

Architecture and Its Photographic Image

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Robin Evans, in his insightful essay, "Architectural Projection" writes:

Most of our knowledge of great architecture comes from pictures. One could therefore imagine a situation in which embodied architecture—not the every day buildings that we are used to, but buildings in the "great works" category—was hardly more than a rumor of an intervening state. We could, if we wished, treat great buildings that way, since they are completely surrounded by their own projected images. They are set in an aura of illustration that no doubt alters the way we see them.¹

Frederic Jameson, in his slightly more cynical, yet perhaps as insightful, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, writes:

The appetite for architecture today, therefore...must in reality be an appetite for something else. I think it is an appetite for photography: what we want to consume today are not the building themselves, which you scarcely even recognize as you round the freeway....(M)any are the post-modern buildings that seem to have been designed for photography, where alone they flash into brilliant existence and actuality with all of the phosphorescence of the high-tech orchestra on CD.²

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I wish to explore the effect of the photographic image on architectural knowledge and understanding. I am struck by the fact that the vast majority of buildings we "know" about, we know second-hand, through photographic images, drawings, and the written commentary of others. Photographic representations of buildings have, in effect, become substitutes for the haptic experience of a building. The implications for a plastic, spatial medium like architecture are staggering, and further, the opportunity for a critical slippage on the part of architects, historians, educators and publishers is widened. This slippage is responsible for one's

surprise—often disappointment—upon visiting a building that doesn't meet expectations formed by looking at tantalizing photographs on the printed page.

On the other hand, published writings and images "provide the foundation for the collective imagination about building [and are often the only representations we have when the original no longer exists]. The act of writing and the act of reading, [the act of depicting and the act of seeing], thus become necessary conditions for the act of building."³ We must have books, we must conduct a discourse of architectural knowledge, and since its invention, photography has become a necessary participant in this discourse. It simply works too well as a descriptive, documentary and analytical tool for us to do without it. The question is not whether we should or should not use photos to learn about architecture, but: *How* can we best use photos to further our critical understanding of architecture.

For decades after its invention, people believed, upon seeing the wondrous images produced by the camera, that the photograph was, indeed, a representation of reality, as in William Fox Talbot's "Mirror of Nature held up to herself." Even exceptional visual thinkers such as Moholy-Nagy were unable to escape the seductiveness of the photo:

Thus in the photographic camera we have the most reliable aid to the beginning of objective vision. Everyone will be compelled to see that which is optically true, is explicable in its own terms, is objective, before he can arrive at any subjective vision.⁴

I contend that his notion of objectivity is a myth, albeit a common one. And because of this myth of objectivity, the photographic image has a special advantage over other means of representation when it comes to distorting the truth. Further, to a certain degree, the photograph (in the broadest sense, including film and television) has achieved predominance over other forms of visual representation in our society: the benign ubiquity of photographs, coupled with their extraordinary power, brings architecture's photographic image to attention here as a specific topic of study. This talk will begin by examining some of the unique properties of the

photograph that allow it to get away with this, will then examine what some of the resulting problems might be, and will conclude by offering some ideas for resisting the seductiveness of the photographic image.

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTIFACT

Susan Sontag ascribes photography's fluidity to a sort of simultaneity of art and reality. In her excellent set of essays on the subject, she observes:

Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information.⁵ Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: In the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. Photography's ultra-mobile gaze flatters the viewer, creating a false sense of ubiquity, a deceptive mastery of experience.'

The alleged "objectivity" of the photographic medium tends to conceal any mis-representation (either intentional or unintentional) that takes place, allowing photography to oscillate insidiously between truth and falsehood. Furthermore, the polar terms, fact and fiction, applied as opposites, cease to apply here. As Arthur Danto notes: "What sets fiction apart from non-fiction is as subtle as what sets prose apart from poetry, and as there can be historical truth in fiction, there can be historical falsehood in non-fiction, without transforming the texts into their opposites in either case." Accordingly, the photos we look at rarely lie in the most negative sense of the word; neither do they exclaim the cold hard truth as we would like to see it.

The photograph has been (and probably will always be) the subject of endless debate concerning its status as Art (with a capital "A") and NotArt (with a capital "N"). Its kinship with painting lies primarily in its representational ability (which, prior to photography's invention, was one of the highest aims of painting). Its kinship with NotArt is to be found in many of the other photographic images which constantly surround us: x-rays, scientific studies, automatic recordings. In reality, the lines are not so clear: The aura of the work of art is to be found in many of the most pragmatic photos ever taken. In the modern—and postmodern—eras, the lines between these imaginary categories are even fuzzier—or cease to exist altogether, as artists like Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine appropriate, mix and transfigure the languages and images of Art and NotArt.

We are dependent on architecture reproduced for our knowledge. Architecture reproduced is dependent on the rhetoric—and the aura—of the photograph depicting it. In learning from reproductions we must ascertain whether

architectural knowledge can be explained by mere images; whether the meaning of any significant and authentic work is more complex than can be communicated through a set of glossy photos; and whether the lasting value of a work of architecture can be dependent solely on the rhetoric of the work as depicted in photos. With respect to the rhetoric of art, Danto says:

My own sense is that the power of art is the power in effect of rhetoric,...and rhetoric, aimed at the modification of attitude and belief, can never be innocent and is always real because minds are.⁸ As a practice, it is the function of rhetoric to cause the audience of a discourse to take a certain attitude toward the subject of that discourse: to be caused to see that subject in a certain light. It is this increment of activity in excess of merely communicating the facts that doubtless makes rhetoric seem manipulative and the rhetorician insincere and the term 'rhetorical' almost standardly abusive. Certainly the rhetorician — and any of us when we engage in rhetorical strategy — is not merely asserting facts; he is suggesting them but in a way intended to transform the way in which an audience receives these facts.⁹

I would now like to look at this idea of the photographer as rhetorician. For behind every photograph there is a photographer who conceived, framed and exposed the shot.

Julius Shulman, one of the great architectural photographers of the twentieth century, was responsible for many of the iconic images of Southern California modernist architecture we carry with us. In an interview, Shulman referred to the significant role and—for him—obligation of the photographer in creating the modern image:

He must realize that good design is seldom accepted. It has to be sold. So he's a propagandist too. He must create subjective pictures, not snapshots. He must 'produce' moods through lighting. He must sell his subject.¹⁰

The subject which the photographer sells is architecture, along with its architect, who most probably employs the photographer, and who stands to gain from having a portfolio of artfully framed, exposed and printed set of photos.

It's important to say here that I don't wish to imply that there is anything necessarily *wrong* in this activity. Some of the truly great modern architecture, architects and architectural ideas were launched in exactly this way, in partisan magazines and books, and in a very strategic, tactical fashion. But as a critical exploration of the medium, I want to look at some of the problems that might result from this practice.

REDUCTIVISM AND COMMODIFICATION

Walter Benjamin was one of the earliest critics to begin to understand the true power of the photograph. In his *Short*

History of Photography, Benjamin wrote:

The 'creative' principle in photography is its surrender to fashion. Its motto: the world is beautiful. In it is unmasked photography, which raises every tin can into the realm of the All but cannot grasp any of the human connections that it enters into, and which, even in its most dreamy subject, is more a function of its merchandisability than of its discovery."

Shortly after its discovery, people quickly seized on photography's special qualities in the endeavors of advertising. Today, our culture is literally inundated with photographic images whose sole intention is *tosell*, to make *uswant*. Once again, as we saw in the relationship between Art and NotArt, the lines are unclearly drawn between photos intended to sell and those intended to do otherwise. Thus we find Art photographs in advertisements, advertising photographs in Art, advertisements for architectural polemics, and architectural photos in ads for building products, all of which help to reduce art and architecture to the level of commodity.

The same forces that seek to reduce architecture to commodity are at work trying to reduce the architect to commodity. Kevin Lippert of Princeton Architectural Press, one of the practitioners in this industry, observes:

This was clearest to me during the Deconstructivist show. There is now this architectural star-making machine. With the Decon show it became clear that here was this machine, and it was looking for something to publish, having cranked out as many postmodern books as it could. So when the Decon show opened, all eyes turned rapaciously toward it....Academy Editions sponsored a symposium about the Decon show just to gather material for a big coffee-table book on Deconstructivism. In this case the architectural star-making apparatus was searching for something to make a star.¹²

The early European modernists who first successfully harnessed the power of the photograph, (and who were some of the most skillful self-promoters) constituted a vanguard which broke with the historical role of architecture as a reinforcer of social institutions and allied itself with a larger artistic, political and social movement that saw architecture as the primary medium for facilitating and expressing technological and sociological change. They shared the assumption that modernization was progress, and optimistically believed that this new architecture would lead to a better life for all.¹³ Julius Shulman, of whom I spoke earlier, was such a believer.

The vanguard today (if such a thing exists outside of the pages of a few journals, galleries and schools) has a more narrowly circumscribed set of interests. Though they may share the earlier vanguard's concern with architecture's internal relationships, they have left its social and political concerns behind. They have not, however, left behind the chic of the avant-garde, which confers the aura of the artist

on the activity of the architect. As John Chase says in his article *The Garret, the Boardroom and the Amusement Park*:

The new, pseudo-avant-garde tradition has reduced the idea of modernity to the perpetuation of novelty for its own sake. It emphasizes the aspect of the architect as bohemian artist who must exist in opposition to, and in isolation from, positions of real power. Conversely, the adoption of this position frees the vanguard from any accountability to society. The architect is free to play by the rules of artists in other arts, where the only permissible concern of artists is their own perception of and critique of the structure of art. Lost in this imitation of the painter or the performance artist is the capacity of architecture to shape and accommodate human activity and experience in socially agreed-upon terms. Drunk on this heady brew of celebrity and respectability, the vanguard distances itself from the social purposes of architecture. The architect's role becomes closer to that of the vanguard artist who produces one-of-a-kind objects for collectors as the ultimate consumer item.¹⁴

Perhaps the biggest problem with an architecture of image lies in its effect on our world as a dwelling place which requires substantially more than mere image—mere *aura*—in order to sustain our long term needs. Ellen Dunham-Jones has made a persuasive argument for an architecture of reality, that is worth quoting at length:

When architecture loses its status as a fixed referent in the landscape, it can no longer provide us with what Christian Norberg-Schulz has called "an existential foothold." When it merges with the flux around it, it loses its capacity to orient and house, to critique and edify. Commodification, universalization, and dematerialization strip architecture of its ability to make places sacred and strand us in a profane and meaningless world. They enforce our isolation and discourage us from forming relationships with ourselves and our surroundings...

We need to realize the powerful potential of architecture to mediate between man and the environment, to both alleviate the rootlessness of the Telematic Nomad and accept responsibility for the health and well-being of the earth. We need an architecture that works to ground us in place, to provide us with a footing from which to evaluate contemporary technology critically and embrace it selectively, rather than one that celebrates dissolution and the placelessness of telecommunications. We need an architecture of affiliation, engagement, and stewardship.

Without an architecture that bonds us to the earth and to each other, our lives will be as empty as the rapacious sprawl of exurbs and suburbs. We will become strangers to ourselves, interlopers in our own

homes, tourists in our towns, forever cut off from public virtues and concern for our environment. Without attention to the need for architecture to engender love, pride, and cultural bonding to place, our most stylish efforts, most pragmatic solutions, and most sincere critiques will simply add to the decay of an already unhealthy planet."

My interest in this topic grows out of my activities as an architect and photographer engaged in these activities on a regular basis. Faced with the task of designing buildings, reproducing my own work, in shooting other people's work, and in assessing the work of others, I find that I have to continually establish—and reestablish—the ethical underpinnings on which I stand. For instance, as an architectural photographer, I often use extreme wide-angle lenses to get a broad view of a tight interior space in order to communicate its formal and spatial characteristics. By using such a lens, though, I distort the character of the room, making it appear much larger than it really is. How do I assess the trade-off? When I find myself photographing something in a way which distorts the truth how am I to respond? How does one achieve a balance between aura and description, art and documentary?

Obviously there is no way to definitively answer these questions; the inherently unstable ground of truth in the photographic medium will never permit it. But the fact remains: we must draw the line in individual cases. How might we be able to establish guidelines for our actions?

Perhaps the most important thing is to realize the potential for distortion that exists and then to exercise as much detachment and rigor as it is possible to muster when we produce images—and when we consume them. Additionally, photographs simply can't tell the whole story and need to be supplemented by written, graphic and historical information which communicates the information photographs can't. Through information which supplements mere image we can begin to resist the commodification resulting from reductivism.

POSTSCRIPT: MODES OF RESISTANCE

Two recent books may be of help in trying to understand this problem and may offer clues to resistance: Though there is not a photograph in the entire 622 pages of the book, William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairieEarth* communicates infinitely more than any amount of photos ever could (despite a picture being worth a thousand words). Subtitled *A Deep Map*, *PrairieEarth* is exactly that. Heat-Moon spent three years in Chase County, Kansas, a sparse landscape of 3,013 inhabitants in the middle of Kansas and the country:

For years, outsiders have considered this prairie place barren, desolate, monotonous, a land of more nothing else than almost any other place you might name, but I know I'm not here to explore vacuousness at the heart of America.¹⁶ ... (A)fter the thrall of the grassland itself, the thing that lured me here was stone architecture: the

adroitly laid rocks of the courthouse, the Cedar Point mill, and the banks, homes, fences, cattle chutes. Once I came to understand that these things were only one expression of what undergirded the place—geologically, biologically, and historically—then my quest turned toward the bones of the land, toward the hard seed from which the prairie and its peoples grow. Whenever we enter the land, sooner or later we pick up the scent of our own histories, and we begin to travel vertically, we end up following road maps in the marrow of our bones and in the thump of our blood."

In a landscape where all of the photos would appear the same—a flat foreground stretching to a flat horizon line—Heat-Moon communicates the meaning of Chase County through interviews with inhabitants; through the natural, geological, and anthropological history; and through minute observations made while walking along the roadways and across the bluestem grasslands. The result is a journey through time and space, landscape and history; a description of the land, plants, animals, and people until it becomes as 'real' as it possibly could in a representation.

One could argue that true objectivity does not exist. Heat-Moon's attempt at objectivity is one of constantly changing viewpoint, focus, scale, time. As in Edward Muybridge's photographic time and motion studies, Heat-Moon adopts simultaneous, multiple view-points from which to make his observations. It is a quest for thoroughness, even in the face of knowing that true thoroughness can never be achieved.

In his book, *Memento Mori*, Peter Mitchell documents the Flats at Quarry Hill, Leeds from its inception to its ultimate demise and demolition. He begins his search at the latter end, as the buildings are being destroyed, but through research is able to convey a view as objective and thorough as one could hope for. Through newspaper articles and photos, film clips, social artifacts, family snapshots, construction photos, and strangely beautiful, moving and tragic demolition photos, Mitchell allows the documents and pictures to do the explaining for themselves. Aside from an introductory essay at the beginning, and excerpts from Mitchell's own diary, the only supplemental text in the book is the brief captions accompanying the photos. Mitchell achieves his 'objectivity' by constantly adopting a different point of view: as a woman doing laundry, as officials walking the site, in the view from a window, as a child on the playground. Mitchell resists the complacency of stationary thinking; he knows that the questions generated by Quarry Hill can only be answered through prolonged and careful study, with patience and a broad vision to the complex world at large. As his reader, I wasn't inclined to jump to pre-conceived conclusions about the viability of subsidized housing; I didn't succumb to the popular myth of Pruitt-Igoe. Mitchell's lesson as a photographer and documentarian makes one aware that things are rarely as simple as they seem. That there is literally another point of view just around the corner. It is a lesson well worth learning.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I suppose the most important thing we should remember when we look at photos—when we consume photos—is *caveat emptor*: "buyer beware." But we also must claim responsibility for the images we make and use in all of our roles in this field.

As *architects*, we need to take on the task of communicating to the world the complexity of the work we do, the hours we spend, the tools we employ, the sources for our inspiration.

As *photographers*, we need to adopt different viewpoints, different scales, different times of day and different climactic circumstances. We need to expand contexts, explore the effects of time, and approach our work with a deep commitment to rigorous and critical practice.

As *critics*, we need to ask the hard questions as we probe deep into the histories of buildings, look at buildings from inside of someone else's shoes, look outside of the sanctioned circles for architectures we could never even imagine existing.

And finally, as *educators*, we need to impress on students the truly difficult work ahead, the broad purpose behind our charge, and the responsibilities we have to our world as a place of dwelling.

NOTES

¹ Robin Evans, "Architectural Projection," *Architecture and its Image* ed. Eve Blau, (Montreal: CCA, 1989). p. 20.

² Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991). p.101.

³ Richard Ingersoll, "Building, Writing, Reading" in *Design Book Review (DBR)* Issue 18, Spring 1990, p.3.

⁴ Moholy-Nagy cited by Joseph Harris Caton, *The Utopian Vision of Moholy-Nagy*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984).p.73.

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1977) p.62-3.

⁶ Sontag, p. 48

⁷ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1981).p. 145.

⁸ Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992) p. 194.

⁹ Danto, *Transfiguration*, p. 165-166.

¹⁰ Julius Shulman, cited by Joseph Rosa, *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), p. 88.

¹¹ Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978) p. 213.

¹² Kevin Lippert in *Design Book Review*, #18 Spring 1990, p. 30

¹³ John Chase, "The Garret, the Boardroom, and the Amusement Park" in the *Journal of Architectural Education*; November 1993, p. 84.

¹⁴ Chase, p. 85.

¹⁵ Ellen Dunham-Jones, "Losing Ground: Post-Industrial Identity in Architecture and urbanism" in *Modulus 20* (Univ. of Virginia, 1991) p. 100.

¹⁶ William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991) p. 10.

¹⁷ Heat-Moon, p. 273.