

*French-born, New York-based photographer Simon Chaput on photographing the soon-to-open El Blok hotel in Vieques, Puerto Rico, designed by Fuster + Architects:*

El Blok started about five years ago. Its owner, Simon Baeyertz, is a friend. When he showed me the drawings, I thought they looked fascinating. I loved the way the light appeared to play through the perforated panels. I first went in October of last year, when it was a huge construction site. The wonderful thing about going at that time was that the outside was pretty much finished. There weren't any windows or doors yet, so I could see through from one side of the building to the other. A lot of the photographs I took you'd never be able to replicate, because now there are doors where there used to be open spaces. I went back in December, and at that point windows had started going into some of the rooms. It was pretty much the last time to shoot it as a construction site.

I like this aspect of a raw space: You use your imagination to make up what it's going to be. It was really just a concrete shell. Concrete looks like a very boring material when there's no light on it, but as soon as you put light on it, concrete comes alive. It's a little bit like the work of the French artist Pierre Soulages: He does totally black paintings, and when you throw light on them, you realize they're not black. I love that about concrete. It's one of my favorite materials. There's a sense of purity to it.

When I'm shooting, I spend a lot of time just walking around. If the light isn't right, I'll take note of my position, the time I was there, and when I should actually be there. I visualize what the sun and sky are going to do. I also don't want a single cloud in the sky. That's always a challenge, and it was a big challenge in Vieques. I never had blue sky; there was always a cloud somewhere. If there are clouds, the building just becomes a landscape and you can't abstract it anymore, you can't make a sculpture out of it. Also, the building needs to have texture and shapes that I'll be able to abstract. If a building is too simple or flat, I'm not going to get anything out of it.

The photographs I take are less about the actual building or the architecture, but more about how the light plays with these spaces. I suppose that no architect would hire me to photograph a building as the showcase of his or her work, because my images are so abstracted. Of course, I love the buildings to start with, but I really love the magic that they can bring out when the light plays with them.

Without the shadows, the light is invisible. It's like painting with light. If you look at my work—the waterfalls, the nudes, the architecture—more than 50 percent of the photograph is usually black. That's the only way to have the light exist and shine. I need the shadows. I rarely take a photograph unless I can get really dark or black shadows. I like pushing the contrast and abstracting it as much as possible.

At El Blok, I especially love the exterior panels. As soon as the light comes through them, it plays in the most magical way. The stairwells are also magnificent, and so is the center shaft. The space looks a little bit like a James Turrell work. When it rains, the rainwater comes down all the way to a pool in the lobby. The round shapes are curved so that when rain comes down, it's redirected and flows from one floor to the next. Sadly, I didn't get a day of rain, so I wasn't able to capture that.

For me, color becomes a distraction. That's why I love black-and-white photography. You're attracted to the shapes, not the colors. It breaks down everything to the essential values. —As told to Spencer Bailey









