How to Be an Architecture Critic

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Central Park, New York. [All photos by Jeremy M. Lange]

Buildings are everywhere, large and small, ugly and beautiful, ambitious and dumb. We walk among them and live inside them, largely passive dwellers in cities of towers, houses, open spaces and shops we had no hand in creating. But we are their best audience. Owners, clients and residents come and go, but architecture lives on, acting a role in the life of the city and its citizens long after the original players are gone. We talk (in person, on blogs) about homes as investments, building sites as opportunities, unsold condominiums as an economic disaster, but all of that real-estate chatter sidesteps the physical reality of projects built and

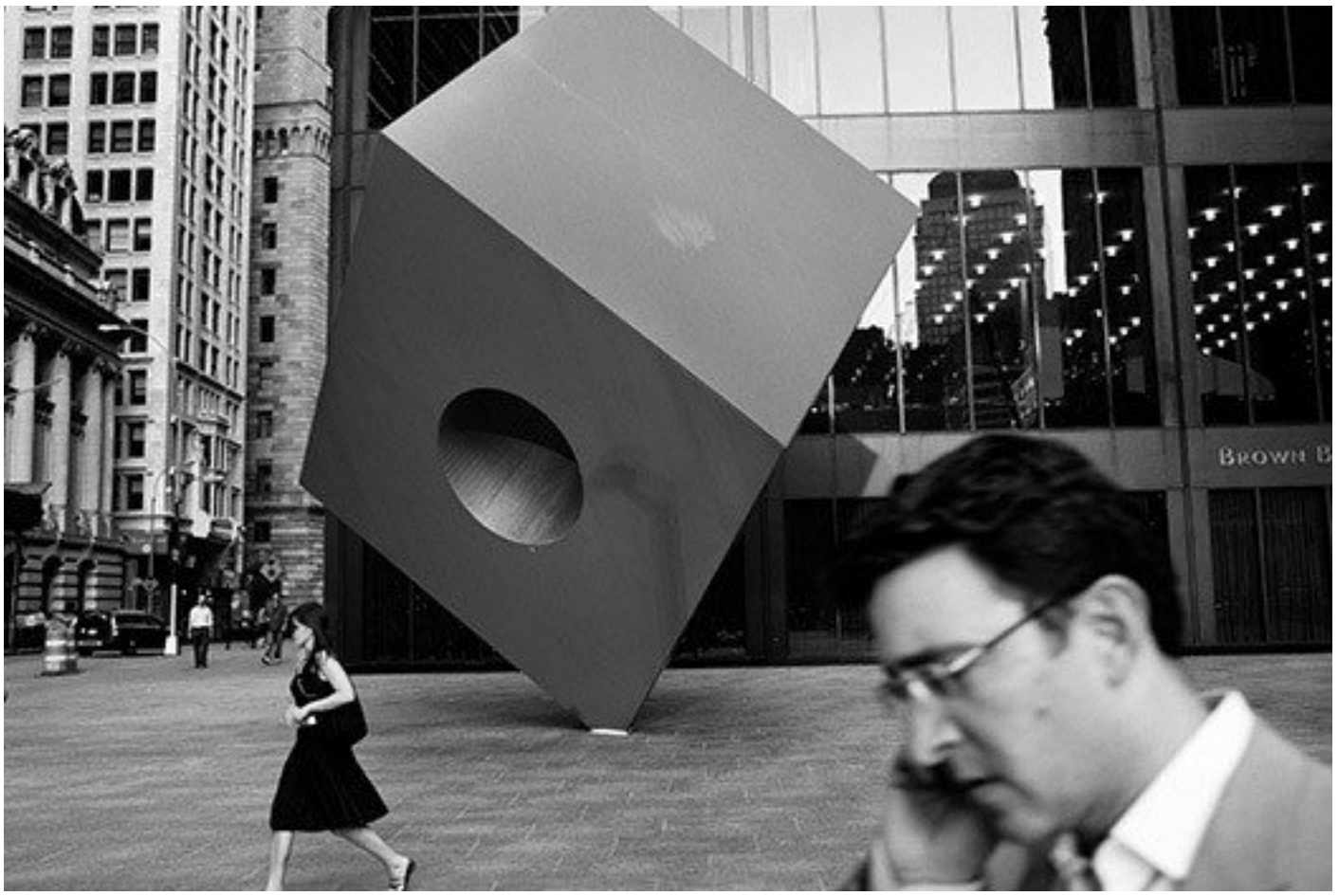
unbuilt. Rather than just talking about money, we should also be talking about height and bulk, style and sustainability, openness of architecture and of process. Design is not the icing on the cake but what makes architecture out of buildings, what turns them into places we want to live and eat and shop rather than avoid. Architecture critics can praise and pick on new designs, but their readership has lately been too limited. We need more critics — citizen critics — equipped with the desire and the vocabulary to remake the city.

There are times when city dwellers are roused from passivity; disaster (Ground Zero) and personal affront (NIMBYism) make protestors out of us all. But we are rarely roused by the day-to-day, brick-by-brick additions that have the most power to change our environment. We know what we already like but not how to describe it, or how to change it, or how to change our minds. We need to learn how to read a building, an urban plan, a developer's rendering, and to see where critique might make a difference.

So how do you read a building? As with any craft, start with the best example you can think of and pick it apart until you see how it was done. The piece I return to in my courses on architecture criticism has a title that applies to the text as much as to the spaces the text describes: "Sometimes We Do It Right," published by Ada Louise Huxtable in the *New York Times* on March 31, 1968. Huxtable's review of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's 1967 Marine Midland Bank Building at 140 Broadway in Lower Manhattan describes the miraculous way public art and architecture of different eras can come together to create a great urban space.

Huxtable reviews the office tower, but only in passing; she knows that for 95 percent of New Yorkers, its importance will only ever be as a backdrop for Isamu Noguchi's *Red Cube* sculpture. She quickly skims the surfaces of all the neighboring buildings, noting their varied materials and historical styles, and how their presence alters the streetscape. The sidewalks and open spaces are her main concern. Noguchi's cube claims the plaza that is Marine Midland's front yard, and is indeed an arresting sight, but there are views around the cube and through the downtown canyons that are equally striking. The contrast of solid and void is what

makes this corner “right” and what makes any city right.



Isamu Noguchi, *Red Cube*, New York.

What differentiates one corner, one neighborhood or one city from another is the ratio of building to open space: the heights of Midtown versus the low brownstones of Brooklyn in New York or the peaks of central Lake Shore Drive versus the residential neighborhoods to the north and south in Chicago. As Huxtable observes, “Space is meaningless without scale, containment, boundaries and direction.” Balancing the need for architecture and the need for open space, she writes from the perspective of the pedestrian, adding a sense of history to the everyday experience of walking the streets.

Few practitioners of criticism meant to be critics. Criticism happened to them, through a combination of luck and outrage, at moments in cities

when building outstripped sense. There are strong parallels between the architecture of the late 1950s, when Huxtable began her career as critic, and the building boom of the early 21st century. In both cases a certain amount of bedazzlement prevailed as glittering towers replaced brick-and-stucco neighborhoods. There were (and are) great pieces of architecture, but the speed of construction also fostered a culture of knock-offs — good ideas repeated in inhospitable places or with subpar materials.

Huxtable started her career as an assistant curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1940s. She received a Fulbright in 1950 to study modern architecture in Italy and subsequently wrote a book on architect and engineer Pier Luigi Nervi. As one of few trained historians of the modern movement, she noticed gaps in the *New York Times*'s architecture coverage. Her sense of connoisseurship, distinguishing the best from the second-rate, served her from the very beginning of her career. In 1959 she wrote the *Times* editors a long letter in response to their positive review of a photography show on a modernist housing project in Caracas, Venezuela. Apparently, it looked great, but Huxtable had been there and had seen that the beautiful buildings did not work for their inhabitants. Her letter (printed in full) showed knowledge, passion and a critical voice, and the paper hired her.

In 1963 Huxtable became the *Times*'s first architecture critic. She held that position, with variations in title, until 1982 and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970. What is charming and replicable about her first ten years as reviewer is the immediacy of her experience of so many great works of modern architecture: the Whitney Museum, the CBS Building, the glass canyons of Park Avenue, the marble plazas of Lincoln Center. Reading her pieces (collected in the wonderfully and evocatively named *Kicked A Building Lately?* and *Will They Ever Finish Bruckner Boulevard?*), it is clear that her first loyalty is to the citizens of New York — and that she thinks they deserve better.

Whitney Museum, New York.

Before she does anything else in “Sometimes We Do It Right,” Huxtable describes what she sees. This may seem rather simplistic, but it is a step many critics skip today, since most reviews come with a photograph or slideshow. These writers want to leap over the visual to get to larger concerns: the architect’s genius, the international trend at work, the latent theory in the practice. Huxtable gives the reader explicit directions about where to stand and candidly states what she notices, offering immediate insight into reading a building or the city. First, you have to be there. Critiquing renderings is often a necessity, but you cannot discern what works unless you have seen it, touched it, and experienced it in person. Here is the formal approach exemplified: she stands on the sidewalk and points you east.

> For a demonstration of New York at its physical best, go to Broadway

> between Cedar and Liberty Streets and face east. You will be standing in front of a new building at 140 Broadway. ...
>
> Look to your left (Liberty Street) and you will see the small turn-of-the-century French pastry in creamy, classically-detailed stone that houses the neighboring Chamber of Commerce. To your right (Cedar Street) is a stone-faced building of the first great skyscraper period (pre-World War I through the 1930s).
>
> Move on, toward the East River, following the travertine plaza that flows elegantly on either side of the slender new shaft, noting how well the block size of the marble under foot scales the space.

If you were to literally follow in her footsteps (as I hope you will), you would see just how much is not described in the text. The critic is an editor: to make a visual argument, you have to cut out much of what you see. You also have to comment on what you do see, as concisely as possible. Calling the Chamber of Commerce a "French pastry" is funny, conjuring up (for me) the idea of a croissant wedged between dour towers or artist Claes Oldenburg's 1965 *Proposed Colossal Monument for Park Avenue*, a Good Humor bar of 60 stories to replace the unloved Pan Am Building at the south end of the avenue. The Chamber of Commerce looks just as much like a crumpet today, with its fruity garlands and elaborate Ionic capitals, and still provides an excellent contrast in personality to both Marine Midland and the 1915 Equitable Building by Ernest R. Graham across Cedar Street.

Huxtable's historical reference to the first skyscraper period demonstrates her authority (she didn't see her first skyscraper yesterday) without interrupting the present-day flow. The "stone-faced" Equitable is a building distinguished less for its neoclassical wrapper than for its bulk: it fills its block from side to side and corner to corner. Its monstrous presence spurred the 1916 zoning resolution that sprinkled Manhattan's streets with tapered towers until it was revised in the 1960s to allow for slabs-with-plazas like Marine Midland. Equitable still looms larger than Marine Midland, despite being many floors shorter, because the open space around the later tower makes it seem slimmer — the rezoning was right.

The plaza at the south side of Marine Midland is edged with a planter and a series of benches, leading around the corner of Cedar Street to the lobby. From there, the plaza continues east toward the Chase Manhattan Bank Building, designed by Gordon Bunshaft for SOM seven years before he worked on Marine Midland. Your eye is led to and through the glass atrium that surrounds Chase's elevator core, as if you could see past it and on down Cedar Street. But your feet must stop. Nassau Street lies between 140 Broadway and Chase, and you can't move from one building's plaza to the next without cutting between parked cars, crossing the street, going up some steps. A huge Chase logo looks like the end of the line.

> But the open space continues, even with this barrier [Nassau Street]. Closing it [Marine Midland's plaza] and facing Chase's gleaming 60-story tower across Liberty Street is the stony vastness of the 1924 Federal Reserve Building by York and Sawyer, its superscaled, cut limestone, Strozzi-type Florentine façade making a powerful play against Chase's bright aluminum and glass.

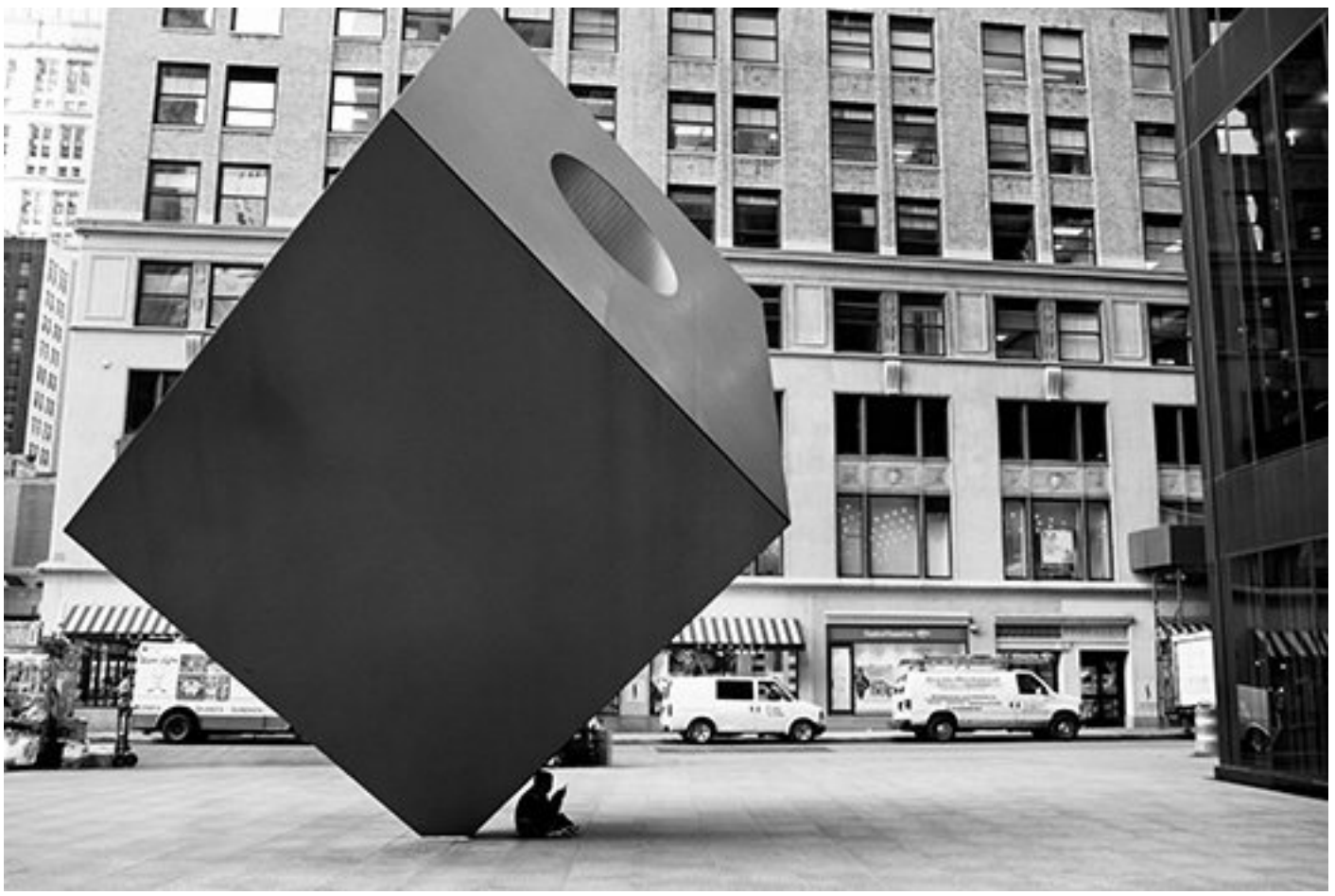
Huxtable stops here for a moment of sheer visual revelry. Her words are active, giving the architecture a sense of movement — *powerful play, gleaming, stony* — that allows a reader to feel what she feels for a moment. Most buildings do not move, but they have impact, and transmitting that impact verbally can fire the imaginations of people who might just have walked on by. These adjectives give a taste of the rhetorical explosion to come in the writings of Herbert Muschamp, the *Times*'s architecture critic from 1992 to 2004. Huxtable has always been more reserved, but she manages to give buildings personality through well-chosen descriptors. The Federal Reserve Building reads as stone wallpaper, so vast is its side, so crisply incised are its mortar joints. It is a model for many of the postmodern office buildings built after Marine Midland, but its solidity and strength are no longer achievable.

Huxtable then deploys another critic's trick, particularly useful for the positive review, overstatement:

> This small segment of New York compares in effect and elegance with any celebrated Renaissance plaza or Baroque vista. The scale of

> the buildings, the use of open space, the views revealed or suggested, the contrasts of architectural style and material, of sculpted stone against satin-smooth metal and glass, the visible change and continuity of New York's remarkable skyscraper history, the brilliant accent of the poised Noguchi cube — color, size, style, mass, space, light, dark, solids, voids, highs and lows — all are just right.

It is hard to know if she really thinks this happenstance plaza beats those in Rome and harder to believe many would agree with her. But her enthusiasm is infectious and carries the reader to her larger point: cities are perpetually reinventing themselves. We may prefer the uniformly ancient beauties of the Capitoline Hill, but that is not a viable model for the contemporary city. Happenstance, accretion, a change in neighbors can combine to create new beauty at any moment. The critic would not be doing her job if she did not think today could be as good as the past. And Huxtable, deeply involved in the preservation movement in New York City, would not be doing her job if she did not recognize the qualities of older buildings as well as the latest ones.



Isamu Noguchi, *Red Cube*, New York.

Her enthusiasm is as much for the historic as it is for Noguchi's then-boldly-anarchic cube, which seems much larger in person than in photographs. That cube is an interesting footnote. Today the corporate sculpture of the 1960s, much of it by Noguchi, rarely warrants a second glance, so imitated has it been by lesser sculptors, in lesser plazas.

"Plop art" was the dismissive term coined by architect James Wines in 1969 for large, geometric, abstract sculptures in corporate settings, suggesting that their commissioning and placement were too easy. It was as if the corporate owners said to the people of New York, "Here you go, some Art." But bad imitations should not lessen the impact of superior examples, and as Huxtable points out, the cube is just the right size, shape and color, set just the right distance from the building.

One section of the review comes close to straight-up architecture criticism as we know it: the critic, the new building, an assessment:

> Not the least contribution is the new building, for which Gordon Bunshaft was partner-in-charge at SOM. One Forty Broadway is a "skin" building; the kind of flat, sheer, curtain wall that it has become chic to reject. ...
>
> It is New York's ultimate skin building. The wall is held unrelentingly flat; there are no tricks with projecting or extended mullions; thin or flush, they are used only to divide the window glass. ...The quiet assurance of this building makes even Chase look a little gaudy.

But this judgment of the curtain wall is only a fraction of what she has to say — she's rewritten her assignment on the fly, because the new building is the least of her concerns. In fact, Huxtable never says the building is good or bad but describes it in terms that make her appreciation clear. She gets inside the architecture by focusing almost exclusively on the curtain wall, as the curtain wall is what sets this box apart from its neighbors and the curtain wall is all that most members of the public will

ever see of the building.

Ever since Bunshaft designed Lever House uptown on Park Avenue in 1952, New York's corporations had been involved in an endless game of curtain-wall one-upmanship. Thus, when Huxtable talks about flatness, she's describing the latest iteration in a search for new looks for the glass-and-steel tower. As Huxtable notes, by 1968 the public was growing as restless with this aesthetic as they were with plop art, but Marine Midland is a superior example of its type. The sense of collective urban ego present in the postwar building boom that produced so many skin buildings never happened in New York's most recent boom, with the possible exception of the 2005 Hearst Tower by Foster + Partners. Huxtable sounds a prescient, doleful note in her conclusion: "What next? Probably destruction. One ill-conceived neighboring plaza will kill this carefully calculated channel of related space and buildings. ... It only takes one opening in the wrong place, one 'bonus' space placed according to current zoning (read 'business') practice to ruin it all."

Lever House, New York.

“Sometimes We Do It Right” includes a number of features that I would urge citizen critics to use in their own writing. One, description: She sets the scene, and her theme, through opening paragraphs that bring the city vividly to mind. Two, history: She demonstrates that the skyscraper is not something new (via her neighborhood tour) and that Marine Midland is part of a lineage (via her discussion of curtain walls). These glancing references establish her expertise (she knows more about this topic than most) and also sidestep a common problem: a gee-whiz awe at the latest and greatest model in the line. Three, drama: Many people consider architecture boring. The first line of defense against this charge is making the connection for the reader between how architecture looks and how it makes one feel. It’s not just a building but a speaking artifact. Finally, the Point: Huxtable has 1200 words with which to make her point. When you read her review, you feel at all times that she knows exactly where it is going. She has chosen the three areas she wants to highlight — the surroundings, the plaza, the building’s skin — and she makes them with all deliberate speed. (If you have selected a theme and a mode of organization, and if you know what your critical approach is, having a point shouldn’t be hard. Leave out more than you leave in.)

Huxtable’s modest, carefully articulated rallying cry is left to the end: “Space is meaningless without scale, containment, boundaries and direction. ... This is planning. It is the opposite of non-planning, or the normal patterns of New York development. See and savor it now, because it is carelessly disposed of.” Her method is developmental, leading the reader to agreement rather than telling them what they will learn at the outset. Huxtable is asking us to look at what is around the architecture as much as the building in question, calling our attention to what is really important to get right.

The more built environment people see and savor, the more they act like architecture critics, the better they will be able to recognize good planning and become advocates for it. What they need to know is how to recognize, articulate and argue for such continuing moments of beauty. The first step is following in the footsteps of the masters. The second is writing about the city you want to see. ● ●

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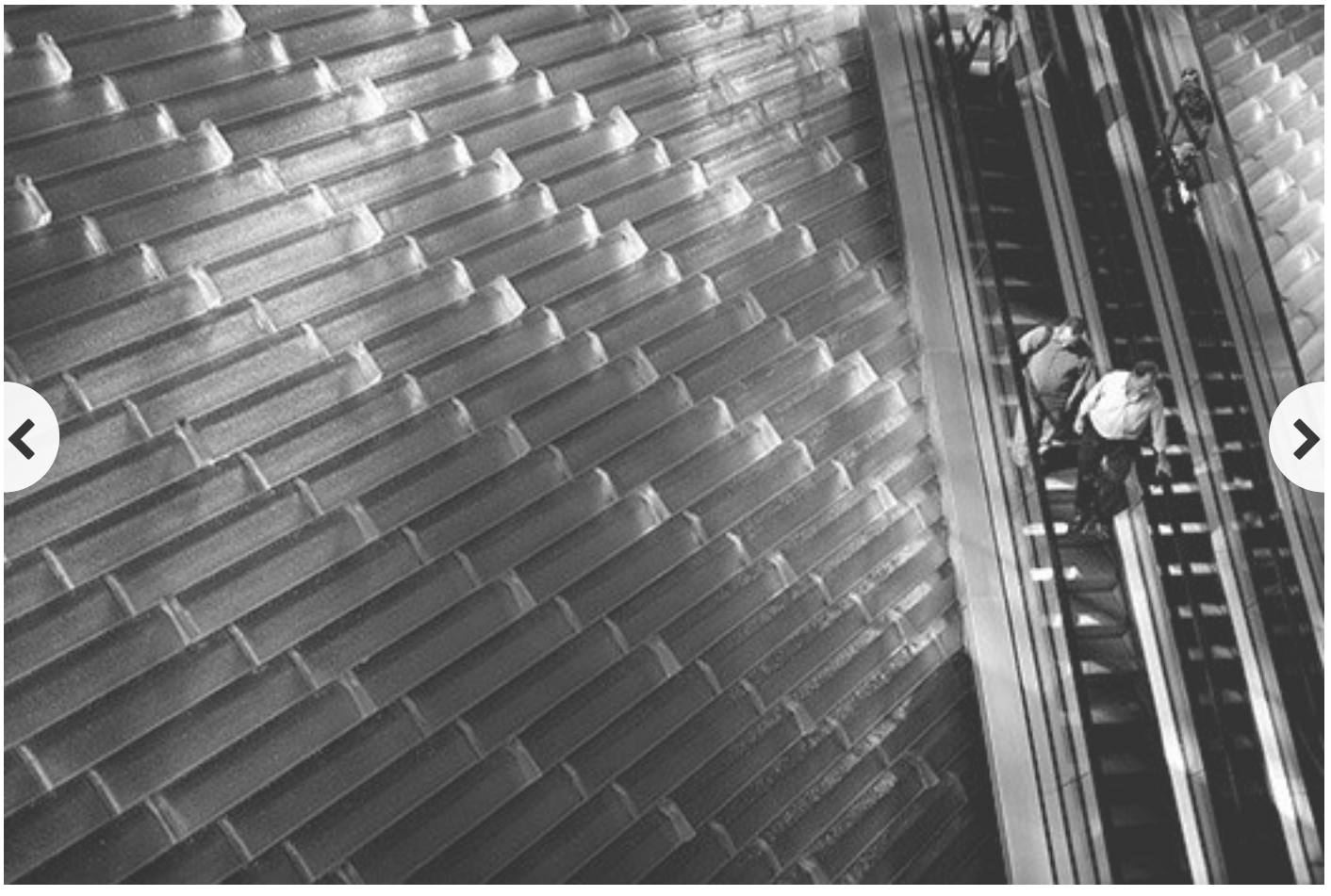

Hearst Tower, New York.

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