



Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age

Ruth Rosengarten

To cite this article: Ruth Rosengarten (2015) Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age, *Photography and Culture*, 8:3, 363-367, DOI: [10.1080/17514517.2015.1091185](https://doi.org/10.1080/17514517.2015.1091185)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17514517.2015.1091185>



Published online: 03 Nov 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 61



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age

Barbican Art Gallery, September 25,
2014 – January 11, 2015

Ruth Rosengarten

It is broadly acknowledged that architecture and photography have historically enjoyed a happy reciprocity. Because of their inherent stillness, buildings facilitated the long exposure time required by early photography. In turn, architecture harnessed the indexical condition of photography, with its attendant authenticating claims granting photographs the status of archival records. Early modernism saw innovations in the field of photography that were particularly compatible with the geometrical spaces and surfaces of modernist architecture, and in the 1920s and 1930s, architecture and photography enjoyed a particular aesthetic and ideological complicity. Beatriz Colomina has argued that the ways in which published photographs became the real site of architectural modernism (making widely visible industrial buildings in remote geographic locations) shaped the trajectory of architectural modernism itself. But it was with the invention of lighter and quicker cameras, in its increased capacity to picture the interaction between architecture and the society it served, that photography of the built environment began to diverge from the zealous campaigns of “architectural photography.”

The discipline of “architectural photography,” with its controlled perspectives, is not the subject of *Constructing Worlds*, except, perhaps, tangentially in Lucien Hervé’s photographs for/with Le Corbusier; and Luigi Ghirri’s photos of the architectural works of Aldo Rosso. And while several works in the show include images of iconic modernist buildings, this is not a display of how photography has served the architecture of modernity. Here, we have images by 18 photographers who train their lens upon the built environment in an age of rapid change. Curated by Alona Pardo and Elias Redstone, the exhibition tracks several tendencies in this “expanded field” of architectural imaging. Although organised chronologically, the feeling that this show

engenders, as one inhabits and moves through the spaces constructed for it, is one of organically grouped affinities, bouncing a sense of deadpan or documentary precision against a more subjective, romantic poetics of space.

Berenice Abbott begins the exhibition with the documentary strand, and like many of the following works in the show, hers reveal the intersection of planning with improvisation. Adhering to the observational practices of Eugène Atget, whose archive she acquired in 1927, in her grand project *Changing New York* (1939), she focuses on the shifting and transitional structures of the city. Her work concerns itself with picturing not only the dramatic angles and precise geometries of architectural modernism, but also the temporal layering of the buildings of Manhattan (*Construction Old and New, from Washington Street, Manhattan, August 12, 1936*). In the crisscrossed laundry lines sweeping dynamically between sections of early tenement houses, we are given the first of many metonymies of human presence that this exhibition offers, hinting at the lived realities of boom and bust America. In contrast to her immersion in the metropolis, Walker Evans travelled through the countryside of the Southern states on assignment for the Farm Security Administration, photographing vernacular architecture, exposing the harshness experienced by the rural poor during and after the Depression. The sweep of Evans's architectural (and with it, social) documentation transformed records of modest buildings (and their inhabitants) into a critique of American values, and in this, his work is pivotal in the show.

A different strand of "American value" is tapped in Julius Schulman's sumptuous color photographs of Southern Californian modernism. Each is a seductive, not quite believable *mise-en-scène* that invokes the intangible allure not of bricks and mortar (and steel and glass), but of a "lifestyle" that it encapsulates, bringing to mind the photographic collages that were being produced at the same time by Pop artists such as Richard Hamilton and Tom Wesselmann.

The bid for taxonomic completeness in the projects of Walker Evans, linked to the apparently detached "eye" of the documentarian, cuts across the show, linking the works of Stephen Shore, Ed Ruscha and Bernd and Hilla Becher. All of their works suggest a sense of affective distance as they cast their deadpan gaze upon apparent ordinariness, in idioms that speak directly to contemporary (post-Pop, postmodern) sensibilities. All three groups of work are imbued with the "anticipatory nostalgia" that the catalogue text attributes to the work of Stephen Shore, where the innovative and the modern seem to point directly to future obsolescence. Shore's vividly colored, emotionally flat *Greetings from Amarillo*, "Tall in Texas" (1971), brightly lit by a southern sun, are devoid of narrative or dramatic incident, and often include reflective surfaces that purposefully ward off the viewer's penetrative gaze. Ed Ruscha's photographs of Los Angeles from the 1960s highlight the alienating cityscapes of late capitalism and, in its tendency to accumulation and enumeration (the aerial views of *Thirty-four Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, 1967), underline the serial potential of photography itself. Like Ruscha's paintings, his photographs capture an uncannily deserted stillness, obliquely exposing the evisceration of the landscape for the accumulation of anonymous and repetitive parking facilities, but the critique is muted and implicit.

The work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, anticipated by that of Walker Evans in the United States and August Sander in Germany, became iconic and influenced many conceptual artists and photographers. The effects of their dogged project is especially manifest in the work of the photographers of the so-called Düsseldorf school in Germany, here represented by Thomas Struth, as well as in the consumerist sublime of the digitally composite works of Andreas Gursky. The Bechers systematically recorded, in grid-hung black and white photographs (each a snapshot of an individual design), structures of

modern industrialization. These constitute serial and taxonomically coherent bodies of work that first foreshadowed, and then ran alongside, the methodological procedures of conceptual art, while inheriting the formal protocols of minimalism. Evacuated of any trace of human presence in its content and subjectivity in its facture, their work had a particular resonance in postwar Germany. Implicitly, it asks how it was possible to speak of modernization in that context, after the overpowering utopian appeal of fascistic ideologies that oversaw the rise of modernism. In this, their archive of soon-to-be-obsolete structures of modernity serves as a paean to, and the cemetery of, bureaucratic reason.

From the next generation of German photographers, Thomas Struth's typological explorations of street scenes on a global scale, *Unconscious Places* (1977–2012), cut across national boundaries to explore the common features of (and differences between) diverse urban locations, also suggesting, in their collective title, the uncanny ways in which urban spaces feed into psychic life. As in most of the works in the show, he manages to capture streets and buildings as though they belonged to ghost towns. But unlike the Bechers' photographs, Struth's invoke—and are taken from the point of view of—an embodied and positioned spectator, and the dilapidation they capture suggests the collapse, in the 1970s, of various conflicting ideological utopias.

The concern with the street in Struth's work pits itself against Le Corbusier's famously provocative denunciation of the very existence of "the street," whose foretold death was subsequently regarded as a reactionary and antisocial contribution to urban planning. The sharpened ideological implications of Le Corbusier's architecture are not the focus of the black-and-white images emerging from the architect's long-term collaboration with Lucien Hervé, whose heavily shadowed, romantic

photographs of the project in Chandigarh (to design the first planned city in post-Independence India) establish a contrapuntal theme in the exhibition. This moody, romantic strand of photography, relying heavily on the subjective appeal of light and shadow, is taken up in the black and white work of Héléne Binet and Hiroshi Sugimoto and in the colour photographs of Luisa Lambri, while Luigi Ghirri's photographs of the projects of Aldo Rossi (beginning in 1983) are delicate and subtle essays in the interplay between familiarity and estrangement, bringing together the objective and subjective strands that the exhibition probes.

Luisa Lambri and Héléne Binet both focus on indoor space: Lambri trains a lingering lens on the leeching away of light and the absorbent propensities of shadow. Of all the empty spaces pictured in the show, hers are the most melancholy invocations of absence. Binet's work too fixes upon indoor spaces (is one to make anything of the delicate suggestion of gendered vision here?). In her photographs, starker contrasts of light and shadow serve to dematerialise solid structure, working in a particularly haunting way in her images of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, while it was still under construction. A sense of the evacuation of human presence also pervades the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto, most of whose photographic projects are meditations on the passage of time. His *Architecture* series, reminiscent of the paintings of Gerhard Richter, is also an essay on dematerialisation. A dream-like melancholy suffuses his out-of-focus photographs of icons of hard-edged architectural modernism, such as Le Corbusier's Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut de Ronchamp and Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building in New York.

In ways that avoid being strident or pedagogic, the final section of the exhibition underlines the dismantling and collapse of the optimistic ideologies that sustained architectural modernism. If, in its soaring perspectives and

conflation of micro- and macro visibility, Gursky encapsulates the dehumanising megalomania of late capitalism, Bas Princen's sweeping photographs of manmade structures in peripheral and emerging zones of Istanbul, Cairo, Amman, Beirut and Dubai (*Refuge, Five Cities*, 2009) throw light on the precarious outcomes of such investment of capital. In expunging contextual detail, Princen's photographs underline a dystopian sense of dislocation in these desolate, generic urban spaces.

Guy Tillim's project *Avenue Patrice Lumumba* explicitly highlights the relationship between an idealistic modernism (in particular the "Tropical Modernism" that emerged in colonial Africa) and its erosion and transformation into ruin in the aftermath of decolonization and independence. Similarly, Simon Norfolk's unsettlingly elegant photographs of building remains in war zones (*Former Soviet-era "Palace of Culture", Kabul*, 2001–2002; *A Cellphone Booster-station Built on the Wreckage of Buildings that once Housed a Market*, Kabul, 2010–2011) focus on the work of ideology, but here, the ruins are the effect not of neglect, but of state power, tyranny or attack. The blasting apart of civil society is made especially explicit in a photograph of a looter and his family at the old Air Force Headquarters in Baghdad. Norfolk's concern with the way sites are transformed and ossify emerges in images that seem paradoxically still and timeless.

Dutch photographer Iwan Baan's project *Torre David* contemplates the eponymous complex of buildings in downtown Caracas, a 45-storey tower block housing over 3000 residents. While in Gursky's photographs, human agents are reduced to insect-like minuteness, Baan's contemplates the lives that inhabit this sprawling urban environment, planned during Venezuela's last period of economic and political stability, and abandoned when its chief developer suddenly died and the project lost its financial backing. In exploring the ways in which ordinary citizens are creatively improvisational

in their ways of inhabiting architectural space and humanizing it, Baan's work is singular in this exhibition that otherwise tends to highlight alienation and vacancy.

The dismantling of the old powers – those under which modernism flourished – has been superseded, the exhibition suggests, by the emergence of China as the new world power; where, belatedly, the Industrial Revolution has had a brutalizing effect both on the environment and on its human subjects. Set alongside Iwan Baan's lively photographs, Nadav Kander's desolate and beautiful pictures close the exhibition: in confrontation, the two bodies of work strike very different chords. The implicit optimism of Baan's work is met with the brooding, contemplative stillness of Kander's. Working with a large format camera, Kander followed the course of the Yangtze River, in a project that lasted some three years, documenting the effects of exponential urban and industrial growth on the fluvial landscape, while adhering to traditional Western painterly conventions of landscape construction. Suggesting an affinity with the Northern sublime of Caspar David Friedrich, Kander also composes using the *repoussoir* strategies initially deployed in the paintings of Claude Lorraine or in the early works of JMW Turner, allowing gently interlocking and gradually receding planes to lead the eye back from the frame into atmospheres immersed in romantic, nebulous mist, which here is no doubt the effect of pollution. In these landscapes, transformation is so rapid that memory is constantly invoked and erased. Kander's large-scale photographs are always highly constructed and aestheticized; the exquisiteness of the scene chafes against the knowledge of the brutal work of industrialization and "development" that went to its making.

Although each of us could, no doubt, construe an alternative exhibition or contribute names that seem glaring by their omission (for example, Lázló Moholy-Nagy, Dan Graham, Robert Adams, Candida Höffer, Michael

Subotzky), this exhibition gains cohesion by the implication, running through it, that photographs aid or manipulate the ideological underpinnings of architecture; the way buildings—even if uninhabited—physically perform *value*. While the show is undercut by occasional flares of optimism, its general mood is melancholic, as

though history itself were now up for grabs. It seems that the real subject of these photographs, where monument so readily tends towards natural or human-made ruin, is time itself.

Ruth Rosengarten
view.rosengarten@gmail.com