

# Graphic and Explicit; Photography, *punctum* and Architectural Appearance

By Andrew Metcalf\*

*Observing a century of relations between architecture and photography in the use of graphic, drawing and photographic practices, this paper follows some conceptual transactions between the two disciplines. Primarily, there is an essential difference however; in a given situation, photographers will seek to capture what is, whereas architects often work to formulate what can be. Over time, there has been a convergence of thinking and practice between the two disciplines, notably on the part of architects such as Neil Denari whose thinking reflects certain practices of photographers like Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall. In examining these occurrences, it is relevant to note Roland Barthes' critical insight of the binary pair he called the studium and punctum to visualize a cohesive overall background coupled with a specific element occurring in photography, and by inference, in architecture, especially at the conceptual and representational moment.*

## Introduction

The relationship of architecture and photography is close. Just as architecture provides enduring photographic subject matter, architectural schemes are now becoming imbued with photographic form as architectural conceptualizing draws on the aesthetics of photography. Decades before the development of digital image manipulation technology, architects discovered photo-montage and photographic composition. Now, some architects view practices deriving from photographic theory and technique as exemplary models for architectural production itself. Prior to the turn of the current century, it probably would have seemed unimaginable that works in architecture and photography would be created digitally. In a certain way the two disciplines now constitute a mirrored pair, they tend to overlap and even hybridize. This phenomenon is such that buildings can now look as if they've been created digitally and architectural renders can appear distinctly photographic and not "drawn" at all. Talking about this situation, Philip Ursprung<sup>1</sup> suggested this convergence had now reached a point where: "... *the architecture of the photograph and the photograph of the architecture merge and can no longer be clearly separated from one another.*" The pictorial anticipation of an architectural proposal now encompasses extensive use of digital techniques marshalled from both architecture and photography. Over the

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1. Andreas Ruby and Philip Ursprung, *Images: A picture book of architecture* (Munich: Prestel. Schaerer, 2004), 4.

last fifteen years, the role photography has come to play in architectural image formation is inestimable. However, even though it's possible to talk of hybridism there is still a viable demarcation between photographer and architect.<sup>2</sup> The photographer's intention is to capture: "... *the moment like a seismograph*" whereas "... *the architect is ...trained to think about what could be there.*" Although the story of how this has happened and what might come next is undocumented, the conversations have started.<sup>3</sup>

My intention in this essay is to reflect on the core of 20th century architectural, photographic and drawing practices that are germane to the current situation. I will also discuss the work of Neil Denari, as an instance of an architect receptive to photographic possibilities. Those core features are: the differences between the human eye, the "photographic eye"; the creative correlations between architects and photographers; architectural image formation in first half of the century; Roland Barthes' construal of the *studium* and *punctum* in photography; composition and uncanniness; and, the work of narrative photographers Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall. Since emerging in the 1990s with intense architectural delineations of striking graphic quality, Denari has gradually moved to an architecture-to-photographic parallelism in his projects which places him in the middle of the digital architecture-photography association.

The visual language of architecture and photography are dissimilar. In a perceptual sense, photographs transform architectural volume into surface and distil matter and shadows into forms.<sup>4</sup> However, it is in the nature of photography to capture architecture quite differently from the way a human eye does. Camera lenses are optical instruments that offer view angles and a sensibility to light exceeding that of the eye. However, cameras can't see all those views simultaneously as the eye can and have a smaller dynamic range (i.e. record both highlight and shadow in great detail) than does the human eye, although technology has breached that gap to some extent as the work of contemporary photographers shows. An important consequence of these differences is that photographic devices come between us and what we see in various ways. Firstly, looking into a camera immediately alerts us to the fact of framing the picture, where something is in the frame and everything else is excluded. This doesn't happen with the eye of course. Secondly, the eye, which has a nominal focal length of 50mm (equal to that of a standard, full frame lens), can see - or give the impression of seeing - a complete range of focal lengths whereas camera lenses, only see one focal length per image capture. Habituated as we are to viewing architecture through the medium of photography, we are only dimly aware of the self-deception these constraints engender when we think of photographs as a stable record. A photograph, that seismographic instant, does indeed capture the moment but it is that moment

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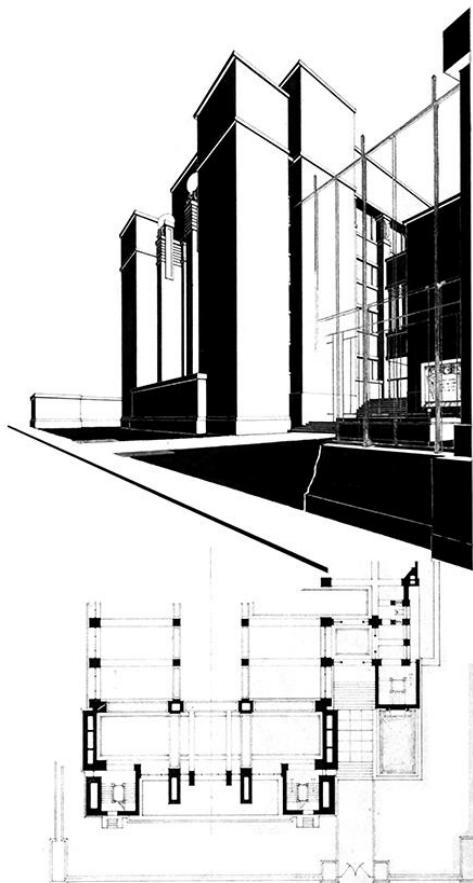
2. Philipp Schaerer (n.d.), <http://www.philippschaerer.ch>, [retrieved May 11, 2015].

3. Ruby and Ursprung, *Images: A picture book of architecture*, 2004; Daniela Janser, *Concrete: Photography and architecture* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013).

4. Janser, *Concrete: Photography and architecture*, 2013, 10.

and no other. In photographs, we access one specific way to see, while our eyes see much more and differently.

Photographs and drawings are both depictive mediums where photography's capability to capture form relates to that of a drawing. Until recently, drawings were the principal pre-construction depictive medium for the presentation of architectural ideas whereas photographs were the depictive media used for recording buildings, the final form of architectural ideas. So, even though photography originally came to architecture post-construction, that too has changed as it now tends to dominate the pre-construction depiction of architecture. Interestingly, that change began a century ago as the depictive practices of drawing, collage and photomontages evolved under the influence of photographic precepts.



**Figure 1.** Wright, FL (1902-06) Larkin Building, Buffalo NY. Drawing by H Klumb (1929)

Source: Image Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust.

For example, it's astonishing how progressive graphic visualizations such as Frank Lloyd Wright's view (Figure1) of the Larkin Building (Buffalo, 1902-06) anticipated the mid 20th century standard of the wide angle, high contrast architectural photograph decades before it happened. The clear-cut black ink drawing and perspective distortion valorise the building to a high level. Wright

used this type of drawing infrequently, presumably for certain publication situations, so it could be deemed a minor mode compared to the larger corpus of his drawings. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, on the other hand, developed a progressive trajectory with his presentation artwork and refined it continuously. From the 1920s to the 1950s he used new photographic techniques such as photomontage and photo-collage to literally "construct" architecture on paper. In his montage renders the presence of photography gradually increased in significance as the images evolved from just drawn content to virtually total photographic content. This metamorphosis starts with the Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project drawing (1921) and ends the Chicago Convention Hall project (1953), the interior rendering of which is an assemblage of photographic images entirely. The 1926 Alexanderplatz proposal, the 1939 Resor House, the 1947 IIT Campus proposition belong to the three decade sequence. It is clear that, without photography, these images would not exist and it is also likely that few leading architects would have used photography this extensively in those decades.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, in commissioning photographers Hedrich-Blessing, Balthazar Korab and Ezra Stoller to record built work, Mies didn't abandon traditional architectural photography at all. Alluding to the epic photographic tradition in 1995, Ignasi de Sola-Morales<sup>6</sup> articulated the difficulty we have in separating our interpretation of modern architecture from the iconic photographs that standardize access to the canonical works. An archetype of the transactions between architect and photographer that generates Sola-Morales' dilemma subsisted between Richard Neutra and Julius Shulman over three decades from 1936 (Figure 2). They both brought value to the affiliation which made it possible to influence one another's creative practice. Just as Neutra's architecture unquestionably fostered Shulman's images, those images furnished the architect with a fresh way of seeing which fed into his architectural thinking.

It's hard to imagine Neutra without Shulman and vice versa. Interviewed later in life,<sup>7</sup> Shulman struggled to explicate his photography and lapsed somewhat to a recitation of technique noticeable for its absence of theoretical content.

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5. Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, *Mies in Berlin* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001).

6. Ignasi De Sola-Morales, *Terrain Vague. Anyplace* (1995).

7. Joseph Rosa and Julius Shulman, *A constructed view: The architectural photography of Julius Shulman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994).



**Figure 2.** Shulman, J. (1947) Kaufman House, Palm Springs, California  
 Source: Image Courtesy of J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

Modern photographic theory appears to have flourished with the impact of the Bauhaus photography program and seminal essays such as Walter Benjamin's *A Small History of Photography*.<sup>8</sup> By the early 1980s, the field had expanded to include the classic Roland Barthes essay *Camera Lucida*, a meditation on form, content and meaning in photography.<sup>9</sup> Looking at, and thinking about photographs after his mother's death, he noted that all photographs are of something that has been but is no longer there - something that is already dead. Architectural photographs are of a like nature: the moment of the photograph, which architectural photographers sometimes call the "zero hour," is artificial in that it is immediately gone and beyond recovery. Further, with the passage of time, photographs become archival documents and hence, part of history. Barthes comments: "... I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past. And since this constraint exists only for photography, we must consider it, by reduction, at the very essence ... of photography".<sup>10</sup> In *Camera Lucida* Barthes also mulled over two phenomena, which he called the *studium* and the *punctum*, to be found in photographic images. For him, the *studium* is the main visual form or dominant

8. Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One-way street, and other writings* (Pbk. Ed.) (London: NLB, 1979).

9. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

10. *Ibid*, 76-77.

image substrate which is almost, but not quite, the background and the *punctum* is the thing which unhinges and disrupts the *studium*.

Barthes instanced this in a war picture by Koen Wessing where the *studium* comprises three soldiers patrolling a barricaded Nicaraguan street and, behind them, two nuns cross that same street and provide the *punctum*. Tension is evident. As Barthes says: "*To recognise the studium is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them.*"<sup>11</sup> The *studium/punctum* relationship generates a key part of image composition and meaning. Of course, image composition is something architecture and photography have in common. In architecture, it characteristically arises amid associated forms with the *punctum* allocated to an essential part of the program. In architectural photography it can occur in the residual space between forms. In this Wolfgang Sievers<sup>12</sup> picture (Figure 3) two perspectival forms rise through the frame - one light, one heavy, one in silhouette, the other not. The eye is drawn to the space between them.



**Figure 3.** Sievers, W (1965) *Royal Insurance Building, Collins Street, Melbourne*

Source: Image Courtesy of National Library of Australia.

In another manner, photography's facility to stimulate formal insights into architecture is exemplified in Edward Burtynsky's work<sup>13</sup> documenting the Bangladesh ship-breaking and recycling industry wherein large vessels are

11. Ibid, 27-28.

12. Wolfgang Sievers, *Wolfgang Sievers* (Neutral Bay, N.S.W.: Writelight, 1997)

13. Edward Burtynsky, *Edward Burtynsky SHIPBREAKING Web Gallery*. <http://bit.ly/2btsjXl>. [Retrieved May 11, 2015]

broken down into sections the size of large architectural constructions. There is a startling blend of the familiar and the unfamiliar in such weird, deconstructed assemblages that are simultaneously ship-like and building-like. They are an uncanny transmutation of Corbusier's<sup>14</sup> ocean liner archetype of the 1920s. "The uncanny," Johannes Binotto explains, is: "... not just the opposite of the familiarity of being "at home", but is the moment at which the seemingly familiar turns out to be unfamiliar, while, conversely, the seemingly unfamiliar unexpectedly appears familiar."<sup>15</sup> Current pre-occupations with uncanniness in photography make it tempting to think that the phenomenon is more endemic in photography than architecture. However, this imbalance could be of the present and may change, particularly as the range of available digital tools and effects increases in architecture. Significantly, there is an historical discourse on architectural uncanniness instanced in Anthony Vidler's 1992 study<sup>16</sup> of the "unhomely" for example and, added to that, there is Neil Denari's orientation to the "reality distortions project" which is of the moment.



**Figure 4.** Crewdson, G (1999) *Untitled*

Source: Image Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Evidence of the uncanny in photography resides in the much published and exhibited work of Gregory Crewdson (Figure 4) who constructs still pictures in a manner that reflects the *mise-en-scene* ("placing on stage") practice belonging to the theatre and motion pictures. Using scripts, actors and

14. L. Le Corbusier, *Towards a new architecture* (Repr. Ed.) (London: Architectural Press, 1976).

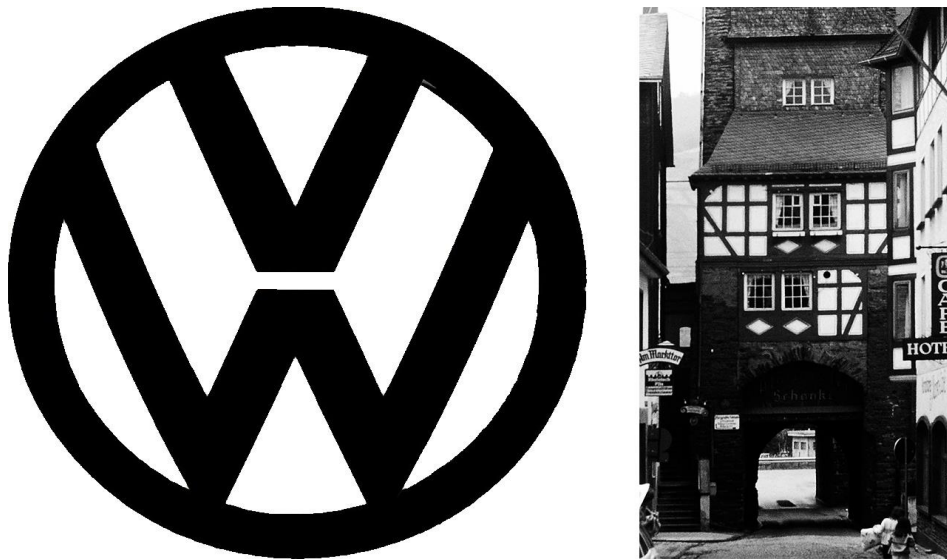
15. Johannes Binotto, "The Other Scene: On the Uncanny Architecture of Photography," in *Concrete: Photography and architecture* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013), 228-231.

16. Anthony Vidler, *The architectural uncanny: Essays in the modern unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).



elaborate lighting to generate scenes for his large-format still camera he fabricates and narrates circumstances in an imaginary suburban world. In Crewdson's pictures the implied narrative is one in which it appears as if something has just happened ... or is about to happen.

The Canadian Jeff Wall's photographs also enable stories to be constructed. He explains<sup>17</sup> that he works to pre-figure his pictures by initially "... *not taking a picture - that comes later.*" Reflecting on parallels his process has with film making including pre-visualisation and scripting, he says: "*In film, people have to prepare a lot of things - working with performers, inventing spaces that haven't existed before, adapting equipment etc. I want to create a plastic sequence and bring it to a conclusion somehow.*" Elsewhere we confront what he calls a "... *aura of mystery asking questions such as: is this the moment before or after; who is the woman; where is she going; and what's under the cloth?*" Wall, who Herzog and de Meuron have commissioned to photograph a project, has also explored Mies van de Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion. His *Morning Cleaning* (1999)<sup>18</sup> shows a cleaner at work in the building. In this picture, which has circulated widely in architectural circles, the *punctum* is the solitary figure in the midst of Mies' architecture. Our attention is drawn to the human figure. Wall, who is also an art historian, may well have done so with the intention of furnishing a trace of one of those personages Michel Foucault called "... *those billions of existences which are destined to pass away without a trace.*"<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 5.** VW Logo and Half-Timbered House

Source: Image Reconstructed by A. Metcalf.

17. Jeff Wall, *AGWA Talks: Jeff Wall*, 2012, <http://bit.ly/2c8icG4>, [accessed May 11, 2015].

18. It is actually a combination of two photographs taken from the same viewpoint - one exposed for the exterior and the other for the interior. Then, using Photoshop, they've been blended into one, thus replicating the dynamic range of a human eye.

19. Michel Foucault, "The Life of Infamous Men," in *Michel Foucault: Power, truth, strategy* (Sydney, Australia: Feral Publications, 1979), 76-91.



In a 2008<sup>20</sup> lecture espousing photographic metaphor, Neil Denari showed a VW logo beside a monochromatic axial photograph of a half-timbered German dwelling saying: "If on the one hand the Volkswagen logo is about a commercial, global world, it's also about a technique which is about trying to burn an image into one's eye." He continued that the half timbered façade works in the same optical way as the logo saying: "In terms of messages that they send, one is about offering a super graphical way of talking about structure, and the logo is about graphic, high contrast resonance. We'd like our work to borrow from both these paradigms." Further, he records an ambition to get, what he calls, "the Gursky effect" into his renders and buildings, referring to the work of the famous German photographer whose images are known for their graphic potency.



**Figure 6.** Denari, N (2005-12) HL-23, Exterior/Interior, New York  
Source: Image Courtesy of Neil M. Denari Architects.

Denari's HL23 Apartment Building (2005-12, New York)<sup>21</sup> delivers on that avowed intention (Figure 6): it is what he calls a "graphical project" with an internal steel structure sitting inside a glass façade albeit with the structural frame redrawn as a frit on the curtain walling. Shortly after the building opened<sup>22</sup> he spelt out a recurring axiom for himself to "... make it graphic and explicit, which is essentially ... to talk about the explicit in architecture which is artifice, but also a real signifier." Denari doesn't talk of the uncanny, but of

20. Neil Denari, *The New Intimacy*. Syracuse University School of Architecture Lecture, 03 October 2008, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fy-4Z75\\_Dtk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fy-4Z75_Dtk), [retrieved May 11, 2015].

21. Neil Denari, *HL23. Log #29* (2013), 100-09.

22. Neil Denari and Thom Mayne, *A.U.D Lecture Series 2009-2010: Neil Denari and Thom Mayne in Conversation*, 19 February 2012, <http://bit.ly/2bvUUVY>, [retrieved May 11, 2015].

creating "reality distortion" projects (alluding to the *Reality Distortion Field* effect at Apple in the 1980s where engineers worked hard on their ideas only to find the best ended being Steve Job's big idea). Denari is also interested in Jeff Walls' pre-figuration of his pictures, and Gregory Crewdson's intricately planned "construction" of photographs using story-boards, sets, lighting and actors<sup>23</sup>. In all this Denari, looks to expand architecture's field of referentiality to include that which is graphic and high-impact - not to mention scripted and structured like a movie (Figure 7). His is also a prescription that abrogates the architectural default strategy of merely "... holding a mirror up to the world."



**Figure 7.** Denari, N (1999) *Vertical Weekly Mansion, Tokyo*  
Source: Image Courtesy of Neil M. Denari Architects.

Over time, this architect's trajectory has moved from 1990s drawn fictions to digitally created, graphically overt built works with a consistent *mise-en-scene* like use of pre-figuration and photo-simulation techniques. He has produced images that are like photographs and built works that strive to reach the graphic force of photographic works. Photographers talk about *making* a picture, not merely *taking* a picture; Denari draws on this trans-disciplinary sentiment when he tackles the imagining, inventing and constructing of architectural projects. Reversing Roland Barthes' "... a photograph is always of something that-has-been," Denari follows a path of working to represent and build architecture that has *never been* but *will be*. At this point it is pertinent to recall Barthes' *studium/punctum* dialectic in photography to make sense of a

23. Neil Denari, *Reality Distortion Field: Spring 2014 Baumer Lecture Series #3*, <http://bit.ly/2bTLQ1i>, [retrieved May 11, 2015].

cohesive overall background coupled with a specific element which pointedly disrupts it. Denari's current architecture foregrounds graphic *punctum* to observable effect (Figure 8). One way of reading his architecture would be to subject it to an equivalent analysis.

A century after its inception photography's visual properties showed up in architectural drawing practices, as the 1920s work of Mies van der Rohe attests. Whilst this was most evident in the presentation of architect's designs for most of the remaining century, in this century, photographic aesthetics and digital realisation are becoming established in the conceptualisation of architecture as well as its presentation. The architecture of Neil Denari and others illustrates this tendency.



**Figure 8.** Denari, N (2017 projected) *New Keelung Harbour Service Building, Taiwan*

Source: Image Courtesy of Neil M. Denari Architects.

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