

Research, Speculation, Media. Contemporary agency of Architectural Photography

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This review offers a bibliographic overview aimed at framing the current state of digital photography in relation to the production and reproduction of contemporary architecture. It begins by examining key theoretical references that consolidate a critical interest in the ontology of the photographic image within contemporary thought, before moving into a selection of relevant texts and exhibitions that explore how these frameworks directly inform architectural practice.

The starting point -widely agreed upon by authors within the critical field- is that the image plays a fundamental role in constructing the reality we inhabit. The notion of the photographic image as a distinct phenomenon, different from images produced by other technical means, is central to many foundational postmodern texts, such as Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977), Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980), Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), and Rosalind Krauss' essays in *Notes on the Index* (1977), later collected in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985). Following the consolidation of digital media, virtual environments, and information networks consumed online, photographic criticism has reconceptualised its object of study and begun to interrogate the operativity of images in the present.

Throughout 2024, studies from the photographic and tech industries estimated that nearly 1.9 trillion photographs were taken by users of digital devices. This number surpasses the total amount of photographs taken worldwide from the invention of the daguerreotype to the commercial release of the iPhone in 2007. The emergence of Instagram in 2010 marked a turning point, with a reported increase of over 600% in image production since then. While difficult to visualise, such figures become tangible when translated into daily habits: on average, each person takes around 230 photographs per year. The evolution of hardware and software dedicated to digital photography has advanced to such a degree that the act of photographing has virtually eliminated

the technical barriers to producing an accurate visual record.

This proliferation of photographic images, and their modes of transmission and consumption, has been framed since the early 21st century as post-photography. The term was introduced by Geoffrey Batchen in his article *On Post-Photography* in *Afterimage*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1992) and further developed in his essay *Post-Photography in Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1997). For Batchen, photography had ceased to function as a material record of the real, becoming part of processes of appropriation and resignification that shifted the medium from representation to critical engagement with reality itself. Circulated through mass media, the photographic image acquired its own language -something previously denied by John Berger in his article *Appearances in Another Way of Telling* (1952). This new visual language, aligned with mass consumption, displaced photography's representative power towards its operational capacity, closer to the logics of archiving and manipulation.

Building upon Batchen's work, Fred Ritchin explores post-photographic conditions in relation to the digital in *After Photography* (2008), a context in which the dynamics observed by Batchen become amplified. In *La furia de las Imágenes* (2020), Joan Fontcuberta describes this scenario as one that has reshaped our visual order -characterised by "the immateriality and transmissibility of images; their profusion and availability; and their decisive contribution to the systematisation of knowledge and communication". This book completes a trilogy begun with *El beso de Judas* (1997) and continued in *La cámara de Pandora* (2010). Fontcuberta offers multiple examples that support Batchen's argument, particularly the claim that photography no longer measures reality objectively but has shifted towards curatorship, management, and the reinterpretation of images.

Andrea Soto Calderón contributes to this discourse by addressing the consequences of image excess in *La performatividad de las imágenes* (2020), arguing that quantity is not the problem per se, but rather the replication and normalisation of the codes that govern image production, which neutralise their critical potential. In *Le Travail des Images* (2019), Soto Calderón discusses with Jacques Rancière on how the image is not simply a fabrication, but an object that resists -first, through its independence from the creator's intent (something equally relevant to architecture); and second, through its performative dimension, which, as Fontcuberta notes, breaks free from the reality it claims to represent.

Architectural photography is no exception to the post-photographic condition. The visual record of built form -once a material epilogue to the design process- is today disarticulated by the disjunction

between object and image across a bifurcated virtual and material realm. This shift from representation to operativity, and the image's transformation into a data archive, anticipated over two decades ago in Flusser's writing, now informs the research of authors such as Lev Manovich (*The Language of New Media*, 2001; *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, 2017), Wolfgang Ernst (*Digital Memory and the Archive*, 2013), Daniel Rubinshtein (*The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, 2013), Andrew Dewdney (*Forget Photography*, 2021), and, lastly, John May (*Signal Image, Architecture*, 2019), who explicitly addresses the image's representational value within architectural design, reframing it as infrastructural.

Given these conditions, architectural photography can no longer be understood as an objective documentary practice. The photographic image is inherently bound to the medium through which it operates and must be situated within a specific discursive space: as an object of consumption, speculation, or investigation. Its operativity may lie in communication, artistic production, or in the very infrastructure of the architectural project.

In 2023, the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) launched a long-term research initiative, scheduled to conclude in 2029, examining the role of photography and digital media within architectural practice. Its first publication, *The Lives of Documents* (2024), is led by Bas Princen and Stefano Graziani. Both photographers have established relationships with architectural practices -OFFICE KGDVS in the case of Princen, and *baukuh* in the case of Graziani—and have long investigated the post-photographic condition of the image. In *Image and Architecture* (2018), exhibited at the Vitra Design Museum Gallery, Princen explores the disassociation of architecture's material and spatial qualities when translated to flat, printed surfaces. In *Questioning Pictures* (2017), shown at Fondazione Prada's Osservatorio, Graziani presents photography as a tool of narration, cataloguing, and reinterpretation, investigating museum archival systems to reconnect works across space and time through a curatorial, photographic, and research-based approach.

The Lives of Documents continues this line of inquiry, revisiting the CCA's archive through conversations between curators and contributing photographers, while addressing the blurring of disciplinary boundaries between architectural photography, documentary work, and long-term visual research. The publication features contributions from figures such as Jeff Wall, Lara Almarcegui, Lynne Cohen, and Thomas Struth.

From a speculative perspective, Graham Harman engages with the thought of Latour, Yaneva, Meillassoux, and Eisenman in *Architecture and Objects* (2022), theorising the virtues of non-literal approaches as a way to reveal qualities in architec-

tural objects that are not immediately apparent. *The publication Fiction and Fabrication: Photography of Architecture after the Digital Turn* (2019), curated by Pedro Gadanho and Sergio Fazenda Rodrigues and exhibited at MAAT in Lisbon, builds upon this premise. It showcases the work of authors such as Isabel Brison, Doug Aitken, Philipp Schaerer, James Welling, and Patrick Hamilton, who distance themselves from the apparent literalism of the camera through narrative and speculative strategies. Techniques such as collage, colour grading, posterization, blurring, layering, and unconventional printing methods are employed to construct images that resist normative visual perception. Against a backdrop of technological advances oriented toward hyperrealism, these authors offer a form of resistance by crafting diffuse, dreamlike, and destabilising representations.

Finally, architectural photography's most enduring field of engagement remains that of communication. In *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (1994), Beatriz Colomina argues that modern architecture is inseparable from its media construction. Since the advent of modernity, the focus of analysis has shifted from the built object itself to the system of representations that surrounds it. Given that most architecture is now experienced through images, these representations have come to define physical reality more than direct experience. Julius Shulman's photographs constructed the collective imaginary of the Case Study Houses, shaping North American residential design standards to this day - just as Català Roca did in 1950s and 60s Spain through Corderch's projects.

Today, media globalisation has led to the normalisation of visual criteria for presenting architectural images, with online platforms and digital repositories adapting to the dynamics of image consumption in the networked age. Photography magazine *EXIT* reflects this bifurcation in its double issue on architectural photography: *EXIT #36: Arquitectura I - La Mirada Profesional* (2010) and *EXIT #37: Arquitectura II - La mirada del artista* (2010), explicitly acknowledging this split. The first volume features the work of photographers such as Iwan Baan, Roland Halbe, Hisao Suzuki, and Hélène Binet, while the second presents images by Candida Höfer, Thomas Demand, Lucien Hervé, and Andreas Gursky. While one might question the categorisation of these artists, it is clear that the first volume reflects the established canon of architectural photography promoted by specialised publications and shared across digital platforms. As Colomina suggests -and as Lluís Juan Liñán further elaborates in *Web Architecture: From Reproduction to Production in the Internet Age* (2021)- the aesthetic codes of digital image reproduction have displaced the project's critical foundations in favour of an aesthetic designed for circulation, which has in turn embedded itself as a projective influence within architectural practice.