

G.E. Kidder Smith Builds: The Travel of Architectural Photography

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Book Review / CRITICISM

***G.E. Kidder Smith Builds:
The Travel of Architectural Photography***

By Angelo Maggi

Foreword by Michelangelo Sabatino

Epilogue by Samuel Pujol Smith

Novato CA, USA: ORO Editions, 2022

8 1/2 x 1 x 11 in. [21.6 x 2.5 x 28 cm]

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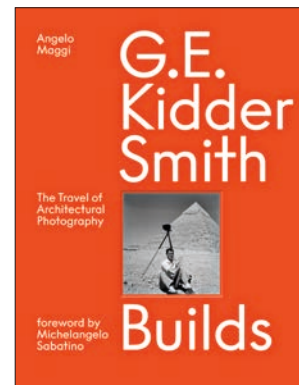
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A recent ill-conceived Apple promotional video for the newest thinnest iPad titled “Crush” ominously depicts a massive industrial hydraulic press crushing tools and artifacts of creative expression and representation – among others: books, musical instruments, crayons, cameras, drafting equipment, sculpture, a physical architectural model, and a wooden mannequin model – all destroyed as obsoleted anachronisms – which are then miraculously replaced by Apple’s new iPad. Physical objects and tools that engage both the eye, and tactile and muscle memory of the hand are no longer necessary in a digitally simulated AI world of images.

Angelo Maggi's book *G.E. Kidder Smith Builds – The Travel of Architectural Photography* is the antithesis of the current technological valorization of artificial images. The first to explore Kidder Smith's career, an architect photographer self-described as "[...] an inquisitive architect and critic and only an amateur historian,"¹ Maggi's book is an exemplary example of the value of diligent and thorough research, clear writing, elegant book design, and quality book-making, a combination more often the exception, rather than the norm.

Kidder Smith's curiosity, travel and on-site use of the camera as an analytical tool affirm the value of experiencing architecture over the remote consumption of images on screens. His books of photographs and his descriptive text stand in stark contrast to the sheer volume of images of architecture available online, devoid of description, explanation, or setting. His photographs of architecture are not idealized images of buildings isolated from their surroundings. Unlike many current books on architecture, Kidder Smith's books also include architectural drawings and, when possible, his photographs of buildings and spaces of cities frequently depict human figures and activity.

G. E. Kidder Smith (1913–1997) was indeed an "inquisitive architect." Although educated as an architect, licensed in 1946, he did not design buildings and as a photographer did not work for clients. Instead, for over 50 years, his practice was multivalent, involved in architectural and landscape photography, writing, book design, curating, exhibit design, teaching, lecturing, and later in his career, preservation activism. His advocacy and persistence to protect and preserve architecture was instrumental in preventing the demolition of two of the most significant houses of the twentieth century – in 1959, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye; and in the late 1960s, Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House.

[Reviewer's disclosure/disclaimer]: I am predisposed to admire this book for several reasons. A tattered copy of Kidder Smith's 1955 book *Italy Builds [L'Italia costruisce]* discovered in the sale book bins of Strand Bookstore in New York in the early 1980s influenced my own work. Kidder Smith's high contrast black and white photographs, his concise descriptions, and ability to place architecture in its setting; the inclusion of vernacular buildings exposing relationships and tensions between pre-existing national and regional building traditions and twentieth-century modern architecture; and his selection of primarily post-war Italian architecture and architects too numerous to list, contributed to a book that became my primer on post-war twentieth-century Italian architecture. *Italy Builds* was my first exposure to a practice of architecture that was not limited solely to building design, but instead could involve a range of size and program, projects characterized by the Italian architect Ernesto N. Rogers (1909–1969) and editor of *Casabella-Continuità* (1953–1965) as designs scaled "from the spoon to the city."

Why, until the 2022 publication of this book and three accompanying exhibits² curated by Angelo Maggi and Michelangelo Sabatino, has G.E. Kidder Smith's substantial contributions to the appreciation and advocacy for architecture been overlooked for so long? Michelangelo Sabatino notes in his foreword "G.E. Kidder Smith's Reputational Shadow" that his photographs never "[...] assumed [the] iconic status of the professional photographers Ezra Stoller and Julius Shulman."³ In an essay published in 2017 prior to the 2022 publication of his book *G.E. Kidder Smith Builds*, Maggi cites the criticism of Kidder Smith's photography by the Architectural Historian Joseph Rykwert as a "glamorization of architecture" and a "misreading of the Italian [post-war] situation, a characterization also made by the Milan designer Massimo Vignelli."⁴

Kidder Smith's interest in photography began early as an architectural student at Princeton University in the 1930s. Maggi describes in great detail his early interest in photography, his evolution, and subsequent development as a peripatetic traveler, photographer, and photographer/author of numerous books beginning with the 1943 publication, *Brazil Builds*, to his last book published in 1996, one year prior to his death in 1997, *Source Book of American Architecture*. Frequent traveling and photographing architecture and "building books" was an ongoing passion requiring planning, proposing book projects to commercial publishers, and raising funds. In all of these endeavors and travels, his wife, Dorothea "Dot" Fales Wilder (1916–2015) was his constant companion and collaborator, driver, and assisted in the organization of his field sheets, and frequent appearances in his photographs to depict human scale. Kidder Smith prominently recognized her participation and collaboration in his 1950 book *Sweden Builds* with a full-page acknowledgment:

TO:
D. F. K. S.
WHOSE ADVICE, ASSISTANCE AND INSPIRATION
CAN BE SEEN ON EVERY PAGE

There are numerous monographs, survey books, and exhibitions on the subject of architectural photography. Most tend to fall into thematic categories, and following is a short list, as the number of publications and exhibits on the subject of architectural photography is much too long to include in a book review:

- (1) Documentary images of architecture and the built landscape by professional photographers and studios. For example, the nineteenth-century work of Fratelli Alinari, Édouard Denis-Baldus, and the many photographers employed by Roy E. Stryker's FSA and Standard Oil Project in the 1930s and 40s – Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, among many others.
- (2) Professional architectural photographers commissioned to

portray idealized images of architecture for promotional purposes: Lucien Hervé, Hedrich-Blessing, Ezra Stoller, Balthazar Korab, and Julius Shulman.

(3) Photographers and artists observing the built landscape of cities and the periphery: Edouard Atget, Berenice Abbott, Lewis Baltz, Guido Guidi, Robert Adams, Edward Ruscha, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Gabrielle Basilico Candida Höfer.

(4) And finally, architects who used the camera as a tool to record their observations: Le Corbusier, Charles Eames, José Antonio Coderch, Giuseppe Pagano, Gian Luigi Banfi, and Enrico Peressutti.

Kidder Smith's photography did not fit any of these categories, despite the breadth and scope of his photography and books for over fifty years. In the introduction to his 1990 photographic monograph of *Looking at Architecture* including eighty of his photographs, selected and organized chronologically, and accompanied by his texts he describes himself: "as an architect, author, and 'sometimes' [emphasis mine] photographer [...]." ⁵ He characterized his frequent travels to experience architecture as an obsession driven by curiosity: "My expeditions stemmed from a curious obsession: a concern for architecture. In perhaps quixotic fashion, I would like to help open more eyes to the provocative rewards of well-turned buildings in space [...] Architecture is the slate of mankind: on the palimpsests of the centuries – from which we are still learning – we are designing our future." ⁶

Kidder Smith was not an historian. He was an advocate for architecture, primarily through his books aimed at both a general audience as well as architects. Architects as advocates are somewhat rare. Three architects that perhaps shared a similar "calling" with Kidder Smith could include the Italian architects Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909–1969); Giuseppe Pagano (1896–1945); and the Austrian American architect Bernard Rudofsky (1905–1988).

All shared an interest in a vernacular architecture – and what Rogers termed as "pre-existing" conditions and the possible connections between the traditional and modern. All published essays, books, and curated and designed architecture exhibits, and all were photographers. Two were influential editors of architectural magazines – Pagano, as editor of *Casabella* (1933–1943); and Rogers, editor of *Domus* (1946–1947) and of *Casabella-Continuità* (1953–1965). The architect, traveler, and photographer Rudofsky was perhaps the most well-known proponent of the virtues of an *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, the title of his 1964 book and exhibit held at the Museum of Modern Art in the same year.

Unlike Rudofsky, Kidder Smith remained an advocate of modern architecture. Kidder Smith recognized the ingenuity, economy of means, and geometric purity of regional native architecture, not as nostalgia, nor a preference of one over the other. Contemporary architects could learn from

the use of local materials, shared construction solutions and techniques, and simple means of climate control. The books that best typify Kidder Smith's comparisons of vernacular and modern are the four books in his "Builds" series, and arguably his most known until now with the publication of Maggi's comprehensive overview.

All four books were conceived and designed in a similar format and devoted to architecture and public spaces within individual countries. *Brazil Builds* (1943); *Switzerland Builds* (1950); *Sweden Builds* (1950, 1957); and *Italy Builds* (1955) – the book considered by Kidder Smith as his "best book."⁷ Three included introductions by architects: *Brazil Builds*, by Philip Goodwin, architect (and author); *Sweden Builds*, by Swedish architect Sven Markelius; *Italy Builds*, by Italian architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers, partner in the Milan architectural office BBPR, and, as mentioned, at the time editor of *Casabella-Continuità*; and *Switzerland Builds: Its Native and Modern Architecture* (1950, 1957) by the Swiss architectural historian Siegfried Giedion. Rogers did not only contribute the introductory essay "The Tradition of Modern Architecture in Italy" to *Italy Builds*: Kidder Smith's acknowledgments to the book singles out Rogers' importance as: "Among the architects in Italy, no one could be more sympathetically critical and inspiring than Ernesto Rogers, whose heart [...] beats only for the cause of bettering the world's architecture."⁸

According to Maggi – in his 2017 essay published prior to this book "Re-Interpreting Kidder Smith's Italy Builds: Crossovers between Photography and Architecture" – "[Rogers] fundamentally guided Kidder Smith during his photo journey."⁹ With the exception of *Sweden Builds*, each "Builds" series book's subtitle acknowledges the presence and traditions of the past with the modern: *Brazil Builds – Architecture New and Old*; *Switzerland Builds – Its Native and Modern Architecture*; and *Italy Builds – Its Modern Architecture and Native Inheritance*. These three books devote a considerable exploration of the regional differences within each country. In each, Kidder Smith reveals with his photography and descriptions the variety of differences between each region determined by necessity and climate, access to local materials, and shared techniques and means of construction. The depth of exploration, analysis and photographic documentation, and drawings of "native architecture" in the three books that follow *Brazil Builds*, is not only evidence of his voracious curiosity. It is an argument that proposes a genealogical and aesthetic link to buildings of the past. Kidder Smith presents traditional architecture as exemplary precedents of rationality, a geometry of simple forms and economy of means that could inform the fundamental attributes of modern architecture.

In the last book of the "Builds" series – *Italy Builds* – he describes the regional differences of materials and climate as an: "autochthonous architecture which grows so naturally and wonderfully from these terrains. In this building will be found a skillful solution to environment, a basic honesty of expression and a respectful use of materials that fits well with the philosophy and directions of modern architecture."¹⁰

Neil Donnelly and Siiri Tännler's sensitive interpretation of Kidder Smith's "Build" series books' layout and size emphasizes Kidder Smith's attention to the importance of his book designs. Following the book's foreword by Michelangelo Sabatino, and Maggi's introductory essay "G. E. Kidder Smith: The Itinerant Architectural Photographer Par Excellence" are two sections: titled "Books as Buildings," and "Architecture on Display." The first section – "Books as Buildings" – is the longest and appropriately so, as Kidder Smith's architectural practice was indeed his books. The chapter "Books as Buildings" – over half of the book's 279 pages – is devoted to an in-depth examination of each book.

Maggi describes each book in depth, including selected Kidder Smith photographs, and importantly numerous images of books as objects, dust covers, end papers, and double page spreads. The addition of ephemera, design layout sketches, acknowledge the preparations preceding the finished object. Design attributes included for most also include the identification of typefaces, graphic designers, and printers. The opportunity to review this exemplary book on Kidder Smith knitting in-depth research with an equally compelling graphic design and layout; and revisiting my own two Kidder Smith books, *Italy Builds* (1955) and the earlier publication *Brazil Builds, Architecture New and Old* (1943), gives me hope that publishers such as AR+D and ORO Editions will continue to value books as tangible physical cultural contributions – thoughtfully designed and well made.

Notes

1. G. E. Kidder Smith, *Looking at Architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 7.
2. The three exhibits in 2022 curated by Angelo Maggi and Michelangelo Sabatino on Kidder Smith's photography and books to coincide with the book's publication were: *Building Books*, IIT College of Architecture, Graham Resource Center, Chicago; *At Home in America*, Barnsworth Gallery, The Edith Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois; and *Discovering Italy*, Italian Cultural Institute in Chicago.
3. Michelangelo Sabatino, "Foreword – G.E. Kidder Smith's Reputational Shadow," in *G.E. Kidder Smith Builds: The Travel of Architectural Photography*, ed. Alberto Maggi (Novato CA, USA: ORO Editions, 2022), 11.
4. Angelo Maggi, "Re-Interpreting Kidder Smith's Italy Builds: Crossovers between Photography and Architecture," *Sophia Journal* 2, no. 1 (2017): 80–93 – <https://www.sophiajournal.net/sophia-2-re-interpreting-kidder-smith-by-angelo-maggi>.
5. Smith, *Looking at Architecture*, 7.
6. Ibid.
7. Sabatino, "Foreword," 78.
8. Kidder Smith, "Acknowledgments," in *Italy Builds [L'Italia costruisce]* (London: The Architectural Press; New York: Reinhold Publishing; Milan: Edizioni Comunità, 1955), 4. Kidder Smith first acknowledges Rogers in his list of those architects "who were outstandingly helpful [...] so generous with their time and materials."
9. Maggi, "Re-interpreting Kidder Smith's Italy Builds."
10. Smith, *Italy Builds*, 19.

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