

Architectural Photography

Adrian Schulz

Architectural Photography

Composition, Capture, and Digital Image Processing

Revised Second Edition

With Comments by Marcus Bredt

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Adrian Schulz
kontakt@architekturphotos.de
www.adrianschulz.de

Editor: Gerhard Rossbach
Copyeditor: Cynthia Anderson
Proofreader: Sarah Castellanos
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1 Foreword

The digital photographic medium is currently on an unprecedented roll, and ever-increasing numbers of people are beginning to experiment with the challenges and rewards of this most modern medium. Thanks to the digital revolution, architectural photography, with its endless variety of exciting subjects, has won many new fans among beginners and experienced photographers. Architectural photographers today are blessed with endless creative ways to capture and display their subject.

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and this is particularly true in the field of architectural photography. There is no better medium than a balanced, well-taken photograph for capturing and displaying the look and feel of a building. This book uses numerous pictures to illustrate the examples described in the text, and provides answers to many theoretical and practical questions regarding equipment, technique, and the reasons why sometimes buildings look so different in a photo than they do in reality. There are also comprehensive sections on ways to improve your images and the opportunities presented by the magic of digital image processing.

You will quickly find that architectural photography is a unique and fascinating photographic genre.

1.1 What Is Architectural Photography?

The term “architectural photography” describes both the subject (architecture) and the means of capturing it (photography).

The word “architecture” comes from the Greek “arkhitekton”, which consists of roots meaning “chief” and “builder”. Architecture is ubiquitous in our lives, and its primary function as shelter encompasses a great many functional uses. Architecture is practically a human’s second skin. Le Corbusier once said, “Architecture is one of the most urgent needs of man, for the house has always been the indispensable and first tool that he has forged for himself.”

Architecture takes on an extremely broad range of forms, from simple, primitive huts, the ornate temples of antiquity, and the purely functional factories of the industrial revolution to today’s urban landmarks of concrete and glass. Mankind without architecture would have remained anchored in the stone age, with few options of places to live, sleep, eat, work, trade, produce, withdraw, rest, administer, and educate. In many regions, climatic conditions would make life without architecture impossible.

The word “photography” comes from the Greek “photos” and “graphé”, which means “drawing with light”, and describes a technical means of optically capturing the likeness of objects and making them palpable in places where they cannot normally be seen. Photography thus propagates images of buildings into the wider world, enabling people to view them in a wide variety of circumstances - whether in newspapers, books, posters, the Internet, or in galleries or museums.

1.2 The History of Architectural Photography

1.2.1 Early History



Fig. 1: A mural in Pompeii, 1st century AD

The history of architectural photography stretches back to the beginning of the 19th century, when the very first photographic attempts were made. Prior to these experiments, the extreme significance of architecture to mankind gave rise to the first paintings of buildings in ancient times (fig. 1). Paintings of buildings are two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional objects, although they are not as directly connected to specific buildings as architectural photographs. Renaissance painters like Michelangelo or Raphael painted bold architectural visions (fig. 2). During the Baroque period, painting was used as an integral part of many architectural designs—wall and ceiling frescos often served to enhance the design of the building itself, and painted surfaces were used to extend architectural space (fig. 3). At around the same time, architectural subjects began to represent a separate, independent genre, especially in the context of Dutch Baroque painting. Public squares and buildings were reproduced in context and in great detail (fig. 4). Other artistic techniques, such as the etchings popular at the time, also used architecture as their



Fig. 2: Raphael, The School of Athens, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican City, 16th century fresco



Fig. 3: Cosmas Damian Asam, ceiling fresco in Ettlingen, late Baroque period



Fig. 4: Jan van der Heyden, The Church at Veere, 17th century, oil on canvas



Fig. 5: Matthäus Merian, Lübeck, 17th century, etching

subject. European cityscapes by Matthäus Merian (fig. 5) are a particularly good example of this subgenre. The veduta paintings popular in 18th century Italy took extremely realistic representations of landscapes or cities as their subject. While creating his famous paintings of Venice and Dresden (fig. 6), Bernardo Bellotto used the *camera obscura* as a technical aid to producing realistic work. The idea, which goes back to Renaissance times and was also used by the Dutch Baroque painters, is considered to be the forerunner of the modern photographic camera. In Bellotto's era, the device took the form of a portable box with a lens that projected the view in front of the lens



Fig. 6: Bernardo Bellotto, View of Dresden, mid-18th century, oil and tempera on canvas

onto a ground glass screen, and enabled the artist to accurately reproduce the perspective of the chosen scene (fig. 7). The device guaranteed precise perspective in paintings and drawings and continued to be developed as a result.

1.2.2 The Invention of Photography

Although the camera obscura and light-sensitive materials had already been discovered, the invention of the modern photographic process did not take shape until the beginning of the 19th century. In 1827, Nicéphore Niépce used an exposure of several hours and an asphalt-coated plate to capture the view from his window. He called the resulting image a *heliograph* (fig. 8). This earliest surviving photograph already encapsulates one of the main hallmarks of an architectural photo, namely, a depiction of perspective. This image is, coincidentally, also the first architectural photograph, even if the subject was chosen for practical rather than aesthetic reasons. Alongside still lifes, the static nature of architectural subjects made them popular in the early days of photography when extremely long exposure times made it impossible to capture moving subjects.

At around the same time as Niépce, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot were experimenting with ways to capture photographs that involved exposure times of just a few minutes. Daguerre's street scenes (fig. 9) are famous examples from this period. His *Daguerrotype* images were all unique and unfortunately cannot be duplicated. Fox Talbot's *Calotype* process couldn't reproduce the same level of detail as Daguerre's plates, but its negative/positive principle made it possible to duplicate images once they had been captured (fig. 10).

The new medium developed quickly in the following years (fig. 11). An album of photographs of the world's most famous buildings was presented in Paris in 1841, and by the end of the 19th century, photographs were becoming an important element of architectural books and magazines. The disassembly, move, and reassembly of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace and the building of the Eiffel Tower in Paris were both documented photographically (fig. 12). Architectural photography began to be used to make foreign countries and cultures accessible to the general public, as well as to document the possessions of individuals and institutions. At this time, reproducibility and documentation were the main motivations behind architectural photography, so the resulting images were correspondingly static, conservative, and often cumbersome.

1.2.3 The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Changes in architectural styles following World War I brought changes in how buildings were photographed. The Bauhaus movement founded by Walter Gropius in 1919 began to consider photography as an art form, viewing the

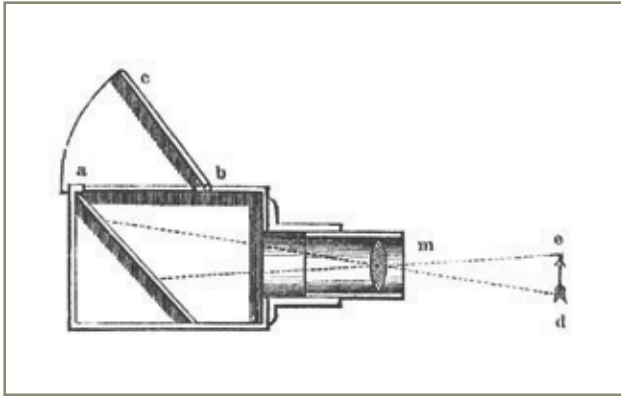


Fig. 7: The Camera Obscura



Fig. 8: Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, View from the Window at Le Gras, Chalons-sur-Saône, 1827



Fig. 9: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Boulevard du Temple, Paris, 1838



Fig. 10: William Henry Fox Talbot, Boulevard des Capucines, Paris, 1843

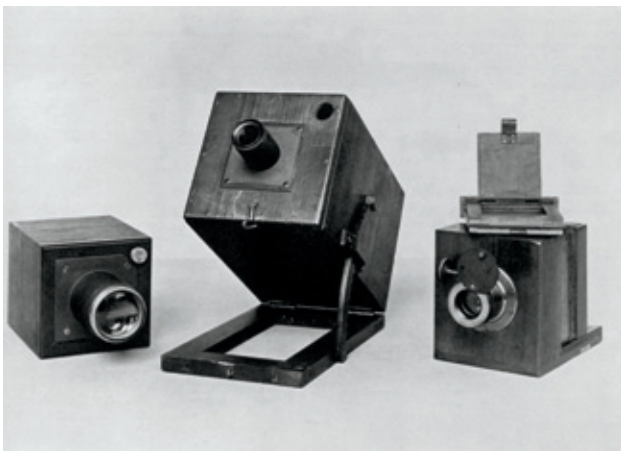


Fig. 11: Mid-19th century cameras



Fig. 12: Pierre Petit, The Building of the Eiffel Tower, Paris, 1888



Fig. 13: Leica II, 1932

medium as “the perfect combination of manual dexterity, technical progress, and artistic expression”. The German photographers Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander, and Karl Bloßfeldt practiced a photographic style termed “New Objectivity”. American artists like Walker Evans began to photograph purely functional subjects such as grain silos and factories. Using selective composition and unusual viewpoints of existing structures in their images, photographers began to give architecture a dynamic of its own.

Technical progress in the following years increased the quality of architectural photos, while outstanding photographers like Andreas Feininger experimented with self-built cameras. It was Feininger who developed the world’s (then) largest telephoto lens, and with it a new way of taking photographs. The advent of pocket-sized 35mm cameras prior to World War II (fig. 13) encouraged spontaneous, subjective photography, and the medium became available to the masses. The flexibility of smaller camera systems transformed the camera into a new kind of notebook and gave birth to modern photojournalism. Post-war architectural photography developed into a purely practical form of documentation, especially in Germany, and served mainly press and advertising purposes.

Artistic architectural photography began to develop as a genre toward the end of the 1950s. Artists such as Hilla and Bernd Becher systematically photographed anonymous, monumental industrial architecture, creating extensive sequences of images showing buildings in various states of decay. The idea of the documentary photo series gained worldwide popularity and blurred the distinction between “good” and “bad” architecture. Buildings that didn’t conform to the perceived aesthetic of modern architecture received just as much attention, and the advent of art galleries and the large-scale production of coffee-table books in the 1970s underscored the importance of the genre as a whole. Whether ancient or modern, grouped or free-standing, well-known or strange—, the range of potential architectural subjects is virtually unlimited.

The popular photographic boom continued toward the end of the 20th century. International exhibitions travelled the world, and prices of photographs at auction reached previously unheard-of levels. The introduction of digital technology brought with it the ability to correct image perspective and distortion—tasks that were previously extremely difficult to perform. Traditional aspects of architectural photography, such as the documentation of construction sites, began to take on artistic aspects, giving architectural photography a twin role as an artistic and documentary medium.

The development of digital photography over the last 10 years hasn’t changed architectural photography per se, but has brought about enormous changes to the methods used to perform it. Although digital technology has banished 35mm and medium format photography to the role of niche practices, large format cameras capable of producing higher quality images than their digital cousins are still in widespread use, in spite of the enormous cost involved.

1.3 Authenticity in Architectural Photos

Just like in the field of architecture itself, there are various approaches available to shoot architectural photographs, ranging from purely functional to complete artistic abstraction.

Documentary architectural photography walks a narrow path between presenting a neutral visual experience and an authentic representation of the inner values of a building (fig. 14). Here, the composition has to limit itself to communicating information—otherwise, the building will lose its central importance and the photo itself will become the center of attention.

This raises the question of whether it is actually possible to shoot 100 percent authentic architectural photos. Even the most perfect, realistic architectural photo has a certain degree of intrinsic abstraction, if only due to the artificial scale of the reproduction or the lack of a third dimension. Ergo, it is impossible



Fig. 14: A documentary architectural photo

to portray a building absolutely authentically using external media. Additionally, a photo can only reproduce the emotions felt by the viewer in a given situation. In other words, the way a building is perceived where it stands is often completely different from the way it is perceived in a photograph. In his essay “Medien zwischen Sein und Schein” (“Media Between Myth and Reality”), published in 2000, the architect Meinhard von Gerkan said, “An architectural photo is almost bound to be a visual lie, because the medium seems to represent the greatest possible potential objective authenticity, [...] true to the fact that a lens is an incorruptible technical device. We know it is an illusion.”

At what point does architectural photography become art, and how can we differentiate between artistic architectural photography and its documentary sibling? The transition between the two is difficult to pinpoint, but it is safe to say that art begins where the intervention of the photographer begins to influence the purely documentary nature of a photo. This is where the choice of subject is no longer intrinsically connected with the impression made by the building. A building can be the central element of an image without actually divulging its function. This process makes us increasingly independent from architecture itself, and objective representation loses significance.

Further extrapolation of this line of thought leads unavoidably to the notion that a photo of a building can have a visual impact that is completely decoupled from the nature of the building’s architecture. The quality of the resulting image will then, logically, be judged on the basis of its own artistic merits, and not on the quality of the building it portrays. Using compositional techniques such as deliberate exaggeration, emphasis and omission, or simplification and distortion, we can influence the strength of specific effects to the point where the building itself becomes the photographer’s plaything—a clear indication that we are, after all, dealing with art (fig. 15).

1.4 Forms of Architectural Photography

Architectural photography in various forms is part of our everyday lives.

Documentary architectural photography: Many documentary architectural photographs can be found in books, magazines, brochures, and construction documents. In these cases, architectural photography takes the form of multiple images with accompanying explanations, plans, or drawings that are designed to precisely describe a building and its attributes.

Postcard photography: Architecture is often the subject of postcards, even if the photographer’s intentions and degree of precision are not the same as those found in documentary situations. Postcards often serve simply as proof that the sender was actually in a particular place. Such photos serve only as a means of recognition and are often reproduced with oversaturated colors, over-the-top effects, and scant regard for technical prowess.



Fig. 15: An artistic architectural photo

Vacation photography: Tourists often have similar intentions when they photograph churches, castles, and other landmarks. Such photos form personal memories. While architecture is part of the subject, the location is usually more important than the type of building. Interestingly, these types of photo are taken almost exclusively on vacation. In everyday situations where we live, buildings like these are considered neither newsworthy nor photogenic (fig. 16).

Advertising photography: Architecture often plays a role in poster, magazine, and TV advertising, and is often used to enhance the apparent significance of a product. Modern architecture stands for progress, technology, high quality of life, and glamour. For example, the automobile industry uses many manipulated architectural images in its advertising, employing stylistic devices such as color adjustments, deliberate distortion, stylization, image blending, and artificial reflections.

Artistic architectural photography: Artistic architectural photographs can often be found in galleries and exhibitions, usually in the context of a particular theme or artist. Here, architecture serves only as a means to an end, with no particular connection between the message of the image and the message conveyed by the architecture itself. In this case, it is the photographer and not the architect who is the focus of the activity.



Fig. 16: Although architecture is the subject of this vacation photograph, the building is much less important than the location