



PICTURE THIS

ARCHITECTS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS
OFTEN HAVE A CLOSE, ALMOST
SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP, YET
THEIR WORK INHABITS DIFFERENT
DIMENSIONS. *KAREN GLASER*
EXAMINES THE PARADOX

Architecture's guardian angels, architects' image makers, buildings' visual advocates – it is hard to overestimate the importance of photographers to architects: in a single click they capture what is often years of design work, recording for many what will be their only experience of a feted building.

Most people won't ever get to experience in person Le Corbusier's pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp or Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. They will experience the architecture, the place, through the lenses of René Burri and Hélène Binet – the respective and undisputed visual chroniclers of these particular masterpieces.

And there is more to the relationship between the architect and his or her photographer. The photo shoot is often the first time the architect will return to a project since its completion. In many cases it is the last visit, too. More often still, it is the final time the architect sees the building before it is handed over to its inhabitants – the last time, in other words, the building – if it merits the description – is pure art. So, the photographer's image, their interpretation of the building is, in effect, all that remains of the architect's one-to-one relationship with that building. No wonder good architects commission good photographers – and the rapport between them is invariably close.

For some architects, though, a photograph of a building is so different from the real thing that it is almost meaningless.

Peter Zumthor, for example, typically requests a single image from Binet, his preferred photographer. 'He says architecture has to be experienced, that you can't visit an image,' explains Binet. At the opposite end of the big-name spectrum sits Zaha Hadid, another of Binet's personal favourites, who famously loves being published.

Most architects hover somewhere in the middle and accept that while there will always be tension between the space as depicted in an image and the actual experience of the space, this does not amount to treachery. 'I think it is disingenuous to discredit the value of a composed view,' says James Soanes, a director at architect Project Orange, which works closely with photographer Gareth Gardner. 'When you look at a recipe in a magazine, you can't taste it,' he says, 'but it whets your appetite. The architectural image can transport you to a place or space even though you can't touch, see or feel it. It's a cipher, a clue, not a facsimile.'

Tim Soar, commissioned by the Building Centre earlier this year for Faces of Architecture, a series of portraits of the UK's leading architects, agrees. 'I offer my experience of the photographic process and wed that to my architects' insight and ambition for the project. Together, I hope we manage to illustrate those parts of the project that best celebrate the architect's original desire. In other words, I aim to be the architect's sophisticated camera, to become part of a »

Previous page and this spread: images by Hélène Binet for Caruso St John

Previous page and below:
Nottingham Contemporary

Right: Interior of a private residence, London



REALLY GOOD ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY HAS A LIFE BEYOND THE ILLUSTRATION OF A BUILDING. IT IS RARE, THOUGH



**HÉLÈNE BINET AND
ADAM CARUSO, OF
CARUSO ST JOHN**



HB: Architects need to be seen or they wouldn't be architects, but compared to most of their profession, Caruso St John are not egocentric. They are genuinely interested in collaboration, particularly with artists. And they want to see their work in small and discrete books, not in fast and colourful images on the pages of magazines. I like slowness and I like black and white, so their values work for me.



AC: 'Our relationship works because Hélène always discovers unexpected things in our buildings. We discuss the ideas of a project and then she is more or less autonomous, she is taking her photographs – not the ones in our minds. 'Also, I have always appreciated that her photographs are emphatically two dimensional, emphasising surface and construction rather than a false spatial dynamism. And while I am not obsessed as she is about analogue photography, I can see parallels in her jealous protection of using film and printing her own work, and our stubborn persistence in holding construction and the received language of architecture as being important things in contemporary practice.'

DAVID GRANDORGE
AND STEPHEN BATES,
OF SERGISON BATES



DAVID GRANDORGE

DG: ‘What makes for a good architect-photographer relationship? That’s easy: mutual respect, which comes, in turn, from understanding each other’s motives. I’ve always had empathy with the firm’s mode of practice, especially the significant questions they ask about both the tectonic and inhabitation at the scale of both building and city. We also share an enthusiasm for the Smithson’s ideas and formal inventions – this was particularly important in cementing our relationship in its nascent stages.’

And in the very early days, some cement was required: ‘My first job for them, in 1997, was to take some model photographs, and I turned up late. That irritated Stephen. And I was irritated by his irritation. We became friends soon after.’



SB: ‘David’s work goes as far as it is possible to go in two dimensions. And he is also an architect, which helps our relationship enormously – we always have interesting conversations about what underlies our buildings.’

‘Like us, he is very anti glowing PR and he celebrates inhabitation, the dirty realism of the everyday. His particular skill lies in how the image is composed, and makes me think of the Delft School of painting where ordinary situations are given dignity through the structure of the picture.’

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This spread: Photography by David Grandorge for Sergison Bates

Left: Social housing and a creche on the Rue Rousseau, Geneva

Top right: Urban housing, Finsbury Park, London

Above: Care home, Huise-Zingem, Belgium

larger narrative. I wouldn’t call this interpretation; it is a combination of viewpoints. At the end of the day, my real job is to get my architects more work.’

Others see the business of architectural photography – of rendering an intellectual and three- and four-dimensional argument legible in two dimensions – as art in its own right, as more than a ‘combination of viewpoints’. They include Adam Caruso, of Caruso St John, who says: ‘Really good architectural photography has a life beyond the illustration of a building. It is rare, though.’

If it is rare, magazines are part of the explanation. With the notable exception of this title, commercial pressures mean that less and less photography is being commissioned by architectural publications. When you consider that the very best photographers charge £2,000 a day and will often take several days to absorb a project, this pressure becomes more acute still. So, instead, magazines get photography direct from practices which have, in turn, commissioned it with the (entirely understandable) principal motive of attracting new clients.

The result is increasingly generalised and idealised images in similar compositions, often in full-saturated colour. It is a long way from the distinctly unglamorous, monochrome style of the Architectural Review’s legendary Manplan series of 1969/70 which were like stills from a Jacques Tati film. In a continuation of this trajectory, photographers are »



Above: Tim Soar's image of Westminster Academy, a school designed by Alford Hall Monaghan Morris

Right: Oakham School, Rutland's Jerwood art and design building by Project Orange as shot by Gareth Gardner

Far right: Gardner's image of Project Orange's Cemetery Road scheme



WHEN YOU LOOK AT A RECIPE IN A MAGAZINE, YOU CAN'T TASTE IT BUT IT WHETS YOUR APPETITE. SIMILARLY, THE ARCHITECTURAL IMAGE CAN TRANSPORT YOU TO A PLACE OR SPACE EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T TOUCH, SEE OR FEEL IT

increasingly asked to video buildings. Caruso, for one, hopes the phenomenon will pass. 'They are boring, and seem to be under the illusion that moving pictures are closer to reality than static ones,' he chides.

But Soar, whose work is principally in fashion, thinks the machinery, technology and sheer energy of fashion shorts can be 'gently persuaded' to meet the more intellectual and emotional requirements of the built environment. 'It is simply the shock of the new,' he says. 'Architects used to swear by the precision of the five-by-four inch image; now the image quality of digital SLRs is beyond question. To be frank, architecture desperately needs to become more accessible, and the sound and movement of films can help bring this about.'

If the architectural film phenomenon does grow you can be sure that some architects will insist on sitting in the director's chair: those same architects who now like driving from the back seat on shoots, says Gardner. 'Some make frame shapes with their hands and tell you where to plant your tripod. Other architects have no desire to attend the shoot and leave you to second-guess their intent and hopefully deliver images to their liking. Is it coincidental that these are usually situations where the architect and the client have fallen out?' he asks.

It is a rhetorical question. If they want a meaningful relationship with their guardian angels, architects have to have a proper dialogue with them ■