

Article

On the Past and Future Tensions Between Documentation and Esthetics in Architectural Photography

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Received: 2 July 2014; in revised form: 26 August 2014 / Accepted: 26 August 2014 /

Published: 8 September 2014

Abstract: From the perspective of a specialist in environmental health and as a son of an architectural and architectural photography innovator, the author of this essay reviews the ways that photographers approach architecture. It argues that the Internet and digital technology should be used to document how architecture accommodates what clients do and how they interact as well as documenting brief esthetic experiences in and around architecture.

Keywords: architecture; architectural photography; Richard Neutra; Julius Shulman

1. Introduction

I am a retired physician and environmental epidemiologist who spent his professional life using evidence as a guide toward a healthier environment. My friend, architect and architectural historian, Pierluigi Serraino, knows that I grew up around two people who practiced and cared about architectural photography, my father Richard Neutra and his protégé Julius Shulman. As a youth I pushed around the furniture while they composed their photographs and I watched my father carefully decide how such images should be arranged in the illustrated books that he wrote. In our conversations Pier Luigi has noticed that I absorbed from my father the strong feeling that architecture, like medicine, ought to use evidence to impel steady improvement and that esthetically compelling

photography should have a role in disseminating such evidence. He encouraged me to write down my thoughts on these issues.

2. Context

2.1 Varieties of Architectural Photography

Let us consider the various purposes with which the photographer can approach an architectural work:

1) The photographer can document a structure to facilitate a complete description. The obligingly static nature of monuments attracted long exposure daguerreotypes and calotypes for documentary purposes, starting in the 1840s by such practitioners as William Henry Fox Talbot and in France in the 1850s the official "Mission Heliographique" sponsored the systematic documentation of ecclesiastical buildings [1]. To be thorough, documentation would involve straight-on elevations of all exterior and interior walls, ceilings. These are views that most occupants would rarely see as they moved obliquely around and through these buildings and spaces. Criteria of thoroughness, clarity and the preservation of relative proportions would be valued. Esthetics would be incidental here, although composition is distinguished in some of the early 19th century documentary photographs (Figure1).

Figure 1.



2) A photographer could document structural damage for the purpose of insurance claims.. Once again thoroughness, clarity and the preservation of relative proportions around the damaged area would be important.

3) Photography used by a realtor is designed to entice potential buyers into a purchase. Here the photographer is required to cover certain rooms and features likely to be of interest to the potential buyer. The pictures are "staged" with furniture and appliances that will appeal to the widest audience. The rooms will be made to seem as large as possible and unfavorable features will not be shown. Closets, emptied of most of their clothes will evoke a reassuring spaciousness.

The objective of a real estate pictorial web site is to impress purchasers with the thoroughness of the selling real estate agent and attract more clients to that agent as well as to increase the probability of visits to the actual property. The esthetic quality of the photograph is important, but the photographer must imagine the social class, ethnicity and level of education that characterize the class of likely buyers. If the likely buyers are recent kleptocratic billionaires from a developing country the esthetics might need to be different than those for old moneyed aristocrats in Switzerland (Figure 2).

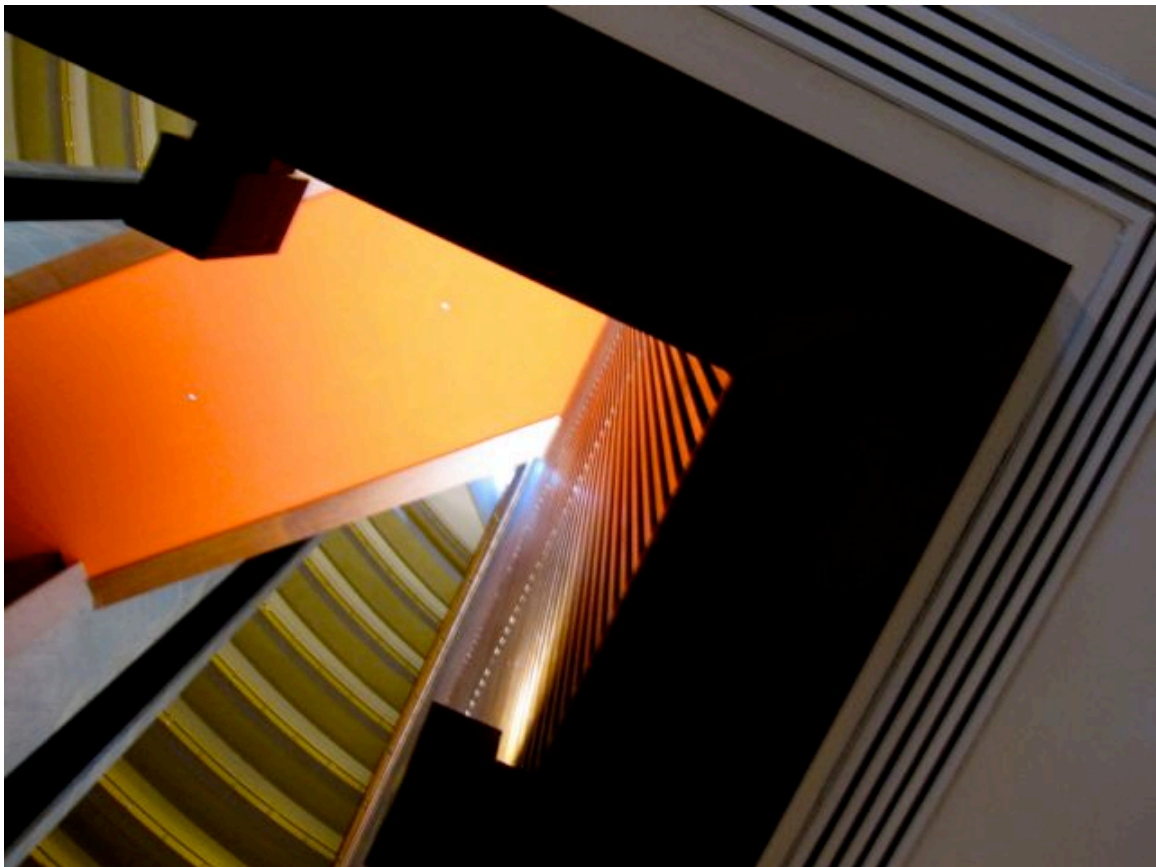
4) Photography can document human or animal use of and interaction with a planned environment. Here we think of some of the sociological and anthropological studies of plazas and parks and how and when people use the spaces. The focus here is on the users and capturing illustrative moments where the planned environment is influencing what people do or how they interact. In the photograph below, the canted and sloped surfaces of Calatrava's Sun Dial Bridge in California has set these children to running. One would want to document both intended and unintended consequences positive and negative. Here there would be scientific criteria for validity and reliability of findings. However one could imagine that the quality of the photography used to achieve these purposes could either be esthetically prosaic or as striking as one of those critical behavioral moments of Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Figure 2.



5) Photography of a building, assembly of buildings and parts of buildings can be done with the aim of producing an artistic abstract image that is an end in itself. In this case, the image spoke originally to the photographer. It is success in the art world requires that an accepted arbiter of taste, or, in the new online world, that some percentage of internet photographic trawlers "like" what has been presented and spread the word. Images like this one of the lobby of Mandarin Oriental in Singapore don't even need to read as a building (Figure 3).

Figure 3.



6) Popular home and garden magazines, like *Sunset Magazine* demonstrated new ways that a middle class person could enhance their home environment or use it for sociable activities. Here it would be appropriate to stage a scene with average looking people in such a way that the relation of the social activity and the architectural environment made sense. The photograph would appeal to an average middle class esthetic taste.

7) Home repair magazines use photography to document ways that a dwelling can be modified and how the part of the structure that was modified, looks after repair. Clarity and documentation are the desired qualities here along with a minimum of esthetic appeal to a practical audience.

8) Magazines like *Architectural Digest* use photography to satisfy the reader's curiosity about the use of architecture and furnishings as tools for establishing social pecking order. Occasionally the movie

star or millionaire will pose to establish ownership but rarely to illustrate an interaction with their treasured environment. The style of illustration is close to those of a good Real Estate website.

5) Architectural magazines, and now internet media, could, like medical journals, have as one of their objectives the sharing of information that would advance the quality of the built environment. How can we document our successes and failures to improve the way this environment accommodates what we do, how we interact and what we experience? The use of photography in architectural magazines and books have evolved over the last century, starting with a bland kind of accurate documentation and ending with an emphasis on striking photographic images. Below, I will discuss my father's participation in this evolution and his thoughts and my own on the creative tension between esthetics and documentation in architectural communications.

2.2. Neutra and Shulman: Process and Innovation

Pier Luigi Serraino in a recent conversation with me observed that European modernists of the late 1920s and early 1930s used photography to document structural and to some extent practical functional features of the work they did, while my father and Shulman and those that followed them evoked in photography what he called "lifestyle" implications of the architecture. When I pressed him to enlarge on the idea of "lifestyle" he talked about spaciousness and the genteel accouterments of the lived in space. As we talked, it occurred to me that the relationship between architects like Ernst May or Margarete Schuette-Lihotzky and their clients was quite different from the relationship between my father and his individual clients. Ernst May was directed by mayor Karl Landsmann to provide a humane alternative to the cramped unsanitary slums of Frankfurt in the last half of the 1920s. The audience for his photographs was not a reluctant public who had to be enticed by photography out of their slums into the cheerful but Spartan spaces with their prefabricated, ergonomically studied "Frankfurt Kitchens." Instead, the audience consisted of other architects and housing officials. The same was true for the illustrations from the Vienna Werkbund Siedlung where my father had designed the smallest dwelling in 1932. In the very same year my father was building his own duplex and office. His live-work space was also a case-study for the economic use of new technology for a climate sensitive structure on a 60 x 70 foot lot near downtown Los Angeles. Although potentially relevant to a housing ministry, decision makers in libertarian America were not bureaucrats but individual consumers. Therefore, the photographs taken by my father and his photographer of choice in the early 1930s, Luckhaus Studios, already go beyond (but do not neglect) mere documentation. They illustrate what an owner would experience from inside and outside of the house. In a November 1934 fifteen page spread devoted to this little structure in the Architectural Forum there are, besides photos of pre-vibrated reinforced foundation joists, and details of a cabinet enclosing a small upright piano, and space for cello storage; full page night pictures from inside looking out to the under-eve strip lighted foliage beyond the windows and looking up from outside at the glowing ceilings and lights of the upper floor. Judging by the other illustrations in the Architectural Forum of that year, these night-time views were quite unusual (Figure 4). In an un-credited picture one can see my mother taking in a view of the nearby reservoir on the indoor-outdoor porch of the living room [2].

Figure 4.

Compare this to the almost contemporary illustration of Neutra's Vienna Werkbund house which used the same prefabricated reinforced concrete floor joists. This publication was controlled by Josef Frank the overall planner of this Siedlung (Figure 5). It exemplifies the purely documentary style to which Pier Luigi referred in our conversation [3].

Figure 5.

In 1936, the young amateur photographer Julius Shulman accompanied a Neutra draftsman to see the newly completed Kun house and took a few pictures that so impressed the draftsman that he showed them to my father. My father in turn hired Shulman to take more pictures and introduced him to his former apprentices, Rafael Soriano, Gregory Ain and Harwell Harris. My father never told me why he switched from Luckhaus Studios to Shulman, it may have been a matter of price and the willingness of the young Shulman to take direction from my father. In his 90th decade Shulman described in interviews he gave to others [4] how he resisted my father's interventions and moved the camera back to its original position when my father's back was turned. However, forty years earlier in an article he wrote about his relation to my father and acknowledged their cooperative mode of composing the photographs of those Neutra projects.

"However, working with Neutra was not easy. This man was very special—he knew the camera! He realized how significant it was in communicating architecture to the public, as well as to other architects. My young and impatient temperament often created difficulties in our communication. After all I was the photographer. But patience and a degree of wisdom prevailed....When Neutra requested the camera be put in a specific location, that was no time for questioning on my part. And that was my schooling, for thus I learned something of the anatomy of design and perhaps also of the designer's mind [5]."

Indeed Shulman acknowledged that my father was unique among his clients in accompanying him on these photo-shoots and involving himself in that way. Since I often came along on the photo-shoots, these cooperative events are for me vivid childhood memories. My father and the apprentices would load a few pieces of Neutra-designed furniture into the trunk of the car, along with some eucalyptus branches cut off from one of the trees on our small lot. Then we would drive off to a recently completed building. Julius would arrive in a shiny black hearse-like panel truck. While we greeted the owner and started moving their unapproved furniture out of the way and brought my Dad's furniture into the house, Julius unloaded several metal boxes, flood lights, his tripod, his view camera and his black cloth and brought them into the house. My job was to help move the furniture, and to place the eucalyptus branches on the bare ground where the garden was to be planted. Rarely, I was used as a model. A much younger me can be found in various architectural books, sometimes only part of me by accident. In one of these, a color photograph in the enormous Taschen publication of my father's complete works, a semi-circle of kindergartners, placed there by Julius and my father on the lawn, sit in front of my father's 1935 Corona Avenue school with its giant steel sliding door. In the dim interior my head can be seen beyond a table behind which, I as a teenager, had been told to sit to achieve the altitude of a younger person.

My father and Julius discussed the composition of each of these shots and there was a great deal of subtle moving this way and that so that design elements and landscape features were lined up just so, or the branch of a tree just obscured an ugly telephone pole. I was allowed to get under the cloth and see the upside-down images that they were discussing. When the black and white picture had been composed and taken, and the view camera moved, my father would often move into place and take the same view as a color slide through the enormous wide-angle lens of his Leica. My father would order several sets of the photographs that he liked best and would submit them to simultaneously to European, Japanese and South American publications along with captions and descriptions of the project. He counted on the east coast architectural editors to notice these publications and to then

request photographs for their own magazines. Esther McCoy in an article that accompanied the above mentioned 1968 article claimed that my father was an early innovator in presenting packages of images and text to architectural magazines [6].

2.2 Neutra's Photographic Agenda

The overt and covert agenda that my father had for these pictures needs to be explored. Architectural magazines may originally have had the stated purpose of sharing good ideas within the profession. Popular home magazines might have a similar explicit purpose with perhaps less emphasis on the technical means than an architectural magazine. If that were the only purpose then boring systematic photography, floor plans, elevation drawings and selected details would be the bread and butter of architectural and home magazine articles. However, for my father, at least, architectural photographs were targeted to appeal to sophisticated editors, initially resistant fellow architects, architectural students and potential clients. My father was an architectural missionary, he wanted to change the way that people lived in homes, apartments, schools and medical facilities and he wanted to influence other architects to design in a particular way. To attract clients and to influence his fellow architects he had to get published. He instinctively knew that boringly instructive photographs were not the best way to achieve that goal. Architectural and home magazine editors needed to attract advertisers, and advertisers are attracted by readership and readership is attracted by novelty and striking images. The leafing through the pages of each issue of the magazine must delight and excite, not just inform. Yet he felt there was also a need to capture how the building accommodated what people experienced when in and around the structure. The vast majority of these photographs do not have people in them and when they are there, the people's poses more often indicate, like that image of my mother in 1932, what they are experiencing and less often how the structure accommodates what they do or how they interact.

Figure 6.



The reason that this famous twilight picture of the Kaufmann desert house is so memorable is in my opinion *not* dependent on the presence of Mrs. Kaufmann lying next to the pool, her head obscuring the direct rays of the underwater pool light. She could be photo-shopped out of the picture and replaced by a chair with little effect (Figure 6). It is true that this picture does not clarify the various planes and parts of the building as well as some of the others that have been published. Some feel that it over-emphasizes the relation of the house to the surrounding desert instead of the nearby pool and oasis-like plantings [7].

However, I feel that this one photograph captures one of those rare memorable experiences in a building and its environment that comes to most vividly represent it in memory. The glowing house with its rhythmic horizontal lines orients the eye and the orthogonal canals of the inner ear to an invisible horizon. It underscores the jagged landscape at a moment of drama. This one image has come to represent and summarize all the three hundred projects that arose from my father's forty year long practice. Perhaps human memory cannot digest more than this.

The absence of inducements to fashionable social climbing in my father's other favorite pictures and the emphasis instead on landscape and lighting may represent the remnants of his Viennese socialist

roots. He admired Dr. Viktor Adler, the founder of the Austrian socialist party in his youth, who said that there needed to be a proletarian change in consciousness to allow them to live a fuller existence and to effectively participate in civic life. Accordingly the Viennese socialists offered evening classes in economics, and the arts [8].

Frank Wilkinson, the founder of public housing in Los Angeles told me in an interview that my father had volunteered to provide evening lectures to the new inhabitants of public housing on how they could artfully and inexpensively convert old wooden nail kegs into kitchen stools [9]. With the help of Shulman my father staged pictures of the 1942 Channel Heights dock workers' housing with prototypes of the plywood "boomerang" chairs which he had specially designed so that the workers themselves could build them in the woodshop provided in this designed neighborhood (Figure 7).

Figure 7.



This is a different take on "lifestyle" since it is not about keeping up with the Jones as to what products to consume, but rather how to make and savor items of "good" design.

Here a distinction is made. On the one hand there is "good taste" and the ownership of products that are costly because of their careful design as a social signifier that separates the social classes. On the

other hand is a person who had been educated to recognize and relish good design in a mindful if inexpensive manner. It is in this sense that a retired samurai and Zen hermit might pause to notice the pattern of fallen cherry blossom petals on the path after a spring rain. A carefully framed view in a suburb, such as my mother's view of the Silver Lake reservoir and the hills beyond or into a small but artfully planted patio, all these could enhance the quality of life at low cost and without ostentation.

In his book "Survival Through Design, he marshaled what scientific evidence he could to suggest his contention that artful design had implications for health as well as for pleasure [10].

Those "nature-near" architectural experiences that he aimed for are multi-sensorial while any photograph is only visual and incomplete. It is even incomplete in what it has captured of the visual experience. This difference fascinated my father from his beginnings.

In the summer of 1920 my father wrote about architecture in a love letter to his Swiss fiancé', Dione Niedermann, who was to become my mother:

A well-designed house affects our entire sense of space. It is a sense of smell, of touch, of hearing, of temperature and the eye, also an obscure sense for materials...A current of air, a draft, a breeze felt when strolling through the gallery of a cloister, or the rising air in the Dome of Milan, the exhalation of plaster, stone heated by the sun, a musty basement or underground water odor in a crypt, a scent of iron, lacquer...the reverberation of my steps, the echo from a space...An apple tree seen while ascending a path on a certain spot five meters before climbing over a summit, can be a greater mystery than all ghosts taken together. What is it that moves one so deeply every time one reaches that certain spot[11]?

Throughout his life he kept coming back to this theme of what he called "stereognosis." The response to architecture, he thought, is driven not only by what is seen but by the combined effect of what is heard, smelled and felt by touch and heat sensing neurons in the skin and by reports from the senses of balance in the inner ear as one looks upwards or downwards, as in the picture below taken at the Richard and Dion Neutra VDL studio and residences in Los Angeles. The remembered visual image may be given importance by these other inputs even when they are not remembered or even consciously noticed (Figure 8).

Figure 8.

In remembering the Viennese apartment where he grew up in his autobiography he wrote:

It was a four-story building we lived in, and our apartment was one widely winding, cold stair-fight above the street floor. The windings and the cold draft are still with me in some dreams. What happens *to* one, *in* one and *around* one while ascending a stair- and what of it sticks with us as a strangely lasting memory-is to me a master specimen for what architectural experience means. It's way beyond all that photography or motion pictures can convey [12].

In writing an introduction to Shulman's 1962 book and in magazines my father also emphasized that the impact of architecture was not equal over time. Certain moments within this time-flow of stereognostic experiences stand out and form an emblematic memory marker, like that first kiss of one's life partner under the moonlight [13].

Like his mentor Adolf Loos, who claimed that he was proud that photographs were incapable of capturing the experience of his complex interior spaces.

My father recognized that photography could never duplicate a "honeymoon" experience [14]

However, a good architectural photograph should capture the architect's intention for configuring his/her building in its natural context and capturing one of those moments, even though it represents a pale shadow of reality. In his introduction to Shulman's 1962 book, Neutra advised that the photographer should however eschew the error of Neutra's friend Edward Weston, who, when photographing Neutra's Lovell Health House, fell in love with and documented the architecturally irrelevant imperfections of the plastering work [15].

In the days before photography, architectural historians visited and walked through the cathedrals, palaces and streetscapes about which they wrote. After the introduction of photography, architectural history has really become the study of iconic photographs of buildings that the historian has never visited! Thomas Hines, who wrote the definitive biography of my father is an exception to this generalization since he visited as many of the three hundred projects as he could.

In the late 1960s I had the honor of lunching with Walter Gropius in Harvard Square. Gropius had just recently and with kindness, sent a letter to the AIA recommending my father for its Gold Medal. I was astounded to learn that Gropius, who spent each summer riding horses in Arizona had not returned to Los Angeles since his first visit forty years before in 1928 when my father took him to see his own Jardinette Apartments and his plans for the Lovell Health House then in the planning phase. Thus, Gropius, the master architectural educator made his recommendation mostly based on photographs.

More than 60 years after its construction, while commenting on its recent total restoration, the architectural critic Paul Goldberger commented:

I had known of Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, California for years but only when I finally stood inside it did I realize how powerful an impact this modernist classic makes and how fully and brilliantly it blurs the distinction between inside and outside...Another thing I didn't anticipate was how important wood and stone are to this house, to achieving the complex series of counterpoints that Neutra pulled off here—harmonic juxtapositions of mass, of light, of solid and void, of rough and smooth textures[16].

Goldberger had known the Kaufmann Desert House through its photographs, and perhaps only through that one iconic night-time photograph. Apparently though, these Shulman images, striking though they are, failed to fully convey an indoor/outdoor sensation or the textures or material contrasts that are experienced by actually being in the place. What inputs in real life are missing from the

photographs? Is it a purely visual deficit, for example the lack of peripheral vision experiences in photographs, or the moving through the space in time? Could one provide a surround iMax-like movie to fully approximate the reality, or was my father's "stereognosis" subtly at work, desert breezes and smells wafting through those sliding door openings onto Mr. Goldberger's skin and olfactory bulbs?

Notice that Goldberger did not write about the failure of the photographs to document how successful the house was in accommodating what people do in the house or how they interact. He didn't write: "I had not realized how brilliantly the toilet paper roll was placed in ergonomic relation to the toilet or how skillfully the living room could be configured to accommodate an intimate foursome or a large cocktail party." Rather the photographic failure was in conveying a very rarified and sophisticated way of relating to a piece of architecture on a brief visit; that is, to soak it in as a piece of art. Architectural critics and magazine editors look for photographs that evoke this way of experiencing architecture.

4. Conclusion

Are we inculcating bad habits in architectural students and potential clients by directing them to focus only on these brief esthetic experiences? Yes, honeymoon moments are important, but so are the hours, days months and years of subtle and not so subtle architectural successes and failures in accommodating what we do, how we interact and what we experience. Are there ways that photographers can illustrate these successes and failures? Perhaps with the ability of the internet to provide summary and in-depth documentation using computer modeling and three dimensional videography and photography a new kind of documentation is possible that could advance an evidence-based architectural design that served its real inhabitants as well as titillated distant architectural critics.

N.B. Color photographs were taken by the author, the black and white photographs of the Kaufmann Desert House and Channel Heights are by Julius Shulman and used with permission of the Julius Shulman Archive, Research Library of the Getty Research Institute which holds the copyright for them.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no financial conflict of interest, but as a former public health official and his father's son he has a bias. He values architecture that is primarily constrained to serve the welfare of its inhabitants.

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