Building Blocks

Barbara Bender
For my husband, Perry

and

Lisa and Andrew, Jacob and Zach
Bonnie and Jordan, Jessica and Matthew
Jordy and Tama, Daniel, Maya and Lyla

with all my love
Introduction

Although the photographs in this book are of architecture, they are not about architecture. Rather, they are about shape and design, and are the result of play and experimentation. My approach to photography has been greatly influenced by my seven grandchildren whose playfulness and willingness to experiment is a joy to behold. I am delighted by their wonderful ability to play with whatever is at hand and how they use their vivid imaginations to create scenarios that are innovative and resourceful. I’ve also observed that they often try new ways of doing things with a curious and adventuresome spirit, regardless of the outcome. Adopting these attitudes and behaviors influenced the way I make photographs in general, and enabled me to make these images and put the project together in its present form.

Many years ago I began making graphic architectural images as a way of photographing in situations where the light was harsh — and not optimal for shooting natural subjects. Remembering how children will improvise and create imaginative play with whatever is available, I began to look for things to photograph in the conditions I found myself in, rather than being disappointed and regarding the shoot as hopeless. Because it was sunny, I noticed areas of light and shadows on the planes and surfaces of nearby buildings. I began to play with these areas, isolating them within the frame while looking through the viewfinder. By eliminating context, and disregarding the fact that I was shooting architecture, I found that I could create shapes that were defined by tonal contrast, and enjoyed organizing them into compositions that were graphic in design, and often abstract. Over a number of years I continued to add to my growing portfolio of such images — made when I was shooting under sunny skies.

It wasn’t until six years ago, when my husband and I began spending our winters in Arizona, that I began to concentrate on this project in earnest. The desert light is very harsh and high-contrast, and I decided to take advantage of the fact that the smooth adobe and stucco surfaces of many of the buildings were perfect for displaying the well-defined areas of light and shadow that I had enjoyed working with when I made my previous architectural graphics. I began seeking out interesting curves, angles, and shapes in buildings in various places in the American Southwest, back home in Toronto, and other locations when I traveled. Although most of the buildings were very ordinary (often found in strip mall parking lots) the continually changing patterns of light and shadow were wonderful and fun to work with. I simply played with the shapes in my viewfinder, realizing there were endless possibilities for making different compositions by moving the camera slightly, thus altering the proportions, sizes, and positions of these shapes.
Once I had accumulated an extensive collection of architectural graphic photographs, I began to put them together into a portfolio entitled *Architectural Geometry*. As I was putting the finishing touches on the project, and was viewing them as a cohesive group on the computer in Adobe Bridge, I suddenly had the impression that the screen was filled with structures not unlike toy building blocks. I realized that many of the photographs appeared to be composites of two or more separate images, although I definitely knew that they were not. On a whim, I decided to digitally join two somewhat similar images together onto a new canvas — experimenting with their placements until I created a composition that I liked. That lead to many hours of playing with different combinations and configurations of various images — just for fun. At first I had no intention of adding the composites to the original portfolio; I was just experimenting and enjoying the results, although I often got confused as to which image was which, and where one ended and the next began. It was frequently hard to tell which photographs were single images, and which were composites! I also struggled with foreground/background perceptions. With very flattened perspective and no sense of scale or context, there was a lot of “innie/outie” uncertainty.

After several days of this, I came to the realization that the focus of the project had changed significantly. What had begun as a portfolio of architectural graphics had evolved into something more. Through play and experimentation, I used my existing images to develop my own version of elaborate structures that a child might create out of toy building blocks. Essentially, I played with visual blocks of buildings that already existed in order to construct new photographic compositions. Although the assembly process and materials differed, the creative process was identical: both rely heavily on a willingness to play, with no limitation but one’s imagination. I added some of the new composites to the original portfolio, and renamed the project *Building Blocks*.

This project reflects my attitude towards making photographs: I make photographs because I love the process of doing so. The finding and creation of the image is more important to me than the final product. I rarely plan how the finished image will look. Rather, the work evolves according to what I see and the mood I’m in. While it is rewarding when a photograph is “successful,” it is not essential in order for me to feel satisfied after being out with my camera, or working/playing digitally. Although I love to travel and visit exotic places, I don’t feel that I need to do so to make my images. For the most part, the buildings in this collection were very ordinary and could have been found in any city. I love to work with whatever conditions I find myself in, regardless of the subject or light. There is visual interest and beauty everywhere, and the challenge of making a photograph in situations where there doesn’t appear to be anything worthwhile to work with is something I take great pleasure in, and find creatively exciting.
Born in 1948 in Oshawa Ontario (near Toronto, Canada), Barbara Bender moved to Toronto in 1965.

After working briefly as a registered nurse, earning her Bachelor of Arts, and raising her family, she began her art career as a stone sculptor. She exhibited her work regularly with the Sculptors Society of Canada, after being voted into membership, and was a founding member of Stoneworks and Company, a collective of women sculptors.

In 1998 her interests shifted to photography, which she has since pursued with great enthusiasm. Primarily self-taught, she has also increased her knowledge through her association with several photographic groups, as well as attending various workshops.

As a professional freelance fine art photographer, writer, and lecturer, Barbara has been the recipient of many awards, and had the honor of having her work published in high-profile international publications such as *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended, Black and White* Magazine, *Color* Magazine, *Nature’s Best Photography*, and *Photo-Life* Magazine. In addition, Guernica Editions has selected more than forty of her images as cover art for published books of poetry. A prolific and creative photographer, Barbara has self-published eight photographic books through Blurb.com, and also creates audio-visual presentations of her photographs set to music. Her work can be found in private and corporate collections in Canada and the United States.

Barbara and her husband, Perry, have three married children and seven grandchildren who live nearby. They divide their time between their homes in Maple, Ontario; their cottage in Muskoka (two hours north of Toronto); and a residence in Sun Lakes, Arizona.

To see more of her photographs and sculptures, find details about upcoming events and exhibitions, or learn more about her self-published books, please visit her website:

[www.BarbaraBenderPhotoArt.com](http://www.BarbaraBenderPhotoArt.com)
LensWork Monograph Series

Monograph #6 – Building Blocks by Barbara Bender
Monograph #5 – Florilegium by Kim Kauffman
Monograph #4 – Chariots of Desire by Huntington Witherill
Monograph #3 – Mexico: The Light and The Warmth by Michael Reichmann
Monograph #2 – Photographs 1979-2013 by Stu Levy
Monograph #1 – Made of Steel by Brooks Jensen