

## ■ CAMODERN INTERVIEW

# Shulman face to face

*Photographer Julius Shulman looks back at how he started his career, the role of nature in his work, the use of color versus black and white, and his best-known photographs and favorite architectural building*

Interview: Jeffrey Head  
Photography: Adriene Biondo

JULIUS SHULMAN, the preeminent photographer of modern architecture in Southern California, remains an active photographer and keeps a full calendar, even at 96 years of age. Through his photography, Shulman has indirectly become a documentarian, historian, participant, witness, and promulgator of modern architecture and design in Los Angeles.

Shulman is quick to point out that he does not 'shoot' with his camera, saying, "I'm not a hunter. I don't shoot. The paparazzi go on a photo shoot. That's what press photographers do. When my partner Juergen [Nogai] and I photograph, we are creating a photographic statement. We are not shooting."

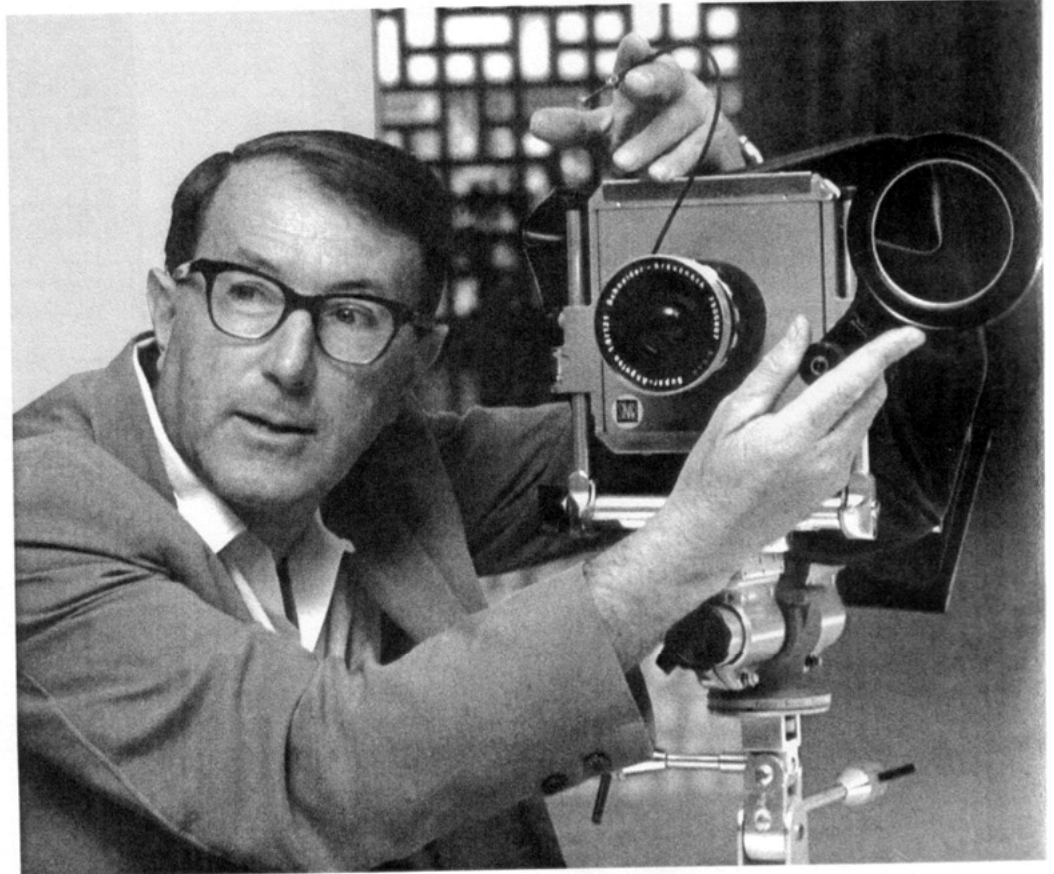
Shulman's Hollywood Hills studio, inside the Raphael Soriano-designed home he has lived in since it was built in 1950, is filled with books and photographs and a large desk that reveal a range of projects he personally oversees. A pair of matching Arne Jacobsen egg chairs and a Harry Bertoia sound sculpture contribute to the modern aesthetic Shulman has created for himself and which is widely reflected in his architectural photography. This was the setting for our recent interview.

**Q: How did your architectural photography career begin?**

JS: In 1936, the Richard Neutra Kun house [of Los Angeles] was the first modern house I had seen in my life. I met a man who worked with Mr. Neutra, and he took me to see the house. I photographed the house at that time, not realizing I was already a good architectural photographer. I took six pictures that day, walking around the house.

**Q: How do you go about photographing a building?**

JS: When we go out on an assignment, we work ahead of the sun. It's been the subject of many of my articles. The sun moves continuously—by the second, by the moment. If you're not conscious of the beauty of the sunlight, you cannot create a texture—a resolution of the



JULIUS AT WORK. "The moment we go into a space," he says, "I evaluate it for its design qualities and the design statement it makes, not its photographic qualities."

design element created by the architect.

All my photographs are composed. I never 'grab a shot.' Every composition is planned. The moment we go into a space, I evaluate it for its design qualities and the design statement it makes, not its photographic qualities. The photographer comes onto the scene and creates a composition for which the sunlight is involved.

I've been training my partner Juergen to understand this in our work, and he's gotten some very wonderful results, all based on time, sunlight, and the position of the sun on the exterior and interiors.

**Q: What role does nature play in your work?**

JS: When I was three years old, my father decided he was going to become a farmer, so we moved from Brook-

lyn to Central Village, Connecticut. I wandered around the farm by myself and became involved with nature, living with nature. The farm was surrounded by forests and wild animals.

When we came to Los Angeles in 1920, I was ten. I joined the Boy Scouts and became even more active with nature. Somehow my early childhood was immersed in nature. Maybe through my adherence and respect for nature, I learned to see and feel things. I absorbed some of the feelings of what nature is all about without the symbolism adapted by people.

**Q: What do you consider your best-known photograph?**

JS: The Pierre Koenig Case Study House #22, in 1960, is so dramatic. Seems it's been reproduced in every architectural magazine in the world. Before that time,

the Kaufmann house in Palm Springs, completed in 1947, was my most widely published photograph.

**Q: How did the photograph of Pierre Koenig's Case Study House #22 take place—the nighttime shot of the man overlooking the city lights below?**

JS: We had been working all day with Pierre Koenig photographing the house. The representative from Beth-

lehem Steel was at the house. Bethlehem Steel provided the steel, and he was there to select certain areas they wanted to show for advertising. Pierre had suggested we photograph the representative in the house, but the man from Bethlehem Steel could not be photographed as an employee of the company, so he stood in the doorway with his back to the camera.

Recently a magazine in Stockholm, Sweden called me to ask if they could publish this photograph for a story they were doing on *Playboy* magazine. They published the photograph [as a] full page, color, showing the man in the photograph as a playboy or bachelor waiting for his girlfriend who he had invited over for dinner. *Vanity Fair* also recently published the photograph. People are surprised I did that one in



color. I didn't do it in black and white.

**Q: And the photograph with the two female models, also at Case Study House #22?**

JS: The photograph with the two girls in conversation with the view behind them, [the girls] were not models. They were young students—girlfriends of two architects working for Pierre. They asked Pierre if the girls could see the house. Pierre asked me if I thought it was all right. I said of course. I told him to have the girls wear light, comfortable dresses, and thought if they were attractive, I would use them in my photographs.

One of the girls saw the photograph a few weeks after it was taken and said to me she thought I was just photographing the outside of the house, not her and her friend since I had set the camera up outside. The photograph is successful because of the two girls. In fact, people identify as I do, when they ask for a photograph of the case study house, I ask, 'Oh, do you want the one with the two girls?' And they say, 'Of course.'

**Q: What is your preference—color or black and white?**

JS: When I photograph a house, I'm looking at it from the point of view of its accents and design. Not whether I'm going to photograph in color or black and white. But many people who know my work and see my photographs say, 'Your color is beautiful. Did you by any chance do any black and white?' The black and white is graphically important. I became renowned for my black-and-white photography. I still am. So, it's not a question of color or black and white. It's both.

**Q: When have you had to go back to re-photograph a building because the lighting was not right or when you were not satisfied with the results?**

JS: We don't go back to re-photograph. In 70 years I've never gone back. Before I set the camera, I walk outside and see where the sun is moving around, approaching the area I want to photograph. I watch the sun on the building. I watch the sun in the foreground. The shadows do not

stand still. By the time the sun moves into the area I'm photographing, I know exactly where it's going to be. Watch the sunlight. It changes minute by minute by minute, which is what photography is all about. It is not static.

**Q: What is your favorite photograph?**

JS: They are all good.

**Q: What is your favorite building?**

JS: When we were selecting the 12 images for the 'Los Angeles County Museum of Art' calendar, I said there was no question about selecting the cover and pointed to the Bradbury Building photograph. That's my favorite building in Los Angeles. It's a magnificent building, built in 1893. It's modern. Look at the atrium on the roof. The elevators are classic. The oak molding, the wrought-iron stairs, the railing is baroque—so what. I first saw the building in 1955. I was working with Ester McCoy. She said to me one day, 'I want you come with me to see a beautiful building.' She took me to see it, and after that I went back with a camera and spent a day photographing it. The photograph in the calendar is more recent, taken after the building was restored.

**Q: What are these notebooks and ledgers around your desk?**

JS: I've been gathering my early business notebooks. This one is from 1939. Showing charges to [Paul] Laszlo, [Gregory] Ain, J. R. Davidson, [Richard] Neutra, [Alfred] Eisenstaedt, and others. Here's a charge to Eisenstaedt for \$2.25, Neutra \$3.25 for a print. I was making a lot of money. One month I made \$189. Can you believe I never had a bad client. Everyone paid. Every bill.

**Q: How do you manage all your activities—photography, writing, travel, lectures, and appearances?**

JS: I don't strain myself or push myself. I'm active but not socially. You don't get known socially or by running around. Photographs help our clients get known by our participating in their projects. I've become known by participating and attending many events, like the [Museum of Design Art & Architecture, Culver City] exhibition where

they made a beautiful show of our photographs [those with Juergen Nogai]. I went to Palm Springs for a book signing at the modernism show. The Palms Springs Desert Museum was having an exhibition of Steve Erlich's architecture. He has created a successful variation on modern architecture. He wanted me to see his work, and I did—so I'm always participating.

**Q: What are some of your current projects?**

JS: I just wrote an extensive article for the Kansas State University, College of Architecture, Planning and Design for their annual journal called *OZ*, on the theme of how an architect relates to time, like time on a clock. This is something I've never thought about before now. I write about how we've adapted time to suit our fancy, our conveniences, to suit our wallet. I don't do that with my time, and I explain why, and I talk about how many architects do not relate to time. I'm selecting images to accompany the article now.

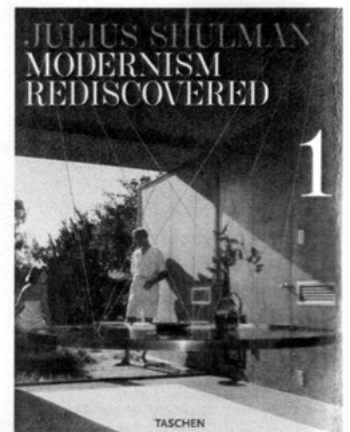
The Palm Springs Modern Committee wanted me to do new photography of houses I photographed in the past. I spent three days there photographing about eight houses. A steel house by Wexler; the A.Q. Jones house for the Annenbergs, which is on 200 acres with its own golf. I'm going to photograph the Griffith Park Observatory for the *Los Angeles Times*. It's newly renovated, and I have been there several times to check it out. In 1935 I photographed the observatory from the top of Mount Hollywood with my vest pocket camera.

**Q: What books are you working on?**

JS: I have two or three new books coming out this year, including a new edition of *Modernism Rediscovered* by Taschen. Benedickt Taschen and I have a friendship. It will be three volumes. A total of 750 pages. The first edition was 575 pages. Much of the new version hasn't been published before. When the book comes out later this year [July 2007], Taschen is sending me out on a tour of every continent to promote the book.

Also, I'm doing a very large-format

book on photography and then a book on fashion and photography. I may also do one on food and photography. Nazraeli Press published my 'Vest Pocket Pictures' book, images from 1933 to 1936. It's tremendously successful. People love it. It



**JUST RELEASED.** The main cover to Shulman's new three-volume set, *Modernism Rediscovered* (Taschen), with writer Hunter Drohojowsak-Phillip.

does include some architectural photographs. I wasn't even thinking I was going to be a photographer when I did those little Kodak pictures. This book is another page in my life's story.

For the Woodbury University, Julius Shulman Institute. We're starting on a tremendous program with my slide collection. We're producing slide lectures with Woodbury for high school students. The lectures demonstrate the power of photography, what you can do with a camera. The students love it. We've assembled 19 different lectures from my thousands of slides. We can show students many different subjects through the slide programs: fashion, food, architecture, travel. How to photograph a city, how to photograph a forest. There's no end to what you can do with photography.

It's very gratifying, to say the least, that things are happening. I've been blessed all my life, having a built-in, compassionate kind of ability to create, speak, and write. ■

Archival photograph: Ebby Hawerlander - courtesy Julius Shulman