

# BILD BAUTEN

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STANDPUNKTE

# WHEN THE VIRTUAL BECOMES REAL

NATHALIE HERSCHDORFER

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's Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>1</sup>

The modern architectural drawing is interesting, the photograph is magnificent, the building is an unfortunate but necessary stage between the two.

—H. S. Goodhart-Rendel<sup>2</sup>

In his rigorous and structured series, Philipp Schaerer offers us images of strange buildings and unsettling architecture. And, contemplating the *Bildbauten* series, we ourselves, like Alice in her wonderland, are drawn into a dreamlike world. Indeed, Schaerer offers a new vision of architecture, not only 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 aggregate, somehow appear unreal. Are these built objects made or found? Are they improb-

able, unlikely contemporary constructions? Or are they, on the contrary, somehow close to the built environment of tomorrow?

Schaerer's images are characterized by a seemingly neutral aesthetic and great accuracy in detail—two characteristics of documentary photography. But while architectural photographers usually try to be as realistic as possible in their viewpoint, Schaerer rejects perspective, and is therefore popular among architects and publishers eager to show buildings in their most favorable light. By 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 seem not to be far from elevation drawing. The view of the background is limited and neutral; even light pervades every detail. Schaerer's approach also depends upon the consistent repetition of images such that the images themselves seem necessarily to convey concrete evidence. It is an operation through which repetition turns speculation into proposition. The architecture varies from one image to another but as the distance from the object is almost always the same, these variations are magnified.

Architecture has been an obvious subject for photography since its invention. Many early photographers began by working in the architectural field. The medium's accuracy of detail and relative speed of execution afforded it immediate success. 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. Today, our knowledge of architecture remains primarily photographic, the first impression of a new construction often given by photographs that claim to represent it. Very few people are actually able to see a particular building firsthand, and this is even more so in the Internet age, as we flit from one image to another on our screens. Architectural drawings are relegated to specialized

journals, on the grounds that photographs give the most faithful image of architecture. What's overlooked is the fact that the photographic image is the result of the highly subjective intention and vision of one individual—the photographer—and that this subjectivity persists, must persist, 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 nineteenth century is closely linked to, even dependent on, the images left by photographers. We can certainly appreciate the photographs taken by Édouard 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 and widespread distrust has taken hold; we realize that the images surrounding us can and do "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, et cetera—we should also realize that image professionals themselves don't hesitate to play around with pixels. And while the advertising industry has long edited and retouched images, we still often 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 shown at their best. This was already the case in the 1860s, when architects presented photographs of their buildings to potential clients.

In 1930, the architect and critic Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel said, "A photograph proves that the building exists or has existed; a drawing proves only that it has been proposed."<sup>3</sup> But while the architectural photographer is meant to represent real buildings, in a way, their photographs are

often closer to the ideal image conceived by the architect rather than to a document of the building as it exists in the world. Historically, photography has been linked to the notion of testimony and truth. From the interwar period, documentary photography has been based on this concept and has opposed itself to any allegedly false, fictitious, and invented construction. The controversial vision of photography 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>4</sup> Since the nineteenth century, architects have realized that photography could be an ally in promoting their work, and that the strength of the image would guide our perception. Participating in the choice of angle, 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. And magazine editors look for seductive images 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 instead support it with a bright, positive, and generally appealing message? Images have often served to reinforce ideology, to alternately praise tradition or advocate modernity. Editing and considered editorial selection have always existed and, in this sense, digital technology has not revolutionized this aspect of architectural photography. But digital technology has dramatically changed the way we circulate, receive, and produce images.

The *Bildbauten* series, developed on the basis of photographic language, uses exclusively digital tools. Diverging here from the architectural photographer’s traditional approach, Schaerer uses his images to question the aura of architectural photography. The artist seeks to find a balance between the abstract image and the realistic vision of contemporary architecture, and in this balance avoids choosing one or the other. Thanks to his technical expertise, Schaerer makes us believe he’s photographed buildings

and, therefore, that his depicted subjects “exist.” The images are extremely compelling. Textures and reflections are depicted with great subtlety. But although Schaerer’s work is visually akin to photography as such, it ultimately has more in common with computer imaging.

Trained as an architect, Schaerer discovered visual images during his first job, for which he spent over a decade of creating computer-generated images in the architectural field, mostly for architects Herzog & de Meuron. During this time, he developed a personal body of work focusing on architecture and based on the simplicity of its elements: shape, skin, facade openings, ground. As Schaerer the architect was guided by his knowledge of computer graphics, the same digital tools that enabled him to create compelling visuals for projects in development in his profession also allowed him to develop a body of notably “assembled” images, using forms stored in his computer’s database. By combining elements—landscapes, architectural details, materials, textures, surfaces, backgrounds, colors, shapes, et cetera—from different sources, Schaerer creates illusion by manipulating pixels. Digital editing provides images that appear *more* than real.

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 with these questions ceaselessly. Philipp Schaerer creates the “artificial.” His images reflect a desire to treat documentary material in a new way and to examine the relationship between reality and manipulation. The confusion and doubt that we feel when seeing his images fade away upon viewing the entire series. Schaerer gives us clues—he claims to make “honest” images that do not conceal their two-dimensionality while providing enough evidence that he is not documenting real buildings.<sup>5</sup> But the imitation of photographic representation is troubling in the *Bildbauten* series. The images—and their artist—challenge the legitimacy and

credibility of architectural photography. Schaerer questions the relationship between semblance and reality, between truth and manipulation.

While Schaerer did not train as a photographer, his work nevertheless contributes to a broader art-historical discourse on architecture and landscape photography. Indeed, the formal qualities of his images evoke work by Bernd and Hilla Becher. While their black-and-white photographs representing architectural structures such as water towers and blast furnaces date from another era and are, indeed, the result of a different approach—the Bechers photographed actual structures—a strong visual link unites Schaerer’s work to that of his two famous predecessors. His systematic representation of buildings from the front, in places difficult to identify and from which any human presence is removed, is similar to the approach undertaken by the Bechers in the sixties and seventies. The couple played a major role as teachers at the *Kunstakademie* in Dusseldorf: Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth are among their many notable students. Work by this second generation emerged in the nineties and is distinguished by a passion for architecture and landscape; an arguably cold, neutral, detailed, and impersonal aesthetic; and the exclusion of sentimentality and subjectivity. The Dusseldorf School also considers itself heir to the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* of the twenties and thirties. Photographers of the period, such as Albert Renger-Patzsch or August Sander, were interested in representing typologies of nature, industry, architecture, and society, systematically photographing their subjects in isolation.

Schaerer draws on this layered tradition without trying to imitate it. He prefers to reconfigure it. By creating typologies, he focuses on the diversity of the architecture of anonymous buildings and submits them to aesthetic comparison. And his taste for minimalism renders form of the utmost importance. But while Schaerer’s work is reminiscent of that by Dusseldorf

School photographers, it's unclear if his images can as easily be considered architectural *photographs*, per se. The *Bildbauten* series represents fictitious constructions "made into" images. But despite the series' title, which orients our reading of his images, we want to believe in their reality. With an architect's awareness that current technology and materials allow us to manipulate form with great freedom, Schaerer creates buildings with a deliberately abstract outline. This abstraction is the expression of refined architecture. But his formal language is not austere. Is it really architecture? Is it not rather "Minimalist" sculpture? Again, a connection with the work of the Bechers and their *Anonyme Skulpturen* seems apt.

The same difficulty is posed by the work of Thomas Demand, another member of the Dusseldorf School who became famous for his paper-and-cardboard reconstructions of architectural interiors. The viewer discovers the reconstruction through minimal details here and there, and although he then understands that the scene is completely contrived, he is still tempted to read the space—and the events that could have happened there—as distinctly *real*. The viewer is encouraged to look for a kind of story, despite the signs telling him that it is a space built from "nothing" and that it is therefore fictitious. Schaerer also places reality and fiction in a relation of significant uncertainty. He plays on the ambiguous border between reality and artifice, preventing the fixing of meaning without ever really opting for explicit, and perhaps relatively facile, 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 Joan Fontcuberta's *Herbarium* series (1982–85), in which the plants appear 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 poetic “it has been” of Roland Barthes. Schaerer’s work questions the future by trying to give it a form through a prospective approach. One might call it the “it could be.”

The unique quality of Schaerer’s work lies exactly in the blurred boundary between computer graphics and photography. As in Surrealist photomontages, Schaerer, as image-maker, draws from a constantly growing database of some 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 forms 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 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 by 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. And so, 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 any and all possibility. Like a DJ who sometimes acts physically on the object—notably when scratching—Schaerer works on the very substance of the elements that compose his image. This 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 rather to return to a vision of architectural expression as creation. This resistance to showing the built environment of our time is, in itself, remarkable. Schaerer's work, which displays a wide range of shapes, is far from the standardized architecture produced by globalization, an architecture also so omnipresent in contemporary photography. His strange "buildings" form a living whole and question us about our own environment, suddenly relatively dull and uniform in comparison.

Schaerer's field of investigation is not built architecture but more specifically the practice of the architect, an architect now subjected to the influence of computer modeling. Similarly, photography has influenced architecture, notably by basing itself on "point of view," or photographic framing. During the twentieth century, the architect has developed his practice drawing more from photographs of architecture than from visiting real buildings. Three-dimensional modeling, which has developed over the last fifteen years, now influences contemporary architecture from its very inception. While in its infancy, it was regarded as a new means of representation, modeling is now an active tool with which to develop real projects. Today, many architects want to retain the purity of the computer-generated image in their realized buildings. The abstraction of detail possible with three-dimensional modeling is no longer considered a technical limitation but rather becomes an aesthetic ideal. What gives reality to the computer-generated image is detail, detail that allows the object to pass from abstraction to reality. Schaerer understands this capacity and maintains the purity of detail. His images, which show constructions impossible to capture with traditional photographic techniques—and perhaps also impossible to build with traditional architectural methods—are fascinating in their simplicity and "obviousness." When one browses the 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. In this way, digital manipulation also gives us a renewed vision of architecture.

Ultimately, architectural photography creates “fiction” in Schaerer’s work. His images are similar to traditional photographs—in their clarity and realism—but are purely imaginary. The computer-generated image gives a supposed view of reality. Reality—which Schaerer takes care to exaggerate—has undergone a metamorphosis. Like Alice, we let ourselves be carried away in a world in which 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 the real.

#### NOTES

1. Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 9.
2. Quoted in Gavin Stamp, “Bliss Was It in That Dawn to Be Alive: An Interview with John Brandon-Jones,” *Architectural Design*, 49, no. 10–11 (1979): 98.
3. *Architect and Building News*, 150 (April 9, 1937): 33.
4. See Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire. D’August Sander à Walker Evans (1920–1945)* (Paris: Macula, 2004).
5. Terri Peters, “Architect and visualizer: Philipp Schaerer talks about photographs, photorealism and the new ‘real,’” *Mark*, 15, (August/September, 2008): 147.

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