Many years ago a good friend and reviewer observed that I was comfortable in the flattened space of two-dimensional media. Photography is unique in that, with a few exceptions, there is a linear correspondence between three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional image. It was suggested that the conversion of the one space to the other was what I was most interested in. As a longtime graphic artist it may well be that I have been trained to think from the flat page backwards.
Ann Arbor, 1981

That friend was speaking of this photograph, and while I recognized some of the geometric regularity in the light-dark-light-dark banding, I had not recognized the repeated echoes of the major details throughout the minor ones, nor that the bottom third of the photograph is an inverted image of the structure of the middle third.
The obvious perspective in this image makes us want to believe in the third dimension, yet that large even-toned field is about as flat as anything gets. Everything about this image—the two triangular forms, the ladder of parallel lines—leads the eye to the head of the model, and causes the receding plane to rotate forward to the near vertical.
Stairs, 1980

Despite the physical depth of the subject, this photograph immediately collapses to a complex of triangles and parallelograms.
Oxford, 1981

The field is divided into two roughly triangular areas, separated by a group of parallelograms whose size increases as they proceed across the image. The two roughly rectangular shapes of the pilings and their shadows serves as anchors in a composition that wants to lead the eye off the right margin of the print.
Building, 1979
East Hall, 1985

And then there is this pair which I’d never put side by side until writing this article. Taken a decade apart, they nevertheless divide space in much the same way. Each has an upper division that pushes down into a contrasting lower division.
This has always been one of my favorite compositions. When I sketched it out, something about it seemed familiar. I had, without any planning at all, stumbled across the Golden Section formalized by the Greeks thousand of years ago. It’s standard construction lines almost exactly match the elements of the photograph. Triangular shapes also abound, though with the exception of the area under the extended arm they are more subtle than is usual for me.
Photo Notes is a series of short essays on various photographic topics illustrated with examples from my own work. I’m not claiming any great insight into art, photography, perception, or even my own goals and motivations as a photographer. Rather, in the course of reviewing some 25 years of photographs, I noticed some trends in my work and I thought I’d write down a few observations. Recognize that all these observations are strictly post-hoc. I can’t claim to having thought them out before making the photograph or noticed them at the time I was working. It’s only with the luxury of time and distance that I find patterns emerging.

Photo Notes can be found on the web at: www-personal.umich.edu/~mrwizard

The Photo Notes Series

Sunlight Through the Window:
Natural Light and the Figure

On Simple Ground:
Figure and Background

The World is Flat:
Geometry and Abstraction

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