

# A CRITICAL EYE

## ICELAND'S ARCHITECTURE PHOTOGRAPHER GUDMUNDUR INGÓLFSSON



*1 / 20 All images © Gudmundur Ingólfsson*

**Veteran Icelandic photographer Gudmundur Ingólfsson was of invaluable support in the making of uncube issue no. 40: [Iceland](#). Not only are his images stunning but he has also documented an enormous number of buildings in Reykjavík and beyond and therefore has first hand experience of the architectural changes that have taken place there over the last half a century. uncube asked him to choose a selection of images that reflect the current transformation of the city.**

*For how many years have you been a photographer and what drew you to the profession?*

Since the age of 16, so for 54 years – professionally for 44 years. Once I gave up hope of becoming a jazz musician at the age of 18, I started running my own business instead. In the beginning I accepted every job offered: portraits, groups, advertising illustrations, photographs for theatre and opera, food photography, furniture and architecture, reproductions of artwork and so forth.

*I get the impression that you are the island's resident architecture photographer. So many images in so many books and magazines and articles are by you. How did this come about?*

I became very interested in architecture and read books and magazines on the subject and ever since I have had a keen interest. In the early seventies there was a revival of a society which was tailored along the lines of the German *Werkbund*. I was made treasurer and there I met and befriended a lot of artists, designers and some architects. "Some" photographers could be described as being frustrated architects (like "some" architects are frustrated artists). This might have been the reason I got so many assignments in that field. We have a state architect, but I am by no means the "state" architectural photographer.



*Away from the waterfront, the gaps and spaces often found between houses on streets like Bræðraborgarstígu appear under threat...*

*Like so many professionals in your country you left to get an education but then came back. How do you think this has affected your viewpoint of your homeland? Were you ever tempted to stay abroad and not come back?*



I was educated at the Folkwang College of Design in Essen, Germany [now Folkwang University of the Arts]. Like most of my fellow students I could probably have got commissions from magazine publications in Germany but I had already started a family in Iceland, so I moved back home. Staying abroad for some time makes you see your familiar environment from a different perspective. You have a sentimental love for your home while abroad, but view it with a critical eye when you return.

*Has architecture always been the focus of your work?*

No not really. But after getting commissions to photograph architecture commercially I realised I liked it and was interested in it. I began to photograph spaces and constructions of my own choice, such as a series on [herring oil tanks](#) and a colour series on the ever changing built environment of Reykjavík. Most of the time with an ironic or comic eye.

*Why architecture?*

The most powerful quality of photography is its ability to freeze time and thus conserve it for the future. Our first professional photographer Sigfús Eymundsson began to photograph Reykjavík in 1866. If it were not for him we would only have a very vague idea of how Reykjavík looked back then. Since I have a fetish for houses and the environment and wanting to pay tribute to Mr. Eymundsson, I photograph houses.

*Which is your personal favourite building and why?*

I think my favourite building or buildings is Verkamannabústaðir við Hringbraut. It is a complex built for poor seamen and labourers between 1933 and 1938. My grandparents lived there right from the beginning and so did other members of my family, my aunt was the hairdresser and my uncle the fishmonger. This should have set an example for future buildings of a similar kind but it did not. After the Second World War we felt rich and wanted no more of that German *Sozialer Wohnungsbau* [social housing] thing. I also love the Nevigeser Wallfahrtsdom by Gottfried Böhm [1968]. It is a church in West Germany that has the most powerful space there is. It elevated my spirit and made me believe in God for a while.



*...well, suddenly those views aren't quite the uninterrupted panorama they once were...*

*You must have seen so much change here. What in your opinion has had the biggest effect on Iceland's architecture in the past 40 years?*

The crazy airport we have in the middle of town, that should have been moved out of the city in 1960, has made it impossible to plan the town properly. And our economy, with its many booms and depressions.

*How is the current tourism boom changing both Reykjavík and Iceland in your view?*

Every house downtown is being turned into a hotel and all the shops are turning into bars or souvenir shops. How are we going to use those buildings when Iceland is out of fashion or when the tourists are not interested in paying our rip-off prices any more?

*Does this worry you?*

I am only worried for my kids and grandkids who'll have to pay off the foreign debt after the next crash.

*What do you feel Iceland needs to pay attention to preserving more – or is change and evolution good for the island in your view?*

I would like for us to plan ahead and slow down our greed for instant gratification. And we definitely need a quota for tourists like we needed one for fish!

*Interview – Sophie Lovell*