

### **Philipp Schaerer: When the virtual becomes real**

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*“For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.”*

*Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland*<sup>1</sup>

In his rigorous and structured series, Philipp Schaerer offers us images of strange buildings and unsettling architecture. Contemplating the ‘Bildbauten’ series, we are drawn into a dream-like world, and like Alice, we dream of entering these strange structures. Indeed, Schaerer offers a new vision of architecture: in part by questioning the contemporary built environment, but also by focusing on the way we read images. His images are seemingly characterized by a well-defined subject, that of architecture itself. But each image is a studied combination of formal references that in the aggregate somehow appear unreal. Are these built objects made, or found? Are they improbable, unlikely contemporary constructions?? Or are they, on the contrary, close to the built environment of tomorrow?

Schaerer’s images are characterized by a neutral aesthetic and great accuracy in detail – two characteristics of documentary photography. While architectural photographers usually try to be as realistic as possible in their viewpoint, Schaerer rejects perspective, and is therefore popular with architects and publishers who are eager to show a building in its most favourable light. When choosing a frontal and close-up view of the building, the artist increases the impression of meticulousness and clarity of the image; in fact, we are not far from elevation drawing. The view of the background is limited; it is neutral and the even light pervades every detail. Schaerer’s approach is also based on the repetition of images and seems to convey concrete evidence. Repetition turns speculation into a proposition. From one image to another, the architecture varies, but as the distance from the object is almost always the same, these variations are magnified.

Since the invention of photography, architecture has been an obvious subject, the accuracy of detail and the relative speed of execution offered by this medium accorded it an immediate success. Many photographers of the first generation earned their stripes working in the architectural field. Photography was seen as visual documentation of a flawless nature, useful for archaeologists, historians and amateurs of ancient architecture. They particularly appreciated the clear, sharp and rigorous rendition provided by this new medium, which they learned to use both to illustrate and magnify their observations. Our knowledge of architecture is indeed primarily photographic. The first impression of a new construction is often given by the photographs that claim to represent it. Very few people are actually able to see a particular building first-hand. This is even more so in the Internet age, as we flit from one image to another to screens. Architectural drawings are relegated to specialized journals, on the grounds that photographs give the most faithful image of architecture. Overlooked is the fact that the photographic image is the result of the highly subjective intention and vision of one individual – the photographer – even if he generally works on commission and is obliged to follow certain guidelines. And if he is able to take photographs in total freedom, he generally chooses the project and his tools according to the medium and with an eye to the intended recipient of the images.

Thus, architectural photography has trained our ‘eye’. The idea we have of the architecture of the 19th century is closely linked to the images left by photographers. We can

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Jean-Claude Lattès publishers, Paris, 1987, p. 21.

now certainly appreciate the photographs taken by Edouard Baldus in the 1850s and 1860s for their artistry, but we still assume that they represent the world as it was. However, in the digital age, a certain distrust has taken hold; we realize that the images surrounding us can ‘lie’. Anybody can play with photographs on their computer, changing them radically and seamlessly. If we take the liberty to edit our holiday snapshots – red eye, a sky altered by the flash, etc. – we should also realize that image professionals won’t hesitate to play around with pixels! The advertising industry has for a long time edited and retouched images, but we still allow ourselves to believe the evidence of the environments they depict. Architectural photography has followed suit. When they commission photographers, architects expect their ‘babies’ to be well highlighted and shown in their best guise. This was already the case in the 1860s, when architects presented photographs of their buildings to potential clients.

“The photograph proves that the building exists (or has existed), a drawing only proves that it has been planned”<sup>2</sup>, so said the architect and critic Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel in 1930. The architectural photographer would therefore feel committed to give reality to buildings that would be purely virtual before he has photographed them. Historically, photography has always been linked to the notion of testimony and truth, an idea exploited by the architects who use photography to keep track of their buildings for their archives. From the inter-war period, documentary photography has been based on this concept and has opposed itself to false, fictitious and invented construction. The controversial purpose of photography to stand as a witness, a tangible record and a memory of reality, is still vigorously debated. Indeed, the photographer has always been torn between the will to testify and the obligation to ‘give form’ in order to be convincing.<sup>3</sup> From the 19th century, architects have realized that photography could be an ally in promoting their work, and that the strength of the image would guide the way we perceive their work. Participating in the choice of shooting angles or choosing the moment when the construction is finished, when the interior and exterior have been completed but not yet been occupied, are tricks well known to architects. Similarly, magazine editors are always looking for seductive visual impact as they strive to sell an imaginary world to their readers. Who really wants to show the ‘real’ when it comes to the promotion of an architectural project? Is not the temptation to support it with a bright, positive message? Images have often served to reinforce ideology, in praising tradition or advocating modernity. Basically, digital technology has not revolutionized this aspect of architectural photography as editing has always existed. It has however dramatically changed the way we circulate, receive and produce images.

The ‘Bildbauten’ series, developed on the basis of photographic language, uses exclusively digital tools. Distinct from the traditional approach of an architectural photographer, Schaerer’s images question the traditional aura of architectural photography. The artist seeks to find a balance between the abstract image and the realistic vision of contemporary architecture, avoiding choosing one or the other. The photographic effect is essential in his work and allows him to question the reality of the images. Thanks to his technical expertise, Schaerer makes us believe they are photographed buildings and therefore that they exist. Textures and reflections are depicted with great subtlety, making his images extremely compelling. But although Schaerer’s work is visually akin to photography, it has more to do with computer imaging. The artist does not need a camera, the manipulation of pixels being his domain.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Robert Elwall, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> See Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire. D’August Sander à Walker Evans (1920-1945)*, Macula, Paris, 2004.

Trained in architecture, Schaerer discovered visual images during his first job. Having created computer generated images for ten years in the architectural field (mostly for the firm of architects Herzog & de Meuron), he developed a personal body of work focusing on architecture and based on the simplicity of its elements: shape, skin, facade openings and ground. Schaerer the architect is guided by his knowledge of computer graphics. The digital tools that enable him to create compelling visuals for projects in development in his profession, also allow him to assemble different images stored in his computer's database: landscapes, architectural details, materials, textures, surfaces, backgrounds, colours, shapes, etc. By combining these elements from different sources, Schaerer creates illusion by manipulating pixels. Digital editing provides images that appear more than real.

The artist creates the 'artificial'. His images reflect his desire to treat in a new way the documentary material and examine the relationship between reality and manipulation. The confusion and doubt that we feel when seeing his images fade away on viewing the entire series. Schaerer gives us clues – he claims to make 'honest'<sup>4</sup> images that do not conceal their two-dimensionality, while providing enough evidence that he is not documenting real buildings. But the imitation of photographic representation is troubling in the 'Bildbauten' series. In a word, the artist challenges the legitimacy and credibility of architectural photography. He questions the relationship between semblance and reality, between truth and manipulation. The tension between the photographic image and the building it is said to represent has always existed in photography: is the photograph a topographical recording, an architectural document or an artistic creation? Photographers **grapple** ceaselessly with these questions.

Although Schaerer did not train as a photographer and uses digital image processing, his work nevertheless pertains to architectural and urban landscape photography, a major genre of contemporary photography. The formal qualities of his images evoke the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher in the late 1950s, although their black and white photographs representing architectural structures such as water towers and blast furnaces date from another era and are the result of a different approach. The Bechers have indeed photographed actual buildings. However, even if Schaerer's subjects are created with digital tools, a strong visual link unites his work to that of his two famous predecessors. His systematic way of representing buildings from the front, in places difficult to identify and where human presence is removed, is similar to the approach undertaken by the Bechers in the 1960s and 1970s. The couple played a major role as teachers at the *Kunstakademie* in Düsseldorf: Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth being among their students. The work that can be attributed to this German school emerged in the 1990s and is distinguished by a passion for architecture and landscape, and cold, neutral, detailed and impersonal aesthetics. It excludes any sentimentality, emphasis or subjectivity. The Düsseldorf School also considers itself as the heir to the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* of the 1920s and 1930s. Photographers such as Albert Renger-Patsch or August Sander were then interested in representing typologies of nature, industry, architecture or society, systematically photographing subjects in isolation.

Schaerer draws on that tradition but without trying to imitate it. He prefers reconfiguring it. By creating typologies, he focuses on the diversity of the architecture of anonymous buildings and submits them to an aesthetic comparison. With his taste for minimalism, form is the only importance for him.

Although Schaerer's style shows characteristics identical to the Düsseldorf School, can his images be considered as architectural photographs? The 'Bildbauten' series represents

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<sup>4</sup> Terri Peters, « Architect and visualizer: Philipp Schaerer talks about photographs, photorealism and the new 'real' », in *Mark Magazine*, August-September 2008, p. 147.

fictitious constructions ‘made into’ images. But despite the title that orientates our way of reading his images, we want to believe in their reality. Knowing as an architect that current technology and materials allow us to work on the form with great freedom, Schaerer creates buildings with a deliberately abstract outline. This abstraction is the expression of refined architecture. But formal language is not austere. Is it really architecture? Is it not rather ‘Minimalist’ sculpture? Again, the link with the work of the Bechers and their ‘Anonyme Skulpturen’ is visible.

The same difficulty is posed by the work of Thomas Demand, another member of the Düsseldorf School, who became famous for his bizarre reconstructions of architectural interiors made of paper and cardboard. The viewer discovers the reconstruction through minimal details here and there and although he has understood that the scene is completely contrived, he still is tempted to read the space as real and the events that could have happened there. He is encouraged to look for a kind of story, despite the signs telling him that it is a space built from ‘nothing’, therefore fictitious. Schaerer also places reality and fiction in a sort of significant uncertainty. He plays on the ambiguous border between reality and artifice, preventing the fixing of meaning, without ever really opting for a mere unreality. The artist uses his imagination to create objects. Its architecture is based on the subtle construction of buildings too bizarre to be true. The ‘Bildbauten’ series is akin to the ‘Herbarium’ series by Joan Fontcuberta (1982-1985), whose plants appeared to be, after careful examination, surprising collages of various materials. The very deliberate confusion between reality and fiction serves several purposes in Schaerer’s work: it reflects a critical attention to the objectivity of the documentary tradition of architectural photography; it underlines the fact that, if the image can provide access to the object, it also creates and provides something new through its very visualization. Traditionally, photography is rooted in the past – the ‘it has been’ of Roland Barthes. Schaerer’s work questions the future by trying to give it a form through a prospective approach. One could call it the ‘it could be.’ The changing quality of photography calls for new changes. New experimental routes are opened. Virtual reality provides new opportunities and new sources of freedom.

The uniqueness of Schaerer’s work lies in the fact that the boundary between computer graphics and photography is blurred. As in Surrealist photomontages, Schaerer the image maker draws from his constantly growing database of 40,000 images to create his buildings. Fragments of a texture or shape gradually merge with other photographic or virtual elements until they fuse completely. The juxtaposition of elements foreign in nature to one another form a strange composite. The unusual combination of architectural textures and details reinforces the enigmatic character of his images. The architecture resulting from the manipulation is so far from the photograph that served as its basis that the relationship to the referent is abolished. The tradition of collage has indeed a long history in photography. The Dada and Surrealist movements were particularly fond of it. The approach has also existed for a long time in the world of music; DJs create music by copying and pasting sound loops, linking recorded sequences. Any scenario is possible when browsing the labyrinths of databases. The DJ finds his sources of information in the history of music. Similarly, Schaerer draws on images in his database. In both cases, different variations can be created indefinitely and without any limit. The recycling of images, such as the recycling of sounds, means staying open to all possibilities. Like a DJ who sometimes acts physically on the object – notably when scratching – Schaerer works on the very substance of the elements that compose the image. It begs the question as to whether digital technology produces a specific photogenic quality.

Schaerer’s work initiates a debate on the reproduction of architectural projects, and on the influence of this reproduction on architectural production. Unlike many photographers

today, he does not focus on the standardization of architecture but intends to return to architectural expression as creation. This resistance to show the built environment of our time is in itself remarkable. The work of Schaerer, which displays a wide range of shapes, is far from the standardized architecture produced by globalization and so omnipresent in contemporary photography. His buildings form a living whole and question us about our own environment, which seems dull and uniform compared to the edgy architecture he offers us. There is a connection between Schaerer's work and the imaginative strangeness of the Surrealists. With this artist, strangeness mixes well with architecture.

His field of investigation is not built architecture but more specifically the practice of the architect, who is now subjected to the influence of computer modelling. Similarly, photography has influenced architecture, notably by basing itself on the point of view, i.e. photographic framing. During the 20th century, the architect has developed his practice drawing more from photographs of architecture than from visiting real buildings. 3D modelling, which has developed over the last fifteen years, now influences contemporary architecture. While in its infancy, it was regarded as a new means of representation, it is now a tool to develop real projects. Today, many architects want to retain in their buildings the purity of the computer generated image. The abstraction of detail, due to 3D modelling, is not considered as a technical limitation anymore but as an aesthetic ideal. What gives reality to the computer generated image is detail, which makes the object pass from abstraction to reality. Schaerer has understood this capacity by maintaining the purity of detail. His images, which show constructions impossible to capture with traditional photographic techniques, fascinate by their simplicity and obviousness. When one browses the entire history of architectural photography, a constant remains: buildings acquire an iconic force as they pass through the lens of the camera. In recent years, some photographers have tried to 'demonumentalize' architectural photography by offering new visual and reflexive methods. Digital manipulation also gives us a renewed vision of architecture.

Ultimately, in Schaerer's work, architectural photography creates 'fiction'. The computer-generated image gives a supposed view of reality. His images are similar to traditional photographs – for their clarity and realism – but are purely imaginary. Reality – that Schaerer takes care to exaggerate – has undergone a metamorphosis. Like Alice, we let ourselves be carried away in a world where images and impressions are mixed and intermingled. Nearly forty years ago, the Bechers claimed: 'what you get is what you see.' The digital image takes another step in challenging the relationship to the referent. One might say, what you think you get is what you think you see. Today, digital techniques can simulate reality. Schaerer also knows that reality can now be generated from computer graphics. The virtual becomes real.

*'Modern architectural drawing is interesting, photography is beautiful, the building is just an unfortunate but necessary step in between.'*

*H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, 1937<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Robert Elwall, *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography*, Merrell, London and New York, 2004, p. 9.