

courtesy Architects Journal

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 BY
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Fragmenting the architectural photograph a critical contribution to the architectural media

A generic form of architectural photography dominates the platforms of architectural criticism within the architectural media. The generic image prioritises a supposed legibility of architectural form using the precision of medium or large-format cameras, corrected perspectives and carefully deployed, directional light. Whilst often technically rigorous, the mandate of the generic image is limited to witnessing the building at its optimum moment of completeness when the built reality most closely resembles the authored conception of its design as a technical drawing or rendering. Architectural photography is thus often criticised for failing to represent architecture as process – spatial, material or social.

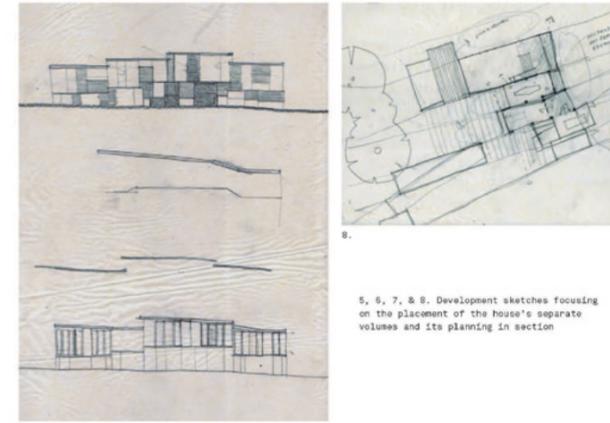
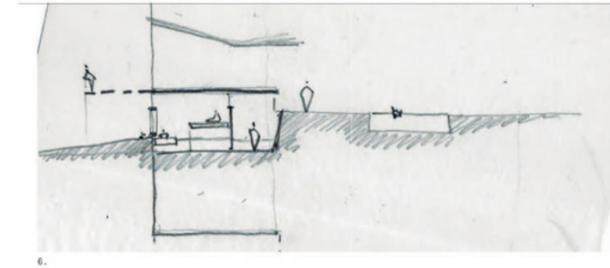
However, perhaps the most intractable problem with the architectural photograph is not its form as such – which, after all, originally evolved in the nineteenth century from the conventions of architectural drawing – but rather its condition of dominance within the media; its hegemonic status as the official way to see architecture. The architectural photograph is deployed through a

media system defined by an essentially complicit relationship between architects and the industry's media professionals (journalists, editors, photographers). Architectural photography facilitates this structure of complicity as a form of photographic representation that postures as objectivity, and which is all too easily, and passively, received as a faithful version of architectural reality.

How might we contribute to a media system characterised by such a systemic closure of critique? Should we abandon the architectural journals altogether, or find ways to recuperate some form of critical space within them? For my part, I advocate continued engagement with the media in the belief that the Building Report – the documentation and analysis of a new architectural system in image and text – presents a complex interdisciplinary and collaborative challenge – a worthy site for resistance to formulae, cliché and commodification.



Nigel Green



5, 6, 7, & 8. Development sketches focusing on the placement of the house's separate volumes and its planning in section

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courtesy Architects Journal

A more critical and reflexive use of the image within the architectural media would not eradicate the existing model with the replacement of one form of architectural photography with another. Instead a critical image of architecture would evolve: relational, its meaning and significance formed within a diverse field of imaging, and more broadly representative of architecture's processes. A reform of the architectural photograph needs a reactivation of the site of its publication as a discursive platform in which a portrait of architecture is understood as both a project and a projection: a work of construction in image and text.

Such an approach to architectural documentation within the journals requires internal editorial support, a protracted process of dialogue with a receptive editor. The examples here are taken from a building report I produced in collaboration with the artist and photographer Nigel Green for *The Architects' Journal* in 2007.

pages, above, from the AJ building report, showing the interpretation and the early drawings of the site, the context and the architecture of the Toh Shimazaki/ OSH house.

your words here please, to tell us what you want us to know about tge above images.

The Nigel Green images were used on the cover, the images used for the building study itself were Green's more conventional photographs, (right), plus sketches, drawings and plans, sections and elevations. So there was a combination of the poetic and the illustrative. etc etc: your words.

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Nigel Green

A house in the Surrey countryside by London-based practice Toh-Shimazaki Architects was published with previous AJ editors Andrew Mead and Sarah Douglas during a short-lived period of experimentation with the conventions of representation. This was the result of a re-launch of the journal by the London-based, design agency APFEL (A Practice for Everyday Life). APFEL, who have also worked on signage and identity designs for clients such as the British Council, Tate and the V&A, reformed the journal's graphic identity and layout, and also engaged with AJ staff in a significant reconceptualisation of the relationship between image and text.

Our Toh-Shimazaki article focused extensively on the landscape context of the house and drew on the architects' own imagery of site investigation and design process (maps, sketches, montage, models and snapshot photography). The prehistory of the building – the building as an idea, as a process and as a contextual entity on both intentional and unconscious levels – was strongly represented. Two distinct modes of photographic representation were used for the building itself: orthodox medium-format colour photography and fragment photographs. These derive from a method that Green developed in his art practice, involving a deliberately excessive use of the processing chemicals of analogue photography to create contingent effects of staining and solarisation, plus a physical tearing of images into fragments. Fragments of the exterior of the building were used on the cover of the journal, whilst more orthodox photography of the interior was used within the article itself.

The fragment uses an inherent disruption of legibility to expose what is at stake in the construction of a generic image. The implication is that all object (or referent) presence within an image is fluid or fugitive, subject to the actions of the chemical medium. The fragment's 'archival' quality also fundamentally confuses the location of the referent in time (is it past, present or future?). The article sets up a dialectical relationship between the fragment – which unequivocally expresses the actions of the medium, foregrounding the process of making and thus the role of the author – with a generic norm that works precisely to eradicate all signs of process within the creation of an image that supports the fiction of unmediated photographic realism.

On receiving the published article the architects felt that the fragment photographs contained an implicit criticism of their work along the lines that the building was somehow overly nostalgic and reliant on the work of mid-twentieth century precedents. The architect's misreading of our intentions registers two things: the sensitivity of the profession to the role of photography in presenting its work, and an instinctive distrust of any image that develops aesthetic autonomy from the architectural design. It also reveals how architects understand photography to be the dominant medium of discourse within architectural journals; that the photographic image alone is capable of formulating an article's critical position independent of the text.

The Toh-Shimazaki article revealed the potential discomfort of a renegotiation of the implicit professional covenant between architect, writer, photographer and editor, through its shift in the style of photographic documentation. The imperative to challenge the dominant mode of architectural photography lies not simply in the potential to reveal something different about architecture and the life of buildings, but also to enable reflection on the way architectural and media professionals perceive their roles, establish the terms of collaboration and understand the value of their work.



Nigel Green