Persistent Conventions in 20th Century Architecture Photography

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ABSTRACT

Photography and architecture maintain a unique and constant relationship with each other. The invention and technology of one proved to be the optimal mechanisms for the dissemination of the latter, transforming it into an ideal model in front of a camera. However, these evidences, embodied in paper, also reveal the installation of a disciplinary field that tied the visual and aesthetic canons of both disciplines. This text proposes therefore to investigate this binomial based on the invariants that circumscribed the architecture photography of the 20th Century. The methodology applied resorted to texts that delve into visual culture, together with theoretical literature about photography and classic examples of architecture. In the attempt to analyze, partially, the visual communication of the architecture – from a contemporary perspective, overvalued by image consumerism – it is concluded that it is evident that the photographer officiates as the translator of architectural conventions, while the architect does it as an organizer of his images. Both establish visual codes that last over time and, in each photographic act, confirm and deepen their disciplinary artistic discourses.

> Pictures take the place of words or at least convey something that words cannot.
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> *Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, 1986 (p. 148)*

In the late 18th Century, almost prophetically, the hand of Claude Ledoux anticipated with his engraving of the Besançon theater the changes in the ways of seeing architecture that would be evident only by the end of the next century. This image recreates in a specular form, and almost laterally, a work also by him. But although architecture is perceived in a cropped way, the author was able to concentrate it in a beam of light that crosses the iris of that eye and, with it, not only permutates the gazes of architect and spectator, transforming the latter into a protagonist, but also anticipated the visuality principles on which, years later, photography will be based (Figure 1).

The fact is that, since its invention as medium for graphical representation of reality, photography found in architecture its best ally. Buildings, due to its tectonic, static and formal conditions, became the most accurate archetype to obtain monochrome portraits and, thanks to them, they quickly became a novelty. Two hundred years after its creation and stunned by the images of the digital era, it is fair to say that architecture photography

maintain, and reiterate, almost invariably, many of the established canons, to the point of typifying a sort of handbook for visuality.

Considering then that the architecture photography produced in the 20th Century may be understood as documental text, this proposal will tell about the invariants adopted by this binomial and their qualities of legitimacy and authenticity, which, in the end, reveal a graphic and aesthetic discourse of a global nature. Some questions are thus posed that allow to look into it: does the architect establish limits so that his or her work be photographed in a certain way, inhibiting other possibilities? How much design and/or functional authenticity is there in the architecture photographs that are known? How much legitimacy is preserved of this architecture exhibited in images? Are there preestablished conventions among authors – architect and/or photographer – that, eventually, deconstruct the photographed architecture?

Doubtless, photography and architecture have more points in common than is presumed. The latter, for its static condition, has ended up being the model that best poses for the photographic instant. Both share intrinsic properties of representation by having the graphic ability to be shown in a two-dimensional physical medium when, strictly speaking, they allow the observation of three. It happens that, in this transfer of architectural materialization to the printing on paper, some of the fundamentals prevail of

the photographic essence mentioned by Barthes (1989, p. 22): the still pose and the decisive moment will keep other intentions of exhibition and visual reading veiled to the observer.

Verifying what has been said about these questionings, diverse authors locate the relation between architecture and photography in European modern movement times. However, it would be fair to say that this association was born at the very moment that Niépce fixed an image portraying the boulevard Le Gras from his window in 1826 (Figure 2). Since then, the appeal and the need to photograph architecture started to increase, as proven by the work of the French Mission Héliographique *in 1851 or the purpose under which the National Photographic Record Association was founded in 1897: to carry out a photographic inventory of buildings. Also, years later, in the article 'Modern photography' published in* The Study journal *in 1932, similar clues to capture architecture photography were evidenced, expressing that:*

> *The possibility of focusing extreme perspectives over spaces dramatically conceived, the change in scale through which a small object, adequately lit, is magnified and highlighted, and a large one, turned small, is framed in a new relation with its surroundings, all of these things have been shaped within a technical repertoire unknown to photographers working before the war (as cited in Elwall, 2004, p. 122).*

The celebration of these photographic patterns reached such a level that, in 1937, architect Harry Goodhart-Rendel, chairman of RIBA, reiterated the validation of photography over the drawings pointing out that:

> *Whatever the value we may assign the architect over change, the public seems to prefer the architectural evidence of the lens, above the pencil, pen or brush. A photo proves that a building exists or has existed; a design only proves that there was the intention of building it. The photographer portrays in a very familiar medium for us where we can even ignore falsehood, for a drawing awakens our suspicion that we may be deceived by less familiar conventions (as cited in Elwall, 2004, p. 129).*

The concomitance between architecture and photography became inevitable. Of course, in this sense the extensive exposure times collaborated, because the analogue photographic technique of that time required inert objects, precise and immutable to meteorological conditions, making of architecture an infinite album of possible models. These instances helped democratize, in a global sense, all built things, so that the photographic act was transformed into surprise portraying the remarkable and, for the same reason, quickly declared remarkable everything that it portrayed (Barthes, 1989, p. 73).

Given the properties these two disciplines share – photography and architecture –, the analysis of both is enriched when incorporating the social aspects. For this reason, a possible study methodology is to consider that the images offer the vision of a world that is cropped, for in it, not just presences are manifested, but also absences are denoted, conditioned always by their time and the cultural facts that give them place (Burke, 2001, p. 239). Likewise, they allow delving into them for the multiple common documental attributes they acquire, such as competences that are iconographic (interpretation of forms that exist in reality), aesthetic (where the

preexistences of the observer dominate), encyclopaedical (identification of context), modal (its insertion in space and time) or communicative and narrative (Méndez, 2011; Valle Gastaminza, 2002). For this reason, the interpretative value of a photograph does not only rest in the exhibited image, but – maintaining the precautions about the vision that its producers had, architect and photographer – in the distinction of understanding which were the tenets that the reading of its content offer, frequently apparent and distant from the reality.

Thus, to understand the alliance between photography and architecture forces us to revisit the conventions that originated them. In this sense, Régis Durand's comments are relevant when he points out that:

> *In the history of photography there has always been a tendency for a maximum capture of the photographed object – the most frontal, the closest, the clearest, etcetera. An eagerness for the documental and even scientific, the eagerness to leave a mark as real as possible, perhaps a sort of simulacrum of the object (2012, p. 65).*

These conceptualizations may be extrapolated, so by substituting the object for the architectural documents, photography would alert about an undisputable coincidence: front views, close and clear, besides details, sections or design gestures. No more and no less than the necessary convention that feeds back all design and the projects graphics in architecture.

Like that example of the Besançon theater by Claudie Nicolas Ledoux, the architectural discipline acknowledges that its historiographic line used images

to complement its discourse. This resorting to them increased as the 20th Century progressed: it shared routes with the specialization of the photographic technique, with the technological advancements in standardization of construction materials and with the dissemination of mass communication media. And it did so to such extent that this convergence would change the perception of architecture through photographs and transformed it into an object for consumption (Colomina, 2018, p. 75). This is how the leaders of the architecture of that time understood it, perceiving the transcendence of that dissuasive, visual, and informative channel to which the professionals resorted to as favorite tool for the dissemination of their theories. In this way, architects became media leaders of their own creations and held on to portraying their works in alliances that showed their strictest design convictions. These discursive clues crossed frontiers, and both designers as well as photographers established successful relations with architectural modernity, like Mies van der Rohe with Richard Nickel, Le Corbusier with Lucien Hervé, Frank Lloyd Wright with Pedro Guerrero or Richard Neutra with Julius Shulman. The satisfaction for promoting this type of architecture was expressed by Le Corbusier, whose mediatic ability assured him coverage of the modernist doctrine, to such extent that his indications in sketches ordered and organized the work of the photographer. Himself proposing the photographic takes that would be functional to his ideas, Le Corbusier reaffirmed that the only concrete thing is that which is under the jurisdiction of the vision (Figures 3 and 4).

Clearly, he was not the only one. Other photographers resorted to artifices that elevated this art, as demonstrated for

instance by Julius Shulman's image of the Kaufmann House by Neutra (1946), in which the morphology of the house is highlighted against the Palm Springs sunset. However, this take would be hampered by the lateral glow of a lamp, this setback was solved by Shulman placing, as a sort of screen, the owner of the house laying beside the pool, adding with this an additional value to the image: it would capture one of the very rare images in which the human scale is integrated into architecture photographs (Figure 5). In closer contexts, these actions were repeated, as happened with the photographic reports that Armando Salas Portugal or Guillermo Zamora did for the works of Luis Barragán, and, adding to them, the photographs of Chilean modernity through the lens of René Combeau or the ones by Manuel Gómez Piñeiro, who portrayed the rationalist avant-garde in Buenos Aires, among many others (Figure 6).

The diffusion of architecture through photography had arrived to stay. With its protocols, it guaranteed that the photographic models would not discredit or question the project design, at the same time that, with this discourse, it installed new conventions of aesthetic visuality for each built work. Of course, these photographs deconstructed reality at the architect's convenience, but they did so in the eyes of the spectator, frequently altering the very thing that the image tried to reflect (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 336). Images were thus reproduced in which the formal purity of architecture stood out thanks to low-angle shots, the buildings were portrayed without neighbors, their staircases became endless loops, perspectives were exacerbated and, dragging along the pictorial tradition of the Renaissance veduta, photographs underscored with backlights the best that architecture

was able to stage. It was thus that, in photography, the 20th Century architecture works were presented as autonomous artistic objects, as an unscathed and intact drawing, valuable in itself, devoid of humanity, and concealing its true reason for existing: the act of inhabiting.

Considering the mediatization of images in which contemporary society is immersed, favored by the fact that taking a photograph is something accessible to all, the notion of 'photographer' is dissolving in the immediacy of the networks and equates – without room for novelty – the meaning of all the events it portrays (Sontag, 2006, p. 26). By now, and although the language of the image may seem – almost – invariable, the roles have inverted when it comes to architecture photographs. In this respect, Spanish architect Luis Fernández Galiano reflected in an editorial note for his magazine, pointing out that:

> *Today's photographers are the most influential architecture critics, as much for the selection of works they choose to document as for their way of representing them, in order that it is their agenda and their pupil the ones that establish the coordinates of global architectural conversation (2013, p. 3).*

Mariela Apollonio (2017) also coincides in the necessary renovation of the analysis of architecture photography and invites us to generate new roads capable of overcoming the utilitarian bias that tinged the images of architecture in the past century. Certainly, throughout the 20th Century architecture photography has had the capacity to establish a disciplinary platform with its own aesthetics. In it, its protagonists had to alternate and alter their trades:

photographers became the translators of architectural conventions and architects learned to deconstruct the photographic images. However, the canons available in both disciplines, those that in their origins established a visual grammar, far from being transformed, still remain and stand up with identical reading codes.

The responsibility falls on our present society to renovate with an innovative gaze, away from consumerism, aimed at the authenticity of the photographed subject but which, presently, still remains in the shadows. **m**

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