

Julius Shulman: The father of architectural photography

By: Michael Webb

For generations of American architects (generations, not years), Julius Shulman idealized the built world. Born in 1910, and active until recently, Shulman's eye framed essential architectural imagery and recorded it for the world. His passing on July 15, 2009 marks a shift in how we appreciate architecture today and suggests we pause to reflect on architectural photography.

First, Julius. This irrepressible personality, lacking formal training in either architecture or photography, but with an upwelling enthusiasm for good architecture, found his calling when he saw Richard Neutra's California houses in 1936. Shulman subsequently mastered the craft of the architectural photograph, using the basics, none more than light. In his iconic images, real and artificial lighting fill space like ether, allowing us to imagine in two dimensions how three-dimensional reality feels. Light paints surfaces; highlights details; provides strong, shadowy contrast, and consequently provides depth and mass.

Architects love the fact that in Shulman's best black-and-white pictures, the architectural elements, crisp as fresh chipboard, pop from the page. At the same time, he invariably and intentionally sets the work deeply in the context of its (usually) Southern California setting. In a Shulman photograph, we know exactly where we are, whether perched high in the Hollywood Hills above Laurel Canyon Boulevard--scene of his riveting, dramatic image for Arts and Architecture magazine of Case Study House Number 22, by architect Pierre Koenig for Carlotta and Buck Stahl in 1960)--or architecture melded into the landscape, where walls between interior and exterior disappear in a color image--as in Richard Neutra's Samuel and Luella Maslon house, in Rancho Mirage, California, of 1962.

Shulman was a master of light and composition, but his greatest achievement was to win a broad audience for modern architecture in southern California. From 1936 almost until his death, he tirelessly promoted a vision of carefree living in spare, light-filled rooms and beside the pool. He lived that dream, commissioning a steel and glass house from Raphael Soriano in 1950, and created a luxuriant garden behind it. His sense of optimism matched that of his clients: good architecture could enrich lives.

By enhancing our appreciation of the depth of field, the photographer managed to engage us beyond the picture plane. The basics of fore-, middle-, and background, so numbingly simple as a principle, yet often overlooked, establish a kind of perspective reminiscent of the craft of quattrocento Italian painters. Who can overlook the twin chairs at Neutra's Edgar Kaufmann house in Palm Springs of 1946-47, the glowing house behind the pool shot through with light at midrange, and the lumbering insistence of the dark mountains behind? Great architecture; great image.

Craft lay in the photographer's attention to detail, not leaving the basics to chance. For the Koenig house, Shulman opened his lens on the cosmos of the Los Angeles night for 7.5 minutes with his 4x5 camera, at the same time that a flash highlighted two women standing inside the primary space. Serendipity came from the repeated reflection of a hanging orb that stepped into space, multiplying the spatial effect with that of time: The image ascends from the literal to the metaphorical or philosophical. Craft laid the groundwork that chance compounded; historically, much art has relied on such formulation.

Shulman's work described the work of ordinary, good, and great architects, for a variety of media, but none more emphatically than the midcentury architectural journals, including architectural record. His clientele included a who's who of practitioners in his own backyard, from Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, Charles Eames, Eero Saarinen, Albert Frey, Harwell Hamilton Harris, John Lautner, and Mies van der Rohe. His own photographs described the flowering of contemporary American architecture, introducing us to it through his lens. Shulman was not alone. His peers included the late Marvin Rand in Southern California, the Hedrich Blessing firm in Chicago, Balthazar Korab in Detroit, and the late Ezra Stoller in New York.

Today, architectural photographers continue to do what Julius did, though with some changes. Most have jettisoned the 4x5 for digital cameras, taking multiple pictures of the same scene, rather than relying on the staged shot, which might take three hours to execute. Like architects, many travel beyond their home territories, following the trail of contemporary work as far as Outer Mongolia, if talent has built there. They know the airports well.

Today's architectural photographers continue to idealize architecture, but sometimes catch the entire urban or rural scene, including the stuff that makes up real life, including wires and people and cars and potholes. They shoot, almost exclusively in color, broadcast their work electronically, and e-mail their images to clients and publications, whether magazines or books. They see a large volume of new work, and shoot multiple projects.

Seeing constitutes a form of making. Like Julius Shulman, Iwan Baan and Timothy Hursley, Roland Halbe and Christian Richters, Peter Aaron, Alan Karchmer, and Jeff Goldberg act as our surrogates. They travel for us, see the new architecture, and remake the world each month. We know contemporary architecture first through their eyes. As long as there are journals or monographs or Web sites, we need their curatorial expertise, to catch the shot, to choose the best, and describe the work. How this highly refined craft will evolve, as we transition toward new technologies, including three-dimensional media, remains to be seen. Once seen, will we appreciate this world as fully as we have enjoyed it through eyes of Julius Shulman? Ever optimistic about the next generation, he would have laughed away the doubt.

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