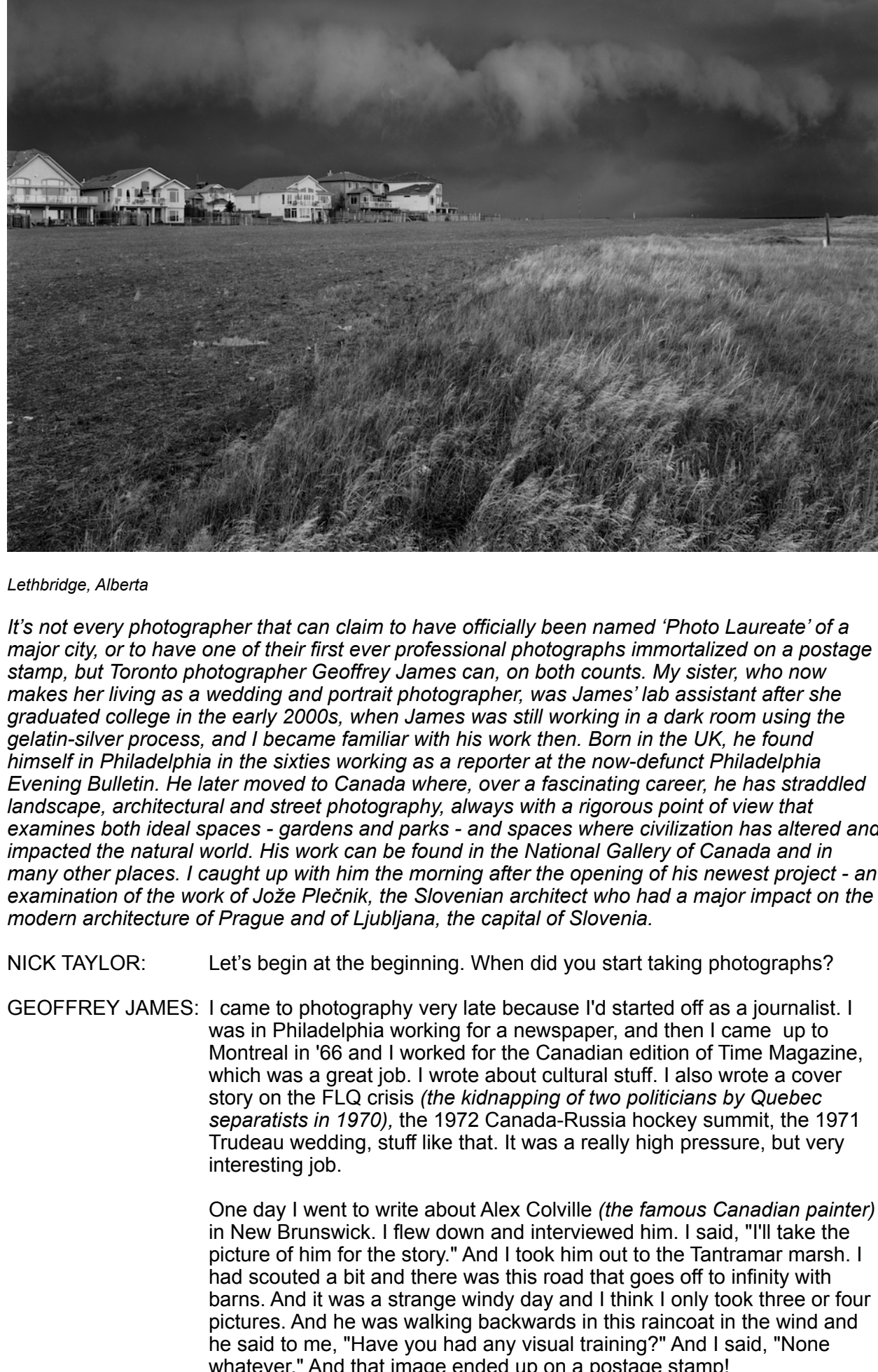


TO MAKE SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING: An Interview with Geoffrey James

by Nick Taylor



Lethbridge, Alberta

*It's not every photographer that can claim to have officially been named 'Photo Laureate' of a major city, or to have one of their first ever professional photographs immortalized on a postage stamp, but Toronto photographer Geoffrey James can, on both counts. My sister, who now makes her living as a wedding and portrait photographer, was James' lab assistant after she graduated college in the early 2000s, when James was still working in a dark room using the gelatin-silver process, and I became familiar with his work then. Born in the UK, he found himself in Philadelphia in the sixties working as a reporter at the now-defunct Philadelphia Evening Bulletin. He later moved to Canada where, over a fascinating career, he has straddled landscape, architectural and street photography, always with a rigorous point of view that examines both ideal spaces – gardens and parks – and spaces where civilization has altered and impacted the natural world. His work can be found in the National Gallery of Canada and in many other places. I caught up with him the morning after the opening of his newest project – an examination of the work of Jože Plečnik, the Slovenian architect who had a major impact on the modern architecture of Prague and of Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia.*

NICK TAYLOR: Let's begin at the beginning. When did you start taking photographs?

GEOFFREY JAMES: I came to photography very late because I'd started off as a journalist. I was in Philadelphia working for a newspaper, and then I came, up to Montreal in '66 and I worked for the Canadian edition of Time Magazine, which was a great job. I wrote about cultural stuff. I also wrote a cover story on the FLQ crisis (the kidnapping of two politicians by Quebec separatists in 1970), the 1972 Canada-Russia hockey summit, the 1971 Trudeau wedding, stuff like that. It was a really high pressure, but very interesting job.

One day I went to write about Alex Colville (the famous Canadian painter) in New Brunswick. I flew down and interviewed him. I said, "I'll take the picture of him for the story." And I took him out to the Tantamar marsh. I had scouted a bit and there was this road that goes off to infinity with barns. And it was a strange windy day and I think I only took three or four pictures. And he was walking backwards in this raincoat in the wind and he said to me, "Have you had any visual training?" And I said, "None whatever." And that image ended up on a postage stamp!



James' Alex Colville portrait

NT: That's something. Not many photographers have that!

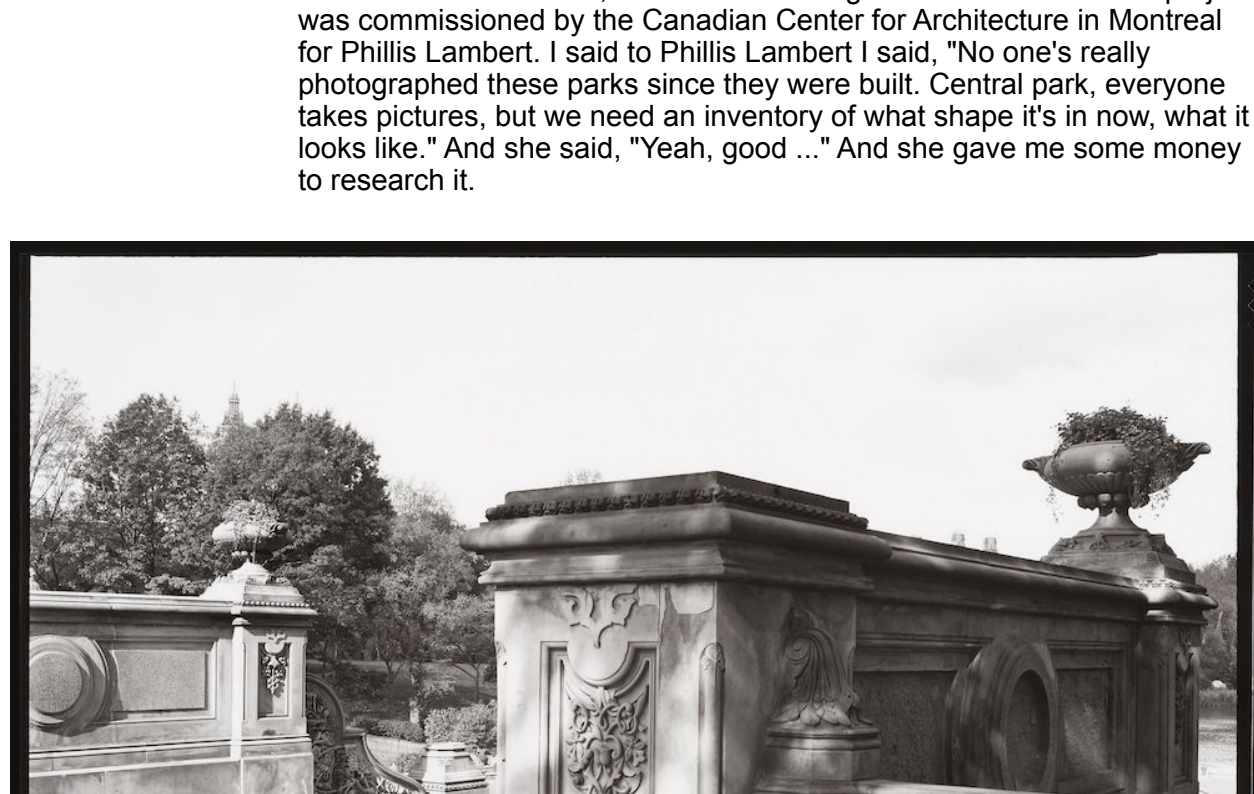
GJ: And they pay you in postage stamps!

NT: Do they really? Because it's legal tender?

GJ: Yeah, yeah, kind of. Anyway, it just got more and more compelling. I just loved doing it. I had a dark room in Montreal. But then they closed down the Canadian edition of Time in '75 and I had this offer to either move to the European edition of Time, in Paris, or to run the visual arts section at the Canada Council in Ottawa, and I chose Ottawa, and that's what changed my life. I was running this thing, chairing juries of photography, and I realized I could actually do this, even with a full time job, and it empowered me. So I did seven years there, came out, and bam I was a photographer! I was 40! And I was very lucky.

NT: Wow. So you first started working with the camera that you showed me in the-

GJ: I began by photographing gardens with this ridiculous particular piece of shit. Sorry. You can quote me.

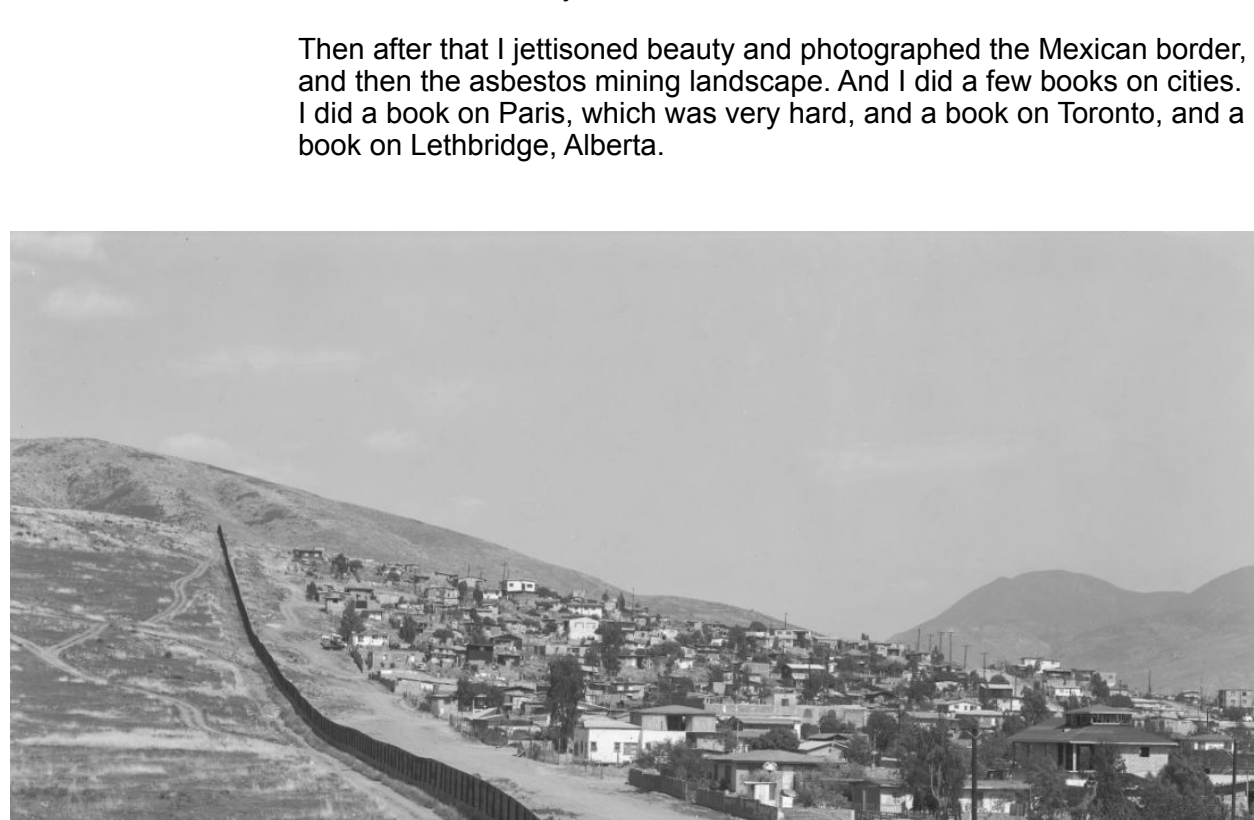


GJ in his office, with his 'ridiculous piece of shit' scanning camera

GJ: It's a panoramic scanning camera. Originally you had to cut the film and tape it in place in a changing bag. So I photographed gardens with it and this was an incredibly primitive camera. It only had one F-stop and one speed. And you didn't really focus it. There were like rifle sights to show the end of the scan and you had to intuit, basically. But I learned how to take pictures with this very primitive device. Then I got a Leica. Leica had been previously used by a one arm Czech photographer called Josef Sudek. He really figured out how to use them. My camera was better because I bought it from a guy in New Jersey who had put a really beautiful German lens in it. Anyway, so that was how I started. And then everything flowed out from there.

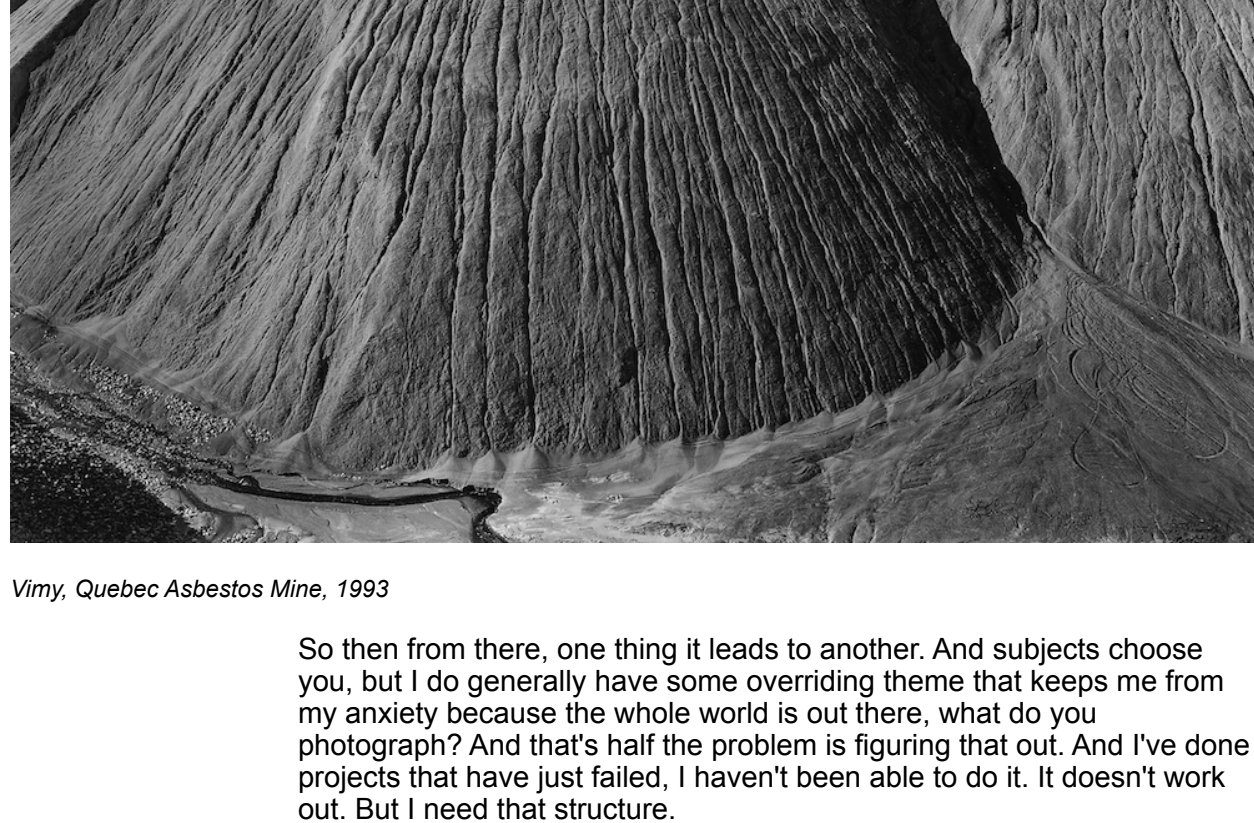
NT: Right. You were saying from the beginning you were doing gardens and public spaces. Why was that? What were you trying to do?

GJ: Well, I started with Italian gardens because when I was five I lived in Italy and some of my first memories are going to Hadrian's Villa outside Rome... And I realized that no one had actually photographed them seriously because in Italy all knowledge is local, because it's really thirteen different countries... So I did a book called *The Italian Garden*.



From *The Italian Garden*, taken with scanning camera

Then I did a book about really obscure gardens built just before the French Revolution, and then I moved on to photographing the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, the man who designed Central Park. That project was commissioned by the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal for Phillis Lambert. I said to Phillis Lambert I said, "No one's really photographed these parks since they were built. Central park, everyone takes pictures, but we need an inventory of what shape it's in now, what it looks like." And she said, "Yeah, good..." And she gave me some money to research it.



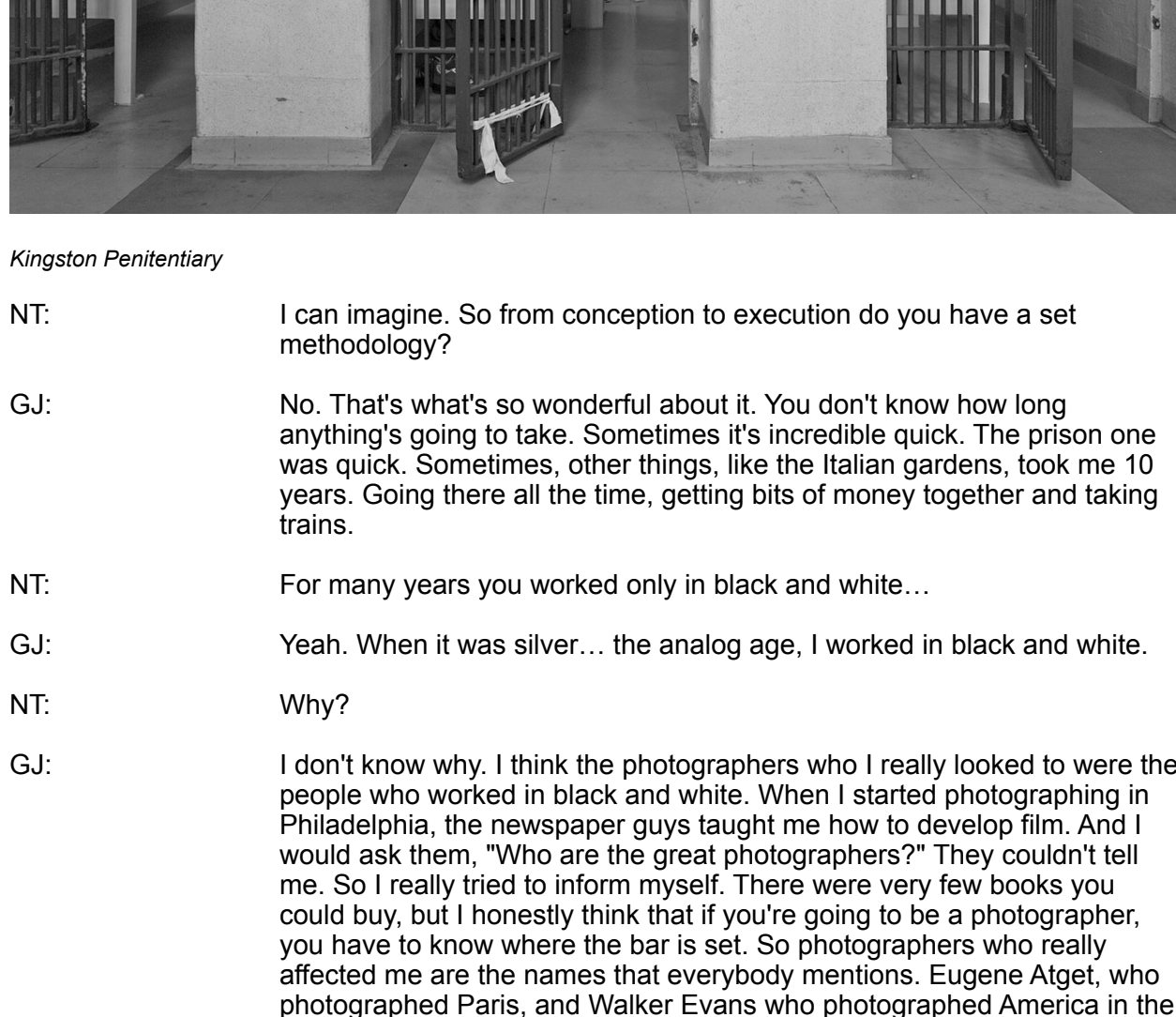
Central Park, 1984

I was very lucky. I got a Guggenheim, after photographing for five years. I couldn't believe my luck.

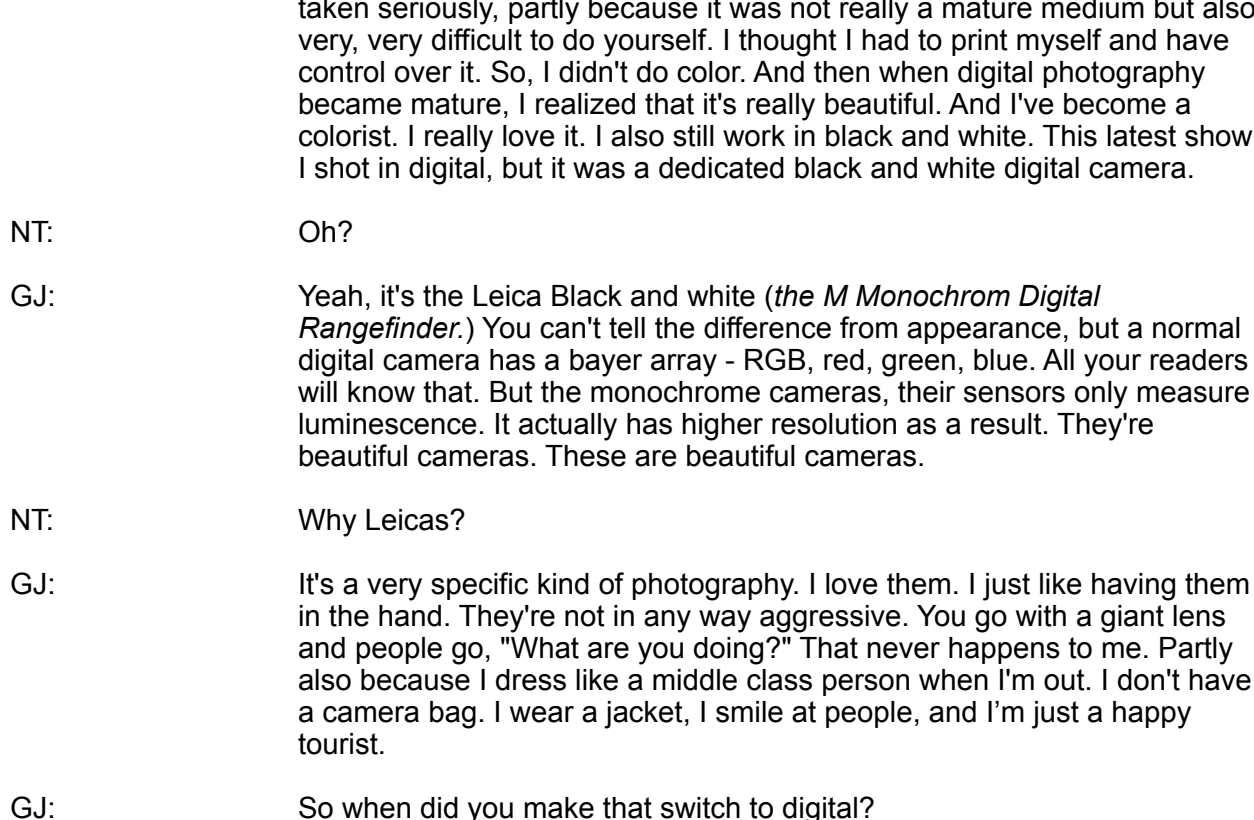
NT: Wow. What do you think it was that set your work apart?

GJ: I don't know, because I was completely outside any fashion. I actually sent these little prints, to me they look very innocent. I learned years later that one of the members of the Guggenheim jury was Helen Levitt who is a great street photographer. The guy who oversaw the Guggenheim said, "Helen Levitt really liked your work." That was the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me in my life.

Then after that I jetisoned beauty and photographed the Mexican border, and then the asbestos mining landscape. And I did a few books on cities. I did a book on Paris, which was very hard, and a book on Toronto, and a book on Lethbridge, Alberta.



US-Mexico Border Wall, 1997



Vimy, Quebec Asbestos Mine, 1993

So then from there, one thing it leads to another. And subjects choose you, but I do generally have some overriding theme that keeps me from my anxiety because the whole world is out there, what do you photograph? And that's half the problem is figuring that out. And I've done projects that have just failed. I haven't been able to do it. It doesn't work out. But I need that structure.

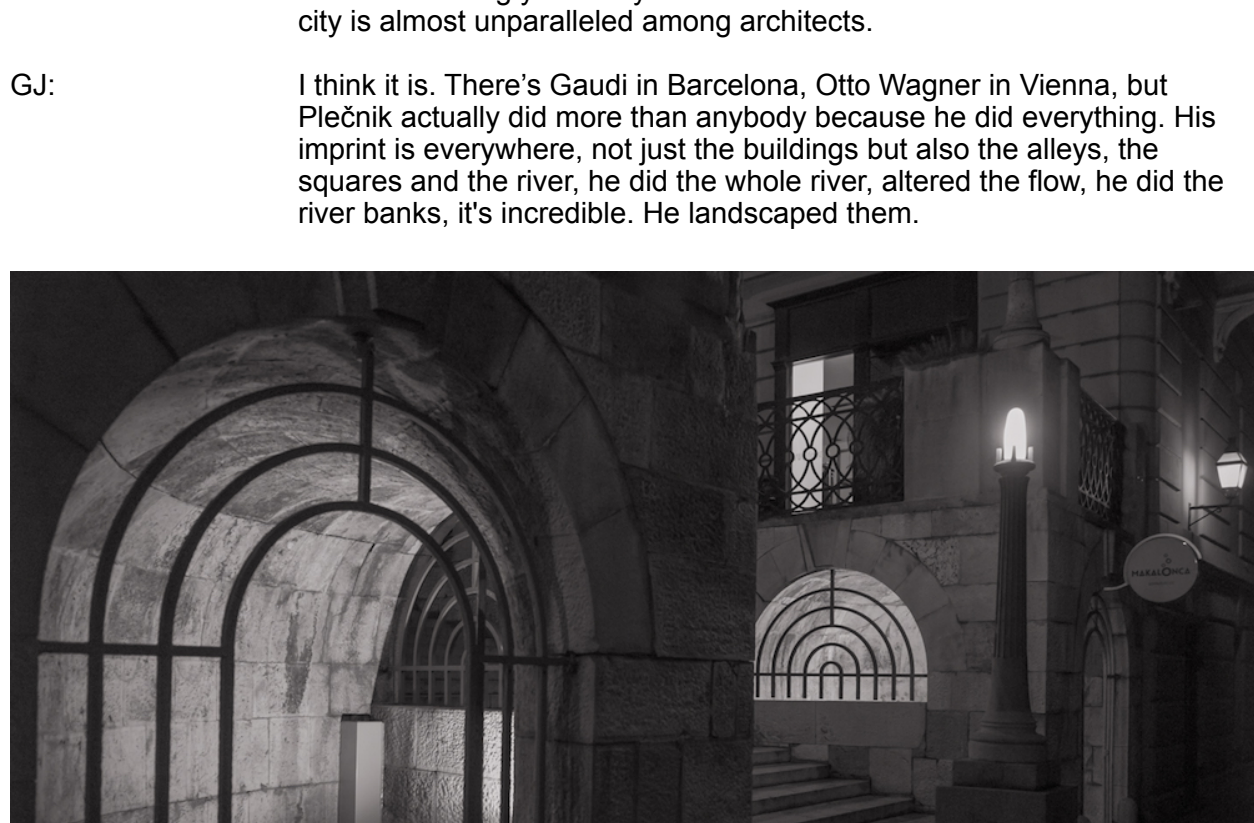
NT: So what is that structure then?

GJ: Well it's just the idea that there's something you need to investigate, that you're curious about it. I always say when I get to the end of a project, I know enough to begin it.

For example: Kingston Penitentiary. I just read in the newspaper that it was closing. I thought, "I've never seen any pictures, except after riots of wrecked cells. I don't know what life is like in this place," and I talked my way in.

NT: And how long did you spend in there?

GJ: About a year. The last six months I couldn't usually take more than two days at a time. I just got so, so freaked out. I had inmates turn on me. It was almost traumatic just dealing with the various forms of dysfunction there. It's a very hard environment.



Kingston Penitentiary

NT: I can imagine. So from conception to execution do you have a set methodology?

GJ: No. That's what's so wonderful about it. You don't know how long anything's going to take. Sometimes it's incredible quick. The prison one was quick. Sometimes, other things, like the Italian gardens, took me 10 years. Going there all the time, getting bits of money together and taking trains.

NT: For many years you worked only in black and white...

GJ: Yeah. When it was silver... the analog age, I worked in black and white.

NT: Why?

GJ: I don't know why. I think the photographers who I really looked to were the people who worked in black and white. When I started photographing in Philadelphia, the newspaper guys taught me how to develop film. And I could ask them, "Who are the great photographers?" They couldn't tell me. So I really tried to inform myself. There were very few books you could buy, but I honestly think that if you're going to be a photographer, you have to know where the bar is set. So photographers who really affected me are the names that everybody mentions. Eugene Atget, who photographed Paris, and Walker Evans who photographed America in the 30's, Robert Frank, Cartier-Bresson. These are the big names.

Serious photography in those days was black and white. Color was not taken seriously, partly because it was not really a mature medium but also very, very difficult to do yourself. I thought I had to print myself and have control over it. So, I didn't do color. And then when digital photography became mature, I realized that it's really beautiful. And I've become a colorist. I really love it. I also still work in black and white. This latest show I shot in digital, but it was a dedicated black and white digital camera.

NT: Oh?

GJ: Yeah, it's the Leica Black and white (the *M Monochrom Digital Rangefinder*). You can't tell the difference from appearance, but a normal digital camera has a Bayer array - RGB, red, green, blue. All your readers will know that. But the monochrome cameras, their sensors only measure luminiference. It actually has higher resolution as a result. They're beautiful cameras. These are beautiful cameras.

NT: Why Leicas?

GJ: It's a very specific kind of photography. I love them. I just like giant lens in the hand. They're not in any way aggressive. You go with a hating them and people go, "What are you doing?" That never happens to me. Partly also because I dress like a middle class person when I'm out. I don't have a camera bag. I wear a jacket, I smile at people, and I'm just a happy tourist!

GJ: So when did you make that switch to digital?

NT: I think around 2010. I guess. It took me a while to get into it because I bought a little digital Leica and it drove me crazy because it had a delay between when you pressed the shutter and when the picture was taken. That doesn't work, it has to be instant, otherwise it doesn't work for me, because a lot of these things are about timing. In the street, you've got to get the picture the instant you feel it.

And even this one ("holds up a Leica M10 Rangefinder"), which is a \$10,000 camera. I don't think this is that fast, especially when you set it up, but this one is the most beautiful cameras in terms of images, so I've got a look now that I'm really happy about. I use older lenses, not ancient lenses, but lenses from the 1990s. The modern ones are too pumped up, the colors are too saturated, so I think one of the pleasures of photography, looking at a photograph is, in real life if you can't see the background is out of focus... but in a photograph everything can be in focus! So you've got these deep spaces rendered. It's a completely different feeling. I always stop it down to F5.6, F8, F8 and it renders beautifully. Anyway, it's a glorious lens actually.

NT: What lens is that and why?

GJ: This is the 35mm Summicron (f2, 1979-1996 version). There was a guy who writes a gear column and he called the lens the 'King of Boken', which is absolute nonsense. I never use black and white. I actually try to have everything in focus. I think one of the pleasures of photography, looking at a photograph is, in real life if you can't see the background is out of focus... but in a photograph everything can be in focus! So you've got these deep spaces rendered. It's a completely different feeling. I always stop it down to F5.6, F8, F8 and it renders beautifully. Anyway, it's a glorious lens actually.

NT: And you print your own work here. What printer?

GJ: It's a Canon 1000 yeah, really good, yeah. I love it. Stick it in, it comes out. It's liberating, completely liberating. I can come back from a trip and download everything in 10 minutes, 15 minutes. I can see what I've got, I can process very quickly, especially black and white if it's properly exposed. I can make a good print. It's not a lot of suffering. In the dark room, you had to go in the dark, in the orange light, the smell of acid. And then you wash it and it's got a spot on the next day, or a crease from handling. You maybe do three images a day. I printed this whole show in about three or four days!

NT: So you have no romantic nostalgia for the dark room?

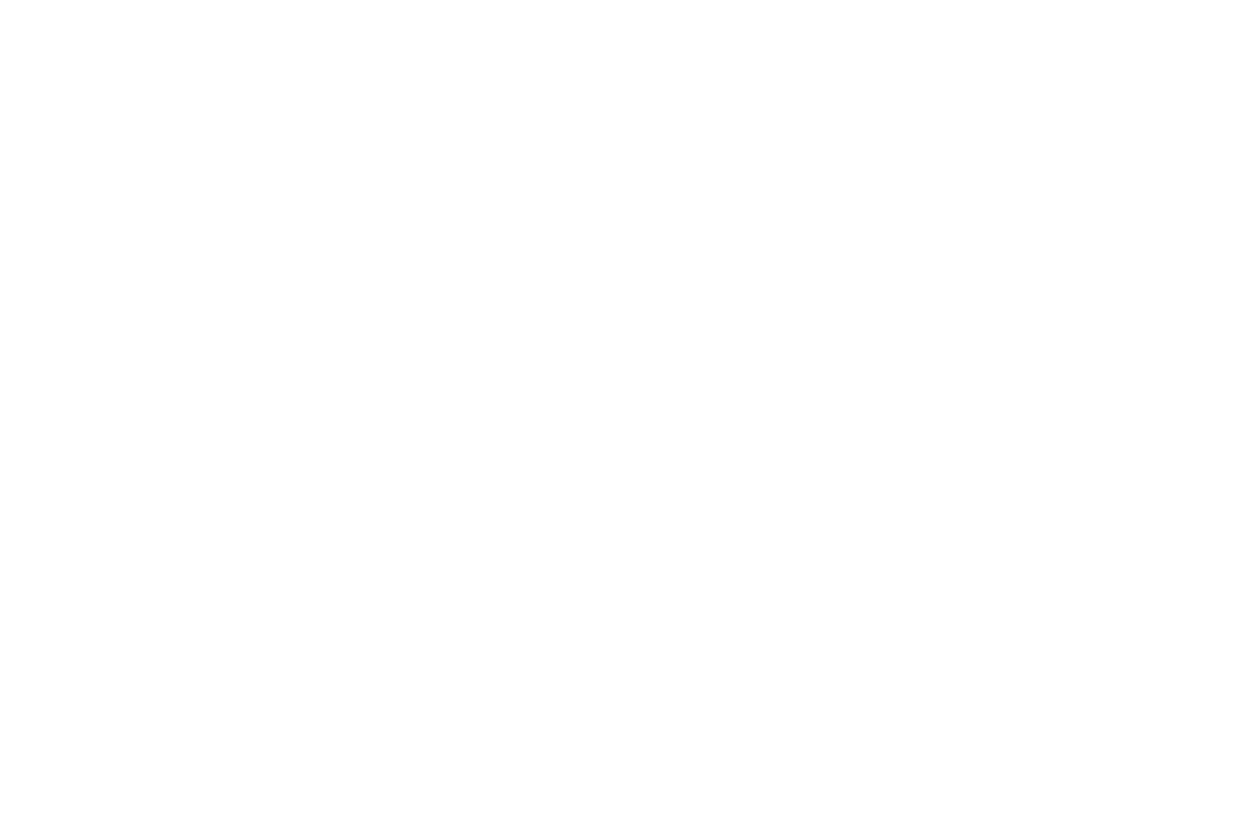
GJ: None whatever, no, no. A lot of people last night thought that they were silver prints, a lot of people, even photographers. It's very hard to tell the difference.

NT: So let's talk about this new show. Why Plečnik?

GJ: I had a Czech friend, actually a Canadian Czech, who told me about Plečnik - the garden that he designed at Prague Castle - and I filed it away. Then in 2013, the book on the Kingston Penitentiary was a really dark experience for me. So when I finished that project I said, "I'm going to do something beautifl." So I went to Ljubljana, I thought the stuff was wonderful so I launched into that project.

NT: You were talking yesterday about how the influence that he has over that city is almost unparalleled among architects.

GJ: I think it is. There's Gaudi in Barcelona, Otto Wagner in Vienna, but Plečnik actually did more than anybody because he did everything. His imprint is everywhere, not just the buildings but also the alleys, the squares and the river, he did the whole river, altered the flow, he did the river banks, it's incredible. He landscaped them.



Erber's staircase, Ljubljana 2015



Plečnik's weir, Ljubljana 2014



Triple Bridge, Ljubljana

NT: So what's next?

GJ: I'm doing a project on Canada. It's partly critical, but it's also celebratory. I want to take pictures that are compelling, but not of some easy ready-made subject. There were two people there last night, and I think they were amateur photographers, and one of them was saying, "You can't make a reputation by photographing the Ontario landscape." I said, "No, that's not it. A photograph is more than its subject. The real challenge is to make something out of nothing," which is what photography's been doing. I mean, it used to be everything had to be beautiful, picturesque, but I'm dealing with the change of the landscape. Luminous Landscape maybe believes in the beautiful, picturesque landscape but I'm actually much more interested in how we've settled this country.



Quyon, Quebec. From upcoming Canada project

NT: Do you have any favourites?

GJ: It's a really weird thing. When you take pictures you can always make a competent photograph. It's when you've made the picture or when you've first seen it printed out, you feel it's something in the pit of your stomach, like satisfaction, like a grunt, and I have a few like that. But it's really fun to keep finding them, to keep doing it, just try to get better.

NT: So, "photo laureate" - what was that all about?

GJ: It was very, very nice. It came to me out of the blue. They phoned me, "We'd like you to be the laureate." And it was terrific because I got a card which looks like it's in a municipal building inspector. It's got the City of Toronto logo on it. I just says, "Photo Laureate." It was like a "get out of jail free" card. I didn't need it, but if I actually photographed somebody on the street and they gave me a hard time I could show the card! When I was photographing people mourning (controversial former Toronto mayor Rob Ford). I just told them, "I'm the city's laureate, I'm doing this for history."

NT: Does that mean you could walk into any building and be like, "I'm the photo laureate and I'm here to take pictures?"

GJ: Pretty much, actually yes. There were no formal duties, but what's come out of it is that I'm working on a book with Ann Michaels, the novelist, who was the poet laureate at the time, and its book about Toronto. It might end up as a novel. We're in the middle of it now.

NT: So you just finished your term as laureate, correct?

GJ: Yeah, three years.

NT: Is there a new laureate now?

GJ: Yes, it's Michele Pearson-Clark who's very, very, different from me, and I'm very happy she's going to do something completely different. She'll be much more political. I am what I am. I'm an older, isolated figure. It's my life, my world. I'm not a joiner, I'm an artist or whatever. I would never have said that years ago, but I think I am now.



Uncollected, La Guairda, Havana 2011

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END.