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Tokyo Japan 2020+1
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**Inheritable Resilience:
Sharing Values of Global Modernities VOLUME 3**

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08. Global / Local Modernities

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Sharing Values of Global Modernities

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TRANSCULTURAL NARRATIVES FROM MODERNISM TO GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT.

Pictures can easily represent life situations, both real and artificially recreated while technical drawings hardly describe the way man dwells. The constant increase of architectural images can be considered as part of the general change in society defined by W.J.T. Mitchell as "pictorial turn". The worldwide diffusion of pictures contributes to the democratization of progress and a standard of living spaces, but it encourages a homogenization of buildings and a loss of places too. If we overcome the dialectic between global and local, we can observe how these images construct narratives that gather in each place the world as a whole creating a collective imaginary capable of transforming specific places starting from global instances. Focusing on three pictures of modernist architectures and analyzing them with an approach taken from the studies of visual culture, this essay explores the ability of architectural images to encourage the birth of transcultural narratives that can overcome local boundaries creating a worldwide collective imaginary.

1. THE WORLD AS THE NEW CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

The complex phenomenon of globalization, which started in the late 20th century, has contributed to define a global culture. If "culture is always born and develops [...] locally, in a proximity and a context"¹, global culture undermines this property by affirming itself in an area extending to the whole world developing from two attractors — global and local, which constitute a dichotomy that can be questioned. Already in 1989, Ulf Hannerz had theorized the emergence of a "global ecumene", proposing a dynamic model of relationships between global flows and local realities and, today, Bruno Latour proposes a new attractor: the *Terrestrial*. The French philosopher supports the idea that globalization "should mean that points of view multiply, that there is a very large number of varieties, that a greater number of beings, cultures, phenomena, organisms and populations are considered".² So, the globe is fragmented

*since the contraction of space and time makes evident the great and irreducible plurality of actors, lifestyles, interests, orientations that populate the global scene. Human beings, no longer isolated, regain an existence in the world through the aggregation with other individuals.*³

It is possible, also in architecture, to achieve this new creative condition that starts from the awareness of the planet as the new context for the project, with all its differences but also with all its mutual aspirations and issues. Reconsidering the word "ecology", a 19th-century neologism derived from the Greek term *oikos* meaning "house", we need to understand how we shape this planet to make it inhabitable.

Modern Movement paved the way through this ecumenic road; not by chance, in 1926 Hannes Meyer, future director of the Bauhaus, affirmed "Wir werden Weltbürger", meaning "we will be citizens of the world". Architecture has

been trying to fulfil this expectation and, as Peter Sloterdijk said, "20th century has made dwelling explicit".⁴ Internationalization, one of the main features of the Modernist project, succeeded in transforming architecture acting in two different ways: on one hand, it promoted a modern way of dwelling spaces, on the other hand, it tried to create a common language — the International Style — representing this new way of living along with the achievements and progresses made in the fields of industry, techniques and materials. This vision of a global standard of progress is surely yet to be accomplished in many aspects of human life, but the work done over the last century succeeded in creating a new worldwide collective imaginary about what defines modern architecture and what modern dwelling means.

This essay presents the first results of a research still in progress, which aims to understand how through the diffusion of architectural images and in particular the iconic photographs of 20th-century architecture, modernism managed to construct this collective imaginary, which acts both on the intentions of the designers and on the wishes of the inhabitants. An imaginary that is able to take root in different places while maintaining its universal recognizability.

2. THE ROLE OF PICTURES IN ARCHITECTURE

The approach used is that of visual culture studies, among the others we will focus in particular on the idea of a "pictorial turn" proposed by W.J.T. Mitchell in the 1990s. With this approach, we can investigate how the photographs are "designed" as synthetic totalities to represent the modern culture of living, so that we can better orient ourselves in the tide of architectural images that distinguish the globalized contemporary age. In fact, today an almost uninterrupted network of inhabited places seems to represent world the most and efforts have always been made to capture parts of this net by many means. Moreover, with the creation of af-

fordable devices, everyone can capture images of places, trying to freeze the global atmosphere of major urban agglomeration around the world. This mass collection of images is part of the phenomenon that is reshaping the way people look at and imagine the planet.

*Image by image, as if brick by brick, we assemble our own multilayered sense of the built environment through many photographers' lenses [...]. We could not envision the world, remember it, and know it as we do without their pictures of places.*⁵

According to Mitchell, the pictorial turn represents "a culture totally dominated by images [...] become a real technical possibility on a global scale".⁶ We are coming to the awareness that the human subject is a "being made up of both language and image".⁷ So, the pictorial turn is

*a post-linguistic and post-semiotic rediscovery of the image as a complex interaction between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, body and figuration. In short, it is the awareness of the fact that [...] the visual experience, or visual literacy, may not be completely interpretable on the model of textuality.*⁸

For contemporary designers, it is becoming more and more difficult to escape this iconological dialogue. This turn has become evident during the 1980s, when

*a new generation of architects such as Herzog & de Meuron, Lebbeus Woods, Steven Holl, Zaha Hadid, Peter Zumthor, Hans Kollhof and Ben van Berkel [...] proceeded to astound the world with projects that inscribe themselves into the cityscape like icons.*⁹

Since then, the diffusion of pictures has increased with the use of digital representation, going beyond architectural photography and supporting the globalization of architectural practice. The use of renderings and 3D digital modeling allows architects to detach from the need of building something to spread their ideas. Many practices around the world are turning their efforts to produce virtual visual representations of their projects. For example, in BIG's latest volume — *Formgiving* — more than half of the projects are represented only by renderings and digital images, but the same also happens for the dissemination of the works of others practices around the world.

Today images are instrumentally used to convey a vision about a specific aspect of the relationship between humans and space, but they had already assumed an essential role for the architectural practice at the beginning of the last century when photography started to be considered more than just a way to document and reflect the reality of the built environment. There is no doubt that, since its invention, photography has been the principal way not only to

document but also to imagine a transformation of the built environment.

Many practitioners entered the field of architectural photography while it was establishing itself as a mean "with revealing character, arguing for distinctiveness and defining presence".¹⁰ This event coincided with the rise of modernism that "reflecting social concerns and utopian aspirations and introducing a lighter material into architecture — would [have] usher[ed] in an optimism and a new aesthetic into architectural imaging".¹¹ Architectural photography works in many different ways:

*like still-life photography, it deals in metaphors. Like landscape photography, it strikes a balance between the everyday and the sublime. Like advertising and fashion photography, architectural photography glamorizes and sell. And like art [...] architectural photography can just as easily trigger questions as answer them.*¹²

3. TRAVELING MYTHS

Pictures play a central role in architecture because "visual language is capable of disseminating knowledge more effectively than almost any other vehicle of communication".¹³ Pictures can be spread through communication media, whether professional or not, making possible the dissemination of a universal architectural language and a common way of dwelling. An exemplar case is how

*numerous popular and specialty magazines, such as Life, Collier's, Fortune, Town & Country, Harper's Bazar, Arts & Architecture, and Architectural Forum, [...] exposed minimalist design to a vast audience*¹⁴

creating a genuine American collective imaginary about modern life and living spaces. However, no image can be limited by national boundaries, they "have legs, that is, they seem to have a surprising ability to open new paths and produce extraordinary new effects".¹⁵ One of the effects of the worldwide circulation of pictures is the democratization of progress and a global standard of living spaces, along with the possibility for architectural practices of operating in different contexts.

On the other hand, though, this system of images, communication and consumption constitutes an inevitable factor of homogenization that imports external models into a place going beyond its specificities. This is a scenario that has to be considered which characterizes a part of the architecture produced over the last century. The consequences of these practices can be read from a different point of view described by the term "transcultural" that goes beyond the perspective of homogenization, trying to reconcile binary local/global issues. Transculturality is based on

spatial mobility and the circulation of flows [...]. It focuses on



Fig. 1. Balthazar Korab, architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, John B. Parkin and Associates, Bregman+Hamann Architects, Toronto-Dominion Centre, Toronto, Canada, 1960s. © image elaboration by Maria Masi.

*the processes by which forms emerge in local contexts within exchange circuits. Contact, interaction and entanglement make transculturality a relationally constituted field.*¹⁶

In the 20th century, an unprecedented intensification of the exchange between different cultural flows begun. It took place in a world connected by technological innovations in the field of communications. In the cross-cultural dialogue, the encounter of flows highlights the differences between the parties, which are negotiated “through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, re-historicization and the reinterpretation of signs — or a succession or coexistence of some of these”.¹⁷ The concept that can summarize these processes is that of myth. The narratives created by travelling pictures lie on mythical concepts that, “because of their revelatory power that goes beyond rational explanation, and their exemplarity, are always a ‘globalizing expression’ of a culture”.¹⁸ In the words of Roland Barthes, “myth is a word chosen by history”¹⁹, a sign detached from a specific context to come back to the generalized world.

The growing corpus of images and the myths they represent constitutes a new reference context for the project contributing to the complexity of the architectural practice. As Jacques Herzog states, “the world is full of meaning and also full of images [...]. We just have to deal with it”.²⁰ We will focus on the photographic apparatus of these narrations, analyzing three modernist cases to develop a lens through which looking at images to find a way for the design that goes beyond the mere visual appearance.

4. VISUALISING A MYTH

The transformation of architecture into pure image and the shift of design toward a visual aesthetic hide a research that concern the project of complex spaces and how to use them. Modernism succeeded in communicating ‘activated’ spaces able to make the everyday visible within the extraordinary context of modernist buildings. The role of architectural pictures in spreading modernist ideas about space is often taken aside to focus on the architecture as a text, try-

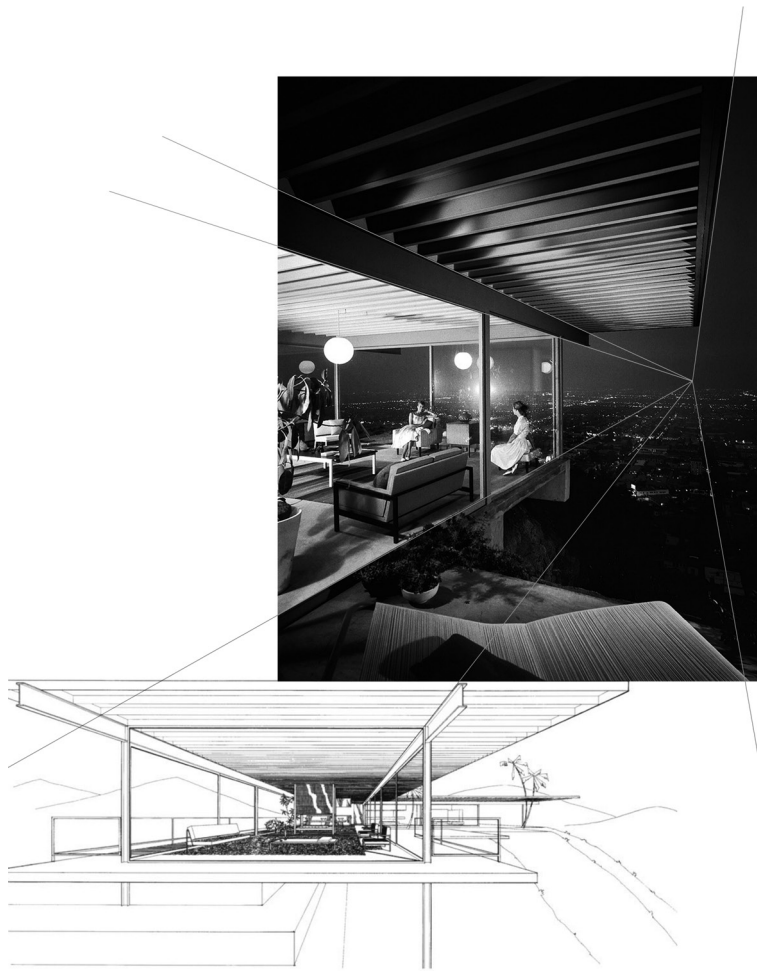


Fig. 2. Julius Shulman, arch. Pierre Koenig, Case Study House No. 22, Los Angeles, U.S.A., 1960.
© image elaboration by Maria Masi.

ing to catch style and character. This approach can be questioned today thanks to the idea of the pictorial turn presented by Mitchell. If buildings and their features are often the main subjects of the portraits, sometimes photography goes far beyond the mere representation of an autonomous object and architecture is considered as the art of building places where human beings can dwell. In this case, the object of the narration is the particular situation portrayed hosted in the frame of space with specific characteristics.

The whole attractive visual image becomes a way through which extraordinary places can enter in the eyes of the viewers to root in the collective imaginary as a myth of a global modern way of living, regardless of the place. A process that allowed

*Modern architecture to finally present itself as an anti-style, ready to represent the essence of a new era of progress and development, and eager to materialize its impending footprint on the planet.*²¹

This is what “the influential work of mid-century photographers like Stoller, Korab, Schulman, and Gottscho”²² did by transforming

*our vision and concept of architecture by capturing and celebrating the spirit of modernism. [...] These photographers turned documentary images of architecture into art.*²³

We will focus on this feature of architectural photography, that is the ability of representing architecture as an active background in which human life takes place. This essay focuses in particular on three photographs of iconic architectures belonging to the local context of American modernism, which is assumed as the origin of many myths which are then decontextualized and relocated in other places in the world. One picture by Balthazar Korab, portraying an urban place representing the relationship between architecture and the city, and two photographs, taken by Julius Shulman, that refer to a particular experience that took place in California from the 1950s called the ‘Case Study

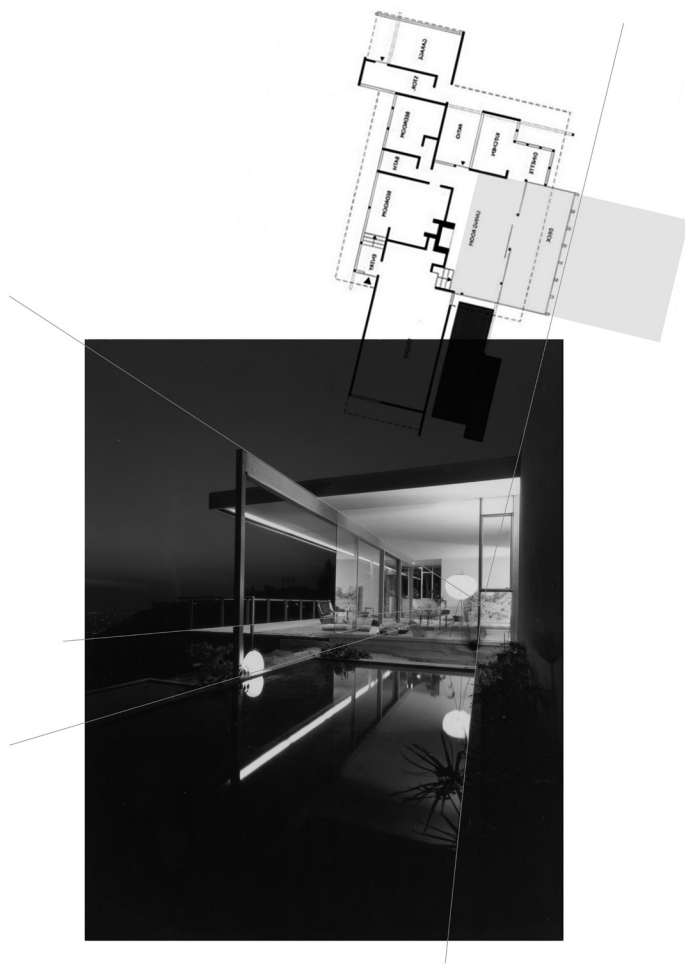


Fig. 3. Julius Shulman, arch. Richard Neutra, Chuey House, Los Angeles, U.S.A., 1956. © image elaboration by Maria Masi.

House Program'. Such program promoted the building of many houses that consistently represented the new American way of life which offered itself as modern and universal.

It is possible to understand which myths are conveyed by these images considering three main aspects: firstly, the composition of the photographic image; secondly, the way light is used to make explicit the presence of man and, finally, the type of life that takes place in all the images.

4.1. Three American Architectures, Three Narratives

In Korab's photograph of Mies van der Rohe's Toronto Dominion Center (Fig. 1), the framing is based on a central point of view that organizes the elements of the composition as layers that overlap with the observer. He is within the life that takes place in the city but excluded from the one happening in the main subjects of the image — the skyscrapers and the lower building in the foreground. Indeed, the camera is placed right in the middle of the expressway that separates the complex from the hectic urban life. The rest of the picture is in a state of quiet, stability and im-

mersed in a fog. Such ambience places the action in a specific time and traces another separation between the motion of the road and the calmness of buildings. The protagonist of the scene is the light: without it, we would never know that life is taking place inside these megaliths; there is a presence that finds steadiness in the motion of the city. This opposition between mobility and stability best describes the modern condition of urban life. Such dualism pervades the picture making it the kind of image in which a narrative mythologizing life in the city is rooted.

In Shulman's representation of Pierre Koenig's Case Study House No. 22 (Fig. 2), the main character is the city. Only a corner of the house is there to frame life happening far below. The composition of the image decenters the point of view. The directions of city roads define the vanishing point. The observer is immersed in the scene and, finding himself caught in the space, his eyes can pass through the elements of the picture emphasizing the use of glass and other modern materials and techniques in the composition of architecture. In this case, lights act in two ways: they give

a shape to the city retracing its form and, like a spotlight, the globe inside the house ignites the scene taking place in it. Under the great roof two women are enjoying a relaxing moment, thus in opposition with the floor of the house that is boldly suspended over the city and the repetitive reflection of the light in the glass still communicate a sense of motion. The situation presents itself vividly to the eyes of the observer. This capacity of “passing through”, of rethinking the relationship between inside and outside, between intimate and public life, is the theme that builds the narration underneath this image: the roof, the globe of light reflecting in the glass, even the lines of perspective communicate this main feature of modern life.

In the last photograph by Shulman (Fig. 3), Richard Neutra's Chuey House, the presence of the inhabitant is communicated by its absence by objects and the personalization of space. The composition is similar to that of the picture portraying Koenig's house. Here, the vanishing point is not towards the infinity of the city but lies in the safety of the house. The photograph brings the observer from the outside within an interior space. This time the house does not share the scene with any other characters: the composition, the light, the concentration of all the elements in the vanishing point create a dense figure that is fully understandable only when looking more carefully. In this dense point several objects lie, no human figure populates the scene. Objects have been apparently positioned casually and then lit by a lamp that someone forgot on. The position and the nature of the objects inside and outside the house (pillows on the floor, low coffee tables and the armchair) communicate an informal way of inhabiting the space and how this flexible architecture is allowing it. The situation defined by the objects includes both elements inside the house and the armchair outside which is positioned towards the inside as if the man who used it was there to dialogue with those who sitting inside of the architecture. Interaction between human and space takes place in this picture which is translated once again in a compenetrating of the interior and the exterior space.

Those three pictures are just an example of the narrations that modernism has brought over the last century. They create worldwide transcultural myths thanks to the process of decontextualization explained above. The descriptions of these photographs are deliberately shallow because a mythical concept is always based on a “confused knowledge, formed by uncertain, indefinite associations”.²⁴ In this uncertainty, we recognize the ability of a mythical concept based on pictures to spread all over the world and build a worldwide collective imaginary.

This study, conducted on three pictures of architectures belonging to the same cultural context, can be extended to others representing architectures located in different places and cultural backgrounds. In this case, we could verify the hypothesis according to which it is possible to find these same myths of modernity also in architectures of other

places, which become witnesses of this continuous transcultural dialogue based on the universal language of the image; a transcultural exchange that certainly began with modernism, but that today has reached unprecedented levels and clearly distinguishes contemporary architecture.

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