

Forum

BOOKS

Modern eyes

Dennis Gilbert

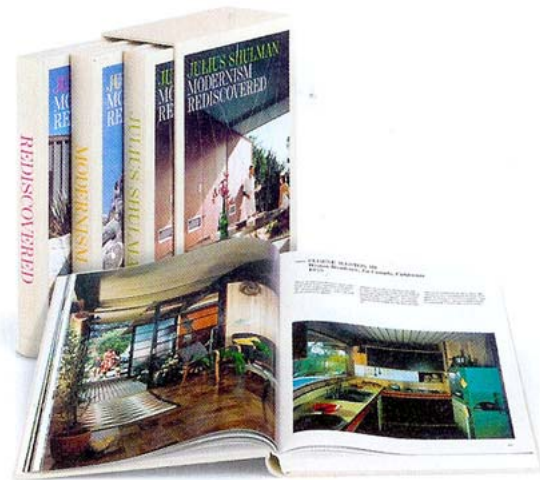
Julius Shulman:
Modernism Rediscovered
Taschen, 1008pp, £200

Julius Shulman's is one name I can drop to assistants. In 1980 I went on a shoot with him to a house in Long Beach and, being a pretentious art student, I asked him on the drive back if he had heard of my favourite photographers Lewis Baltz or Robert Adams. He hadn't. His technical skill was intimidating: just one black and white, one colour negative and one transparency were exposed for each shot, and with his assistant he worked fast and efficiently. Flash

units hidden behind furniture threw direct light and shadow. Even from outside, the flash was triggered for the distant interior.

In the late 1930s he was already making pictures (thanks to a chance meeting with Richard Neutra) that were full of this new kind of interior daylight, light on ceilings and dramatic shadows – even tell-tale shadows from chair legs – all openly left to be seen. He was certainly an innovator, and though British photographers like Dell and Wainwright used dramatic angles and lighting earlier in the decade, it is doubtful that Shulman was aware of their work. At 97 he is still working and his archive now belongs to the Getty Research Institute.

Volume one begins with a biography and an essay, after which the contents are presented chronologically, often with a quote from Shulman in italics and an extended caption describing the building. This text is bland, possibly aimed at a general audience. There are no drawings, and the dated quotes are often from articles written by Shulman for the magazines of the time (including one for Playboy).



His photographic style is robust and formal without being too careful: he states confidently that he knows the shot he wants to make the minute he walks into a room. Paging through these volumes, however, one does feel bombarded by repetition of interiors of houses, with yards of well-fit ceiling overhead and the floor perspective below.

The books are beautifully bound in cream cloth, each mounted with large, subtle colour images. The extraordinary cover of volume two could almost be a modern large format digital image: even the rocks (in broad sunlight) in the foreground are lit, so that the image looks natural to the eye, not like a contrasty photograph. A man in a trilby is holding a trowel up to the newly finished house and two women posed on the rocks are looking over at him: absurd but rather seductive (and for photographers an invitation to a game of 'spot the lighting' in shots including exteriors).

This is Shulman's great gift – to communicate his enthusiasm for architecture, especially with lighting and by posing people right up front or in the far distance. He delivers these highly theatrical images with complete belief. Volume three provides balance, with more examples of other building types. Nevertheless, we still associate Shulman with those classic residences by Neutra, Lautner, Frey, Goff and Koenig.

His work and these books do highlight the central dilemma of architectural photography – how much is advertising, and how much an attempt to convey a genuine experience of the building? – and although I don't understand how this huge package 'rediscovers' modernism, it is a fascinating catalogue of evocative pictures from a supremely optimistic time.

Dennis Gilbert is a co-founder of View Pictures.

Far left Roberts Residence by Weston, Byles & Rudolph, Malibu, California, 1953. Left Lever House by Gordon Bunshaft of SOM (viewed through colonnade of Mies' Seagram Building), New York, 1959.

