



Architectural photographer Ezra Stoller "felt a responsibility to record history"

Vladimir Belogolovsky speaks with Erica Stoller, the daughter of photographer Ezra Stoller through whose eyes we see some of the most iconic 20th century buildings.

by Vladimir Belogolovsky | Published on : Dec 15, 2023

In a 2012 book, *Ezra Stoller: Photographer*, authored by Nina Rappaport and the photographer's daughter, Erica Stoller, architectural critic John Morris Dixon writes, "Stoller became the photographer of choice to record many of the outstanding design accomplishments of the twentieth century." He documented many masterpieces by some of the most prominent architects of the 20th century—Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto, Louis Kahn, Eero Saarinen, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, IM Pei, Richard Meier, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and many others. As Erica told me during our recent interview over a video out of her house in Rye, New York, "We see those buildings, not the way they were but through his eyes." A streamlined account of our conversation follows my introduction about both Stollers—the father and the daughter.

Ezra Stoller was born in 1915 in Chicago and raised in New York City. The family came from Poland. His father was a tailor and his mother was a needleworker. Ezra became interested in architecture and took drafting classes in high school. He studied at NYU where he photographed architectural models and other projects for his friends' portfolios and competitions. However, his degree from NYU in 1938 was in industrial design, not in architecture. He started working with Howard Myers of Architectural Forum on projects in New York, the Midwest, and California. In Florida, he documented Paul Rudolph's houses, and in the Boston area, he met Walter Gropius.



Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson's Seagram Building, New York, 1958

The same year he graduated from NYU he married Helen Rubin, an art student at Cooper Union; she studied textile design and experimented with block printing and painting. Erica pointed out that her mother was a devoted artist throughout her whole life, "She had a difficult time because her husband was often travelling and there was this business to run—pick up the phone, help make plans, write out invoices, and take care of three kids and a dog. It was somewhat beyond her and her career as an artist was compromised." Family life and business were all intertwined. Ezra's dark room and office were housed in an addition to the family home, originally in Rye, New York, and starting from the early 1960s in a much bigger compound in Mamaroneck, a town nearby where even though it was a bigger operation, still an extension of the office phone was installed in the family kitchen. "Someone was on duty day and night; it was like living above the store," Erica remembers with a slight sign of irritation.



The Graham House designed by Arthur Erickson and Geoffrey Massey, 1963

As a photographer, Ezra was largely self-taught, continuously learning from all sources such as a book on fine art photographer Eugène Atget that Helen gifted him when they were still students. The Atget book taught him how to establish vistas, placement, and the focal point. Ezra was concerned with the whole presentation, not a single image. He was interested in describing the flow of space. He studied carefully the whole chronology of how a building is approached and how one moves through space to achieve a sense of continuity. "He was also committed to the total coverage, telling several stories in one location. People were learning different ways to live after the war and he not only took pictures of a new kind of architecture but a new way of living—washing machines, dishwashers, and all kinds of gadgets," Erica explained.

In the late 1940s, Ezra started building what was originally called *Pictorial Services*, a collective to share the darkroom and studio space, and to handle both the business aspect and the film files with his circle of photographers. The service later became *Esto*, a photographic agency. It represents a collective of photographers and manages their images. Erica has been involved in it since 1966. The company arranged assignments, managed production, organised film files, dealt with copyrights and licensing, and provided a bookkeeping service. For decades Erica served as *Esto's* director. A few years ago, this role was passed to photographer David La Spina. Parallel to her directorship Erica Stoller has built an artistic career as a sculptor, exhibiting her work in numerous group and solo shows throughout America and Europe.



Paul Rudolph's Sarasota High School, Sarasota, Florida, 1960

For quite some time Ezra did not see his work as art. "I never claimed that my work is art. The art is the architecture," he would insist. But in 1981 his work was exhibited at the Max Protetch Gallery in Manhattan and since then was shown regularly in museum settings. For the catalogue of Ezra Stoller's inaugural show, Arthur Drexler, the Director of MoMA's Department of Architecture and Design wrote: "If he made some buildings look a little better than they were, the improvement provided an image for aspiring architects. For better or worse, his photographs have been more real to architectural students, and more intensely experienced, than most of the buildings they memorialise. Their instrumental value in spreading the word may now yield their more durable value as art."

Vladimir Belogolovsky: How early have you become aware of your father's occupation?

Erica Stoller: I always knew what he did whereas many of my childhood companions had no idea what their fathers did when they went to work. In our case, there was very little division between home and work. My brothers and I were always drawing on the backs of rejected black and white prints. [Laughs.] And when we went on trips the destination was based on assignments. We travelled with all the photo equipment—eight or ten enormous silver cases—in a large car with a giant roof rack, sturdy enough to climb up on for high vantage point photography.

His work was his primary commitment. You do have to be a kind of maniac to get anything done in this world. He took it seriously and was on a mission of sorts. He was really trying to prove himself as a photographer. More than that, he felt a responsibility to record history. It is unclear if he considered himself an artist. He didn't talk about it. He often used this metaphor of the composer and the conductor. To him, the composer was



Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal, at Idlewild (JFK) Airport, Queens, New York, 1962

the artist. He saw himself as the conductor. He originally may have felt uncomfortable when his photographs were considered works of art. He had less responsibility if he could hide behind the architect, the real creator. Eventually, he got used to it and may have felt he deserved praise since he could be quite fierce if someone denigrated his photographs.

VB: Many modern buildings are recognised by the images Stoller created. Could you talk about his approach? You described your father's commitment by saying that his goal was perfection. He was a very disciplined photographer. How would you recognise his images?

ES: Surely, there is a certain point of view. His work was all about clarity. Each image was composed very meticulously. Whenever I see an image that has too much light in the foreground, I realise it is not his. The dark frame, particularly in the foreground, invited the eye to advance into the photo. Even if you see a pencil on a table in his photo it will always point in the direction of entering the image, to bring your eye in. So, you always are drawn into these images, to these buildings. He was very aware of every detail. Composition was the key and everything was considered and arranged, and rushing was never a part of it. The photographs gave the impression that somebody had been there but had just left the room. There was an open book or a sliced piece of fruit.



Alvar Aalto, Finnish Pavilion, New York World's Fair, 1939

There is an expression about war, "The worst part is not the fighting, but the waiting." It was kind of like that. He was always waiting for the right light. I remember helping photograph One Chase Manhattan Plaza with the Isamu Noguchi sunken garden in Lower Manhattan. We stood around and stood around. I finally asked, "Well?!" He explained, "You see, in 20 minutes the sunlight is going to move between those two buildings and it will cross the plaza, then we'll make the picture, and we'll go home." It was almost as if he told the sun what to do. He really understood it and must have visited the place the day before. He also knew how the sun would be in a somewhat different location, at a different time, from one day to

the next. So, it was about understanding the light, the weather, and the clouds, which he could read as a farmer. We had a little weather radio in our house. It was meant for fishermen and the only news was the weather. It was broadcast for people at sea but it was the background soundtrack in our house—tomorrow's weather.

VB: Stoller produced around 50,000 images during his long career. It is a huge number considering that he was taking them very carefully and each took a long time to set up. He said, "If I had done eight pictures a day that was a good day's work." Could you talk about that?

ES: In those pre-Photoshop days, making professional pictures was a real ordeal. Interior shots in colour had to have the correct balance between incandescent and fluorescent lights for which he used huge pieces of black fabric to cover the windows and keep natural light out. Then on the same piece of film, he would take down those curtains to let the daylight in and turn off the interior artificial light. So, on one piece of film, two exposures—the image on film would be balanced with

the two types of lighting. That took a hell of a long time to set up. For a second piece of film, one would have to do the same thing again, black and white of the same camera angle would take somewhat less time since the lighting variants were less tricky, but he did have to restage everything before moving to the next shot. It was tedious work.

Compared to the interior, the exterior shots may seem easier. Except when a huge truck parks outside and ruins everything. So, you have to move it somehow. Then the clouds move in. There are so many things that can go wrong! And by the time your view is perfect, the sun goes away and you have to try everything again the next day.

VB: I, of course, want to know about some of his collaborations with architects. There must be many interesting meetings and conversations, right?

ES: Ezra met Mies once while photographing the Seagram Building. There was one meeting during which Mies said about Stoller, "He will take many photographs and we will choose a few." So, there was no collaboration at all. Ezra documented the Seagram construction process, beginning with a huge hole in the ground. It is interesting to follow the process because when you see the finished product it looks as if it just arrived as a pristine object.



The interiors of the Miller House, designed by Eero Saarinen, 1957

He and Le Corbusier never met. Arthur Drexler of MoMA arranged for the commission to photograph Ronchamp. Ezra had met Aalto and was very impressed by him. He famously photographed the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair which no longer exists. Of course, that's the case: if you want your photographs to last the building should disappear. [Laughs.] Then the photographs become a reality. Most photographs are not the reality. I assisted him when we went to photograph Aalto's Maison Louis Carré outside of Paris. Ezra had the nerve to move around the furniture! Later we heard that the client liked the rearrangement and may have left it like that. [Laughs.]

Ezra's collaboration with Wright was different. He had visited Wright in Wisconsin and Arizona a number of times early in his career. Wright even asked him to be the official photographer of Taliesin, but he turned that down. He really needed his independence but was proud of having been invited. Once an editor asked Wright for instructions for Ezra for photographing a certain project. The reply with a telegram read, "Ezra will know." In other words, Ezra Stoller's work was a stamp of approval.

VB: Were there any architects who tried to give him instructions on how to photograph their buildings?

ES: I can't even imagine that happening!

VB: That's what I thought. Robert Campbell wrote in *The Boston Globe*: "So influential was Mr. Stoller's work that many architects didn't feel a building was complete until it had been 'Stollerized.' He came to have as much influence on architectural taste as did the architects whose buildings he recorded."

ES: I have been told that it was Philip Johnson who coined the term, 'Stollerized.' Johnson, of course, understood marketing and the value in Stoller's skills. So, Ezra photographed many Johnson projects. I remember I must have been seven or eight when I went with my father to photograph the Glass House. That was before other structures were added to the site.

VB: All of Stoller's clients allowed him to photograph their architecture without their supervision, with one exception, Richard Meier, who reportedly accompanied Stoller on all the jobs until Stoller's retirement. Is that right?

ES: Perhaps not on all of his jobs but it sounds right. Well, Meier used Stoller's work to his advantage. Don't you think? And I recall Ezra saying, somewhat facetiously, that Meier was one of his best assistants. [Laughs.]



Richard Meier's Shamberger House, Chappaqua, New York, 1974

VB: I like his quote, "I don't take a picture. I make a picture."

ES: Well, to take a picture means something is already there, and anyone can take it like picking a piece of fruit off a tree. But he had to create the whole thing. Every time you walk into a room it is not a picture but a series of possibilities. How do you decide what's important? Every image is a statement—whether you admit it is a work of art or not. Ezra Stoller's images are known for being intentional.

In a way, he constructed his images. He was basically telling us what to see. Now we see those buildings, not the way they were but through his eyes. There is always a moment of translation in his photographs. There was also an effort toward perfection. At that moment, everything was just right and could not get any better. But it turns out this perfection couldn't keep you warm in the winter nor could it prevent leaky roofs from time to time. It was quiet. It was still. The children's toys were nicely arranged. And the noisy kids weren't there either.

VB: What mattered was the image. It is still all about the image. It was also about striving to achieve that ideal and perfect image.

ES: I don't think it was about striving. The image was there.

VB: You are right. And the photographs that your father made were to prove that.

ES: Yes. You got it! [Laughs.]

VB: Someone called him the king of straight lines.

ES: I never heard of that one.

VB: Stoller worked at a time when a small group of photographers documented modern buildings: Ken Hedrich at Hedrich Blessing in Chicago, Robert Damora in New York,

Balthazar Korab in the Midwest, and Maynard Parker and Julius Shulman in Los Angeles. Did he compete with any of them?

ES: I never heard him say anything nice about anybody. Did he feel it was a competition? He probably felt it but didn't say so. They were all contemporaries but he was never friendly with any of them. Apparently, he worked with Damora who was a few years older in the photo department at NYU. But I never heard anything about that. Perhaps silence was a way for him to cross out what would be the competition. And he was not very friendly with architects either. Paul Rudolph actually was a good friend. They moved in different social circles, but there was mutual respect. In Ezra's photographs of Rudolph's houses, you can often see both of their cars. So, they worked a lot together. Did he hang around and drink beer with people? No. I don't think he ever took any time off. He worked himself to death. He was not happy when he wasn't working. And come to think of it, he wasn't very happy when he was working either.

VB: What about Breuer?

ES: They were sort of friends in the beginning. However, Breuer became a big international architect and did not hire or request Ezra for his later projects. It was the Whitney Museum that hired him to photograph the building, not Breuer. They saw each other on very rare occasions. Of course, his early houses were photographed beautifully and Breuer was in many of those pictures.

VB: He appears in your father's pictures of the Whitney Museum as well.

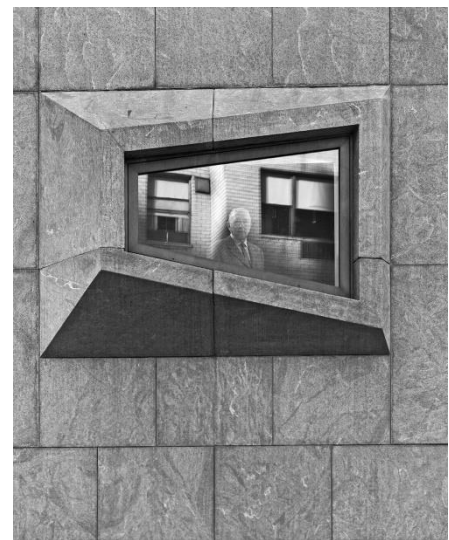
ES: It's true. I love those photographs. He actually liked photographing people. He knew how to put people at ease and make them comfortable.

VB: He retired somewhat early.

ES: It was a lot of work. In the end, it was hard for him. Once, when he was no longer photographing, I recall him saying, "Look this way. Wouldn't it make a good picture?" But he would not take out a small camera since to him taking a picture, or rather making a picture, was a serious commitment, not a game or a pastime. Of our own family, we only have a crummy set of snapshots. Without a real job number, a project was not taken seriously. [Laughs.]

VB: What do you remember most about your father?

ES: Should I apologise for saying that one remembers the images most of all? The person I think of was always busy... and under great pressure. He was unable to compromise and wanted his work to be the best it could be. Good enough was never good enough. He wanted to make prints that were beautiful and large enough so one could see the details. What I remember, personally and fondly, were do-it-yourself projects that we worked on together—building new shelves or putting things together, whatever needed to be repaired or assembled, to fairly low standards. We called it the Stoller Improvement Society. [Laughs.] We made a lot of mistakes. A strange kind of stress-free fun. But going along on assignments was never enjoyable for me. Then he was busy. His concentration was elsewhere. And it took forever, waiting and waiting for the right moment, and then it was over only to start again for the next shot.



Marcel Breuer at Whitney Museum, New York, 1967