

Shulman vs Kindel: A Critical Review of the Role of Photography in the Development of the Modern Movement

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A photograph is the beginning of a story, not the end.
A photograph makes visible, does not reproduce.
A photograph is defined by what we don't see.
A photograph is just a possibility.
A photograph of a house is not a house.
To comprehend is to complicate.
Jordi Bernardó

Architectural photography is not just another branch of the discipline. Since the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, it's probably the primer essence of this art and technique. On the one hand, the conditions of the practice in its early beginnings focused its aim in the architectural object as well as in the city –the new 'natural' landscape for modernity– since they were static and thus allowed the long time exposures required to capture the image. On the other, from the mid 19th Century, the dominant taxonomic perspective used photography as the right tool to achieve the documentary eagerness: accomplished in 1851, the French *Mission Héliographique* was, in this sense, paradigmatic. Recording truth was pursued, not beauty.

Later on, in the early 20th Century, photographers also changed the way of looking through their lenses. The work of Eugène Atget in 1900's Paris was premonitory, and Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen took skyscrapers as the icons of the new American Metropolis. The balance between the trueness of the architectural reality and the subjective impression of the viewer towards the building finally relayed upon the intention of the photographer: it's not a matter of having the technique but of constructing a visual aesthetic. The 'mechanical eye', as Walter Benjamin pointed out, was also meant to look for the artistic aura. By adding individuals into the images, Paul Strand for instance introduced a new dialog between the building itself and its scale and volumetric expression. And, in the same way, the 30's New York of Berenice Abbot became just the pretext to 'read' the complexity of the city.

Nevertheless, and pushed by the strong impact of the centre European *New Objectivity*, architectural photography in the 20's and 30's was very much devoted to a sort of constructive abstraction linked to the imaginary and precision of the industrial atmosphere. This is, let's say it in advance, the dichotomy that a critical review of the role of photography in the construction of the iconic vision of Modern Movement has to face, the dialectic between the object itself as a visual construct and its advocacy as portrait of a new modern way of social inhabiting. It is not a matter of distinguish photography as art or as a professional undertaking. The significant change came from the use of the images: Photography was *the* mean used by architects, historians, critics, journalists or even politicians for propaganda and diffusion of any particular architectural expression and, among them, the Modern Movement.

The father of MoMo, Le Corbusier, knew from the start that photography was intended to be his great ally. He actually took around 500 photographs with his Cupido 80 during his trip to the Orient. He grasped much earlier than McLuhan that the medium was the message, a message that was a manifesto for that 'new spirit'. In each cover of magazines or pamphlets, photographs and their collages were carefully assembled and displayed. And with LC, the Russian constructivists and the ideologists of the Bauhaus: the extensive use of photography implied also a new theoretical reappraisal on the way of looking and the normal conventions of image making were abandoned. The new handy cameras allowed, by the use of new oblique perspectives and framings, the creation of an original visual gender focused on an insight display of purity, light and formal composition. The new architecture implied tilting the camera up and downwards in order to change the way buildings were looked up and the way the city was perceived from the building.

And this is how it began: by the publication of a few selected images in the first magazines or style books of the MoMo, a building by those master architects was raised to the category of icon, trusting its values in the narrative of the visual content of its photographs. A fruitful empathy –rather a convenient marriage– had arisen between architects and photographers. Arranged and selected by the more propagandistic architects like LC, Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius or Josep Lluís Sert and the official chroniclers Sigfried Giedion, Alfred Roth or Nikolaus Pevsner, the portraits of the paradigmatic modern architecture started to travel internationally: a new style had born, as Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson pointed out in 1932. The postcard-like pictures of the modern buildings –mostly façade external views– started to act like collection stickers for the diffusion of architecture.

However, along with this exemplary projects, the imagery brought up in first postwar Europe included shady factories and grey social housing units, which stent out, in the United States, from the impressive urban landscape of the skyscrapers and the pleasant modern houses located in idyllic natural settings. The epicenter then moved to America: the early pictures of Julius Shulman (1910-2009) –particularly the ones of the Lovell Health House by Richard Neutra and that the architect used to illustrate his books *Wie Baut Amerika* (1927) and *Amerika* (1930)– and the arrival of the avant-garde architects to the schools of architecture at Boston and Chicago, together with the original work developed by the distinctive American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, ended up fixing the US as the real spotlight of Modern Architecture. New York was ‘the’ metropolis, but California was the land for buoyant dreams, opportunities and prosperity due to the presence of industry –both aeronautic and moviemaker– and oilfields.

The recent death of Julius Shulman (1910-2009) has exalted even more his figure as the most significant one among the photographers of modern architecture, probably followed by Ezra Stollerⁱ. It is out of the scope of this paper to tackle Shulman’s work and personalityⁱⁱ. “He has defined the way we look at modernism”, “his photographs are the most beautiful fairy tales in the history of modernism”, “he framed our vision of modern architecture” and statements like these could condense his legacy. Ever since he shot Neutra’s Kun Residence with his Eastman Vest Pocket Camera and met him by chance in 1936, he worked for renowned modern architects like the Eames, Wright or Koenig. Celebrated pictures like the ones of the Kaufmann House in Palm Springs by Richard Neutra (1947) or the widely published picture of the Case Study House No. 22 by Pierre Koenig (1960) are a template of idealized modernity.

Published in 2005, the book *Modernism Rediscovered*ⁱⁱⁱ brought back the modern pieces photographed by the ‘perceptive eye’ of Shulman in the 50’s and 60’s. Indeed, the book allows us to revisit not only those best-known images but also many other significant projects –up to 300– that were not so much circulated by the media. It is note worthy the fact that Shulman had 6000 photography assignments from 1936 to 1986. Then, the book becomes, so to speak, a tribute to the memory of that significant period of Modern Architecture in the US. Leaving aside the first magnificent impression we get after having a look at the book, some thoughts may come across.

More than the buildings themselves, these High Modernity images portray a programmatic and representative cliché of the optimistic casual American lifestyle. Compared to the abstract and rigid images of the first European avant-garde –or the first photographs taken of the work of Neutra by the not so well known photographer Arthur Luckhaus^{iv}– Shulman’s shots are full of colored life. These photographs, besides being made with rigor and technical quality, were meant to let the viewer enjoying architecture demanding an emotional response. The consistency of Ansel Adams’ landscapes is the equivalent to Shulman’s modern buildings. Shulman’s pictures are debtor of the technical perfection pursued –depth of field, sharpen detailing, quality paper for printing, etc.– by the f/64 group founded en 1932 by his peasants Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

Shulman images were literally constructed under a scenographical point of view, defining a landscape surrounded by continuous open spaces blurring the transition from the interior to the natural exteriors. Considering photography as an appropriation of realities, Shulman himself was aware of the constructiveness of his photographs, a set of gymnastic statements: translate, transform, transfigure and transcend. Near to the procedure of the 19th Century pictorialism, this process put the emphasis in ‘making’ photographs instead of simply ‘taking’ them. Actually,

Shulman didn't use to shot many pictures on each assignment. He found the way to summarize the whole essence of the house in one single scenography that collects everything that had to be said. As if they were a still life composition, Shulman's philosophy is not concern about Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment –maybe only as regards lighting–, because the moment is explicitly arranged by the photographer. He decides where, when and how things should happen.

Modern homes were therefore transformed into stages for the representation of the masks' dance of happy families attached to the conventional roles of parents and kids surrounded by machines – cars, appliances and toys– that guaranteed the efficacy of modern living. Among many others, the archetypical everyday scene could be exemplified in one of the images of the Case Study House No. 21, playing the role of the man getting home from work and a cheerful woman seated down waiting for his husband. In fact, John Entenza's Case Study House Program was the crystallization of the optimistic belief in a rational and economic way of designing modern industrial houses in Los Angeles^v postwar period and Shulman was the visual reporter of that dynamic architectural exploration.

For Shulman, therefore, Modern Architecture was a repertory of fantasy iconographic pieces and stages, a sort of aesthetic condensed space. It's notorious that both the architects and the photographer really believed in what they were designing and portraying. Taking into account what crisis of MoMo was about to signify right after, can we still look with good eyes at those invented and static representations? In Shulman's photographs, do we really believe that those actors – rigidly located in the stage crossing complicity sights among them– play the paradigm of the modern living? On this regard, the shots taken by the Magnum photographer René Burri –closer to the documentary and reportage photography–of some of Le Corbusier's master pieces are quite inspiring to support this suspicion. On the one hand, his shots of a decaying Villa Savoye in 1959 illustrate the failure of the paradigmatic machine of living, and, on the other, some of the pictures taken inside the apartments at the Cité radieuse in Marseilles that same year show that the emancipated use of some of the residents is distant from the desired atmosphere idealize by the architect.

Opposite to the rigid and distant reality of Shulman, the Modern Movement entrenched outside the United States and Center Europe –that 'other' Modernity– showed us photographically some more contaminated settings, more realistic on the other hand, portraying without ambiguity an imperfect social and urban reality, complex and hybrid, as Architecture itself. The brilliant 50's are as splendid –especially if we look at Shulman's images– as corrupted if considering the imminent collapse of the International Style. That 'other' photography, so to speak, is as sensitive to the phenomenological approach to local culture, tradition, history or place as the architecture and the city it seeks to capture. The work for example of the Spanish photographer Kindel (1905-1990) throws important information for analysis and evaluation.

Spain had, before the Civil War, its own avant-garde adventure and the photographs by Margaret de Michaelis for Josep Lluís Sert's *AC* magazine would be the testimony of that interrupted modern aspiration^{vi}. After the poor and autarchic decade of the 40's, Spanish modern architecture found its own way and expression, as well as the international recognition, throughout the 50's. Gómez, Ferris, Müller, Plasencia, Pando and, above all, Catalá-Roca and Joaquín del Palacio –Kindel– were the photographers that visually recounted that achievement. The first attempt to record what this prodigious decade was all about was the book *Arquitectura española contemporánea* (1961) that became the photographic album of the icons of Spanish Modern Architecture^{vii}.

Catalá-Roca^{viii}, in a way, could be next to what Shulman represented in LA, since he was the official photographer of the few buildings –like the SEAT automobile factories– that emulated the advanced steel and glass technological construction. Yet, Kindel shots were mostly abstract images full of poetry. The architecture he depicted got its best level upon the modern redefinition of the undying abstraction of the traditional Spanish vernacular architecture, its light, textures and powerful wide landscapes: the city as paradigm of modern living vs the modern redefinition of the uniqueness of Spanish identity. The result brings us back to the imaginary of a sort of a picturesque figurative costumbrism, a Neorealism of minimalist esthetic. Paradigmatically, the illustrated report Kindel made of the Colonization villages in Spain represents a completely different approach to what the narrative of photography owes to the idiosyncrasy of Modern Architecture as a global issue.

Contemporary of the CSHP depicted by Shulman in LA, the camera of Kindel focuses on the real identity of the distinctiveness of Spanish architecture.

There was indeed an attempt to match a sort Spanish International Style. However, at the time the SEAT factories shined in Barcelona, Eugene Smith was bringing to light the ultimate truth of the country on his "Spanish Village" report for *Life Magazine*. Smith, like Shulman, wanted to construct the stereotyped performance. Meanwhile, the picture Kindel took in the new Vegaviana Village in 1958 shortens this other way of seeing. There is not formal accuracy –the horizon line is tilted and the composition is not balanced in terms of fore and background relationship– and the characters are not playing a role: they were just into the setting. However, nothing distracts the viewer from the powerful geometrical abstraction and the quality of the textures of that utopian rural architecture. In the Caño Roto district in Madrid (1959) Kindel also takes another imprint, in this case close to a surreal Dalinian atmosphere around the objects and kids in the playground.

The authenticity of Abbott's reading of New York is recovered with Kindel: there is not intermediation between architecture and its photography. As opposite to the icon and propaganda, there was another photography of architecture that got rid without complexes of its complacent and protected welfare to display a different and intricate placing of Modernity. Compared with Shulman's committed mercantilism, nothing has to be sold by Kindel: this architecture is given for free. It is not a matter of adding elements to the image, but to getting rid of what doesn't contribute to ascetically reveal the essence of architecture: a scene compose by means of formal purity and abstraction. As Fernández del Amo, architect of Vegaviana, said, "the photography of Kindel, like the abstract art, reveals the plastic object itself, its essential aesthetic expression regardless its representation. It is not the photographic, but photography"^x.

Compared to Shulman, Kindel is not so concern about formal and technical issues, like for instance the perspective control or the depth of field. Yet, the soul of the space is genuinely captured, beyond its simply documentation, for both the building as an object or when its lived inside. When looking at the images of the apartment designed by Alejandro de la Sota in Madrid (1952) we find the same austere abstraction and purity. We don't need to arrange a setting to sell a particular everydayness because abstraction was not an option: was the consequence of an underlying condition. We could then say that it is not photography, but art.

Susan Sontag pointed out in her essay *On Photography*^x the separation of photography as art and as document. When the object of photography is architecture, the building becomes a fact, a fact that has to be recounted. As the opposite of Shulman's constructed view, Ed Ruscha's *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) was a series of systematic shots aimed to arrange a collection of unexciting architectural objects considered as 'facts'. From the first decades of the 20th Century to the collapse of Modern Movement en the 60's, architectural photography was walked through this ambivalent understanding of the target as fact or document, as media propaganda or as an excuse to jump into the artistic consideration. This agenda, as we have seen, is determined by the different definitions of modern architecture worldwide, by the dichotomy of the modern portray displayed by Shulman or by the photographers that captured the B side, so to speak, of Modern Architecture.

The discourse about the role of architectural photography in the conformation of the international historiography of the Modern Movement is therefore an issue needed of a constant critical revision. This is especially important when we realize that its power was, and still is today, a potential danger for architecture itself, as well as when we observe that photography, under its independency and own idiosyncrasy, is able to add to this dialogue a sharper and compromised reading of the advantages and disadvantages of the way of living that modernity. "Photography, by means of its instant flash, makes clear the plastic phenomenon of the inert matter that awaits as mendicant whom observes it with sensibility", asserts again Fernández del Amo. Photographs do not translate, they quote, says Berger^{xi}. Photographers are witnesses, not narrators: they are present but far-off. Recalling Bernard Rudofsky, we could also have claimed for photography without photographers.

ⁱ Ezra Stoller (1915-2004) developed a 50 years architectural photography career, working for leading architects like Mies, Wright, Rudolph, Saarinen, Bunshaft or Pei.

ⁱⁱ Cfr. Shulman, J., 1998, *Architecture and its Photography*, Taschen, Köln.

ⁱⁱⁱ Serraino, P. and Shulman, J., 2005, *Modernism Rediscovered*, Taschen, Köln.

^{iv} Cfr. Alcolea, R.A., 2009, *Picnic de pioneros. Arquitectura, fotografía y el mito de la industria*, Ediciones Generales de la Construcción, Valencia. On Luckhaus, Shulman says: "He did a lot of pioneering photography... very good commercial pictures... but they weren't 'art-like'". Shulman, J., 2000, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors*, Balcony Press, Los Angeles.

^v For a complete illustrated report of the modernization of Los Angeles see Heimann, J. (ed), 2009, *Los Angeles, Portrait of a City*, Taschen, Köln.

^{vi} Cfr. Mendelson, J., "Creating a Public for Modern Architecture: Sert's Use of Images from GATPAC to The Heart of the City" in Munford, E., and Sarkis, H., 2008, *Josep Lluís Sert : The Architect of Urban Design*, Yale University and Harvard University GSD, Cambridge.

^{vii} Flores, C., 1961, *Arquitectura española contemporánea*, Aguilar, Bilbao.

^{viii} He was also the photographer of José Antonio Coderch, the renowned agent of the Mediterranean modern architecture. Cfr. Catalá Roca, F., 2000, *Francesc Catalá-Roca, una nueva Mirada*, Fundación Juan March, Barcelona.

^{ix} Fernández del Amo, R., 1980, "El arte en la fotografía de Kindel", in Zarza, R. (ed), 2007, *Kindel. Fotografía de Arquitectura*, Fundación COAM, Madrid, p.30.

^x Sontag, S., 1977, *On Photography*, Anchor Books, New York.

^{xi} Berger, J., "Apariencias", in Berger, J. and Mohr, J., 1997, *Otra manera de contar*, Mestizo, Murcia, p. 96.