Review: Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century, by Claire Zimmerman

Jon Yoder
Kent State University - Kent Campus, jyoder31@kent.edu

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Copious maps, tables, and charts help to orient the reader, a necessity due to the breadth of disciplines and methodologies featured in this book. The color illustrations are all located in the appendix. While their presence is appreciated, their location is not ideal for the reader. A number of black-and-white postcards are reproduced in the first section. It would have been appropriate to include analysis of these images or, at least, an introduction to them. One of the strengths of this volume is that it offers frequent regional and continental comparisons. As many readers may be unfamiliar with Porto-Novo, the placement of the city within a greater context is useful.

The volume can be commended for acknowledging the many problems facing Porto-Novo. For example, Sinou’s analysis of the invention of Porto-Novienne heritage and Saskia Cousin’s concluding remarks attest to the complexities and dangers of monumentalizing Porto-Novo’s Vodun heritage. While the yobo, a circular altar for ancestors originally made of earth and now made with more durable materials, is one of the most recognizable Vodun structures, other altars are difficult to identify as they are linked with oral as well as aesthetic traditions. If made into tourist attractions, such sites would be in danger of desecration by members of other religious communities (187–88).

This collection of essays will interest specialists studying architecture, urbanism, and heritage preservation as well as others. It provides a model for works that reach across disciplinary divides to produce new knowledge on the complexities of African cities.

MICHIELE H. CRAIG
Los Angeles

Claire Zimmerman
Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 416 pp., 158 b/w illus. $35 (paper), ISBN 9780816683352

Architectural scholar Claire Zimmerman, author of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (2007) and coeditor of Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern: Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond (2010), has written another important book that extends her research on German and British modernism into the burgeoning field of visual media studies.1 An impressively researched book, Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century explores the complex reciprocal relationships between buildings and photographs before, between, and after the two world wars. Zimmerman uses the term photographic architecture to describe two types of interrelated cultural production: photographs of buildings for either commercial or avant-garde purposes, and buildings whose design and reception are informed by the logics and effects of photographs. She aims to “historicize those effects, and to make them relevant to the present and future” (5).

Zimmerman constructs a compelling alternative history of modern rationalism by tracing a range of productive tensions between buildings and photographs. She begins with a discussion of German modernism before World War I, carefully surveying a series of little-known PhD dissertations written between 1910 and 1914 by Walter Curt Behrendt, Adolf Behne, Paul Frankl, Paul Zucker, Walter Müller-Wulckow, and Siegfried Kracauer.2 Zimmerman convincingly argues that these six early scholars were able to conduct pioneering research on different models of Bildarchitektur—image surfaces on or in buildings—because architectural structure and skin were beginning to technologically and conceptually delaminate. Just as building envelopes attained freedom from structure, photographs of buildings began to circulate rapidly. This was no innocent coincidence. One of Zimmerman’s most intriguing observations is that this trajectory of early modern operative history celebrated surface before World War I, but it “died out after 1918” (31) and was replaced by theories of space.

Subsequent sections analyze the “intermediary” relationships between buildings and photographs in the interwar architecture of the Bauhaus and Mies van der Rohe in the United States, the postwar architecture of Alison and Peter Smithson, and the early postmodern architecture of James Stirling in the United Kingdom.3 Zimmerman’s own impeccable English translations from original German texts enable some of the book’s most important contributions. Her fluency helps to unearth certain discussions surrounding the underappreciated architectural photography of Lucia Moholy, László Moholy-Nagy’s spouse and creative partner at the Bauhaus (159–67). It also supports Zimmerman’s extended analyses of photographic architecture in Mies and Lilly Reich’s Glass Room at the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition The Dwelling in Stuttgart (1927), and Mies’s Barcelona Pavilion (1929) and Tugendhat House in Brno (1930).

Images of these projects, especially selections from a series of eighty sequential photographs of the Tugendhat House by Atelier de Sandalo, constitute a body of persuasive evidence that proves the power of the “raking diagonal view” to reflect existing aspects of Neues Bauen architecture.4 The propagandistic potential of these images reveals why Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, and Mies all used architectural photographs to promote their individual agendas as directors of the Bauhaus.5 The book might have benefited from an even closer analysis of these images and certainly from a tighter graphic relationship between visual and textual content. Herbert Bayer and Moholy-Nagy were both adept at using graphic design to construct multivalent relationships between photography and text. In fact, Zimmerman’s discussion of the striking qualities of their Bauhaus publications makes the limitations of contemporary academic book formats regrettably clear.

Zimmerman also analyzes the roles of large-scale photography in several major architecture exhibitions, including The Dwelling in Stuttgart, Mies van der Rohe at the Museum of Modern Art (1947), and the Independent Group’s Parallel of Life and Art at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (1953). This photographic evidence lucidly illustrates one of Zimmerman’s most important observations, that “modern architectural photographs were images of images” (304). In other words, architects designed buildings to be received as three-dimensional images even before photographers reframed them as two-dimensional ones.

The parameters of these self-reflexive compositions changed as cameras and buildings evolved. During the 1920s, the wide-angle lens of the popular
point-and-shoot Leica camera distorted the apparent dimensions of architectural space. Oblique one-point perspective photographs proliferated, making modern spaces seem deeper and slicker than they appeared in person. After World War II, however, new cameras with flexible focal lengths and greater depths of field enabled sharp, evenly focused photographs that appeared flatter than ever. Zimmerman suggests that a “nearly complete reversal” occurred around this time: “Uniform visual fields substitute for illusions of depth” (226–27). Her insightful exposure of a radical technical shift like this (and she discusses others) makes it impossible to attribute cultural agency to any singular photographic process.

The project with which Photographic Architecture could (and possibly should) be most directly in conversation is architectural scholar Beatriz Colomina’s 1994 book Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media, which focuses on the intermedial architecture of Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos. Although their central figures differ, both books carefully analyze modern architecture’s relationships with visual media. Indeed, Colomina and Zimmerman both construe buildings, drawings, and photographs as simply different forms of representation that are documented, disseminated, and produced through intense engagements with each other. It is where the structures and agendas of the two books diverge, however, that is perhaps most important.

Since Privacy and Publicity’s publication more than twenty years ago, theory as a modality of scholarship has famously come under attack, both within the field of architecture and in the broader culture. Other than occasional references to the likes of Roland Barthes, Hubert Damisch, and Jacques Rancière, Zimmerman conspicuously avoids theory. Indeed, the peeling away of any theoretical filter appears to be one of her main agendas. Referring to architectural scholar Manfredo Tafuri’s influential discussion of the Barcelona Pavilion as an empty sign, Zimmerman suggests that something akin to a phenomenological reduction “without the gloss of post–World War II theory” might bring readers closer to Mies’s actual achievement: ostensibly “a sequence of experiences hinged to specific sensory affect intended to act on the occupant” (77). Ironically, this materialist ambition to remove the ideological veil from history was one of Tafuri’s primary preoccupations.

In attempting to eliminate the “gloss” of theory, Zimmerman omits critical arguments made by Colomina and other contemporary architecture and media scholars. Understandably, the main geographical axis of her study runs through New York, London, and Berlin. But the lack of substantive engagement with West Coast scholarship—particularly the work of Edward Dimendberg, Anne Friedberg, Joseph Rosa, and Mitchell Schwarzer—seems like a missed opportunity to strengthen the book’s analysis. One of Zimmerman’s fascinations is the facility with which photographic architecture reframes commercial and avant-garde concerns. Architectural photography’s attempts to communicate with the general public through rarefied disciplinary techniques are typical of modernity, she insists. This is how “new visual forms from high art slowly become popularized in the mass media, where they retain just the scent of their former site” (147). This archaic conception of a tarnished transmission from high to low culture is perhaps why Zimmerman avoids California sources, which often expose the entertainment industry’s surprisingly potent and innovative cultural contributions.

This might partly explain why architectural scholar Sylvia Lavin’s Kissing Architecture is one of the only texts with which Zimmerman at least implicitly disagrees. “It may be that ‘kissing architecture’ by impregnating buildings with images absorbs and enfolds this condition of image making,” she writes. “Is this a matter of securing the arena of action itself from any necessity for activist commitment?” (307). With this concluding caution about the political dangers of an architectural autonomy in which buildings engage in illicit relationships with images, Zimmerman joins the now decade-long scholarly scramble to disassociate oneself from architecture’s “post-critical” project. But she also refreshingly refuses to appeal to divine theory authorities like Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze who dominated discourse in the last decades of the twentieth century. Instead, Zimmerman turns to the important work on Mies by architectural scholars Barry Bergdoll and Reinhold Martin. She does so without argument, however, instead adopting a straightforward style of carefully qualified observations and clinical descriptions of architectural effects.

In this respect, Zimmerman’s account of Weimar architects’ preference for neutrality over invention is both an inadvertent comment on her own rhetorical approach and an index of the current prosaic state of “post-theory” architectural scholarship. “On the whole [Weimar] architects tended to discourage innovation, preferring photographic neutrality to a distinctive artistic signature in all but a few well-known cases,” she explains. “They often saw skillfully composed photographic compositions as distractions from the ‘straight’ relay of architectural information” (145). Of course architectural photography is never purely objective. And architectural scholarship—despite its most laudable aims for accuracy and critical distance—is no more neutral than its photographic counterpart. Zimmerman is clearly aware of this fact, as her numerous thoughtful discussions of the political economy of photographic architecture reveal.

Curiously, however, although Zimmerman briefly celebrates operative historians like Reyner Banham, she refuses to assume her own legible position of critical advocacy. What types of photographic architecture does she personally desire? Indeed, the book’s deadpan reportage would benefit from at least a modicum of theoretical thickening. Even without installing the viscous psychoanalytic, “post-structural,” or “post-critical” filters used by Colomina or Lavin, Zimmerman could still recalibrate her own political economic lens to the acuity of Kracauer’s “therapeutic projective historical materialism” (38). After all, Kracauer’s rigorous experiments with contemporary (Frankfurt School) theory, while undeniably subjective, still imbued his scholarship with a radical precision that intensified his arguments and seduced audiences. Photographic Architecture is a valuable resource for architectural scholars concerned with the history of prewar, interwar, and postwar European modernism. With a sharper personal and ideological focus, it could have been an even
greater resource for scholars exploring the projective relationships between buildings and photographs.

JON YODER
Kent State University

Notes
3. The section on the architecture of Stirling, while fascinating, might actually dilute the book’s primary rationalist narrative by expanding into the territory of early postmodern collage and semiotics.
5. Some of Zimmerman’s most lucid passages involve Gropius’s paradoxical embrace and indict-ment of photography as a medium for represent-
ing architecture.
14. Deleuze’s concepts of “movement-image” and “time-image” could have productively informed Zimmerman’s own models of “rhythmic,” “montage,” and “panoramic” space in the archi-tecture of Mies. See Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement-Image (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Timothy M. Rohan
The Architecture of Paul Rudolph
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014, 300 pp., 40 color and 185 b/w illus. $65 (cloth), ISBN 9780300143935

Paul Rudolph was a monumental figure in the 1950s and 1960s, designing a number of important private and institutional projects and serving as chair of the Department of Architecture at Yale for almost a decade. His influence was strongly felt at that time, although it has waned since. Recognition of Rudolph’s importance has increased of late, largely due to the renovation of his best-known commission, the Art and Architecture Building at Yale. Timothy M. Rohan’s research has been central to the resuscitation of Rudolph and his legacy, and it is a pleasure finally to see it in book form.

In The Architecture of Paul Rudolph, Rohan wisely takes the vicissitudes of Rudolph’s reception as a central theme: Why was he so important in the mid-twentieth century, and why is he so much less so today? One might ask this question about many once-prominent architects—Pietro Belluschi, Ralph Rapson, and William Wurster come to mind—who wrote and designed actively in the 1950s and 1960s but left few clear followers. Although Rudolph’s situation is extreme, he exhibited a number of tendencies characteristic of American architects who emerged right after World War II: an admiration of interwar modernism, an interest in experimental materials and techniques, and a desire to adjust modern tenets to the cultural and regional conditions of the site. Rudolph was widely admired by critics and the interested public, appearing not only in industry journals but also in Time magazine—Rohan notes that he was “a ‘star architect’ long before the term was coined” (1).

Rohan’s primary goal is to compensate for the contemporary lack of attention to Rudolph’s career. His book is wide-ranging and thorough, tracing the architect’s work from his early years as a design assistant to Robert Twitchell in Sarasota, Florida, through the apex of his monumental academic and civic buildings in the 1960s, to the later work in New York and the Far East. The book’s coverage is encyclopedic, discussing in detail not only well-known buildings and projects but also many that have thus far escaped widespread attention. Even more important, the book offers readers the opportunity to assess all of Rudolph’s work in one volume, giving them a clear sense of the scope and diversity of his production.

A number of key buildings stand out and receive excellent treatment in Rohan’s account. The complexities of the concave roof on the Healy House (Twitchell and