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CALIFORINA DREAMING

HOW JULIUS SHULMAN'S
PHOTOS TURNED THE WORLD
ON TO WEST COAST MODERNISM

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VOIGTLANDER LENS NEWS ★ THE BEST XMAS BOOKS ★ ANDREY TARKOVSKY'S POLAROIDS

COVER STORY |

California dreaming

His images turned the world on to West Coast Modernism. *Simon Bainbridge* profiles *Julius Shulman*, the father of architectural photography, whose latest three-volume book showcases seven decades' mastery of light and colour

Despite celebrating his 97th birthday in October, America's most prolific architectural photographer is busier than ever. Modernism is back in vogue, and no one captured it better than Julius Shulman.

In his prime, he did more than anyone else – architects included – to sell the laid-back glamour of the West Coast style to the rest of the world. The Los Angeles shooter's sumptuous images of luxurious, minimalist cool sum up the relaxed, easy-going optimism of the period, when the US emerged confident from the shadow of Europe to embrace its own identity. For the privileged few, sat around turquoise-clear pools high in the hills overlooking the arid Southwest, this was a time of unparalleled and conspicuous consumption. Indeed, they never had it so good.

Since the mid-1930s, when he began his professional career after a chance encounter, Shulman has completed more than 8000 commissions, photographing the key buildings by the leading American-based architects of the 20th Century, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van de Rohe, Pierre Koenig, Richard Neutra, Oscar Niemeyer and countless others – some of whom would have lapsed from memory were it not for his all-

embracing archive. His photographs became the public face of the private buildings they designed, away from the city sprawl.

Chance encounter

Two weeks after returning home from college – flirting with the idea of becoming a gardener, having never graduated – Shulman's sister introduced him to a friend who was working for Richard Neutra, one of the leading figures among a new generation of émigré architects working in California before the War. 'I had gone to university for seven years and never majored in any subject,' he recalled when I spoke to him shortly after his 90th birthday. 'It was in a period of hiatus in my life. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't know anything about photography to speak of, and I knew nothing of architecture. When I came back from Berkeley to Los Angeles I was simply passing time as if I was ordained to wait

Right: Pierre Koenig's Stahl Residence (Case Study House # 22), Los Angeles, California, 1960. All pictures © J Paul Getty Trust/Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute, courtesy of Taschen.



COVER STORY |



'I called to the girls, "Sit up", and then to my assistant, "Turn on the ceiling lights" - firing the flashbulbs mounted behind his camera and capturing the whole scene in one shot.'

those seven years.

'Two weeks after I came home, I met this young man who worked with Neutra. I didn't know who Neutra was or that he was then the foremost architect in the world, but I was invited by this young man to go with him to see this particular house that was being finished. He was going to inspect the house with a contractor, and while he was there I wandered around the exterior with my little Kodak Vest Pocket 127-format camera and took six pictures. Whatever he was practicing in terms of the International Style of architecture didn't mean anything to me until later years when I became familiar with what I was doing. When I took those original pictures I didn't know what I was photographing. I was simply taken by its simplicity and its disciplined design.'

Shulman showed the prints he made to the friend, who passed them on to Neutra, and, on 05 March 1936 - a date indelibly stamped on Shulman's memory

- the architect called to set up a meeting. It was the day that he became a photographer. Neutra commissioned more pictures and introduced him to colleagues - Raphael Soriano, Rudolf Schindler, Gregory Ain and others - soon establishing him as the photographer of choice.

Shulman was quite definitely in the right place at the right time. For a start, there were no architectural photographers in LA at the time. Commercial photographers took up building commissions, and Shulman felt that their images were not 'art-like.'

This was also the great boom time for building in California and, as the US emerged from the shadow of World War II as a true superpower, there was a common desire to shake off European shackles and create a style adapted to the new American way of life. Shulman found himself working amongst a group of architects who would soon be at the centre of the world stage.

Master of light

'His success in translating the three-dimensional spaces of architecture to the two-dimensional space of photography earned him a reputation far beyond Los Angeles,' writes Philip Ethington in the forward to a huge new three-volume book, published by Taschen. 'His client list was starting to become a "who's who" of every great architect of the 20th century. In fact, Shulman was one of the inventors of architectural photography. Until the 1930s, architects usually took their own photographs, or commissioned unspecialised photographers to do so.'

Perhaps the fact that Shulman never formally trained as an architectural photographer enabled him to forge his own distinct approach. He simply seemed to 'get' it - both the technicalities and the actual essence of the buildings themselves. He had, of course, already moved on from the Kodak snapper, using first an Eastman View camera, then a

Above: Dale Naegle & Associates' Mills Residence, La Jolla, California 1959. Opposite: Pierre Koenig's Stahl Residence.

COVER STORY

Clockwise from left:
Buff, Straub and
Hensman's Graeme
residence, Sherman
Oaks, California,
1959; Buff and
Hensman's
Greenberg
residence, Palos
Verdes, California,
1966; Residence by
William Alexander,
Los Angeles,
California, 1952.



Sinar system and then a Horseman, teaching himself on his own 'field trips'. But, it was his self-taught mastery of lighting that helped him achieve his complicated compositions, combining interiors and exteriors, and often a field of focus stretching from a few feet to 20 miles. He seemed to always know when the decisive moment – using carefully prepared lighting and natural

daylight – would combine to most dramatic effect.

'The secret to the success of my photography is to always create a proper balance of light,' says the photographer in the introduction to his classic 1962 textbook, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors*. 'Put your camera down. Don't act like a photographer; instead, act like a human being reviewing a piece

of sculpture and understand where you would like the light to be for your exposure.'

Shulman also had an instinctive appreciation of the new architecture, in which the surrounding landscape became the living room wall, and where the divide between inside and outside was blurred by glass, water and vegetation. Having first grown up on a farm in Connecticut, he has

carried an abiding love of nature throughout his life – backpacking and skiing in to his late eighties – which is always evident in his images. Shulman made the landscape and the natural elements integral in his images, accentuating the buildings' drama and their purpose. Unusually, he often used people in the pictures too – models, friends, inhabitants – all of which was crucial to



making the new style of architecture appear both elegant and appealing, rather than radical and severe.

He can't understand why photographers still insist on shooting empty buildings, and shortly before speaking to me, he wrote to the Los Angeles chapter of the American Institute of Architecture, remarking on the pictures from its recent awards programme. 'There was page after page of award winners and not one person. I thought architecture was for the people. They make all kind of excuses: they don't have the time; they can't be bothered; the technical problems...'

'One Shot'

In his heyday, Schulman dominated the market, employing assistants and lab technicians to fulfill an assignment a day, supplying not just architectural magazines, but titles such as *Life*, *Time*, *House & Garden* and *Look*, who regularly devoted spreads to his images depicting a new way of life.

Perhaps his most enduring photographs, shot free-of-charge, are of the Case Study House Program (1945-62), which aimed to demonstrate the principles of Modernism and their sustainability for low cost housing, using the latest hi-tech materials. And if



'Put your camera down. Don't act like a photographer; act like a human being reviewing a piece of sculpture and understand where you would like the light to be for your exposure.'

one photograph has become his signature image, it is *Pierre Koenig's Case Study house #22, 1960* (also known as the *Stahl Residence*), which is said to be the world's most published architectural image. Featuring only a detail from the building, with two women chatting in a corner, seated overlooking downtown LA in dramatic backdrop, it is a perfect example of his combination of instinct and preparation.

He had asked two friends of his assistant to be at hand, if needed, to make the house appear inhabited. 'At one point in the early evening I was setting up inside. I walked outside, and the two girls just happened to be sitting in that corner of the house. I brought my camera outside and immediately set up the composition.' He opened up the camera lens for several minutes – judging the exposure without a light meter – to let in the scene below. 'At a certain moment I called to the girls. "Sit up" and then to my assistant, "Turn on the ceiling lights"' – firing the flashbulbs mounted behind his camera and capturing the whole scene in one shot.'

Benedict Taschen, the publisher of many of his recent books, dubbed him 'One Shot Schulman' for this uncanny ability to judge the light and

composition perfectly and get his shot first time. 'That essence comes naturally,' admits the photographer, who after a brief retirement from shooting in the mid-1980s to concentrate on managing his archive, is now back working on assignments. Since teaming up with German photographer Juergen Nogai in 2000, the pair have completed more than 70 commissions. Meanwhile, he has transferred his archive of 250,000 prints, slides and negatives to the Getty Research Institute for the History of the Arts and the Humanities (the cataloguing of which has taken four years and is due to be completed in 2008), and set up the Julius Shulman Institute, dedicated 'to the potentials of brilliance' in high school students.

Shulman, the son of Russian-born Jewish immigrants, born on '10-10-10', has become an American institution. And he's more popular than ever: *Modernism Rediscovered* is merely the latest – and most comprehensive – of a dozen books featuring his work in the past decade. 'The public is now realising that Modernism is actually a way of life,' says the man whose home and studio remains the Soriano-built steel-and-glass structure created for him in the Hollywood Hills in 1950.

'Photographers bear a responsibility,' Shulman once wrote. 'We create a structure's role in the history of architecture.' Now, he himself is a central pillar in that history. BJP



Reader offer

Taschen has published a massive three-volume book of the photographer's work shot over seven decades, **Julius Shulman: Modernism Rediscovered**, (ISBN: 79838 2284 2874) priced £200. BJP readers can purchase it at a special discount rate of £180, including post and packaging, by calling Mail Order on 01903 828503, quoting reference 'Taschen002'. This offer is valid for UK addresses only.