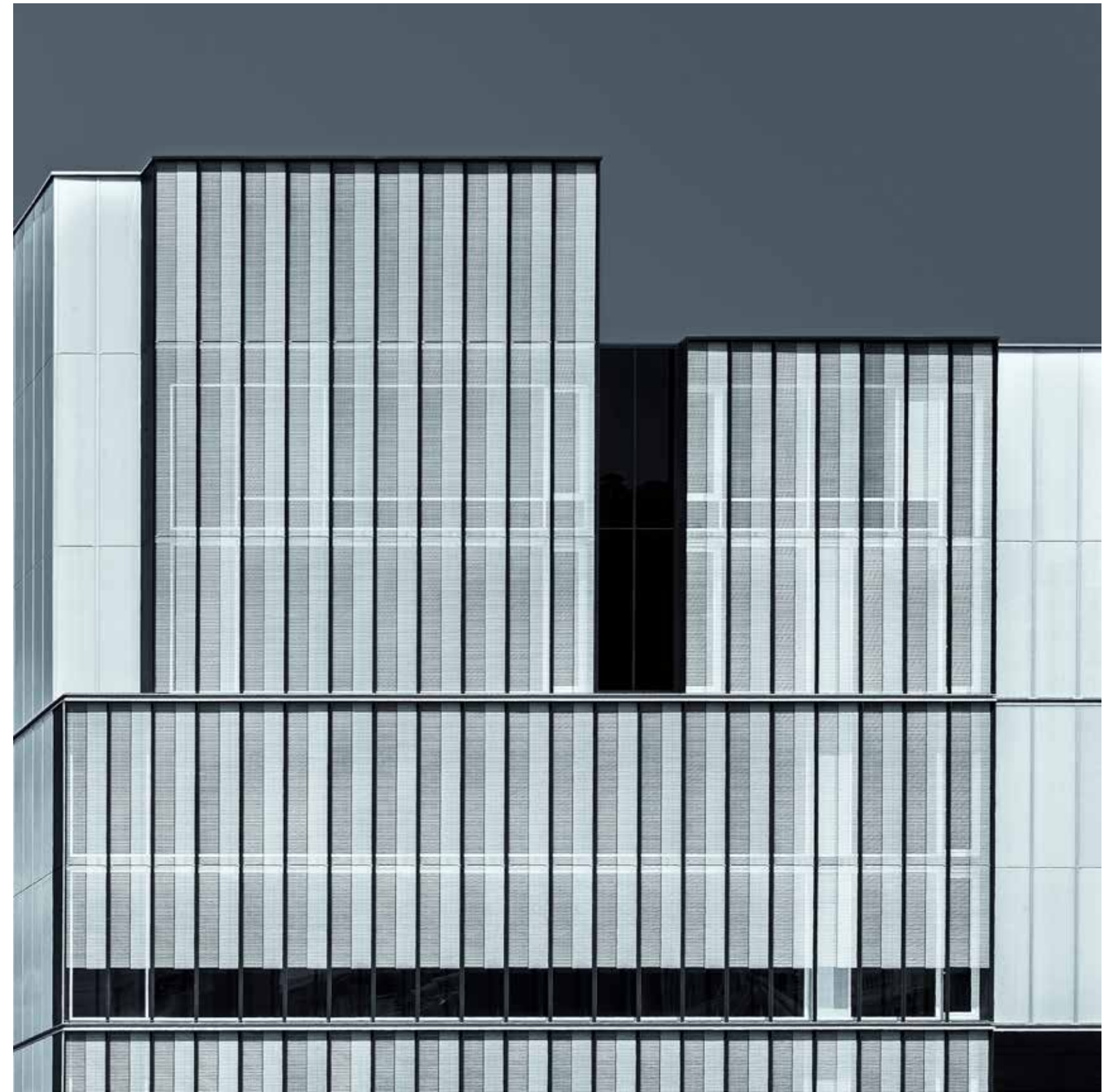




An adaptor, that plug that fits on the end of an ungrounded electric cord, has a certain simple attraction to it. It stands flat and upright, on its bottom the necessary holes to admit three prongs and on the top rising up pro-offers two prongs. Free of decorative flourish it has a job to do—ground an ungrounded tool or appliance.

This building has a similar frugal straightforward character to it. Even in proportion it resembles an adaptor's shape. Spare, mechanical, devoid of decorative elaboration this building appears as a machine might lightly clothed in architectural conceits. More benevolent appearing than the more famous London power plants, its scale is exaggeratingly small in comparison. The London ones: Battersea and Bankside hunker down in the metropolitan landscape like sleeping beasts; their character and size suggestive of malevolence efficacy. This one is quaint in comparison, efficient in an air of standup friendliness. However long abandoned, unmaintained, or in disrepair these kinds of buildings never approach a hint of indolence; like a machine of simple parts or a primitive tool—perhaps a grounded adaptor—they lay in wait for their next task.

Robert Venturi, when he visited Las Vegas, formulated the concept of 'duck' buildings and 'shed' buildings. This one is a duck, a building that is built and shaped expressing its specific function. Buildings designed so specifically for a single use sometimes are demolished once their use is obsolete. It's a shame though, for their singularity also provides character to a neighborhood or an identity as a landmark. If their proportion seem right, their scale appropriate, their bones solid, and a new program imagined—they are so much fun to keep around.





The city is a surprising haven for a range of animals. In my dense South Philadelphia neighborhood I have met raccoons, muskrats, and possums mostly in the middle of the night walking down the sidewalk when I least desire, but probably should expect, to meet a feral animal. Squirrels are ubiquitous and rabbits, through rare, are glimpsed occasionally in our front garden. My cats have brought home snakes from the same garden and hunted the requisite mice and rats inside and outside our home.

The birds are plentiful too. A gaggle of gold finches gather on our sunflowers eating early afternoon meals. Cardinals couple in the evergreen down the street. We hear the geese honking first, before they cross the sky overhead flying in formation, navigating on their way to the wetlands below the city. Every morning crows would sit high in the London plane trees across from the bus stop cawing loudly. My son, flat against my chest I his baby harness would stare up into the morning sky agog at their noisy banter. Pigeons nest in the eave of our neighbor's roof. Mocking birds rattle the block with their sharp cries even before the sun rises.

The occasional hawk will sit on the wires in the alley behind us, silent and motionless.

Of course the stray dog and the plentiful alley cats survive in the neighborhood. Though the well-taken care of dogs are one of the first signs of gentrification, as sidewalks are filled with early morning and after dinner dog walkers. We learn the pet's name before the owners': Annie, Henry, Lily, Ulysses, Maisy, Pepe, Misty May, and Mr. Bob. And not exactly wild, but upon first encounter startling none the less, are the horses ridden through the neighborhood. The noise of their trot, horseshoes on macadam, echoing off the rowhouse walls is uncanny music sure to raise my heart rate.

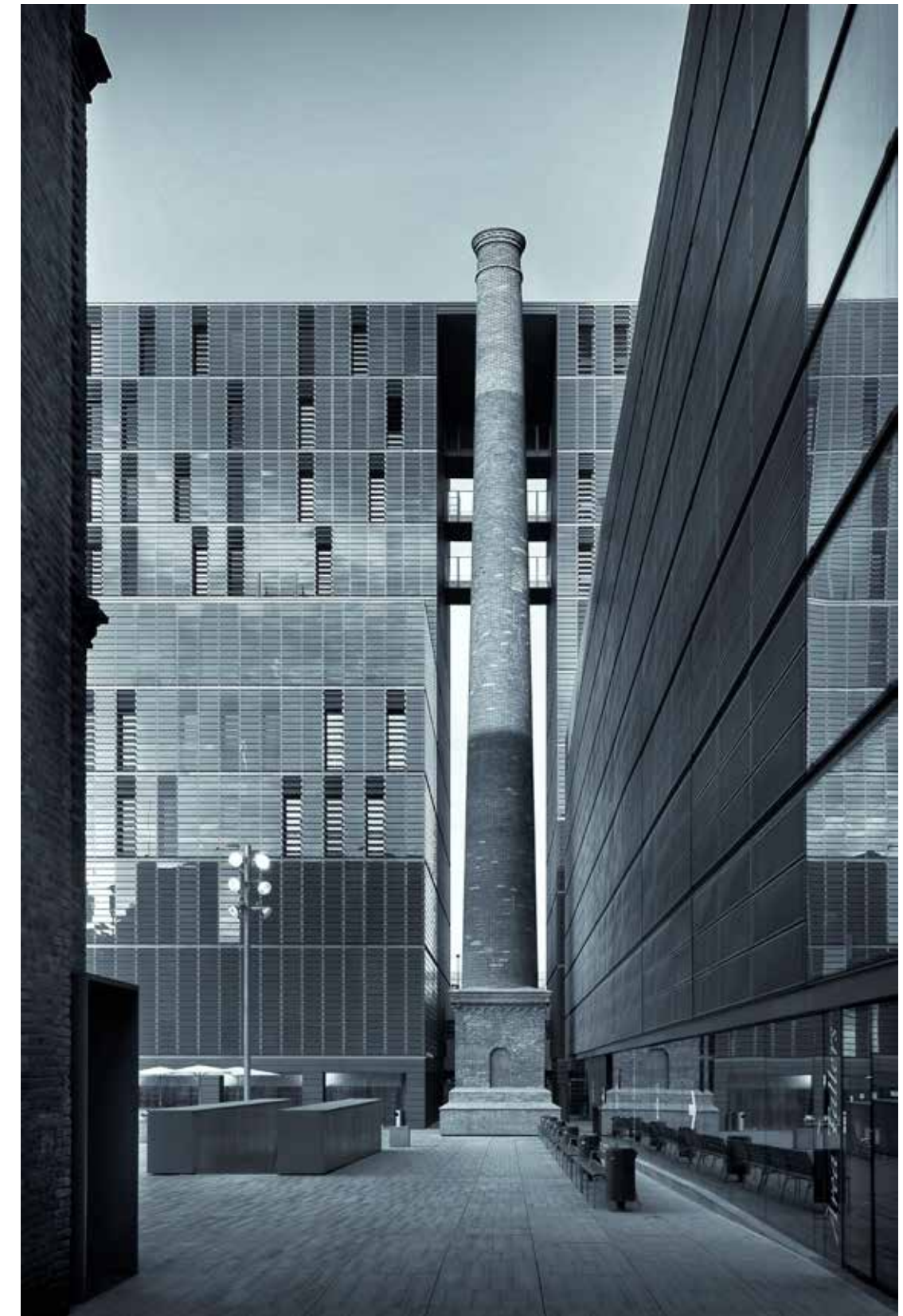




It is easy to live in a city for a length of time and begin to appreciate how the people--its myriad residents--provide the essential character to the place. But the idea of the citizens as the personality of the town is also slippery until you realize it has to do with how these people act, their physicality, personalities, and their relationships. That if one is receptive to such attributes they will quickly reveal a wealth of tell-tale signs. Most architects and urbanists will accept the merits of this position, yet might argue that Winston Churchill said it best when he adroitly observed “We make the city and the city makes us.” I firmly agree the physical aspects—the urban grid, streetscapes, parks, buildings, materials, and other details of the city—provide a sense of place unique to a city.

How these man-made artifacts interact with climate and geography, and how its citizens live through such conditions, is the real source of a city’s identity. Yes, you can study a city and its architecture and stretch to comprehend its urban patterns. I think you can approach an understanding of place and character through this activity. But I also believe that if you don’t approach people who live in the city, if you don’t listen to their stories, watch their lives and participate yourself, you may never approach an understanding or appreciation of a city’s character.

The real mystery is how those pre-ordained decisions that produced the stage-sets coalesce--when the residents perform to create theater—as a place to live unlike any other. Thomas Holmes lays out a 17th century grid through a forest from one river bank to another and forever after we weave buildings in this warp and weft of urban fabric. Street corners come alive with attendance on summer evenings; an overflow of bar patrons, last minute corner store purchases, even the drug dealers stifle the stillness with their presence. A museum moves from one location to another, or a transit line is abandoned, and we change the habits of a lifetime with less than a whisper of dissent. It seems to me no single photograph can present such an appreciation nor could a book or portfolio pretend to encompass the entirety of human agency or built artifacts that work to complete this vision. But sometimes one photograph hints at the complexity complicit in this creation.





I look out my front window as a car drives onto the playground, stops, and a young man gets out, walks back toward our house. The man reappears, with a concrete block in his hand. I perceive trouble so dial 911. The man dives headfirst into the driver's window with his feet in the air. He pops out and casually looks around. I can hear the car's engine revving. He reaches in towards the wheel, jerks the transmission stick and steps back. The car and he take off in opposite directions.

By this time I have described what I'm watching rather incredulously to the 911 operator. My friend, from the front steps, reports back the view of the young man hopping onto the front hood of a moving car as it drives away. Should be easy to identify I suggest to the operator. The abandoned car, drives towards the row-houses across the playground. First it threads the fence poles, gracefully lifting a section of chain link up as it leaves the playground. The car falls down the curb, crosses the street, jumps the next curb, and drives into the front of an abandoned rowhouse. I come out of our house, running across the street. Another neighbor appears alongside and he more bravely approaches the car as I knock on the adjacent houses to warn residents of the potential danger. The car, wheels spinning, is damaged but stubborn as the engine runs at full speed. The rowhouse now has an extra hole in its front façade. The neighbor turns the car engine off and we wait. A fire truck arrives, inspects the gas tank, and sprays the engine. The police arrive, surrounding the site with yellow tape but decide not to interview anyone. "No one ever sees anything" was their not too careful response. They call for a police tow truck, wait nearby, and eventually leave. The day continued. This could be the end to the story. But some stories take on a life of their own.

As the day wore on, people engaged with the car. Some pointed at it and passed on. Someone, initially headstrong, opened the front door and rifled the glove compartment. Others stopped just long enough to pop the hubcaps, jerk the radio, and unplug the battery. Resourceful men with shopping carts peeled and pried whatever decorative metal graced the car. By twilight both front hood and rear trunk were up and the jack had been used to set free the tires. When the police were called, and they were called many times (enough times to have 911 hang up on us!), they arrived only to see the scavengers walk away to sulk like vultures nearby until they left again. Asked by the operator to describe the perpetrators, we suggested the steel belted radials they were rolling down the street might give them away. As any surprise gift, especially one so voluptuous is received overindulgently, with little modesty or grace, the car was received into the neighborhood rather coarsely. By the next morning it was on blocks, engine partially dismantled, dashboard mangled. What began as a stolen car with some front end damage ended as a naked piece of junk.



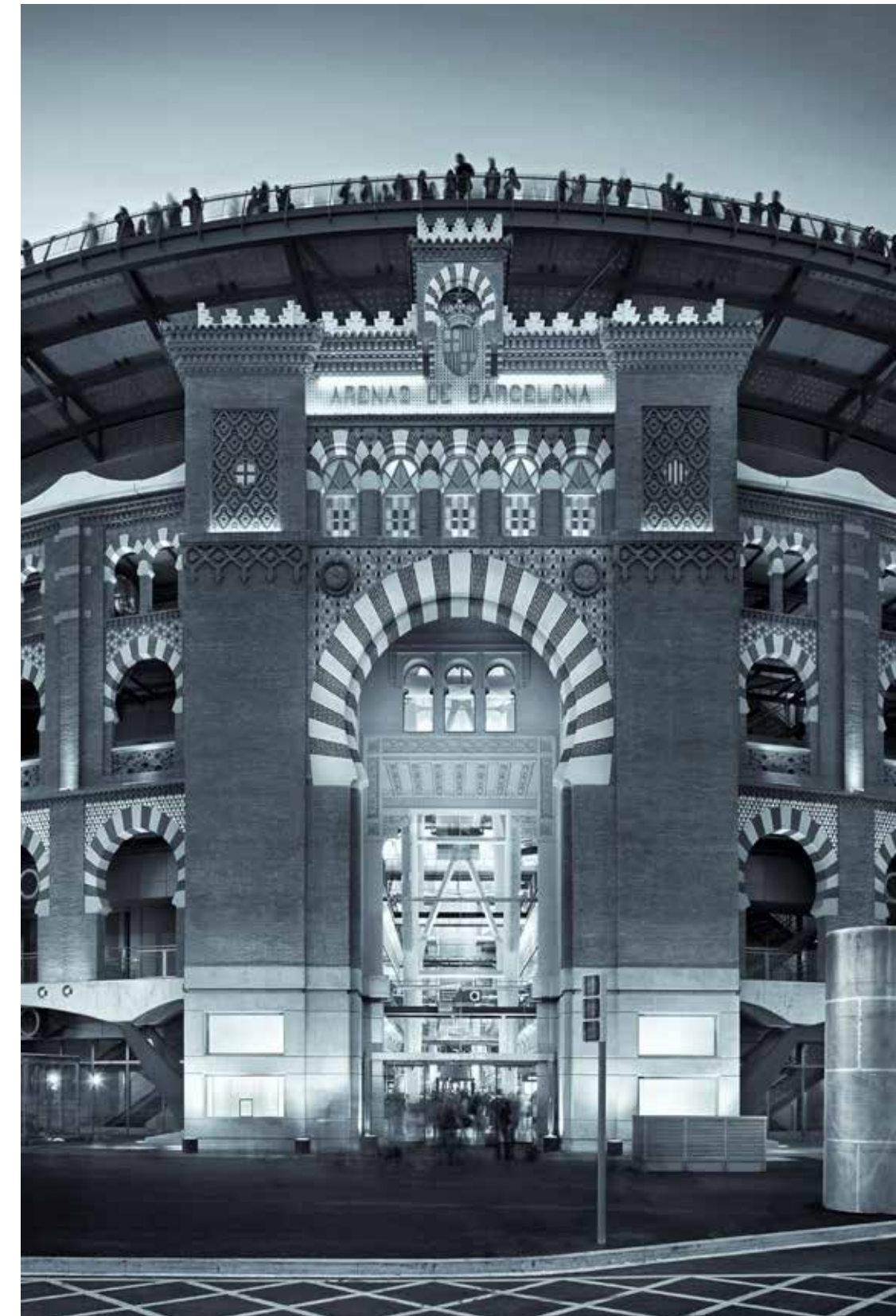


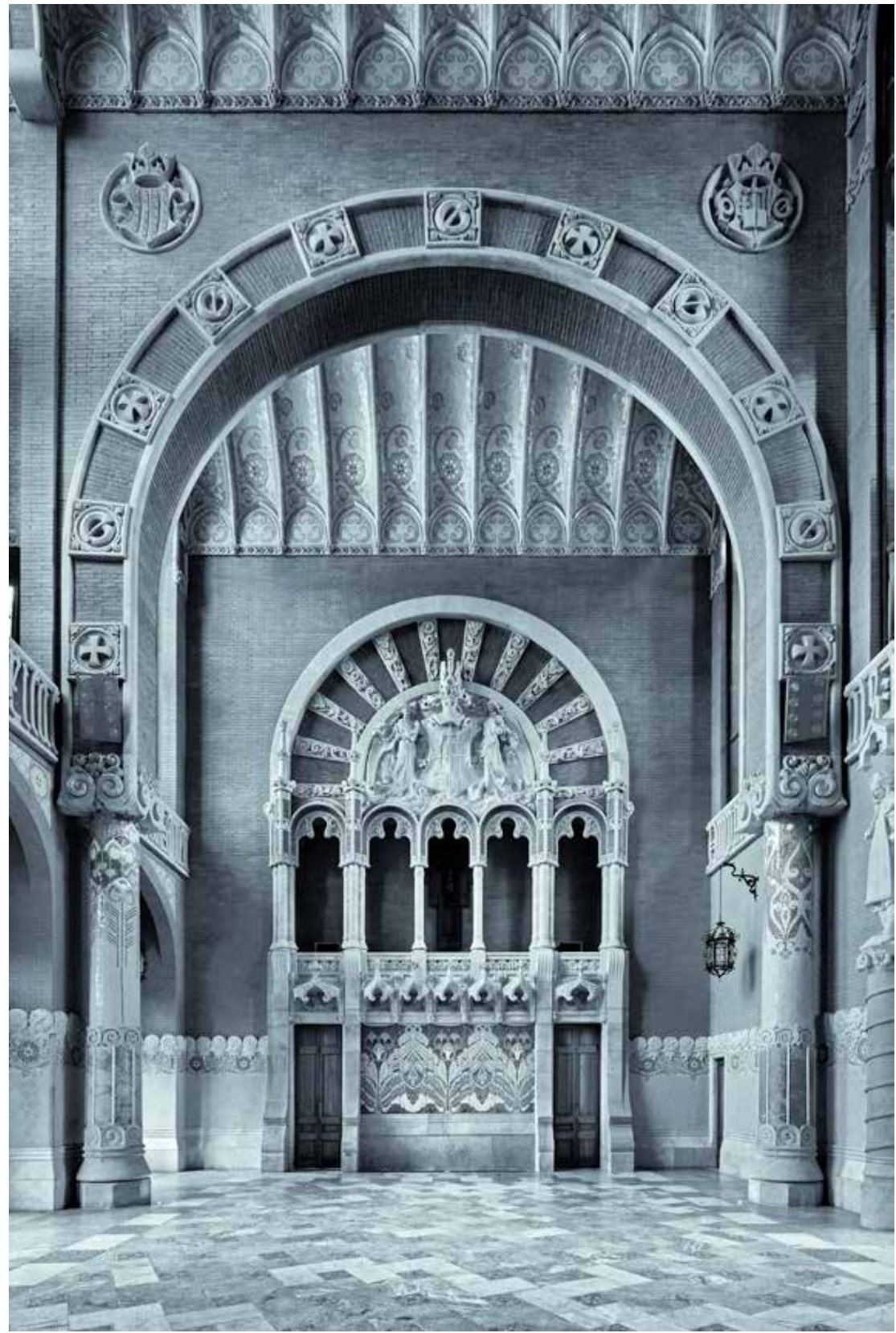
Fibber-fobbers eat people, swallow them whole, head to toe in one large gulp, but for the shoes. The shoes, those dense synthetic chunks of carbon rubber, ethylene vinyl acetate, polyurethane and plastics are indigestible by even the hardest stomachs. Their laces tickle the Fibber-fobber's craw to force a gag, to regurgitate them. The pair of shoes. Out into the air, over the streets like a hairball gone astray they catch and hang from the power lines throughout the neighborhoods. These trinkets, the shoes on the wires, are the primary and conspicuous evidence of the stealthy presence of the Fibber-fobbers in Philadelphia.

I will not pretend to know more than I do and most of what I write here is as much conjecture as it is myth. I understand Fibber-fobbers roamed the forests and fields, valleys and hills alongside the Native Americans long before the Europeans visited the east coast. (I apologize for their name. It is a contrived label used in our family. I imagine it lacks the grace and beauty of their real name-whatever that may be.) When the Europeans came up the Delaware River and settled in mud caves along its shore the Fibber-fobbers did not leave. They are "old" souls, apparently durable, and easily adaptable. Fibber-fobbers are neither migratory by nature nor susceptible to disease or pollution. They are quietly invisible, adept at mimicry and camouflage.

Fibber-fobbers have evidently lived in Philadelphia alongside us, witness to our daily lives like angels, though we are oblivious to their presence. It could be they were once, in some early version of themselves, the large mammals that seem to have been missing from the North American continent. Their curiosity and mutability could foster some sort of accelerated evolutionary tactics that allow them to survive as they do. Today they have changed so much from what we imagine animals are that they do not fall into any simple subdivision of genus or species.

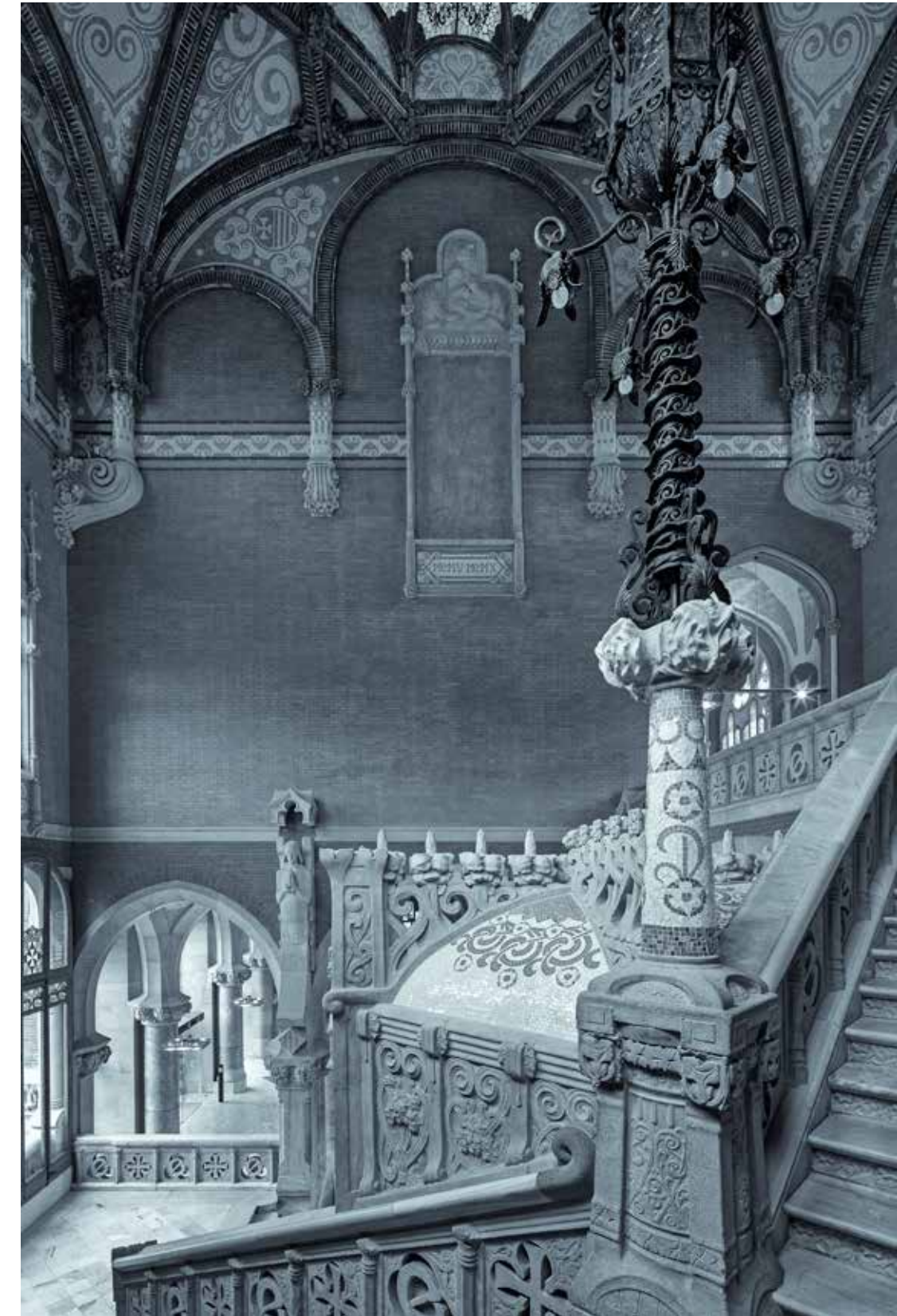
We know little of their habits and less of their thoughts. They are huge though, some as large as vehicles, others the size of a rowhome. Despite their dimension they are as light and frisky as squirrels, as insubstantial as a balloon with a skeleton that is more gelatinous than bone. They sit still or move about discretely; disguised in the city as features we stopped looking at long ago: buildings, trees, buses and cars. They sleep during the day and wander the neighborhoods at night hovering over the alleys, tip toeing on the rooftops, floating about for reasons we cannot fathom. I want to believe they have an affection for children, stray animals, the old and the infirm, even the lost and damaged souls of the city. For the others, evil and criminal, they eat. The pairs of shoes adorn many a neighborhood as a dubious charm that reminds me to look more carefully, to tread more warily, and not to tickle the dumpster around the corner.

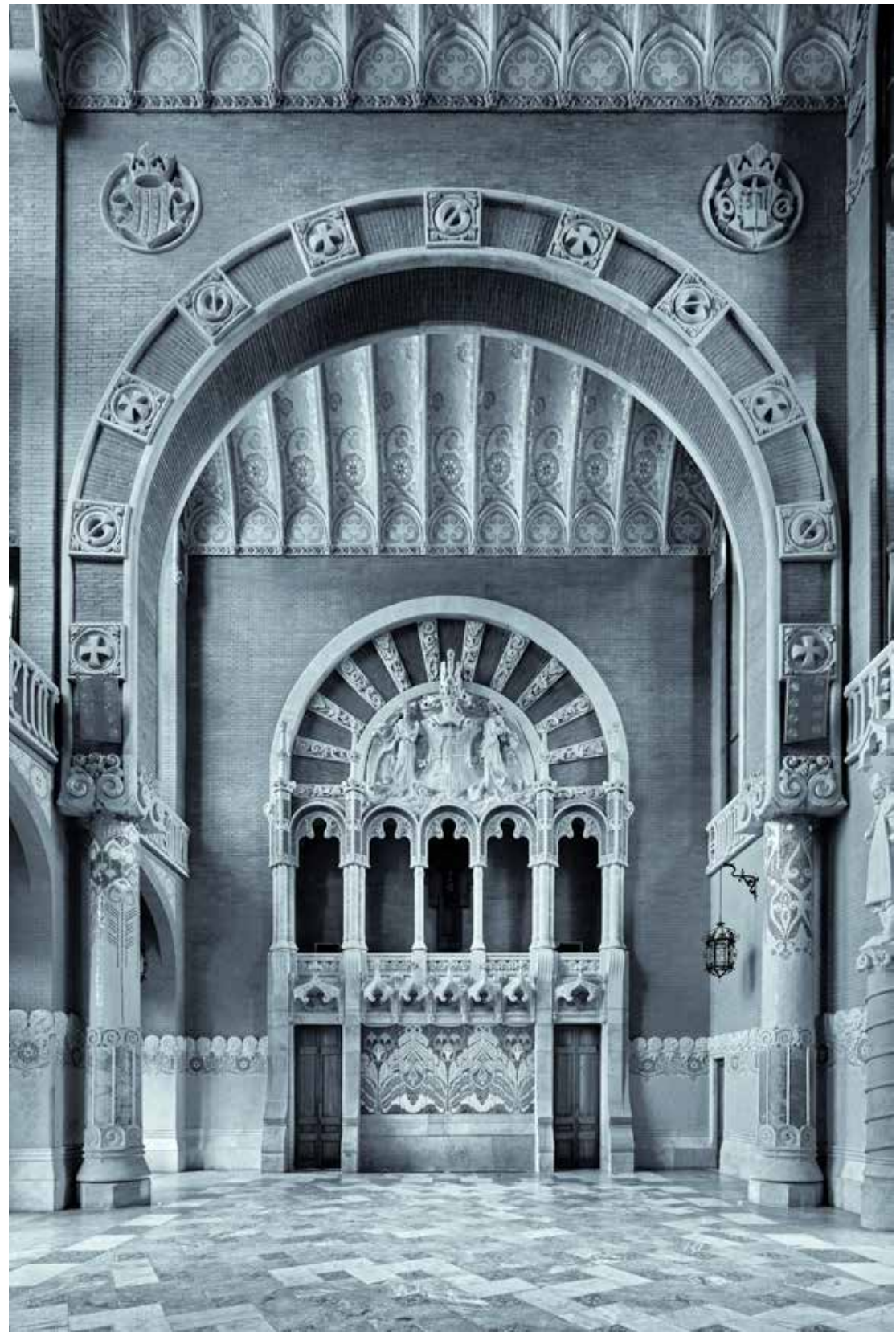




Mr. Izzard worked in our community garden as intent as any farmer cares for his fields. He lived in the homeless shelter across the street but treated the work in the garden as a vocation. His attention benefited us all. One spring season I helped Mr. Webster clear the land of six foot tall dry brush and a few years of debris. A neighbor, Stefan, flagged down the mayor's motorcade one afternoon and got a chain link fence erected around the perimeter. I laid out plots with walkways set of bricks dug from the ground and we all prepared perimeter planting beds. Mrs. Catharine made the keys and distributed them carefully. Soon enough Mr. Izzard came over and contributed to the general upkeep and daily maintenance required in any garden. It was only with persuasive effort that we convinced him to take his own plot; and he did, planting it with whatever all of us had left over. Though it seemed the only plants he was fond of were the hot pepper plants. He watched the red and yellow fruits grow in the green foliage with anticipation and wonder. He would tease us as to who might dare try them when they were ready.

While other residents from the shelter sat in the shade of the school across the street, Mr. Izzard watered, weeded, and mowed throughout the hot summer days. He put us occasional gardeners to shame with his efforts in the service of the collective garden. He did this for years, working hard, talking little, friendly none the less. Mr. Izzard seldom brought up his past. He went from resident in the shelter to a part time employee. He started to ride a bike around the neighborhood. Mr. Izzard moved out of the shelter into a house a couple blocks away with Mr. Ford, another shelter graduate who fished the Schuylkill River with worms from our compost pile. Mr. Izzard offered us, through the garden, a tremendous amount of energy and attention. We never felt as if we could reciprocate or that he expected much from us. His history was opaque. We could only guess at the path that led him to the shelter in the first place. To us he was the nicest neighbor we could imagine. Especially in the city, there is a place for the reticent farmer with a suspect past.







“The American city has been a stage for the ideas of ordinary people,” argued Witold Rybczynski in *City Life*. He thinks we lack the conventional urbanity of past cities or European models of cathedrals and public spaces. For sure we luckily avoided the dreams of emperors and the excesses of kings and for that matter, most of the nightmares of mudlarks and bonepickers. He calls our cities a disparate vision made up of the Main Street businessman, the commercial strip franchise and the suburban family. Rybczynski describes it as cinematic model because it is such a temporary venue with novel juxtapositions and fleeting novelty. Philadelphia’s pedigree as a colonial northeast city probably moderates its most novel or temporary stage arrangements. Though maybe not a traditional American city, Philadelphia does have its own ingredients that present at times interesting collages: row homes and churches are prevalent while twentieth century apartment buildings are less so.

This juxtaposition of a proud condominium building next to an early twentieth century church of singular style is an interesting conversation. It is prime evidence that buildings talk. Whether we care to listen or not is another matter. But they speak. They speak to us as we look at them and as we live our lives through them. They talk to one another across streets, across town, and sometimes over time they address history like few other artifacts. The collective vision of a congregation as manifested in a church of distinctive personality across the street from the singular vision of a developer’s building. Once you pay attention to the stage it is difficult not to be engaged with the play.

