



Megalopolis

by Martin Stavars



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Commentary

Photographing is an activity that takes place one image at the time. Even the staccato of a motor drive captures individual images. And for a great deal of photography's history, the individual image was the end all and be all of the medium. Curiously enough, Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* produced shortly after the invention of photography, set the stage for multiple image projects. But, it wasn't until widespread commercial printing made photography *books* a practical medium, that photographers seriously started thinking of multiple-image projects.

Projects present their own challenges, and often ones that are not a part of the single image strategy. This project by Martin Stavars is a global one whose primary subject is the relationship between humankind and the giant cities we now inhabit. The title *Megalopolis* sums up perfectly the emotional content of the project. Stavars traveled the world, photographing cities from many countries. The objective was to show the similarities of our relationship to our urban environment regardless of the country or continent in which we live.

But having an idea — a *conceptual* idea — of a project is only the first step. For a group of images to be perceived as a unified statement, it's important that they share a similar *visual style* — something easily overlooked when the individual images are photographed over period of years and, as in Stavars' case, in multiple countries.

In my youth, every photographer would strive to develop a personal style — a way of photographing and printing that would supposedly make our images identifiable as ours. That may have been an admirable objective 40 years ago, but today's challenge is different. It's no longer sufficient for us to have a style for our photography *as a whole*; now we need to develop a style that's appropriate for *every project*. That style is a function of the project's content and emotional intent. Stavars' project style is a very unique black and white tonal palette — highlight grays, deep inky blacks, with precious few middle tones at all. Every image in the project has a similar tonal treatment. The images are strangely sterile, even those in which we see tiny people wandering the streets and plazas. It works incredibly well.

Doing the photography in the field is only the first step in the project. The next, and crucially important step, is to determine the appropriate project style for all the images in the project. That style will influence the final image selection and sequencing. The development of the visual style should, therefore, be a part of our strategy from the very inception of the project — or at least as early in the project as possible. The project determines the style which in turn influences the images. Getting all this to work together for maximum emotional effect is the key.