

## **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. 192 pages \$40

When you photograph a building, are you inclined to add essence or pizzazz, using whatever composition, perspective or other techniques are available to produce a compelling or beautiful 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 160 years ago, practitioners have worked around and debated similar dichotomies, which evolved through a succession of styles as the field advanced with developments of enterprise, technology and vogue.

Robinson and Herschman have produced a unique, highly informative retrospective of architectural photography, with some fascinating history. 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 through 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. 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 technically 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 in respect to architectural photography, “No other genre in commercial photography is so totally occupied with the interpretation of another art form.”) According to their book, however, the relationship has been more mutually beneficial than such descriptions imply.

Robinson, for example, 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.”

Robinson and Herschman undertook a daunting task in writing and illustrating this comprehensive history, and produced a remarkable product. 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 become lost. Another tradeoff: Discussion of technological improvements is limited to impact on photographic technique. This is not a book to acquire if your main interest is the development of the camera.

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. More photographs of premium establishment work would have been informative and enjoyable. Then again, the theme of this book is change, not static convention, and in this sense it is fitting that the story concludes with new directions that may or may not be sustained.

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