



Flyby Shooting

Iwan Baan casts a light on his photography, with its focus on buildings across the globe.

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This February, Perry Rubenstein Gallery in Los Angeles opened *Iwan Baan: The Way We Live*, a solo show of Baan's photographs from the last eight years, including those shot in China, Venezuela and India. That the show follows a very different exhibition at the gallery, featuring the work of late artist Mike Kelley, is as clear an indication as any that Baan's name, which for almost a decade has read fluently alongside Rem's and Toyo's, now sits comfortably in an art context.

Plainly, a lot has changed in the six years since *Mark* last interviewed Baan (*Mark* 7, page 104) – to begin with, the photographer has to turn down most jobs he's asked to do nowadays. Last year, Baan, in collaboration with Urban-Think Tank and Justin McGuirk, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Architecture Biennale for *Torre David/Gran Horizonte*, in which his photographs looked deeply into an unfinished Caracas skyscraper now functioning as a self-sustaining community. In November, Baan garnered international applause for his poetic photo of Manhattan – on the cover of *New York* magazine – rendered half-dark by Hurricane Sandy.

I met up with Baan after the LA opening to talk about how his career has changed, along with his self-perception as a photographer and an artist. There was one question to get out of the way before we started – a cliché when talking to Baan: 'Where are you going next, Iwan?' His answer: 'It was supposed to be New York, then Canada, but things got delayed. So I fly to Hong Kong tomorrow, then China and Japan. But I don't know yet about the following week.'

Iwan Baan on top of Torre David in Caracas, Venezuela.

Do you still think of yourself as an architectural photographer? Did you ever?

IWAN BAAN: No. Don't call me that. [Laughs.] Of course, over the last eight years my work has been heavily focused on the built environment, but I always developed those projects to go beyond architecture, even when they included it. After Venice Biennale and the *New York* magazine photo, my name started appearing next to very different pictures, and I'm glad to be able to show in different contexts, like Perry's gallery, but the work has always been there.

You've had solo shows before, all of which featured architecture. Was selecting work for an art gallery different?

Those earlier shows were always about one body of work, one project, a year of architecture, or something like that... This is the first overview of my many different interests, and the selection process was intense. I live with these pictures, so it was hard to part with some of my favourites. You know, it's one thing to put together a show that explains something about a city or a building; it's another to put together a show that explains something about who I am.

What does your work say about who you are?

I live out of a suitcase. Every two, three days I'm somewhere else in the world. In a way, my work is a diary of those movements. I can't plan far in advance, I can't wait for the weather to be perfect, so I work by encountering situations and making those encounters part of the final piece. I don't take timeless pictures. I show fashions changing, seasons changing, the makes of cars changing. That's one reason architects used to be so against using people in their photographs – they didn't want their buildings to be dated, too.

Now you open many architecture magazines and see photographs time-stamped with people and objects. Does that indicate a change in how today's architects want their work understood?

First, it's important to consider the difference of technique among today's photographers. They're shooting with smaller digital cameras, so it's actually easier to include people in their shots and to grab pictures quickly. Personally, my camera is only in my hands for a second – for one click – the rest of the time it's dangling off my shoulder, and I look through it as little as possible.

Second, I wasn't trained as an architect, unlike many architectural photographers, so I go for the user's point of view more than the architect's. Sometimes I show the disparity between those views. You know, the sun is always shining or setting in architecture country, but I'm also interested in moments when it's not. I actually try to photograph buildings when the architect's not there. Architects live with their projects for four, five, eight years and can be more focused on the project they had in mind than the [realized] project in front of us. So, I like to approach a building or site knowing very little about it. I think it was Louis Kahn who talked about the four Fs: finish it, furnish it, photograph it, forget about it. For me, it's the opposite. It's important to show the rubble surrounding the shiny project. And maybe many of today's architects feel the same – many specifically ask to have people in their photographs. But this is where I should make a distinction: there's a big difference between simply including people in photographs and actually telling a story through pictures.

What kind of story do you mean?

I'm fascinated by temporary and improvised environments. One of my interests is documenting life around construction sites. In China, the people working on these giant projects come from the countryside and live on site for years. They're part of the bigger meaning of the buildings. I also try never to sensationalize what I photograph. The point I want to make in my photos, actually, is that there's a full spectrum of 'normal' across the globe. People take care of their surroundings; they're sometimes proud of their

surroundings in similar ways, but the surroundings are extremely different. I don't think I'm photographing anything for the first time, but my intention is to photograph in a different way. For me, the camera is an excuse to go places where nobody would go as a tourist, and where you feel you don't belong otherwise.

Your photo of New York after Sandy brought you a much wider audience, well beyond the confines of architecture. Does that shot fit into the narrative of your other photos, or is it an outlier?

The photo shows New York experiencing a different 'normal' than it's used to, something I always look for in my pictures. I actually didn't realize what I had until much later that night. Unconsciously, I think I was prepared to take it, but everything had to line up perfectly for that impossible shot. I left early that morning, barely got a rental car [only one car was available, because of the storm] and ended up over Manhattan for three hours with my little jacket on. Only later did I realize I'd taken that picture a few times already, but under very different circumstances.

What's interesting is that the storm wasn't a very visible or photogenic event. There wasn't a giant wave coming into the city or anything like that, which is, of course, a good thing. But it's much harder to show why the electricity going out is a big deal – for one, it's harder to shoot without power, since light is vital for photography. New York became a different world for that brief moment, and that was important. In the end, the photo shows the fragility of a city. Two days after I took it, I flew to Haiti, a country that's been in a state of emergency for three years already, if not more. People get by there and make it look relatively easy, compared with the New York I saw during the storm. Getting around New York was a complete scramble. There was no gas. Nothing was open. For a short time New York stopped, because it was used to a certain level of comfort.

Architects often have to answer questions about building in places like China. Do you also feel 'political heat' when you photograph in, say, China or Venezuela?

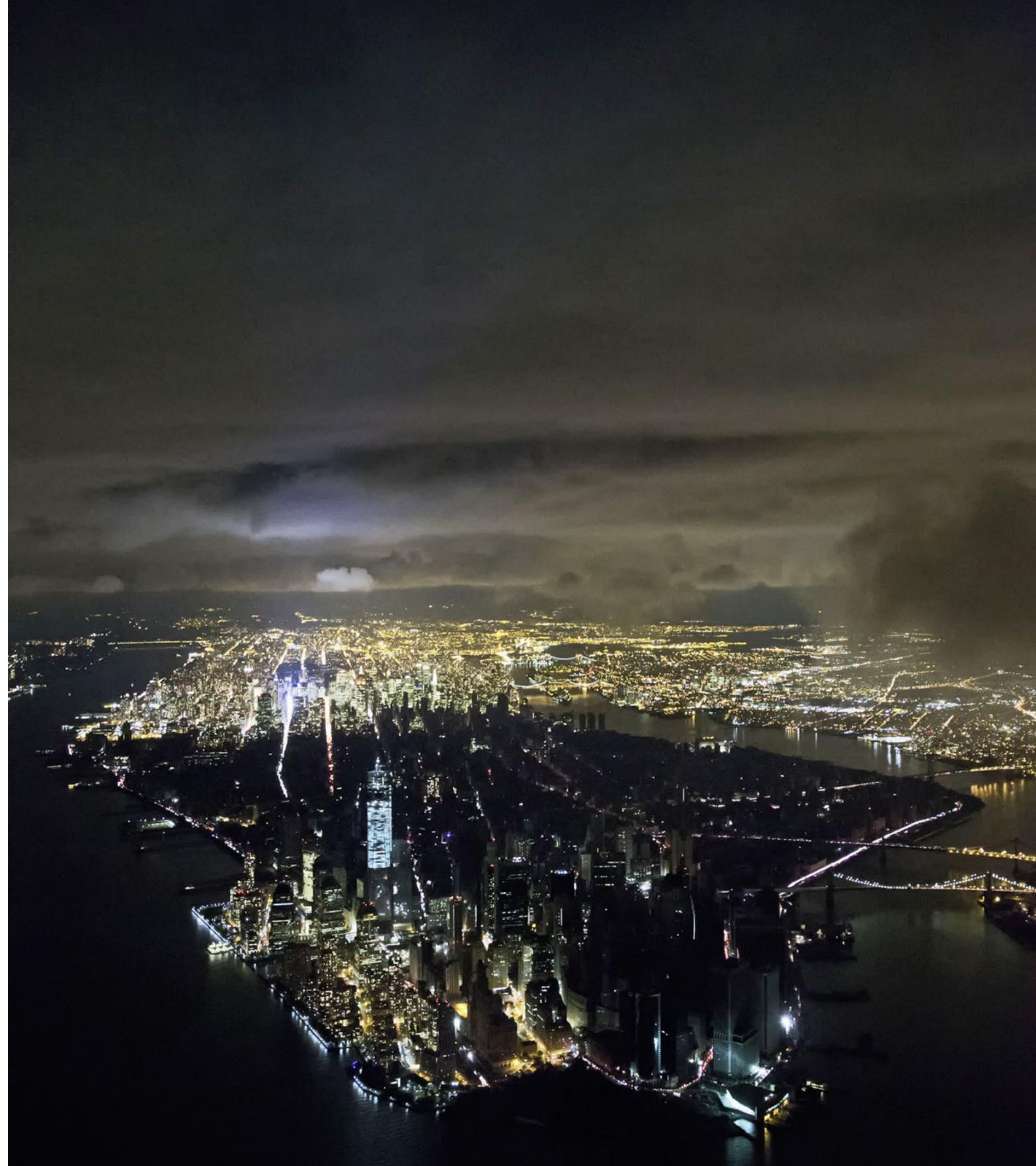
To some extent. I mean, people from the Venezuela Pavilion came to protest outside our Torre David project at the Biennale. But if you isolate the story told through those photographs, it's about how people build their homes from nothing. For many people in Torre David, that building is a step up. In a weird way, it's a positive story, but it's not a comment one way or another about the state of democracy in that country. Again, I try to stay away from sensationalism – and sensationalism is very easy to achieve. Just recently, a *New Yorker* article published about Torre David had a much more negative tone, and now the building has been completely locked off; probably no 'outsider' will get through those doors again.

I know you had a gun drawn on you in Venezuela. How do you stay out of trouble when you enter places most tourists wouldn't go?

That came of a misunderstanding, but I know things can get dangerous even out of misunderstanding. I stand out, so I acknowledge that I'm conspicuous, instead of pretending to be invisible. I say hello to people, try to make a presence, without imposing on anyone or what they're doing. I sit in the street, drink coffee with people, and try to become part of the community, so that people might invite me into their homes. In informal communities, like the one in Caracas, people are proud to show me what they've built. They eventually get over my being a foreigner and let me into their world. That's important for my work. As much as I want to be part of the background, I know people are keeping an eye on the guy with the camera. ←

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'The camera is an excuse to go places where nobody would go as a tourist'



The City and the Storm, 2012, Digital C-Print, 179.7 x 120 cm
Image courtesy of the artist and Perry Rubenstein Gallery, Los Angeles.