



JOEL SMITH

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF BUILDINGS
On Photography and Time

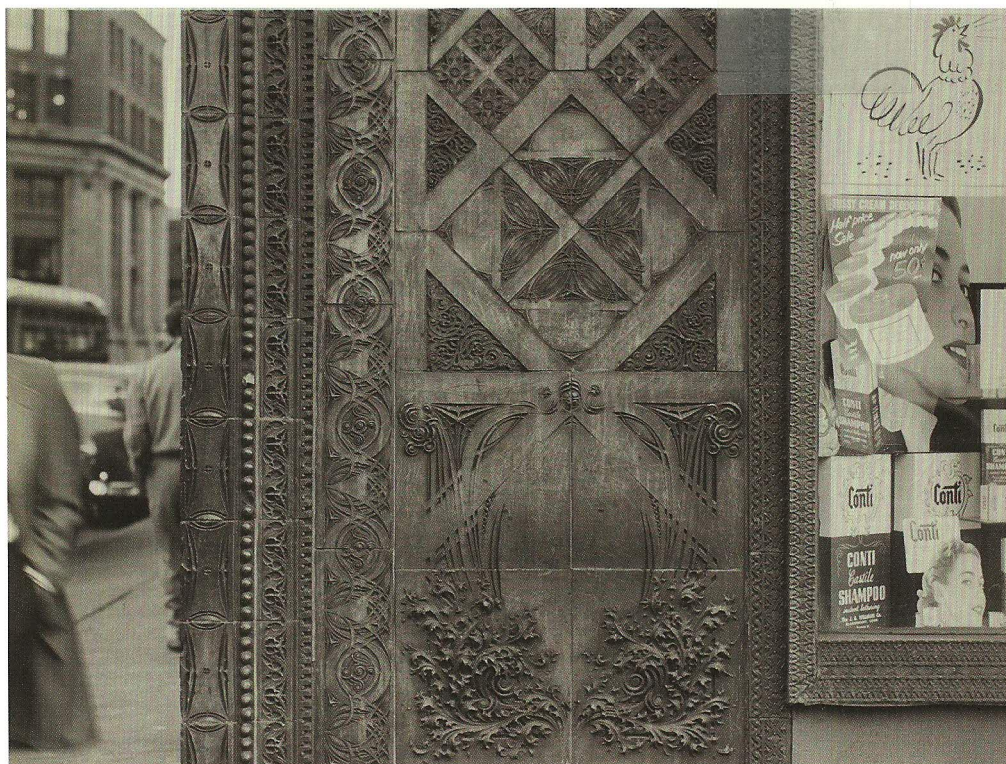


OPPOSITE

Zhang Dali, *Demolition—World
Financial Center, Beijing, 1998*

RIGHT

John Szarkowski, *Corner Pier,
The Prudential Building, Buffalo,
New York, 1951*



Zhang Dali. In his *Dialogue and Demolition* project, begun during the Chinese boom years of the 1990s, Zhang worked in spray paint on buildings facing demolition in Beijing. After painting a signature human silhouette onto a wall, Zhang would hammer clean through it, creating an aperture that described the human void in a city that was, in his view, dying of money. Zhang stresses that he resorted to photography only in order to document the interventions, his first aim being “to communicate directly” with others in public spaces slated to disappear.

The Sentient Wall In the middle decades of the twentieth century, while a generation of American abstract artists worked to give their canvases the compellingly unfinished look of scarred city walls, the wall itself became ubiquitous in American art photography. Weathered, window-punctured, age-layered surfaces, scrutinized in full frontal detail and cropped free of all explanatory context, came to constitute