

HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY: BOOK REVIEW

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Architecture Transformed: A History of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present, by Cervin Robinson and Joel Herschman; MIT Press and the Architectural League of New York, 1990; 192 pages. Originally \$40; frequently available used from \$25 from Internet booksellers.

When you photograph a building, are you inclined to add flair or pizzazz, using whatever composition, perspective or other techniques are available to produce a compelling or at least an attractive photograph? Or do you consider it preferable, for authenticity or realism, to show the scene straightaway, without embellishment? If you have pondered such questions, you are not the first. Since the beginnings of architectural photography nearly 170 years ago, practitioners have worked around and debated similar dichotomies, which proceeded through a succession of styles beginning with straightforward composition, evolving to refined but not overly obvious embellishment, as the field advanced with developments of enterprise, technology and vogue.

Robinson and Herschman produced this unique, highly informative retrospective of architectural photography in the late 1980s. To my knowledge, it is the only comprehensive book of its kind—focusing solely on the history of architectural photography—that has been published in recent times.

Each photograph reproduced in this finely illustrated volume tells a part of the story, with point-to-point reference in the narrative. The book is structured in four sections, covering the genre chronologically: 1839-1880; 1880-1930; 1930-1970; and 1970-Present (i.e., the late 1980s). From one era to the next, the relationship between architecture and photography, shaped by commercial opportunity, technology and style, is elaborated and examples provided.

Architecture was an ideal subject for the photographic processes introduced by J.L.M. Daguerre and William Talbot in 1839, since buildings were amenable to the very long exposure times required. Herschman elaborates how two styles of architectural photography emerged: “the elevation” and “the perspective.”

The elevation approach treated photography as an extension of architectural rendering—draftsmanship and drawing—as a means to illustrate detail as finely as possible. As such, the “elevation” photograph was a head-on, essentially two-dimensional rendering of the building façade. Similar to an architectural drawing of that time, the perspective was centered at mid-height of the building, such that ideally the photograph would be taken from an elevation in an adjacent structure; hence the term “elevation” for this style.

The perspective approach was a variant that emphasized three-dimensionality. Buildings were photographed from a corner viewpoint, to better show how the structure looked overall. This style encouraged creativity on the part of the photographer, and in later decades would lead to more experiential efforts. However in its first two decades, architectural photography was in the nature of stand-alone portraiture, with rather formal composition, rigorously straight verticals, and an elevated perspective—in both the elevation and perspective styles.

Interestingly, street-level photography of buildings was not undertaken for some years; it appears to have been considered inaccurate or unprofessional. Washington DC then played a role in the evolution of architectural photography. Unlike the densely developed European cities or New York, hardly any multi-storied buildings existed from which to photograph the several imposing new structures of Washington DC. Out of necessity, photographs of these lone public buildings, such as the White House, had to be taken from the perspective of ground level. Ultimately this style came to be accepted.

The Civil War in the United States provided another opening to innovation in architectural photography. Photographers of buildings destroyed in the path of war expanded the framework of composition to include ruins and desolate fields surrounding the building shells, so that the viewer could experience the terrible destruction.

Robinson and Herschman challenge the attitude that photography has followed or lived off architecture while contributing little of significance to its progress. (Leading photographer and instructor Kirk Gittings has stated with respect to architectural photography, “No other genre in commercial photography is so totally occupied with the interpretation of another art form.” In fact, however, the relationship has been more mutually beneficial than such descriptions imply.

Robinson makes a strong case that the selling and popularization of modern architecture in the 1920s and 1930s occurred only through a strong push on its behalf by a group of progressive architectural photographers who applied unconventional perspectives, lighting, nocturne and other new techniques to help create a new vogue out of modern architecture. A telling quote, from an article in 1934 by one P. Morton Shand:

“The two fields in which the spirit of our age has achieved its most definite manifestations are photography and architecture. Did modern photography beget modern architecture, or the converse?”

Without modern photography, modern architecture could never have been ‘put across.’ In the early nineteen-twenties architectural photography was as unimaginatively true to ‘life’ and conventional perspective as any other sort of photography. Men with the cultural equipment of beach photographers walked round buildings at a respectful distance like policemen on their beat flashing lanterns at the impeccably obvious. But the new sort of architects had their buildings taken by the new sort of photographers. A revolution in the technique of architectural photography resulted, which has revolutionized architectural criticism.”

What the “new sort of photographers” did was compose their images to illustrate and promote the spacious beauty, clean lines and functionality of the new modern architecture. The majority of the population was exposed to the new styles through published images, not viewing on-site.

Robinson and Herschman undertook a daunting task in writing and illustrating this comprehensive history. In such efforts, space is always constrained; tradeoffs have to be made, and selectivity is the rule. The narrative of the book is written in such a focused, intense style that I was reminded of my old statistics textbooks. The reader must read and absorb every paragraph, in its order, or will come to consider themselves lost. Further, discussion of technological improvements is limited to impact on photographic technique. In other words, this is not a book to acquire if your main interest is the development of the camera or means of perspective control. Beyond statements, for example, that wide-angle and shifting lenses were introduced in the 1880s, which enabled new dimensions in creativity, there is hardly any description or elaboration of technical improvements.

Finally, I thought the treatment of photography of modern architecture in the post-1970 period to be weak, with emphasis on the outer boundaries of technique, with few photographs of premium establishment work that would have been fitting. Then again, the theme of this book is change, not static convention, and in this sense it may be appropriate that the story concludes with new directions that might possibly have been sustained, though it has been my observation that the more conventional styles of architectural photography have prevailed.