



Demolition in Ankara Periphery
2011, Photo by the author

architecture as image

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Architectural photography that generally aims to be a 'portrait' of a building, in the way of representing its best appearance, often it is far from offering a sense of the architectural experience. Architectural photography can be classified into three basic types, the most representative of the experiential aspect being partial photographs that can re-create our movements and perception as we move in space. Furthermore, few architectural photographs refer to the sense of the materials or how our bodies relate to the physicality of the building. It is often disregarded that buildings like people change in time and have a life story. If photography is usually time-specific, can it, through certain techniques, make us understand the duration in time of an architectural object? This paper will try to affront these aspects and problems of architectural photography.

keywords Architecture, Image, Photography, Dynamics of architecture

time and the image

Photography is a hybrid medium in that its relation to temporality is complex; it can give us a sense of the future or the past, or the present, because its object has been petrified in the present. Architectural photography can give us a sense of a futuristic environment, as when the work of Frank Gehry at Bilbao was first seen in the photographs that were taken of its sculptural, winding and shining surfaces. Years later in retrospect the image has shown how our understanding and experience has changed vis-à-vis the same object. Photographs of the Bilbao Museum, when are now compared to the photographs of other later work by F. Gehry, give a sense of déjà-vu or a sense of excess. On the other hand, often, the same building photographed from a view that is not familiar will leave us completely in the dark. As an example the photograph seen in **f1**, will make no sense even to people who have visited the Guggenheim in Bilbao (**f1**). Thus, often when we talk about architectural photography, we are referring to views of buildings that are well known, photographs through which buildings have been introduced to the world. Therefore, we think of 'portraits' of buildings established in the media. In this sense, architectural photographs are like 'celebrity' pictures. (Edwards, Steve, 2006, p. 7).



f1_Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry
Bilbao, Spain, 2012, Photo by the author

The same image observed at different times can offer important differences of visual experience. According to Henri Cartier Bresson, photography is 'an instantaneous action' (**f2**). If we want to go beyond this 'instant' we must take time. We really begin to see a photograph in time, as we wander through its surfaces. A photograph taken with the intention to 'sell' whatever it represents, usually tries to evade this 'after the first impression musings'. The reason why old photographs have the ability to draw us into them, is because they look alien and require a longer view, and then because they have become memories rather than advertisements. As any memory they take us back in time and require from us a longer period of contemplation in which not only do we discover some new details in the image, but also that we have the time to muse over them; each memory opens up to new memories, like a kind of psychoanalysis.

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f2_Behind the Gare-St. Lazare
Paris, France, 1932, Henri-Cartier Bresson
(Image source: google)



f3_House in Holland
Architect Albert van Der Schoot, Holland, 2016, Photograph by the architect

types of architectural photographs

How many ways can architecture be photographed? There may not be a fixed answer to this question, yet we can easily cite three photographic intentions in taking photographs of buildings. A kind that we often see in books or architectural exhibitions is photographs taken to inform the viewer about the general aspects of a building. These usually have an advertising function in that they aim to represent the building in as best light and appearance as possible, using special techniques of lighting and color and viewpoint. They look at the building from an ideal viewpoint, often correct a perspectival distortion and present the building as though it were an industrial object. The second type of architectural photos usually does not aim to make us know the building in general but approach the formal aspects of the architectural object with a view to show the aesthetics of some of the architectural forms in certain lights (f4). The third is more complex, and looks at architecture as a work of art that should be appreciated for its uniqueness. This is different than an advertising photograph; there are no special tricks of lighting and color, no make-up so to speak; but the photographer aims to understand the identity and the identifying forms of a building, or of a piece of architecture. These photos can be of parts rather than the whole; the careful attention to formal attributes may not make us know the building in its totality, yet introduces qualities of a building without which the building would have no meaning. These partial views are usually not used in advertising or in documentary photographs of buildings, except when a building is introduced through a collection of images. This may be the best and most honest way of introducing a building (f5).



f4_Medici Chapel by Michelangelo
Florence, Italy, 2016, Photo by the author

Any piece of architecture or environment can be photographed to create an artistic, or aesthetic image. But to what extent can this be called architectural photography. By architectural photography I tend to understand specific photographic images. The third type of photographs I mentioned would most closely be called architectural photography, either they are partial or view the whole of a building, but with the intention to convey a certain 'character' of the building. Here one should ask, what is architectural 'character'?

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f5_ Laurentian Library Staircase by Michelangelo
Florence, Italy, 2016, Photograph by the author

Heidegger's argument about *techne* and *technik*, will help to differentiate between an advertising photograph and one that offers an architectural character. In explaining how photographs can be works of art and resist technology, Diarmund Costello offers the concept of the presence of the artist in her work. (Costello, 2012, 101-113) Costello asks 'how art could resist technology when the art is photography'. Costello answers this question by asserting that any expression that is worth being called an art 'preserves a space for"artistic character"'. (Costello, 2012, 112) I use the same expression as "architectural character", claiming that architecture is an art form. "Preserving such a space is how art internally resists the reduction of human being to a faceless, interchangeable quantum of resource: we value the work of particular artists, analogously to the ways in which we value other persons..." (Costello, 2012, 112). In other words art resists the invasive power of technology which reduces all things to resources that can be consumed.

According to Heidegger, while *techne* (art) is a 'product of truth setting itself to work', *Technik* refuses to allow anything to show up as concealed as unintelligible, as resistant to human ends.' (Costello, 2012, 103) In this sense, I distinguish between photographs which use technology to 'sell' a work of architecture, thereby reducing it to an object of consumption, and those where the photograph is 'dependent on the mental states of the photographer' where the artist is present in the work. (Costello, 2012, 110) Thus the work becomes a work of art, incorporating the 'nature', the 'phusis' of the artist which, according to Heidegger, is inexhaustible.

architecture in photography

The image also has a certain lifetime in which what it presents can have different meanings. We can see the image differently each time we look. Today as we are looking at Atget's images we understand them differently than when they were first seen, at the time that the image corresponded to the image of the site. Often buildings are photographed as though in a sterile environment, without people around. What makes architecture alive is how it relates to the environment and to people. The inanimate material of architecture becomes alive in contrast to human action and to the human body. A good photograph of a building will often make us feel the coldness or warmth of stone, the hardness and impenetrability of concrete. Good buildings attract people to touch and to feel them. Few architectural photographs have been aware of this (f7). Often buildings do not change drastically in time but their environments do, sometimes the way they were painted, or the window frames, or some details may change creating a sense of alienation. When we look at old photos of buildings that we know, we think we are seeing another building. Therefore it is also important to introduce buildings through their ageing in time; buildings can be understood like personalities who are in time young, mature and old. I do not know of many architectural photographers who return to their subject again after years to see how it has aged or changed.



f6_Contemporary Art Museum

Niteroi Oscar Niemeyer, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2004, Photograph by the author

In reality very little of the architectural object is seen or experienced as a whole. Architecture's difference from many other arts, and its richness depends very much on its being experienced sequentially in time and in space. The temporal sequence of architectural experience can be akin to music which is also only understood in time and in memory. Buildings can never be seen in their entirety, we can only at most see two of their elevations and usually from quite some distance, meaning that they are often seen as a silhouette

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form. Renaissance architects were very much aware of this, thus they created the idea of a façade the proportions and geometries of which would correspond to the idea of the whole design. Alberti, in his book on architecture gives painting as example because, I think, he understands that usually architecture seen as a whole would require the principles used in painting (Damisch, 2016, 65-92). Of course, today, photographs of buildings can be taken from very high altitudes, using all kinds of devices and even helicopters. Yet, this is not an architectural experience but a cognitive one; such images give us knowledge of the architectural object, without our experiencing it. Yet, architects also create such unusual vistas through internet imaging, during the design process. To what degree these images reflect what the building would really be like when finished, is questionable. The very fact of their being on the screen and colored in artificial ways transforms the building into an object of desire at best. Before the computer architects usually used drawing techniques, such as isometric and axonometric drawings of their projects. In my estimation these were truer to life, since every mark on the paper was the outcome of the architect's intention.



f7_Interior of the Niteroi Contemporary Art Museum

Oscar Niemeyer, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Photograph by the author 2004

We almost always experience and appreciate architecture piece by piece. A good building will help us create a continuum between the different sequential experiences and thus, a whole image will be constructed in our minds. When we admire a building, we usually look at it piece by piece, after taking in the whole in a random or summarized way. We experience each vista for its own sake and also for how it relates to the previous one. A good photograph of architecture can only give back to us this vista, sometimes as interpreted by the photographer in its different light conditions, and often, if it is a good photograph, as it represents the aesthetic aspects of this vista. A good photographic representation of a building would generally be a series of photographs of many different vistas of our experience as we circulate through the building and around it.

I would also claim that architecture is often experienced not so much in itself, but in how it presents the world to us. Although, as mentioned above, aspects of a building can offer aesthetic experiences, it would not be correct to call these 'architecture'; they are, rather pieces of a design, or objects in themselves. I believe that shapes of walls, of openings, of ceilings, besides being the objects of experience, condition the way we

experience our own body, the light, the view of the exterior, the opening to an interior space, etc. A photograph can only offer a single aspect or a single vista of the architectural object. However, by itself this vista can offer us multiple spatial forms, or graphic effects through light and dark. Thus sometimes a wall can disappear to create something else, a stimulus for the imagination, or a void, etc. What can be said here is that photography and architecture seen separately or in connection with each other interact and transform each other. The new vision and/or interpretation that emerge through the photograph can be yet another creative and poetic experience. If this is true then the photographer has captured the dynamics of architectural experience even in a single shot.

realism

The issue with 'representation' or 'realism' poses another problem: Each time a new media is invented, it has claims to have approached reality more than what was possible before. With painting this has happened, as we know from the story of Giotto's Madonna painting. As it was paraded down the streets, people fainted thinking that it was real. Probably the same illusion happened as the first photographs were being seen, or the first time films were being watched. Today, not only photography, but also painting, or art in general tries to get closer to reality either through new visual techniques or by getting closer to the everyday and the quotidian. Photography's relation with reality is that generally speaking the image is a kind of copy of what was in front of the camera. This aspect makes it possible for us to use photographs as documents for all kinds of activities, from teaching to criticism. In the beginning of the 20th century many architects, as well as Corbusier used photographs to enlarge their knowledge of world architecture. Photography, in Andre Malraux's understanding was the 'open museum'.

Finally, I would like to contest two misconceptions of about the use of photography today. Images used to present buildings are without doubt reductions and can only give us one quasi-representative image; the photographer who has the task of making an image that will introduce this building to the world usually uses an ideal point of view, and tries to show it without any perspectival or depth effect and often in color, to make it look real. As with portraits of people, this can be an idealization or a bad representation, or very seldom, as with the portraits of Holbein or Raphael, or Velasquez an insightful view of the person both physically and psychologically. I believe painting, with its special tricks and techniques to create an illusion of three dimensionality, can give us a truer image of the thing portrayed, whether a human being or a landscape. In painting, with every brush stroke or pencil mark the artist constructs his interpretation and understanding of reality. With a photographic shot, the captured moment can only give us an instantaneous view. Photography, normally, is without any depth. It creates three-dimensionality mostly through tonal variations, size effects or vanishing lines. Black and white photography is more apt to do this than color photographs, where the color sensation takes over.

The shallow space in a photograph is compensated by the effect of an instantaneous view; a quality of time rather than of space. Motion Film compensates this lack of spatiality by movement. In fact, often, even as we experience architectural space, it is our movement and sequential change of vista that creates a full spatial experience. A single photograph can sometimes create this effect partially only by using unusual eye-levels, as in the photographs of Rodchenko. In these unusual views the wide angle of view, which we are not used to, gives us a sense of expansive space.

If it is not the spatial effect, than often Rodchenko uses intense displays of light and dark, and uses shadows to indicate spatial orientations. These examples can serve as a basis to understand how partial views or unaccustomed vistas can create depth, which is otherwise difficult in photography.

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Color is especially a problematic issue, if it is aimed to render the photographic image more real. No photographic color can match the natural colors of the world. The experience of color, and especially of buildings are dependent on the materials, their surfaces, their capacity to reflect or absorb light, our closeness, the quality of the air through which they are seen such as humidity or dryness, etc. Therefore, often color photography distorts reality.

ending remarks

The majority of the great array of architectural photographs does not give us a true introduction to buildings or architectural objects; more often than not, they function as advertisements for consumption. Moreover, digital cameras which are used today lack convincing depth of field; the tonal variation of digits is even flatter than photography can usually be. Architecture, on the other hand, is often perceived piecemeal and for offering us experiences about the world, about light, about our body and our different senses. Therefore, a true architectural photograph is often one that will offer a partial view of the whole or a detail; for it is usually the attention to such details and their integration with the whole that makes good architecture.

I would like to end by remembering what Bataille had said about architecture: that architecture is what is left over after structure and function; then architectural photography really has a challenge, first of all to find what this 'left over' is and then how to photograph it.

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CV

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