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IMAGE-MAKING AFTER PHOTOSHOP: ARCHITECTURE, PUBLIC SPACE AND THEIR VISUAL DISCONTENTS[1]

Written by Pedro Gadanho

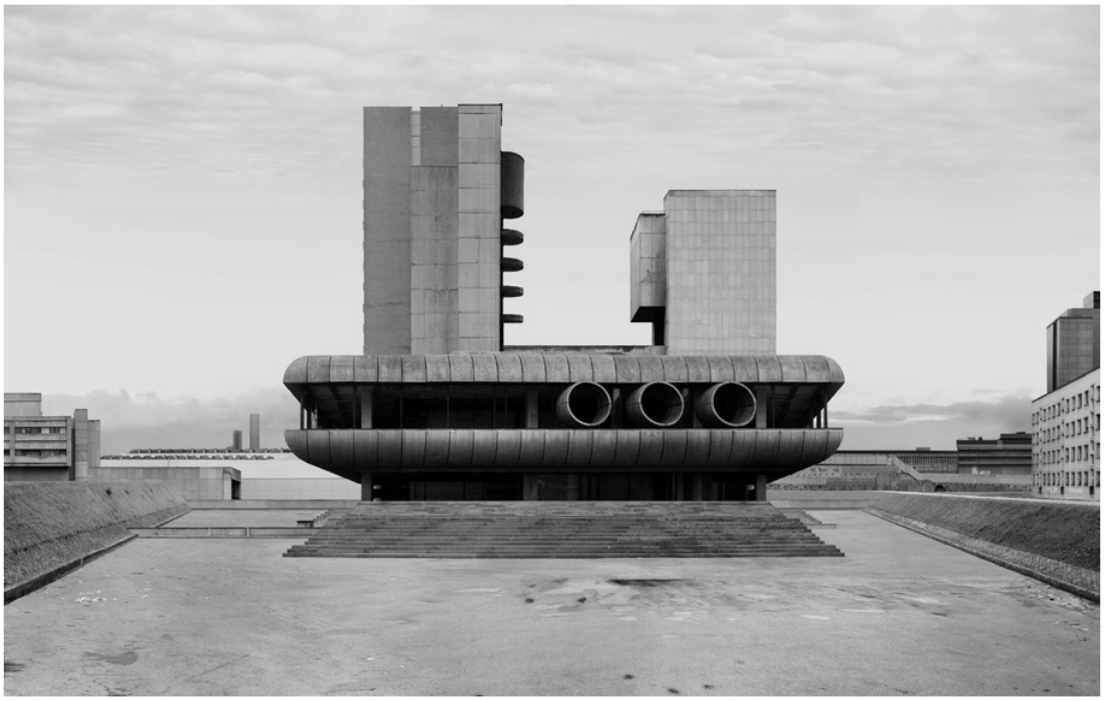
Nowadays, I like to refer to ''photography of architecture'' rather than to ''architectural photography''. This is intentional. Within the notion of architectural photography is the sense of a practice of image-making that gravitates exclusively around the field of architecture—thus relating to the stricter aims and legitimation criteria of that discipline and its professional domain. With the broader scope of a ''photography of architecture'' we may hint at a practice that, while still permeated by architecture-related subject matters, is not dependent on architecture's specific discourses. Curiously, this approach may have deeper, if less obvious, implications for the culture of architecture and the depiction of public spaces as we have known them until today. From the untold history of architectural photography a profound contradiction emerges: Underlining architecture and urban landscapes as specific topics opposes photography's progressive flight from a primary emphasis on its topics or themes towards an understanding of it as a self-governing form of art. As I have put it elsewhere, ''it goes against the grain of photography's autonomy to acknowledge that there is a particular practice of photography that is conditioned, or somehow individuated by its focusing on a given subject matter''[2]. If we want to enjoy the critical insights that this foreign discourse can have on architecture, we should overcome this contradiction. Indeed, in addressing how architecture and the representation of public space are impacted by current image-making, we may need to do more than just confront it with the ''faithful'' mirror of architectural photography.

It is true that beyond the possible relevance of this subfield to the wider history of photography, architecture's century-long romance with architectural photography has had many concrete outcomes. From Erich Mendelsohn, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe's

[1] An extended, diverse version of this essay first appeared under the title ''Image-Making After Photoshop: Architecture and its Visual Discontents'' in Pedro Gadanho (ed.), Fiction & Fabrication, Photography of Architecture After the Digital Turn, Hirmer Verlag, 2019, catalogue for the exhibition of the same name at MAAT, Lisbon, March 20 to August 9, 2019.

[2] See Pedro Gadanho, ''Coming of Age: On the Furtive, Shifting Nature of Architectural Photography,'' in Elias Redstone (ed.), Shooting Space (London: Phaidon, 2014).

early uses of documentary photography and photographic collages, to the delayed recognition of photographers who mostly portrayed buildings as a service to the architectural industry, such as Ezra Stoller and Julius Schulman, architectural photography has a specific yet overreaching history. With growing architectural diffusion through various media, including the internet, the practice has also had the opportunity to amplify its field, find its new heroes, and open up to innumerous practitioners. Through the early adoption of visualization techniques such as photomontage to the proliferating commercial uses of retouched images of just-finished buildings, architectural photography has established its own degrees of autonomy.



BEATE GÜTSCHOW
S#14, 2005
Courtesy of the artist © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2019.

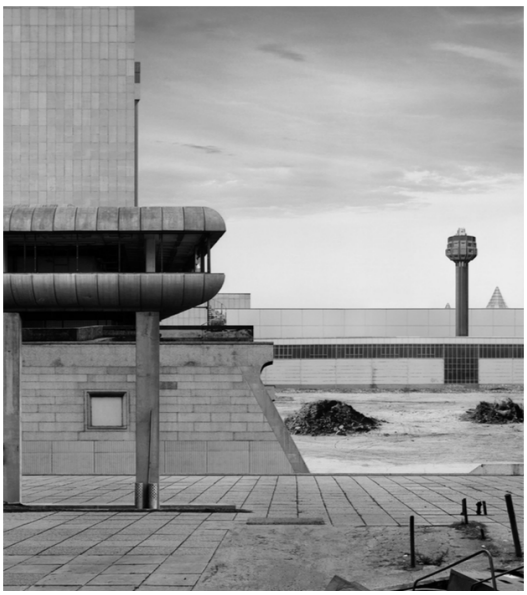
Yet in its dependency on the architectural profession's communication and promotional needs, it fails to diverge from an official historiography intimately related to presenting architects' own expressions of authorship. If we want to explore cross-pollination between the two fields, we can instead welcome practices that eschew objective or neutral portraits of accomplished works of architecture. Architects may then realize that photography "can be more than a mere step in the preservation or diffusion of their production"[3]. We should tackle the fictional and narrative approaches that have defined authorship within contemporary art, potentially as independent vehicles for critically observing architectural culture, and also the evolution of urban space representations. Asserting different points of entry into a mostly uncharted history of architectural photography, I have previously pointed to legitimation processes occurring when we try to historicize and make palpable its practice and objects.

[3] Ibid. In this sense, an "expanded field of architectural photography" was described as one that, by way of "a non subservient photographic gaze," could induce "profound transformations in how the discipline of architecture sees—and seeks to represent—itself".

In the context of museum collections, I have thus advocated the expanded definition of a photography of architecture, in which the construction of a specific, authorial gaze on architecture could supersede other criteria in establishing the importance of one image over another[4]. This could lead to the reconciliation of different evaluation parameters emerging from the fields of photography or architecture. But it could also lead us to focus on practices that, while overcoming truthfulness, faithfulness, or neutrality as the primary values in image- making, end up bridging the interests of both fields.

Adopting the notion of a photography of architecture, we are led to exclude from our considerations the commonly accepted practices of architectural photography in recent times. This deliberate omission freed us to delve deeper into the terse relationships that architectural culture, defined as a spatial practice, has produced with its visual expressions, particularly since digital culture started to permeate image fabrication. Even with this narrower focus, there is a vast panorama to offer on how diverse conceptions of architecture and city are integrated, interpreted, and reinvented in the field of photography today—but also on how this practice is itself being impacted by digital tools.

Photography's invention once changed the course of visual arts; current photography of architecture and urban spaces in art often underlines how digital forms of representation and manipulation are now changing the nature and role of photography within a broader visual culture. When photography was invented, painting was liberated from the imperative to offer a realistic representation of reality. While photography was promptly charged with the capacity for being objective, factual, and documentary, the visual arts could turn to the exploration of each medium's expressive possibilities.



BEATE GÜTSCHOW
S#13, 2005
Courtesy of the artist © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2019.

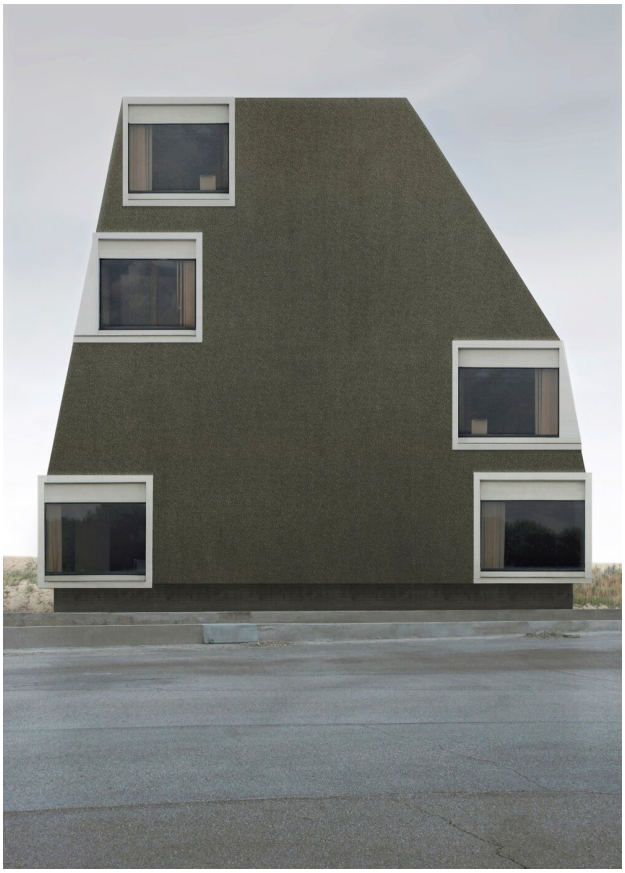
4 See, Pedro Gadanho, "Architecture Photography: New Territories in the MoMA Collection," in SCOPIO International Photography Magazine. Crossing Borders Shifting Boundaries, 2 1/3: Porto, Cityscopio, 2015.

As photography developed its own autonomy as a practice, it alternated between objectivity and self-expression—between supposedly faithful representations of reality, and the revelation of its several truths, made possible by different techniques. From image-printing gradients to deliberate uses of collage, this dual stance conditioned photography's historical evolution, but that condition would enter a whole new stage with the substitution of the relatively stable medium of film by the ability to make, and later alter, digital images.

With the invention of Photoshop in 1987, it was not only the physical making of images that underwent a revolution[5]. Image manipulation has existed since the inception of photography, but image-edition software became an important part of a digital turn that has allowed millions to easily manipulate, fabricate, and distribute images through new channels. Fresh expressive possibilities were soon used widely inadvertising, graphic design, and architectural visualization. Non-existent realities could be created with a new ease and refinement. The objective truth of photography came under a different kind of scrutiny, introducing acute problems that persist to this day—especially when we discuss photojournalism and other documentary photography practices in the age of "post-truth" and "fake news". When most photographic images circulating are now made of electronic bits that allow for untraceable manipulation, news media must stand by notions of a truthful representation. Yet in other domains of image production, a thirty-year history of digital tools serving the manipulation and transformation of images certainly allow for new creative claims. As had happened throughout the twentieth century, artistic and experimental takes on photography have again claimed freedom from its supposed but ultimately false neutrality. They welcome all sorts of approaches, ranging from the use of information derived from formal experimentation to the production of innovative social or political content. The direct repudiation of objectivity through fictionalized narratives or exposed montage techniques has provided a vehicle for critically deconstructing objectivity itself. This has driven a reappraisal of the potential uses of photography within contemporary art—after its early use as a recording device for other conceptual strategies—and ultimately induces new approaches to the representation of shared, collective spaces.

While retaining or playing with aspects of realism, artists have probed new ways of seeing made possible by an expanded understanding of photographic images. Through simple alterations, digital manufacture, the construction of complex settings for image-making purposes, or even transformations of photographic prints into sculptural objects, contemporary artists working with photography have embraced profound transformations in the medium—many of them working with the portrayal or recreation of architectural environments and urban public spaces If architecture and the city were favorite subjects in the early days of photography, mostly due to the medium's technical limitations, they became viral when the possibilities of digitally manipulating images flooded the art world and internet alike.

[5] For an interdisciplinary perspective on how, after Photoshop, "manipulated images can introduce a productive uncertainty as knowledge," see Michael J.Emme, Anna Kirova, Mike J. Emme, and Anne Kirova, "Photoshop Semiotics: Research in the Age of Digital Manipulation." Visual Arts Research 31, no. 1 (2005): 145–53. www.jstor.org/stable/20715375.



PHILIPP SCHAERER
Bildbau No 5 (from the Bildbauten series), 2007.
Courtesy of the artist

Echoing early-twentieth-century photographic collages by the likes of Man Ray, Paul Citroen, or Edward Steichen, contemporary artists have extensively portrayed changing urban conditions in the early twenty-first century thanks to advancements in digital photography, including mash-up techniques. Visual experiences created by Isabel Brison, Filip Dujardin, Beate Gütschow, Patrick Hamilton, Oliver Ratsi, Pedro Bandeira, Vicenta Casan, Gregor Graf, Frank Kunert, Kobas Laksa, Georges Rousse, David Trautimas, and Carl Zimmerman are only the tip of an iceberg of fictional imagery that in recent years, as in the past, has allowed for a diverse, allegorical reinterpretation of both architectural objects and today's "collagecity". In such cases, fabricated realities may arise as satire or critical commentary on a boundless visual culture in the urban context, as much as a willingness to devise unexpected realities.

In previous writings[6] and in a curatorial project at the Museum of Modern Art in New York[7], I have analyzed the emergence of this trend of architecture-related digital fictions, prompted by a revival of cut-and-paste techniques. To these one may add a vaster array of expressive

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6 An early essay on the subject focused on the actualization of notions of allegory and the tableau vivant into the portrait of imagined and made-up urban scenery, as present in the work of authors such as Pedro Bandeira, Oliver Boberg, Isabel Brison, Beate Guttshow, Filip Dujardin, or Gregor Graf. See Pedro Gadanho, Tableaux Edifiants, Ficções Arquitectónicas na Fotografia Contemporânea, in Neto, Pedro e Bandeira, Pedro (eds), On the Surface, FAUP, 2012, Porto, pp. 112–116.

7 See Cut'n'Paste, From Architectural Assemblage to Collage City, organized by Pedro Gadanho and Phoebe Springstubb, July 10—December 1, 2013.

image fabrications, as seen in the practices of artists and photographers whose digital investigations often focus on architecture. From Andreas Gursky's potent images to Thomas Ruff's more deliberate distortions, or from from Jeff Wall's meticulous cinematographic mise-en-scénes to Thomas Demand's or James Casebere's model-based fictions, these practices have successfully re-imagined the medium of photography outside the chastity belt of factual representation, opening up new territories for conceptual visual practice. They anticipated and legitimized transformations in what we can call a renaissance of photography, in which digital culture and technology have firmly asserted themselves. While this evolution has been widely discussed within the discipline of photography[8], such works should also be seen as examples of how recent photographic turns have affected our understandings of architecture—both as a classic subject of the photographic lens and as a spatial practice that, within a pervasively ocular regime, is increasingly consumed through images.

When considering how architecture's images are constructed today, we are faced with opposing gravitational pulls. From one side, the possibilities of digital manipulation, occasionally learnt from art, are often drawn from tools provided by image-editing software. These allow makers of architectural images to produce a false sense of objectivity, with an increasing degree of realism that reinforces the commodification of built environments — and their advertisement to investors.

PHILIPP SCHAERER
Chicago Shuffle 01, 2017
Courtesy of the artist

8 See, for example, Jonathan Lipkin, Photography Reborn: Image Making in the Digital Era (New York: Abrams, 2005.) See also, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Roetzer, and Hubertus von Amelunxen (eds.), Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age (Gordon & Breach Publishing, 1997).

Images of unbuilt architecture, fabricated with sophisticated 3D-rendering software, are populated with catalog-sourced digital happy families and slender women. With these images becoming hallmarks of the commercial construction industry, some artists have felt compelled to deploy similar techniques to produce a critical commentary on current consumer culture.

A different result of digital tools' potentialities is recognizable in the pristine images that professional architectural photographers make of buildings by preferred architectural authors. Beyond the sheer effortlessness with which hundreds of "views" are created, digital erasure and correction create photographs devoid of any imperfection or troubling presence. Users, small faults, technical flaws, and other undesired elements are painlessly removed or covered up, creating the fiction of perfect mastery. As a reaction to these hygienic acts, some photographers and makers of architectural visualizations eventually started reintroducing narrative elements, in the form of a cleaning person, a family element, or even more surrealistic figures. Often derived from well-known imagery produced in an art context, they reveal a certain degree of self-awareness and irony.

In representing public space, post-digital art practices have pushed the photographic representation of architecture towards more declared fictional approaches. Their story-telling, narrative content, cinematographic construction, deliberate imaginary constructions andpolitical messages often reject notions of fake objectivity, introducing a note of disturbance and critical inquiry. Showing up neutrality to be a mere ideological construct, fiction and the rougher artistic gestures of incision and collage become ways to counteract the smooth, sleek digital fabrications through which architecture falls prisoner to the status quo. They deconstruct those depictions that, in their accomplished digital perfection, present themselves as objective, unbiased, and deprived of ideological charge. But they also admonish architecture for becoming a basic provider of non-transformative spaces and their corresponding commodified images.

Ultimately, these operations help question architecture's self-assuredness and sense of stability in a world that is being radically transformed due to a wider digital turn.

As visual culture has been substantially impacted by information technology, it has also empowered the darker impulses of capitalist economies to promote hollow forms of consumption and commodification. While this has strongly affected the architectural realm, related visual fictions assume the not so minor task of providing critical insights and a philosophical sense of doubt about such shifts. As creative, unexpected reality checks, such photographic tactics seem increasingly vital in producing a different type of contemplation of today's spatial practices.

As I have suggested elsewhere, architecture may be splitting into contrasting forms of practice between the vast world of commercial construction and a diminishing niche of cultural discourse[9]. In this context, when factual building is increasingly deprived of a transformative cultural meaning, fiction's intrusion into the history of architectural

[9] See: Pedro Gadanho, "Two Fields," in Architecture, Networked Cultures, and How to Make the Most of em, MAJA, no. 70 (December 2011).

representations points towards much-needed new directions for architectural thinking. Paper architecture was once a form for expressing political discontent through drawing. Today, that role reappears in the fictional turn affecting photography of architecture. With the economic logic of today's mainstream architectural production becoming a sort of fascist regime, we must turn to fiction and that which its intricate narratives may unhinge. As in literature or film, visual fiction can be a form of resistance. When sleek and efficient digital procedures blind us to the essential questions of a given form of practice, the truths and doubts that hide in the fabrications of fiction may indeed be a matter of necessity.

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