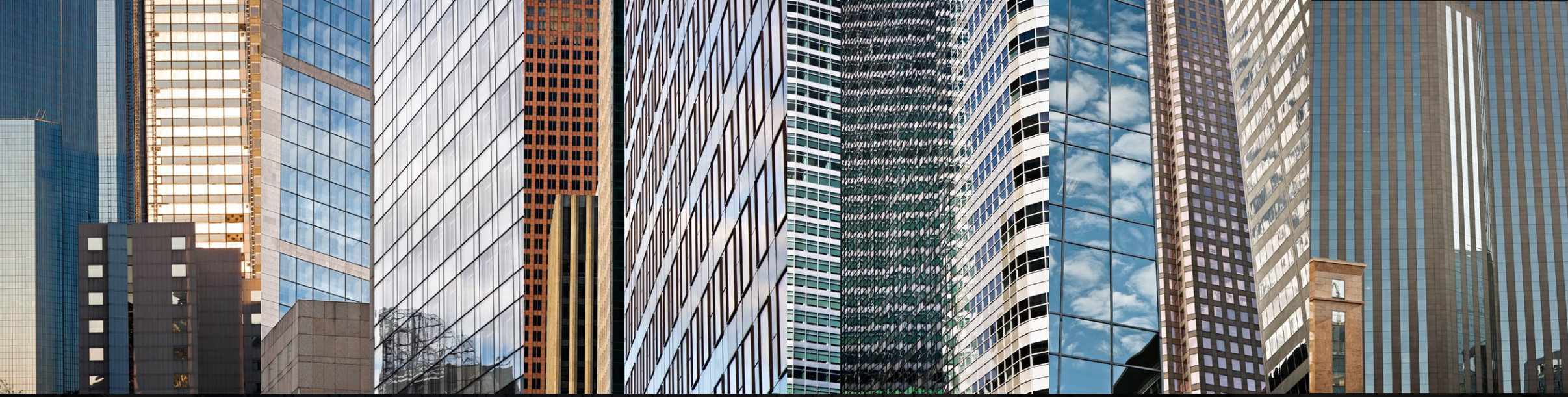
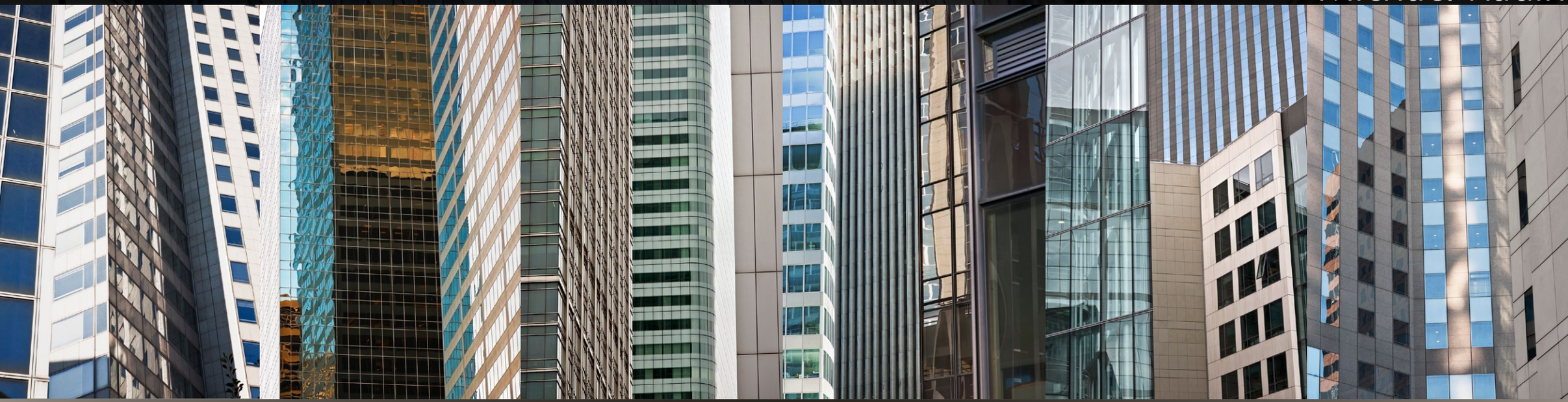


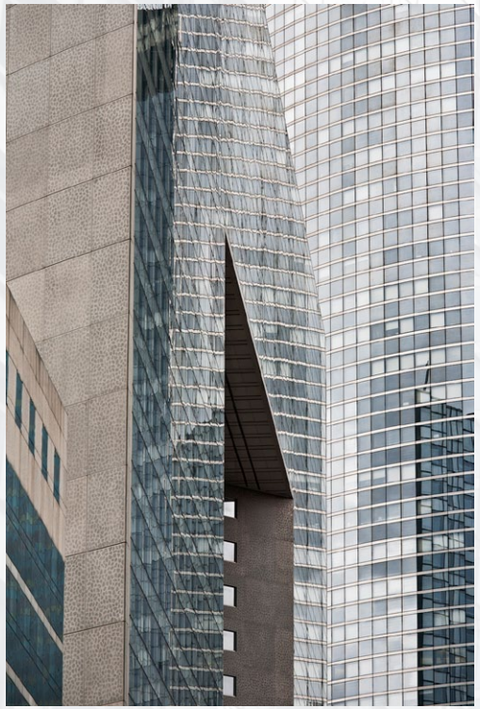
Building Ambiguities

Michael Radin



"I almost felt like I was assembling my own architecture from an erector set made from bits and pieces of these structures."

Building Ambiguities



Equipment: I use a Canon 5D and Nikon D300. There is no image manipulation in these photographs.

Listen to the Interview with Michael Radin
(16:55 audio only)

While in San Francisco a few years ago I took photographs of some buildings. I'm not sure why, as I had never had much interest in this genre before. I printed the images and put them up to "live with" them for a while. I was particularly struck by one photograph of two buildings: because of the way the light fell on them, it was difficult to tell which building was in the foreground. The lighter building would flip from foreground to background as I ran my eyes over the image. As a fan of Escher and the optical illusionists, this image appealed to me — as much of my work in photography is fueled by the curiosity of visual conundrums.

Months later, while walking in New York City, I saw from some blocks away what I was certain were three buildings. Closer examination revealed I was wrong; there were only two. I had used all the visual information available to me to differentiate between reflection and substance, yet had been completely fooled. From these two simple but intriguing events I began a project to see and photograph buildings in a way that would render them both recognizable and ambiguous, with elements of *trompe l'oeil*.

With this visual conundrum to explore, I decided to isolate pieces of buildings in an attempt to *create* ambiguities. I set out to play with the effects of line, color, light, reflection, and perspective on the visual clues that I use to understand the geometry of a photograph. I found that I could use sections of buildings — isolated and juxtaposed, with common reference points — to form edges that appear to flip from background to foreground (or inside to outside) as you run your eye up and down the image. I discovered that I could introduce uncertainty relative to the size of the pieces of buildings, disguise the number of buildings in an image, create uncertainty in the areas that dominate linear perspective, and confuse depth relationships. Sometimes when I was photographing I almost felt like I was assembling my own architecture from an erector set made from bits and pieces of these structures.

The photographs in this project were taken in San Francisco, New York City, Houston, London, and Paris. As my wife is French and has family in Paris, we frequently spend time there. This works out quite well for me, as she visits family and I spend time making photographs. During a visit in 2010 I went out each day to photograph, only to return discouraged. After a few days my wife had grown weary of my complaints about unsuccessful walks, muddled images, and laments about abandoning this project. She suggested that I go to an area of Paris called La Defense. Jacqueline knows me all too well: there I discovered a veritable image garden to explore my interest in creating ambiguous images. With an expansive promenade anchored by the enormous Grande Arche, La Defense is the primary business district in Paris. Contemporary and vibrant, with a concentration of skyscrapers and architecture not often seen in Europe, I was in my element — assembling and photographing *Building Ambiguities*.

Michael Radin

Born 1945, Los Angeles, California

Why photography?
As I remember, from the time I picked up the camera it felt comfortable. I tried a pencil, I tried a paintbrush, but it was the camera that was a better fit for me. Now with digital, I particularly like the flexibility the camera allows because I can shoot a lot of images, play with a lot of ideas, get quick feedback and not worry about the cost. I have always been interested in the ability of the camera to create accurate photographic records that in various ways introduce visual and intellectual ambiguities. I hope to engage the viewer in seeing and understanding what it was that drew me to create the images. I'd like the viewer to come away saying *now that was interesting.*

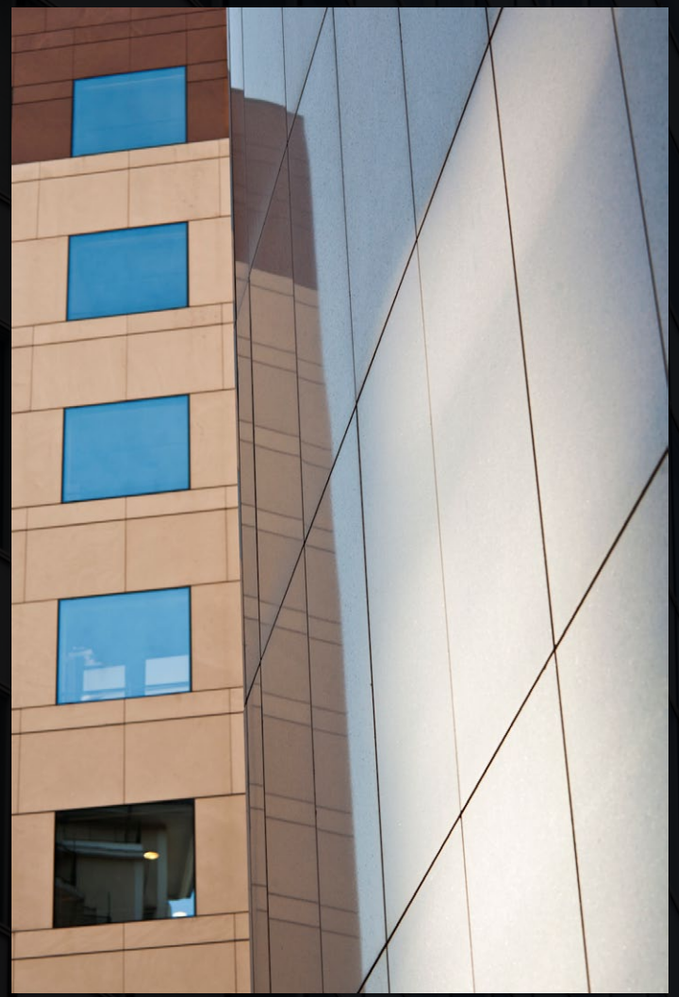
Formal / informal photographic education?
As a teenager I worked for a professional photographer in Los Angeles, where I became fascinated with camera images and the process that revealed them in the darkroom. I later earned a Master of Fine Arts from the University of California at Davis. It was an exciting program to be a part of, as there were no boundaries or restrictions on the ideas that could be and were explored. I had the opportunity to work with Robert Frank, Van Daren Coke, Robert Arneson, Wayne Theibaud and William Wiley — among others. A few years later I found I needed a profession that would allow me to make a living, so I taught myself to program computers and worked as a contract mainframe programmer for 30 years.

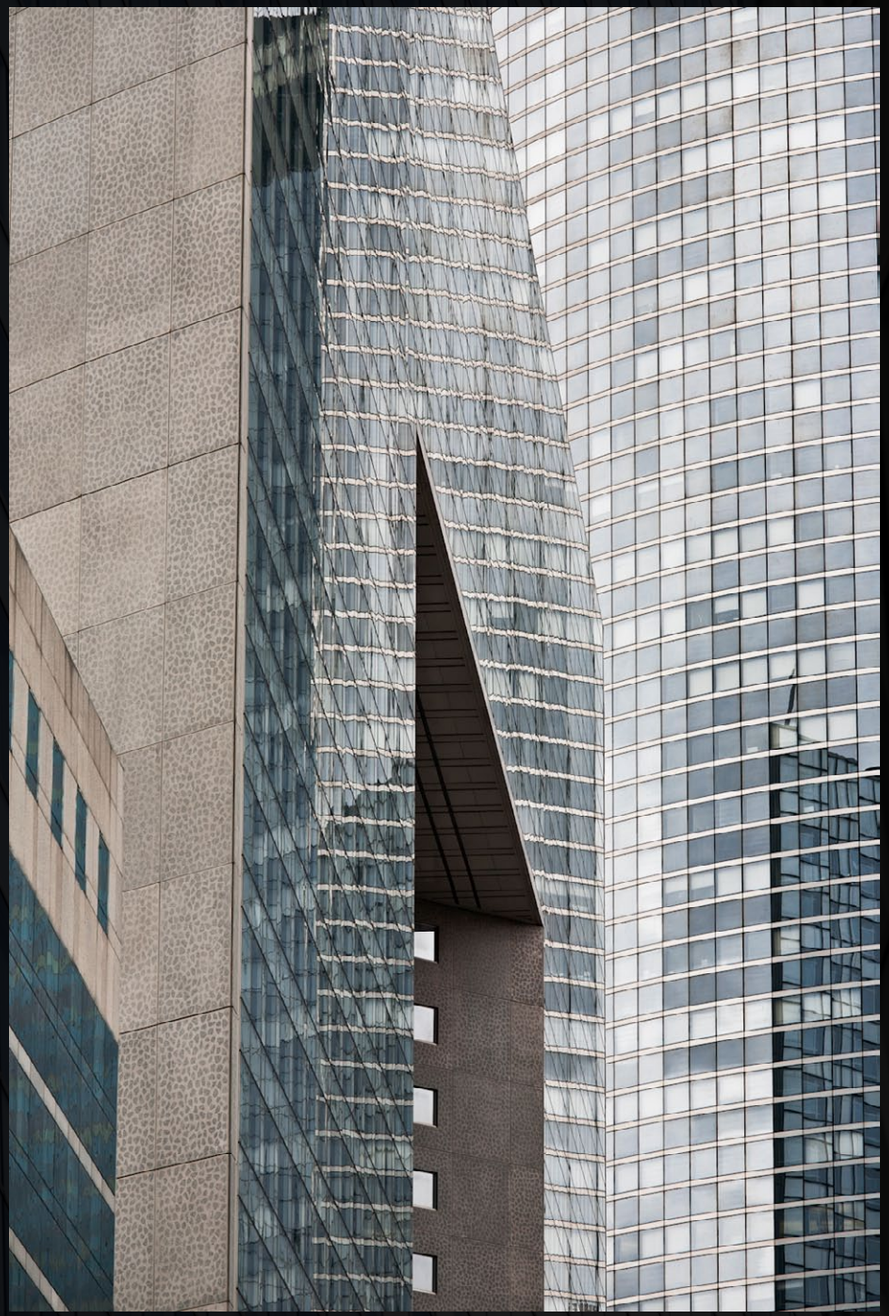
What is the role of photography in your life?
Photography has always been part of my life, and now that I am retired *art* is pretty much all I want to do.

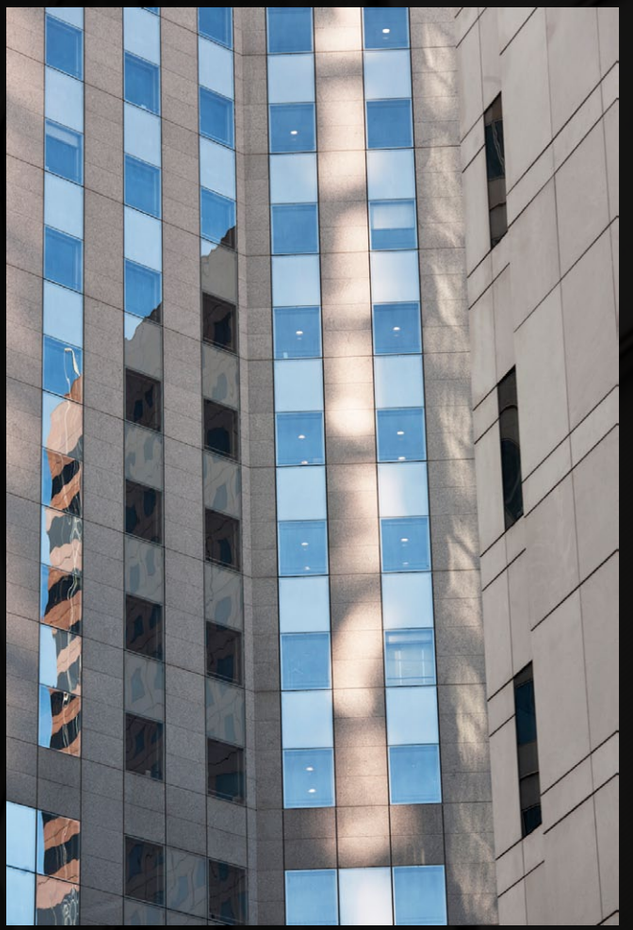
Sources of artistic influence?
Marcel Duchamp, Robert Frank, Harvey Himelfarb, Henry Miller, László Moholy-Nagy, Judith Golden, and Robert Arneson (sculptor and professor of ceramics in the Art department at UC Davis for four decades).

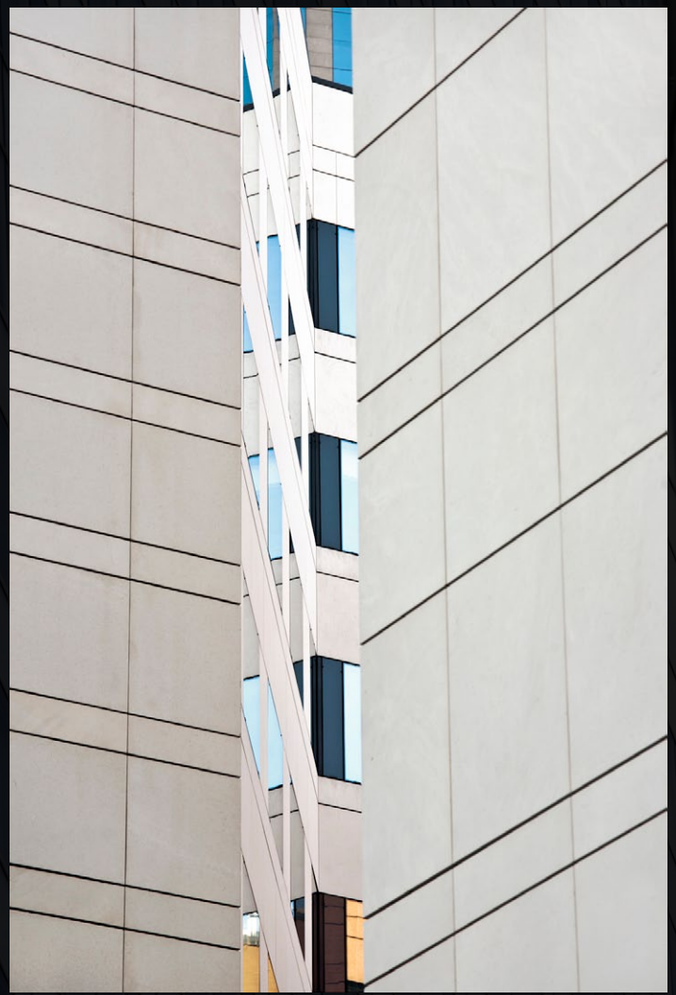
How do you describe "home"?
It is said that "Home is where the heart is," and I've had many homes: In Los Angeles, California; Menan, Idaho; London, England; Berkeley, California; Paris, France; Ocean Park, Davis and Venice, California; Jacksonville and Sand Key, Florida; Lansing, Michigan; Denver, Colorado; Stateline, Nevada; Seattle, Washington; Petaluma, California; and now Davis, California again — where I have lived for the past 12 years with my wife, Jacqueline, and two dogs, Loboloup and Manraycharles. Perhaps I'm ready to settle down.

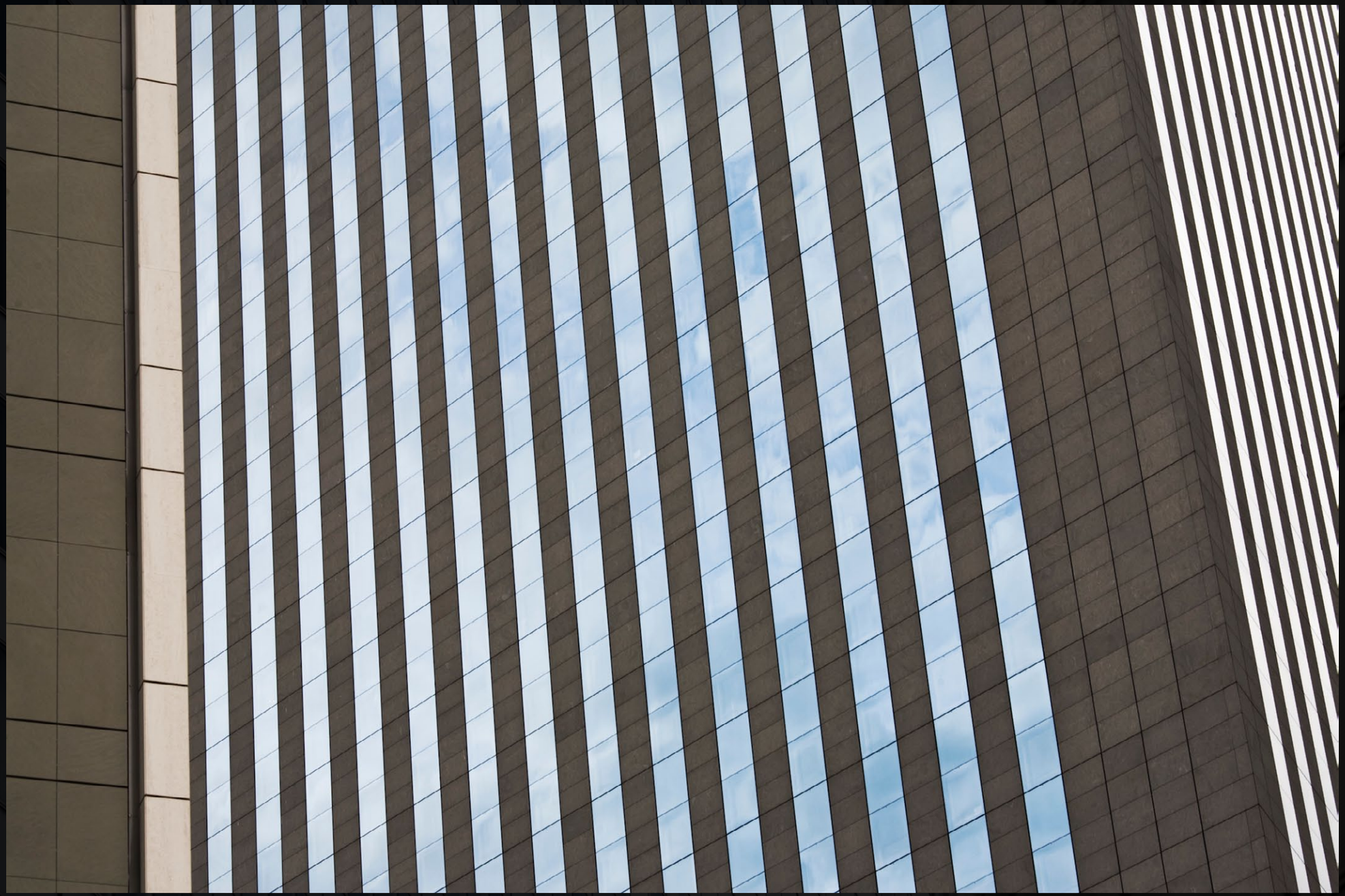
Website: www.michaelradinphotography.com

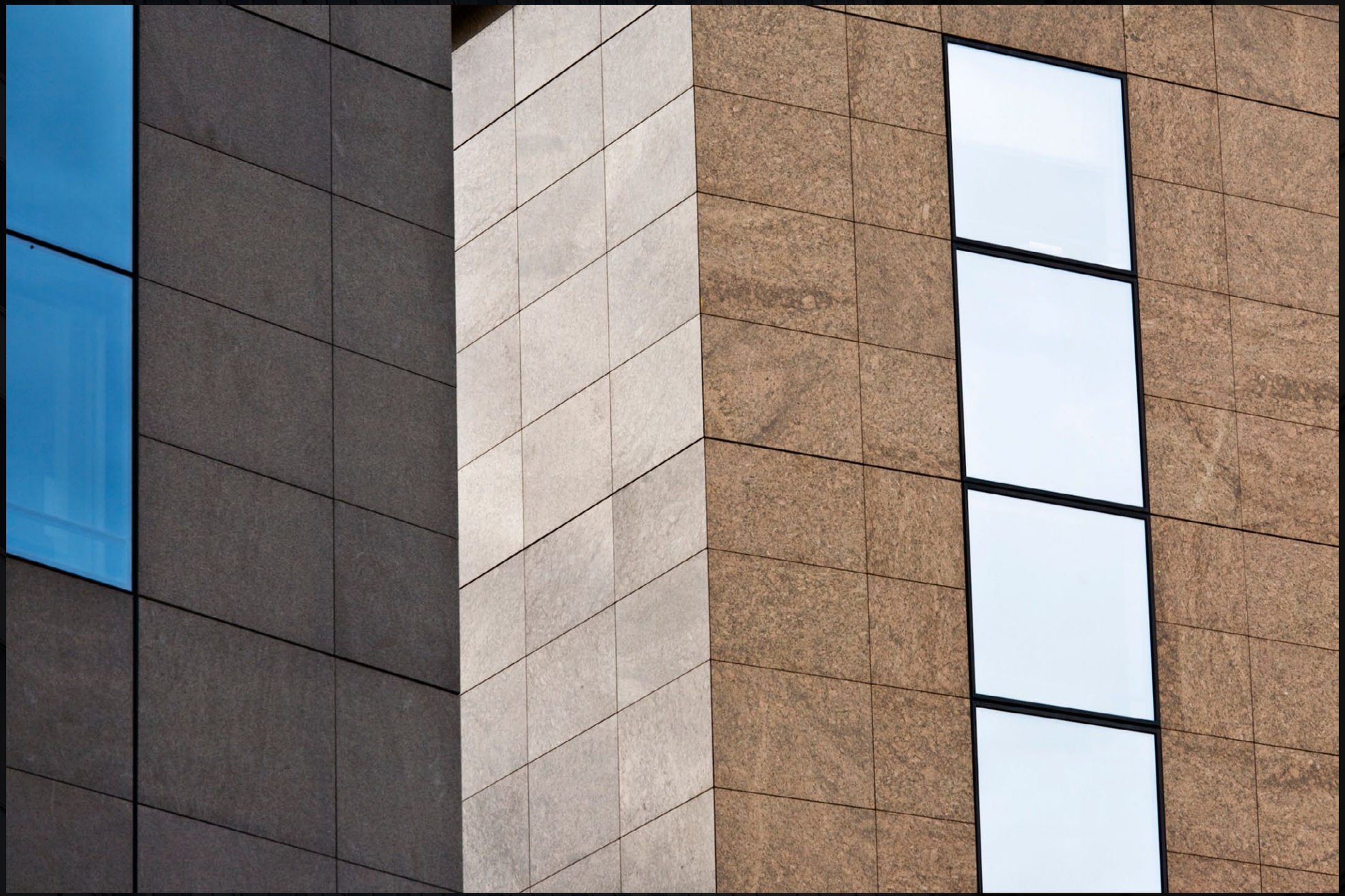


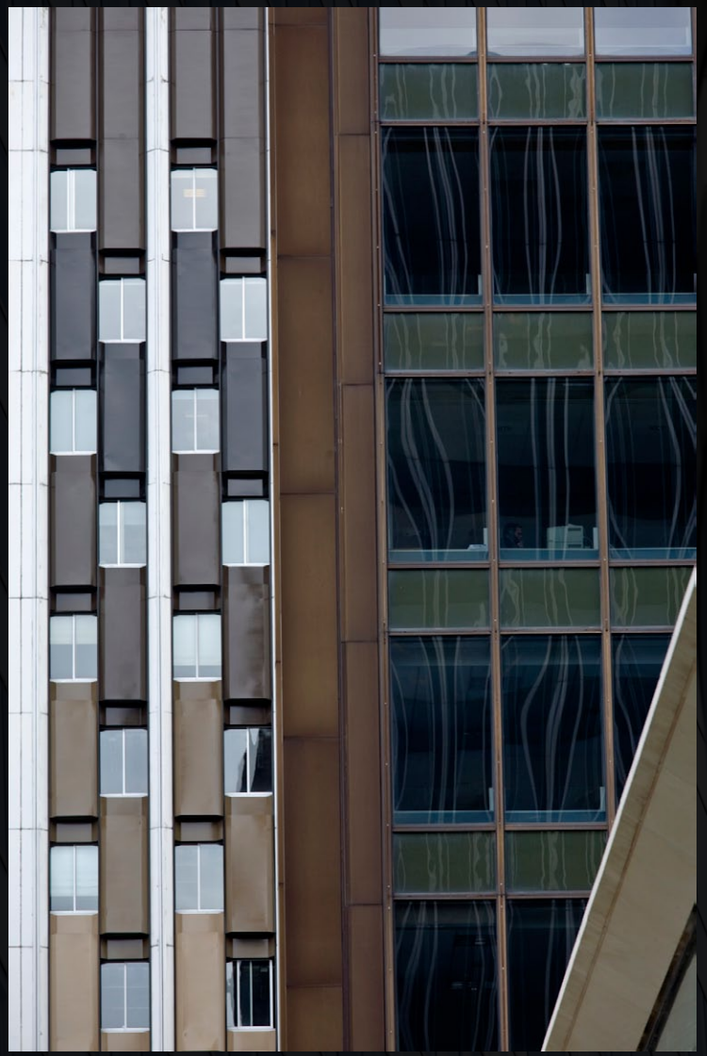


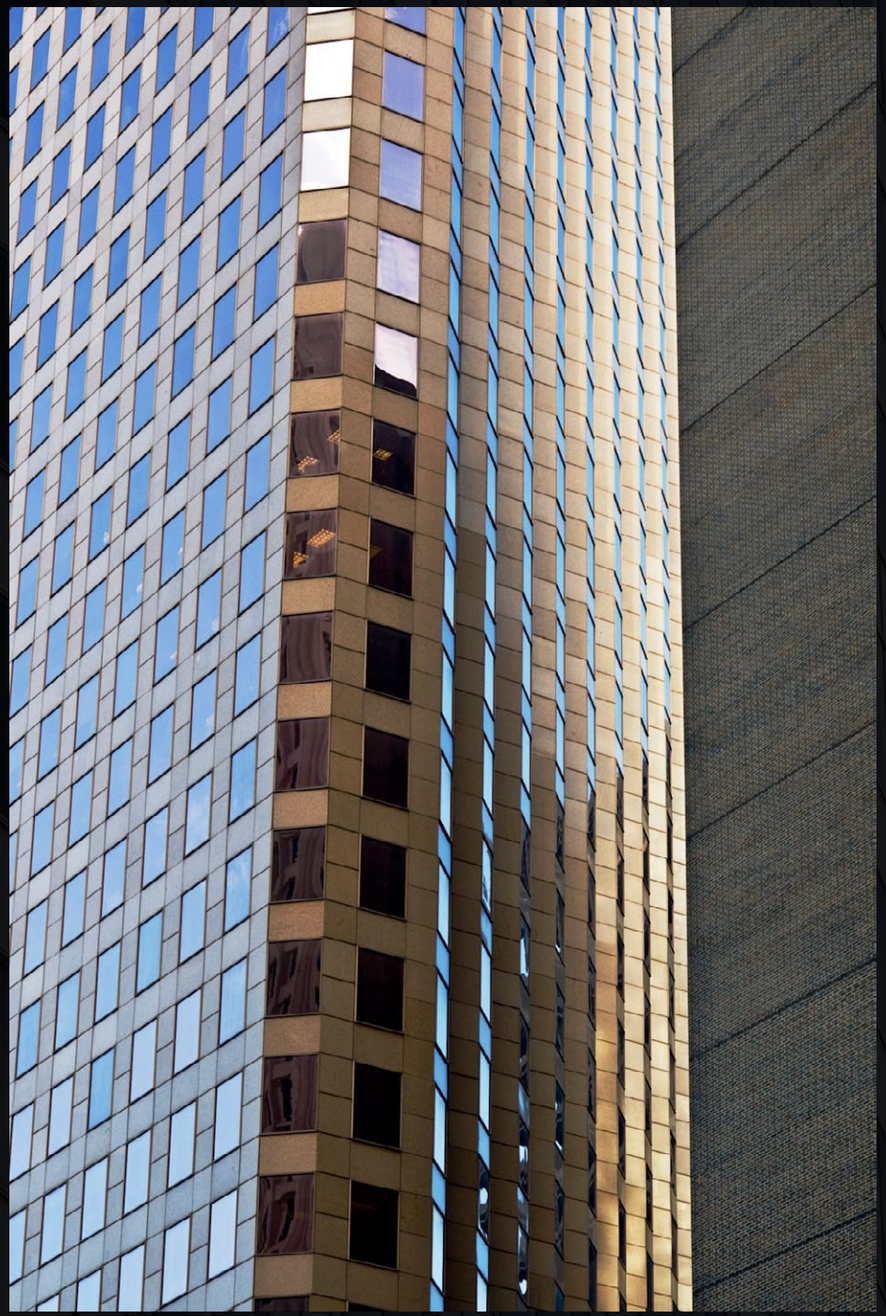












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