

Photography

# The concept of architectural imagery defined

This three-volume set documents over 400 famous architectural projects taken by Julius Shulman

The very concept of architectural photography is defined by the extensive archive of the prolific American veteran Julius Shulman (b.1910), the subject of this massive work from Taschen Books. Before his lifelong exploration of the genre began in 1936, architects would either have to photograph their own projects, or else rely on the efforts of non-specialist, jobbing photographers. But, as often is the case, Shulman's introduction to the métier he came to define happened by chance and only after several false starts. Although he had, from his mid-teens, been a keen amateur photographer, fired by photography classes at high school, building his own darkroom and roaming 1920s Los Angeles in pursuit of his hobby, the decisive moment that revealed his vocation was delayed until his mid-20s. When Shulman returned to Los Angeles in 1936, after seven years of sampling various subjects without earning a degree, first at the University of California at Los Angeles and then at Berkeley, his future was still unresolved. The moment finally arrived when a new acquaintance, an assistant to leading Californian Modernist architect Richard J. Neutra, invited him along to inspect the newly built Kun Residence. Bringing his camera and tripod merely for his own enjoyment, Shulman photographed the house from various angles. Although the photographer claims he knew "absolutely nothing" about architecture and had never even heard of the architect at the time, when Neutra saw the results, he was delighted, saying that they "revealed the essence of my design". Neutra then commissioned him to photograph some of his other buildings, becoming his first patron and sparking off a long creative relationship that lasted until the architect's death in 1970.

From these beginnings, Shulman soon developed his distinctive style of architectural photography, marked by strong geometrical compositions, high contrast, sharp focus, and the evenly balanced exposure of interior and exterior spaces—a style ideally suited to the printed page. Neutra introduced him to the Modernist movement, to other leading architects looking for a good photographer, and to magazine editors. Very soon, Shulman's work was in great demand. His ability to capture the three-dimensional properties of architecture so vividly as to virtually eliminate the camera's intrusion and produce a sense of the viewer's actual presence on site won him a growing reputation beyond Los Angeles. It also secured a client list featuring a virtual index of leading 20th-century architects, including Oscar Niemeyer, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright.

From the 1940s Shulman became a key image-maker among the circle of Modernists published by John Entenza in *Arts & Architecture*, which became a pivotal organ of the movement during the 1950s. Entenza launched the groundbreaking Case Study House Program (1945-62) which demonstrated the viability of low-cost residential housing designs along modernist principles. It employed industrial materials (steel, glass, and fibreglass), eliminated traditional decoration, and sought full integration with natural settings. Although the programme mainly served the wealthy and failed to live up to its social democratic ideals, it produced many masterpieces of post-World War II design by figures such as Charles and Ray Eames, and Pierre Koenig. Shulman's images were the main vehicle for representing such Case Study Houses to the public and remain the principal visual reference to study the movement today. Raphael Soriano, one of the programme's participants

whom he had met years before, designed and built Shulman's own residence and studio in the Hollywood Hills (1950), now an official City of Los Angeles Cultural Landmark.

By the 1960s Shulman's work virtually dominated the pages of niche magazines, also exerting a pivotal role in promoting Modernism through mass-distribution publications such as *Time* and *House and Garden*. He employed full-time field and lab assistants to produce images from at least one assignment per day. Alongside his reputation as southern California's image-maker, his range grew to encompass further examples of Modernist architecture in the Midwest. Characteristically, he then shared the specialist skills he had developed in his technical



Julius Shulman, Pierre Koenig's Stahl Residence, Los Angeles, California, 1960

guide *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* (1962).

While his work is mainly associated with the Modernist movement, his business also benefited from a steady flow of what Shulman called "bread and butter" work. Luxury shops, hotels, restaurants, country clubs, marinas, resorts, educational and military facilities, banks, offices, factories, major housing developments and warehouses were all catered for alongside commissions from furniture makers and manufacturers of building materials. He serviced a healthy list of corporate clients, such as Northrup Prudential, Firestone and Transamerica, with premises built in the International Style by large architectural firms with major engineering capacities.

Shulman's precisely organised archive became a major source for publishers, scholars, and conservationists long before his official retirement in 1986 (which lasted, he says, "for about a week"). Many of these images are synonymous with Modernism and the Southern California lifestyle, such as his renowned photographs *Richard J. Neutra's Kaufman House in Palm Springs* (pictured at dusk (1947) and the night-time view, *Pierre Koenig's Stahl House* (1960), reputedly the single most published architectural photograph ever. This archive contains a virtually complete collection of Modernist architecture in North America. His close collaborations with scores of major architects and interior designers have made it a key reference for studies and retrospectives of

such pivotal figures as Charles and Ray Eames, Albert Frey, Neutra, Schindler and Raphael Soriano. After his supposed retirement, Shulman devoted his time to the constant requests for the publication and exhibition of his work, alongside writing, speaking and holding seminars at schools of architecture, planning and design. At the age of 90, Shulman returned to working on new assignments in collaboration with German photographer Juergen Nogai. Together they have completed over 70 since 2000, featuring everything from small residential projects to such major landmarks as the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels (Rafael Moneo, 2002) and the Walt Disney Concert Hall (Frank Gehry, 2003) in Los Angeles. In 2004 Shulman transferred his historical archive of over 250,000 negatives, colour transparencies, contacts and vintage prints to the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities.

This weighty and copiously illustrated three-volume set documents over 400 landmark architectural projects. Beyond California Modernism, it covers the US and in Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Israel and Hong Kong. An extensive biography by historian Philip J. Ethington of the University of Southern California, an introduction by photography critic Owen Edwards, together with notes on the collection by Wim de Wit from the Getty Research Institute complete the picture. This valuable resource includes short biographies of all the key architects, plus a full index.

**Richard Pinsent**

□ Philip J. Ethington, Owen Edwards, Benedikt Taschen and Wim de Wit, *Julius Shulman: Modernism Rediscovered* (Taschen), 3 vols, 1,008 pp., £200 (hbk) ISBN 9783822842874