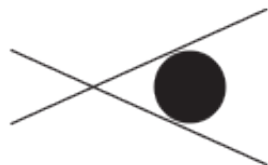


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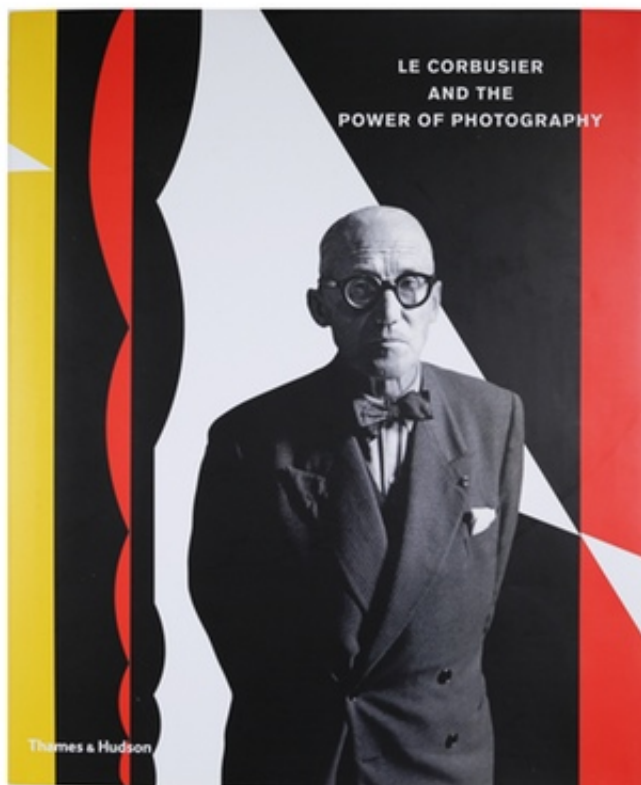
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May 9th, 2013

Reflections On the Concrete Mirror

By Barney Kulok



↔

Resist whatever seems inevitable.
Resist any idea that contains the word algorithm.
Resist the idea that architecture is a building.

Resist the idea that drawing by hand is passé.

Resist the claim that history is concerned with the past.

—Lebbeus Woods, excerpts reordered from *Architecture and Resistance*

Anyone interested in photographs and buildings, or how the two intersect, might have noticed a recent spate of books devoted to the subject. I count at least two dozen, published in the first three years of this decade, devoted to the work of significant architectural photographers, photographic projects for which architecture is the main subject, collections of architectural photographs, or more focused studies of individual architects' relationship to photography (in this case *Le Corbusier and The Power of Photography*, the first of three to come out this year addressing the architect's relationship to the medium). In addition to the recent books, panel discussions have been organized and exhibitions have been mounted—and several more of each is forthcoming. (*Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*, a major exhibition of the architect's work in various mediums opens at MoMA in June 2013.) This fact alone is not such a surprise; the question of how to represent architecture in two dimensions has engaged artists for centuries, and photographs of buildings are as old as the medium itself. Photography was born in the lap of architecture: the first chemically fixed photographic view, made from an upstairs room and framed by a window, depicts the slanting roof of a barn on Joseph Nicéphore Niepce's Burgundy estate. The history of photography is so tightly intertwined with architecture and the built environment that one wonders if this recent burst of attention is even worth noting. If it is not simply a coincidence, a question to consider might be, why *now*?

Le Corbusier and the Power of Photography is an excellent example of the recent intensification of interest in this topic. The book includes six essays by a diverse group of scholars and curators, encompassing the many ways the architect engaged with photography throughout his lifetime. The graphic design is bright and energetic; there is plenty of text, but it is primarily a book of images. Tim Benton writes about the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret's early experiments with a camera on his travels from 1907 to 1911, and the films and photographs he made when he returned to photography in the 1930s after abandoning his camera for a pencil and paper. Reproduced within this essay are many of the architect's own photographs and stills he made with a moving film camera. Catherine de Smet lays out Corbusier's masterful use of photographs in the design of his books and reproduces detailed mockups of many pages from *Une Petite Maison* (A Little House). Arthur Ruegg describes the photo-based murals Le Corbusier called "photographic frescoes" and the photo collages he designed for traveling exhibitions. Catherine Boone persuasively portrays Le Corbusier as a media-savvy propagandist, pioneering in his oversight of the manner in which his work was portrayed in pictures. He was so strictly controlling of the depiction of the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille that he restricted access to the construction site, forbade the publication of any photographs without his approval, and eventually produced a promotional film about the project for which he specified the film stock, wrote the script, and chose the camera angles, the dialogue, and even the music. In "Through Many Lenses: Contemporary Interpretations of the

Architect's Works," Jean-Christophe Blasér, a curator at the Musée de l'Élysée in Lausanne, Switzerland, stumbles through an essay about Le Corbusier and contemporary photography, getting some facts wrong and concluding with a convoluted claim that architectural photography has "contaminated" contemporary practice and led to a decline in "humanist" photography. Lastly, Klaus Spechtenhauser catalogs the many candid and staged photographs of the architect himself, looking (seemingly always) stylish and serious, intense and focused on whatever he was drawing, smoking, pointing to, or driving—even holding up a small pig. This final chapter leaves no doubt that Le Corbusier was clearly aware of the presence and power of the camera.



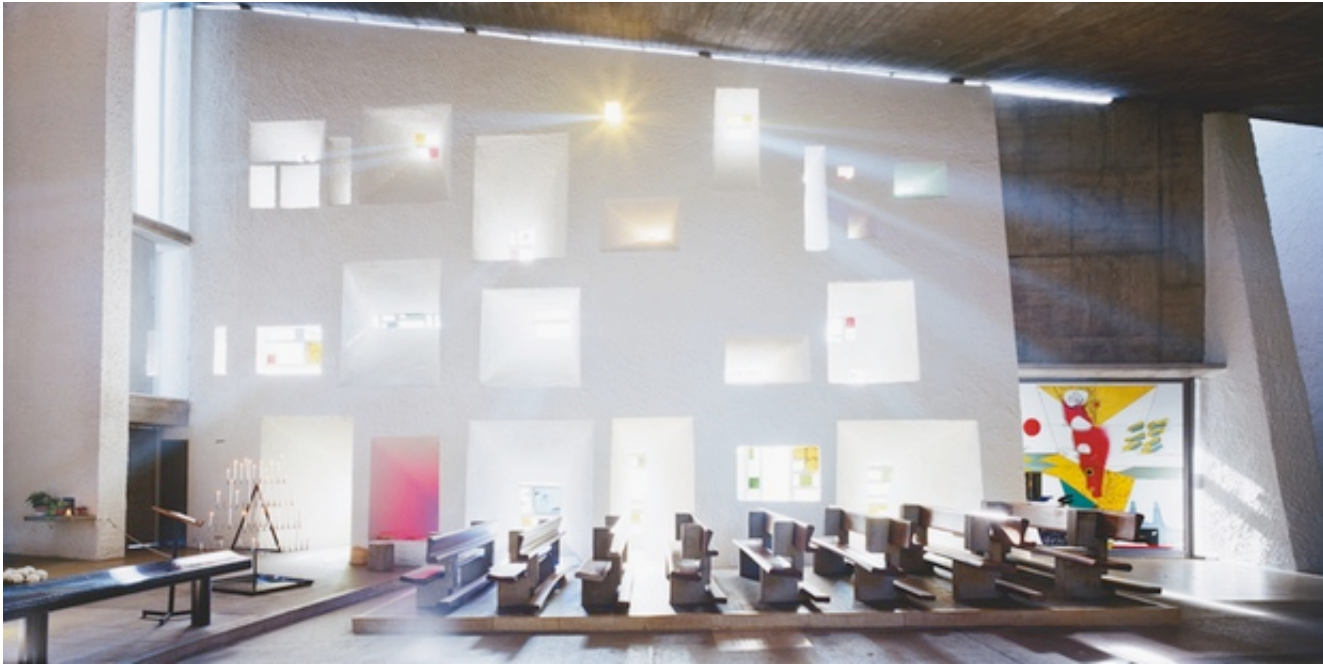
Final scene of Jean Sacha's film *La Cité radiieuse* (The Radiant City), 1952. From the book *Le Corbusier and the Power of Photography*. Courtesy Editions René Château.

Architecture is big news and big business. Contemporary architects are major players on the world cultural stage and, following Le Corbusier's example, most in the public eye have learned to carefully craft their image and exert some control over how their work is represented in the media. In the art world, it seems like every major museum is either adding a new wing, abandoning one space to set up shop somewhere else, or sometimes, tearing one building down to build a new one. This fact alone is not inherently problematic, although there are unfortunately few examples of expansion programs that challenge the prevailing conventions of museum design, which

recently seem to prescribe little more than neatly tailored square footage for staging fundraising events; notable exceptions include Steven Holl's addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, and Peter Zumthor's proposal for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's (LACMA) future campus. Over the last four years the Whitney Museum, Kimbell Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, LACMA, and three Harvard Art Museums have either added new wings or are currently constructing new buildings, all of which were designed by the office of Renzo Piano. The building boom in the museum world is of course just a side note to the construction boom happening all over the world. Cities are built practically overnight in China, and between 2010 and 2013 while all these books were being printed and published, the world record for tallest residential tower was broken three times. In one city. (Dubai.)

In the same three-year period a century ago, buildings in various corners of the world were designed and built by Antoni Gaudí, Adolf Loos, Frank Lloyd Wright, Cass Gilbert, and Walter Gropius, and the original Pennsylvania Station in New York, designed by McKim, Mead, and White, opened to the public. Frank Furness and Nadar died, and Eero Saarinen, Helen Levitt, Robert Capa, and Ray Eames were born. In a factory in Detroit, Henry Ford introduced the first moving assembly line, and while Europe was on the brink of World War I, engineers in Germany built the first prototype of the 35 mm Leica camera. In Paris, Igor Stravinsky premiered *The Rite of Spring* in the newly built Theatre des Champs-Élysées, an early example of reinforced concrete construction designed by architect Auguste Perret. (Le Corbusier had worked for Perret only a few years earlier.) Big machines for living and small machines for seeing were changing the way we experienced the world; the stage was set for a long affair between photographs and buildings, and Le Corbusier was squarely at the center of it.

Architecture in the modern movement developed in tandem with photography. The two disciplines, while fundamentally different, complimented each other perfectly. Buildings and photographs are both products of the convergence of art and science; even at their most ordinary and utilitarian, they each express the trace of some human ambition. If modern architecture provided photography with a perfect surface on which to project its own self-reflexive questions, photography gave architecture the perfect instrument to promote its image and safeguard its history. The parallel trajectories of photography and architecture in the twentieth century might explain their divergence in the beginning of the twenty-first. The argument can be made that photography was the most powerful force to shape our cultural memory of the twentieth century; indeed one underlying fact that unifies the books I have noted is that almost all of them address architecture of the previous century, even if the actual photographs were made in this one. Perhaps it is simply a matter of distance (even just over a decade) that could explain the recent surge of interest. Or maybe something has fundamentally changed about the way architects engage photography and the way photographers see architecture.



Olivo Barbieri, Interior of the chapel at Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp, France. From the book *Le Corbusier and the Power of Photography*. Courtesy Olivo Barbieri.

The “crisis” of the digital in contemporary photography has a parallel in discussions about recent architecture. Last September the architect Michael Graves wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled “Architecture and the Lost Art of Drawing.” He opened the piece with the statement, “It has become fashionable in many architectural circles to declare the death of drawing.” If declaring drawing “dead” is fashionable among architects, in the photography world it has become practically a professional obligation among curators and academics (and some artists) to proclaim and then celebrate or mourn not just the death of film but also the death of photography.

Photography, of course, is still very much alive, more so in fact with the proliferation of new technologies and varied platforms; more photographs are made now than at any point in history, and they are being made by a more diverse group of people, in more places, than ever before. Forecasts of the digital revolution dismantling the medium as we know it have proven to be greatly exaggerated. Photography, after all, has always been a technology on the brink of transformation; its history is demarcated by the failed experiments and technological innovations that constitute its evolution. When daguerreotypes were displaced by tintypes and ambrotypes, which later fell out of use in favor of paper prints, there was both a gain and a loss. The same thing can be said for the invention of smaller, faster, hand-held cameras that liberated photographers from the unwieldy, tripod-mounted view cameras to which they had been bound. The transition from film to digital is not so different. It is also a notable fact that as one technology edged out another, the displaced processes remained largely available to any photographer willing to spend a little more time (and, often, money) in the darkroom (see Aperture’s recent publication of Chuck Close’s daguerreotypes, or any of the books on the work of Sally Mann).

Architecture begins on the page and strives to become a thing in the world: each phase of the

design process adds a layer of complexity to a project as it moves closer and closer to becoming a real building. Photography begins with the world: a photographer selects a view; the camera simplifies it, transforms it into a digital file or negative; and, after further editing and interpretation, a positive impression of that image reenters the world. Today pictures are less and less likely to ever escape the confines of the screen. While technologies have changed the way both architects and photographers see and study buildings, it is the dematerialization of the photographic print that has most significantly changed the way we consume pictures. In the architecture world several notable figures have voiced concern over the increasing digitalization of design and the corresponding disappearance of drawing in schools and among young architects. Back to Graves, who wrote, “Drawings are not just end products: they are part of the thought process of architectural design. Drawings express the interaction of our minds, eyes, and hands.” Drawing, as part of the making and studying of architecture, has no parallel in photography. When learning how to use a camera, regardless of whether the image is projected onto a digital sensor or a piece of film, there is no better way to learn than by making and looking at lots and lots of photographs. Historically, photographs have been effective tools to illustrate and study architecture; they can describe surfaces and imply volumes, and they can highlight the spatial and geometric complexities of an architect’s design; but most importantly, especially for photographers and students of architecture, they travel well. Photographs of buildings act as stand-ins for the things themselves. As curator Joel Smith points out in another recent book, “A photograph preserves a sectional outtake of the past—the core sample of a moment in Alexandria or two minutes in Spain. When the camera’s subject is an enduring structure, the photograph accomplishes a kind of tunneling-through of space-time.” While pictures will never replace the multi-sensory experience of the body moving through space, photographs can carry the image of buildings through time.



Stéphane Couturier, *Secretariat no. 3*, from the series *Chandigarh Replay*, 2006–07. Courtesy Stéphane Couturier. From the book *Le Corbusier and the Power of Photography*.

The camera became the most powerful and effective mechanism to advance and diffuse the image of modern architecture in the twentieth century, and Le Corbusier was the first architect to recognize and harness the power of photography. Lucien Hervé was the photographer Le Corbusier turned to to provide the most vivid and flattering vision of his work; architects have followed his example and employed photographers to maximize the impact and reach of their buildings. New design tools have offered architects many options for drawing and rendering hypothetical spaces from different vantage points (including impossible ones); like virtual-fly-through animation, the camera view has become just one more tool in the architect's expanding toolkit. Architects can virtually "photograph" their buildings before they are even built (3-D renderings of apartments are often listed on real estate brokers' websites in place of photographs). These new technologies have many critics who, understandably, worry about the growing distance between architects and the world. Putting aside the voices of those who naïvely think that architecture can march into the future with no regard for the past, and the symmetrical bias of those who reject all the new digital models and technologies without thought or consideration, most would agree that the new technologies are undoubtedly changing architectural practice. Is it

possible that the recent outpouring of interest in the relationship between photography and architecture is a reaction against the increasing digitalization of both? Is this a moment of collective longing for a not so distant past, or is it evidence of a desire to reconsider photography's ongoing exchange with architecture? Are we looking to create a different kind of relationship between photographs and buildings, in the face of the relentless onslaught of images?

A few blocks from my studio in Long Island City there is a public park that was recently built along the Queens waterfront. Paid for in part by developers to attract residents to a new luxury housing project, the park lies in the shadow of the neighboring towers. There are some nice things about it, but above all I appreciate it as a generous seat from which to view Manhattan. This park is the third point in an important architectural triangle; to the northwest, at the southern tip of Roosevelt Island, is the newly built FDR Four Freedoms Park designed by Louis I. Kahn and directly across the river to the west are the United Nations Secretariat and General Assembly buildings, designed by Le Corbusier, Oscar Neimeyer, and others. The park, unfortunately, does not live up to its geographic potential. Something about it feels off. Maybe it is the uniformity of the undulating backs of the built-in lounge chairs, the height and shape of the brushed-steel lampposts, or the curves of the paths encircling the central lawn. Something about the perforated metal backing of the benches and bulging lines of the Cor-ten steel planters reads as computer-generated and cold, soulless. Even the trees look fake; planted awkwardly along the pixelated tile paths they feel like paper cutouts in an architect's scale model. Crossing the wide avenue at the edge of Queens and entering the park, it feels as if you have left the city, and indeed the world, behind. The park stretches out before you like a life-size, but lifeless, AutoCAD rendering. At least that is how it looks, and feels, to this photographer. Nonetheless, when walking along the wide boardwalk or sitting and watching the city stand still, it is easy to forget about such things. The sky opens up at just that point along the coast in a way that feels unusual, and expansive, in this city of splintered skies. The view of Manhattan from the park is more vivid and exciting than any I know looking out from the island itself. Key architectural monuments line up across the river like they are posing for a class picture: The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the UN Headquarters, and, in the distance, the new World Trade Center. Soon a new public library, designed by Steven Holl, will be built at the edge of the park, and it promises to offer some relief to those of us, in this corner of the city, who have wished for a more thoughtful and exciting space to visit. What architecture gives us, after all, is more than just buildings to look at; it provides the framework for a set of accumulated experiences.

Barney Kulok is a photographer who lives and works in New York. He has presented solo exhibitions at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, and Galerie Hussenot, Paris, and is currently included in the group exhibition Traces of Life at Wentrup Gallery, Berlin. His book Building: Louis I. Kahn at Roosevelt Island was published by Aperture in 2012.