

Interview with Philipp Schaerer

by Alan Rapp, August, 2009

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Alan Rapp:

"Do you think it is as important to demand photojournalistic standards of veracity and "truth" to architectural photography?"

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Philipp Schaerer:

"It's an interesting and a difficult question, and hard for me to say yes or no in very clear manner. Let me explain:

I think it's already difficult to talk about "veracity" and "truth" in the field of photography. Taking a photograph is to project a tridimensional environment on a two-dimensional layer by means of a lens. Depending on the lens you use, the projection can be significantly distorted (as with a wide angle lens). In the field of architectural photography this fact is already problematic for [the intent of such] photographs is to reproduce truly the dimension of a space. How many times have we had the experience of looking first at a photograph of an interior—for booking a hotel room or looking for a new apartment—feeling a little bit disappointed once we physically were inside the space because it felt much smaller compared to the distorted photograph. So, already at this point it's difficult to speak about veracity and truth in architectural photography.

Looking at the postproduction, the question is much more difficult, because at this moment of your workflow, you are able to erase or add supplementary content to the photograph or the image. The major question here is, at which level of intervention does a photograph lose its status of being a photograph? I do not speak of cleaning a photograph of dust and little scratches—that isn't the problem. The problem begins when you are touching the content—when you alienate or change the represented content in the photograph. What does an architectural photographer do in the situation of having taken a shot of a façade and unfortunately there are distracting and accidental elements in the image, like a moving person, a car, or a temporary fencing which hides an important fragment of the façade and has nothing to do with the building. In this situation is the architectural photographer allowed to retouch the distracting elements without violating the "veracity and truth?" I would say yes, because one moment later the person or the car would have been vanished and the retouched photograph would be the "same" as the photograph which would have been taken 3 seconds afterwards. . . . I know, already in this case the concept of photography as a "documentary piece of evidence" begins to alternate.

But what about the instances when architectural components are retouched and suppressed—for example a disturbing socket or a distracting division of a railing or a window? This phenomenon can be observed more and more since the onset of digital image editing. I can't really say if this is good or bad, but I would like to understand the reason and wonder where it comes from:

Most architectural photographs come into existence due to a commission from an architect. But architects and photographers deal differently with the reality. While a photographer is constantly busy to see what is there, capturing the environment like a "seismograph," an architect is more trained to think of what *could* be there. For the architect, reality—built or not—always has something alterable, changeable. His building is a result of a long line of decisions, drawings, image montages, which throughout the design process [contains

elements that can be changed until] the very last moment, when the building is built. I think this moment, when things become immovable, is a very delicate situation for the architect, because it requires a “change of mind,” another “mentality” about reversibility. For the architect a photograph is not really different than a drawing, an image montage, or rendering—it’s just another medium of representation which also has the capacity of being changed.

I think it also depends on the context in which a photograph is highlighted and is used for. I think each photographer or image creator has to ask himself when doing his job and working on the postproduction, for what is this photograph used, and what is the main purpose—documentary or fiction? What level of integrity does the distribution channel or the final reader expect from the image?

Personally I’m only half confronted with the question of veracity when working on architectural images. I’m working in the field of architectural visualization, [creating] images which are not to be seen as a copy of a certain reality; rather, they try to render/visualise an imagined, possible reality, because the buildings don’t exist yet. The only contact point between my work architectural photography is that I use a similar photographic visual language. Today, digital image processing allows the design of images that can hardly be distinguished visually from a photograph. This creates confusion. Architectural visualisations, as a rule designed during the planning stage, usually had a conceptual, abstract character. With the advent of photorealistic high-end renderings, a new kind of image type was added: an image that seems to be a photograph. It becomes increasingly difficult to make the distinction between documentary image as an image of reality, and a simulated, possible image. How do we as professional image creators react to this development? My main interest does not really consist in providing images that are as photorealistic as possible. Visualisations are created in the stage where the freedom or the potential lies in the possibility to really express what is useful for the understanding of the project. So my main interest is: How can I create images which try to reflect not only a neutral, clean copy of a possible, built architecture, but also primarily convey an architectural idea based on the visual language of photorealism? By means of a selective handling of the image elements I try to maintain this balance; perhaps a certain degree of abstraction, helps to distinguish between architectural photography (documentary) and architectural visualization (fiction)."

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