The Ephemeral and the Eternal:
The discordant roles of architectural photography

If we believe what the real-estate world says in its advertisements, modern architecture (especially the building stock created in the 1950s and ’60s) is in good shape. Taking advantage of the taste for modernism on the part of young people with enough money to buy, realtors have discovered the charm of post-World War II houses and have begun to market them as the homes to live in for those who aspire to “style” and sophistication. As is the custom amongst real-estate brokers, who give each housing style an epithet that is general enough to encompass a large, disparate group of houses (for example, a house designed by architects is called an “architectural,” and houses with columns and other historical details are called “traditionals”), these houses are labeled Mid-Century Modern, a name adopted from the language used by architectural historians and preservationists who felt the need to make a distinction between the various kinds of modernism of the twentieth century. The name Mid-Century Modern has become extremely fashionable, so much so that one can now find real-estate advertisements that refer to a house as “Mid-century design brand new in 2006” (which means that the style of the house makes it look like a building designed in the 1950s, although it was actually built yesterday) or as “Stunning remodeled mid century” (which sounds like a contradiction in terms) or an ad that exclaims: “Mid-Century Showplace. All the glamour of the 60’s with quality 21st-century amenities” (the significance of the reference to the 21st-century amenities will become clear in a moment). The name sells so well that the Palm Springs office of Sotheby’s International Realty set up a website called www.MidCenturyProperties.com to sell houses in that region. When one goes to that website, one finds quite a few “modern” houses, but there are also several listings that look distinctly “traditional.” Apparently, “Mid-Century” is the term that attracts prospective buyers; but the actual style of the houses that are for sale does not have to conform to that rubric.
Despite what this real-estate hype might lead us to believe, modernist buildings of the 1950s or 60s are in danger. Many of them have reached an age at which they require updating and refurbishing. Owners are forced to decide whether they want to preserve their building in the original condition, as it was designed about 50 years ago, or renovate it and adjust it to contemporary needs. Even people who like modernist architecture do not necessarily want to live with the small kitchens or bathrooms typical of the era in which they were built. Tastes and customs of living are so different now from those of the early 1950s. While fifty years ago the public spaces (living room and dining room) were still the largest part of the house, now the private rooms, including the den or family room, kitchen, bedrooms, walk-in closets, and bathrooms, take up most of a house's square footage.

Not all houses have, of course, all the rooms that I listed a second ago. However, people looking for a new home expect to find some of them, and if their recently acquired dream house does not have them, they will want to add one or more rooms to their house and at the same time rip out all the old characteristic elements. To those home owners it does not make sense to spend money on fixing up kitchens that no longer correspond with what we now expect to find in a modern kitchen, that is, lots of aluminum, granite, and beautifully veneered woods. Not everybody can see the charm of living with formica counters and painted plywood kitchen cabinets, and most people do not have the mind of a preservationist who will maintain the decoration of a kitchen because it is historically significant. If our taste in kitchen decoration has changed a lot, our taste with regard to the space needed for taking care of our bodies has changed even more. People want separate counters in their bathrooms for him and her, and a shower plus a bath tub for two, and of course sufficient space to accommodate the treadmill or other kind of exercise equipment. A home built in the 1950s is just not large enough to house these kinds of amenities. And office buildings constructed before most people had even heard of computers, e-mail, or databases are not in a much better shape. The advantage they have over houses is that they are most often built on a modular grid, so that if one has the
funding, one can wipe out the interiors of an entire floor and replace it with a whole new office setting. The question then is, does a developer want to put a new and shiny interior in a building that on the outside looks very dated. The outcome is just a toss-up.

It is no wonder therefore that those buildings go up in smoke, often in the middle of the night to avoid having to deal with protesting architectural preservationists. An excellent case in point is the house designed by Los Angeles architect Richard Neutra for Samuel and Luella Maslon in Rancho Mirage (near Palm Springs) in 1963. While this house is not one of Neutra’s most famous houses, it has some notoriety in the architectural world thanks to the photos taken by Julius Shulman. Soon after the completion of the house, Neutra asked Shulman to document it photographically. As he did quite often, Neutra himself came along with Shulman to discuss the views that he wanted the photographer to record. In general, Neutra and Shulman were in agreement about how a house should be photographed. In the case of this house, however, architect and photographer were very much at odds with each other: Neutra wanted photos that only showed the space and the house’s transparency; Shulman wanted to show the house as it was lived in—with its furniture and art works. As Neutra was paying the bill, he won, of course. However, a few days later, Shulman made the two-and-a-half hour drive from Los Angeles to Palm Springs again (this time without Neutra) to make a new set of photographs, now with all the interior decoration in it. When one compares the two sets of photographs one starts to understand why architect and photographer had a disagree-ment. While the u-shaped house with its living quarters on one side and the guest wing on the other was pretty big, the individual rooms were not big at all. Neutra therefore wanted Shulman to emphasize the relationship between inside and outside and wanted to remove everything beyond the frame that would block the view. As a result, the room has a very un-lived-in look to it. Shulman’s second photo on the other hand looks too densely packed. One sees the sculptures and other works of art, but does not get a real sense of space in which these objects are displayed.
The small size of the various rooms may have been the downfall for this relatively young house. In 2002, after Mr. and Mrs. Maslon had died, their children sold the house to someone they thought would be willing and able to take care of it, the son of a partner in Mr. Maslon’s law firm. Within a few days however, the immediate neighbors of the house were shocked to see the structure pushed over by a bulldozer. The new owner, who had said that he wanted to make only some minor changes in the house, requested a demolition permit instead. As the house was not officially protected, the city of Palm Springs issued the permit “that same day with no review and no questions, stamped and approved. Service with a smile. The house was gone in a week.” (NYTimes, April 25, 2002). The photo of the destroyed structure was published in newspapers and magazines all over the country. In some circles, the demolition photo is now better known than the photos taken by Shulman.

This episode provides a perfect example of both the power of architectural photography and its failure in the sense that photography creates a memory, but cannot prevent the destruction of the memorialized object. However, even when a building is gone, the memory is perpetuated through the photos. In fact, there are many 20th-century buildings still extant that we can only remember through specific, published photographs. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Kaufmann house in Bear Run, Pennsylvania, the so-called Fallingwater house, is extremely photogenic from many angles. However, it is the view seen from the bottom of the waterfall taken in 1937 by Chicago photographer Bill Hedrich of the firm of Hedrich Blessing, that is the iconic image of this house. Many photographers, both amateurs and professionals, have tried to recreate this shot emphasizing the precarious, multi-directional staging of the house above the waterfall, but Hedrich’s is the image that is published over and over and the one that is therefore ingrained in our minds.

Like Hedrich, the Southern California photographer Julius Shulman also took quite a few images that have become ingrained in our collective memory. We cannot think of Pierre Koenig’s Case Study House 22, for example, without seeing in our mind’s eye the two young women in their white petticoated dresses
having a relaxed conversation while seemingly floating above the lit-up Sunset
strip in Hollywood. Similarly, Mrs. Kaufmann (the same Mrs. Kaufmann, by the
way, who used Fallingwater as her weekend house) will always be reclining next
to her swimming pool when we think of Neutra’s Kaufmann house in Palm
Springs. We probably do not even recall what the other facades of the house,
the ones not shown in that famous shot, look like. In fact, for those architectural
historians who hope to discover how the house was put together, this photo is
not going to be of much help. Other photographs do convey that information, of
course, but this exterior view was made to celebrate the beauty of the soft desert
sunset lighting up the impressive mountains that loom over the house and
providing a dim background for the brightly lit volumes of the Kaufmann’s
bedroom and swimming pool.

When Shulman took this photo, he probably did not have Architectural
Record or Progressive Architecture in mind, but more popular magazines such
as House and Garden or Architectural Digest, in other words, magazines that
had no objection to seeing people and majestic landscapes in its architectural
photographs. Shulman was particularly successful in selling his work to a wide
range of such magazines, and was therefore able to familiarize a very broad
public with the designs of Southern California architects. Shulman’s photographs
guaranteed that, in spite of their young age, the houses by Neutra, Schindler,
Eames, and Lautner, to name just a few, are now part of the generally accepted
canon of the history of architecture of the second half of the twentieth century.

One other instance of a photographer actively promoting modernist
architecture can be found in Shulman’s participation in the Case Study House
program. I have already mentioned Case Study House #22 by Pierre Koenig.
This number alerts us to the fact that there were more Case Study Houses in
addition to Koenig’s. In total about thirty houses were designed and about fifteen
were executed. They all were part of a program initiated by John Entenza, editor
of the architectural magazine California Arts and Architecture, later called simply
Art and Architecture, who hoped that these houses would become prototypes for
mass production, and that modern architecture would be more generally
accepted. Shulman was so convinced of the goals of the Case Study House program that he donated his photography of the houses designed for this program for free. He wanted to prove through his images that modern houses were not just cold and abstract but totally livable. The angles and frames of Shulman’s shots were so well chosen and the placement of the people in the images (something unheard of in architectural photography before World War II) so well choreographed that his photographs came to represent an entire movement—that of modern living in Southern California. While the success of the Case Study House program was limited in the sense that only a small group of the houses was built and none of them was mass produced, Shulman’s work guaranteed that it did not fade into oblivion.

This achievement is somewhat paradoxical, as architectural photographs are for the most part made for very ephemeral purposes. Commissioned primarily by architects who want to publicize their work or, as in the case of the Case Study Houses, to promote an idea, architectural photographs are marketing tools; in other words, they are made to draw the attention of potential clients. It is safe to say that preservation is in general not on the mind of the designer who just completed the building and commissioned an architectural photographer to take the photographs. Yet, because they capture a moment in time that forever will tell the viewer what a city, street, or building looked like when the image was taken, architectural photos together with the original design drawings have become preservation tools. They are records that help preservationists argue their points. They also are sometimes the only documents left to tell a homeowner what a certain detail looked like before it had been botched by some un-understanding previous owner. Many new homeowners with an interest in restoration have made this point to us in the year since the Shulman archive has come to the Getty Research Institute.

The story however is not always that beautiful. I have already shown what happened to one of the houses built by Neutra in the Palm Springs area, a region that has become very proud of its so-called mid-century modernist legacy. I feel I should point out the real culprit responsible for the disappearance of many mid-
century modernist and other perfectly nice buildings. It is the desire to live in a house that looks like a Roman palazzo, Tuscan villa, or Tudor mansion. In America we have a very apt name for these houses. We call them McMansions, named after the big Macs, oversized but nevertheless cheap hamburgers sold by the McDonald’s company. There is at the moment a huge craze all over the United States for houses that are blown out of proportion (like those hamburgers) and that cover the entire lot leaving little or no space for front or back yards; however, for the new amenities that I mentioned earlier in this lecture, there is plenty of space. These McMansions are also meant to endow their owners with status through a strange mixture of ornaments. Just as one is not entirely sure what exactly is in the big Mac’s chunk of meat, it is hard to figure out which if any historical style was the inspiration for the decoration of a certain McMansion. One sees vague references to 18th and 19th-century periods put together in one house without any consideration of proportional appropriateness. Columns, pediments, balusters with short and heavy pillars, rusticated corners, decorative window frames, and other ornaments borrowed from rich cultures of the past represent wealth and power and give those qualities to the people living behind a façade that has all these embellishments. Unfortunately, there are more people who are impressed with houses dressed in historical styles than people who appreciate the abstract qualities of modernism, which is the reason why it is hard for mid-century houses to survive. Not even a photo by a famous architectural photographer, such as Julius Shulman, can prevent a home owner from knocking down a 50-year old house and replacing it with a status symbol. In the end, it is up to us to educate the public and provide people with all the information needed to make the right decisions. This is a huge, but critical task.