

# Galería Elba Benítez

## **David Goldblatt's Structures**

“Structures are eloquent of the needs, preferences, imperatives and values of those who made and use them, and of the ideologies upon which their beliefs and lives may have been contingent.”

David Goldblatt  
*Structures of Dominion and Democracy*

“I mean these things bring tears to my eyes, because they speak of such hope in such fuckallness.”

David Goldblatt  
*The Last Interview*

In the mid-1980s David Goldblatt undertook a photographic project that would culminate in the 1998 publication of *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*, a collection of black-and-white photographs depicting various types of structures, primarily but by no means exclusively architectural, from across South Africa. The photographs published in the book display the combination of grace and gravitas that distinguishes Goldblatt's technique, a technique inseparable from the penetratingly critical yet unyieldingly empathetic vision of humankind that informs it. In addition to the photographs, the book also includes significant writing by Goldblatt: an ambitious essay in which he posits an historical and political reading of the evolution of South Africa's protestant church architecture, and a series of “extended captions” for each photograph — brief exegetical essays elaborating on what Goldblatt referred to as “the ‘structural context,’ the densely complex matrix of cultural, social, political and economic interaction from which the subjects photographed emerged and in which they had their ‘being.’” Taken as a whole, *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* thus functions both as a historical marker — its publication came in the wake of South Africa's emergence into a post-apartheid political system— and as a manifesto of Goldblatt's deliberate decision to avoid photographing the clamor of “events” so as to pursue, with subtlety and incisiveness, “the quiet and the commonplace where nothing ‘happened’ yet all was contained and immanent.”

While *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* figures as its apogee, in fact Goldblatt's interest in photographing structures forms a continuum that spans the entirety of his career, from his first published book *On the Mines* (1973) to his final project and publication *Structures of Dominion and Democracy* (2018). Essential to this interest was Goldblatt's broad or ‘expanded’ view of what might in fact constitute a ‘structure’ to be examined through the lens of his camera, a view that in its development also spans the length and breadth of his work and ultimately is one of its most lastingly salient features. Goldblatt himself pointed to a key early moment in 1961 when, while photographing places of worship in the Witwatersrand, he sensed “an inchoate but growing awareness” of something in certain structures that “seemed to have less to do with architecture than with indefinable qualities of ‘belonging.’ I wanted to explore these notions and bring them into the light with the camera.” From that starting point (which indeed marked the onset of his mature photographic practice) Goldblatt would continue to seek to “bring to light” the immaterial qualities — ideological, spiritual, political, economic, societal, familial and above all human— that lie immanent within all material structures, regardless of scale, type, function, temporal state or condition. As he was to write decades later:

“Embedded in the stuff of all the structures in South Africa are choices we and our forebears have made. No building, shack, skyscraper, road, township, walled estate, dorps, city, monument, sculpture, artwork, computer, cellphone, or, indeed, anything made by humans, can exist but for choices that gave rise to it and others that are a condition of its continued existence.”

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With this in mind, the exhibition *Evidence of Immanence* at the Galería Elba Benítez presents a small selection of David Goldblatt's photographs of 'structures' (in his own expanded sense of the term), with a particular focus on those that reflect the immediate hands, hopes, needs and constraints of their makers. The photographs date from 1955 to 2008 and the structures they portray encompass a wide and complex variety: domestic, religious, commercial, utilitarian, urban, monumental, artistic, repurposed, ruined, in-progress, make-believe and yet-to-be. Across this range, however, each of the images manifests Goldblatt's heightened sensibility and sensitivity to that which dwells within the 'structure' portrayed —to that which is, literally, immanent within it— and is made evident through its outward form.

*Evidence of Immanence*, however, also sets itself a further task: it attempts to take Goldblatt on his own terms and frame a way of viewing his photographs as 'structures' in and of themselves, structures that, in their outward form, speak eloquently of "the needs, preferences, imperatives and values" and above all of the "hope in such fuckallness" of he who made them. In other words of what in them, too, is immanent.

George Stolz  
Curator

Text written in the frame of David Goldblatt's exhibition *Evidence of Immanence*, curated by George Stolz at the Galería Elba Benítez, taking place from June 21 to July 27, 2024.