

Picturing Modernism: Architecture, Lifestyle, and the “Embodied Image”

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KEYWORDS

Modernism; mid-century; architecture; photography; iconicity; embodiment; embodied simulation theory; Case Study House #22; Stahl House; Julius Shulman

ABSTRACT

How do architectural images influence our physical experiences of a building or site? Why do some architectural images become iconic, while others fail to resonate? In this essay, I focus on the iconic photograph of the now-famous Stahl House (Case Study House #22) and consider how the image impacts our engagement with the architecture through conscious and non-conscious processes. I analyze the photograph through three different lenses: first, in its context within the greater field of architectural photography; second, as an iconic photograph and its influence on lifestyle and architectural tourism; and finally, through an emerging field of research in the cognitive neurosciences related to the embodied simulation of images. Through these three lenses, I argue that the image works on different levels of embodiment, as a result of the interplay between the published photograph and the built structure. Because this Case Study House was essentially built to be photographed, I contend that the built form serves as a supplement to the published photograph, which ultimately influences our engagement with the actual site. In this essay, I consider the roots of the photograph’s iconic status, its role in perpetuating the legacy of its subject, and what this might reveal about our aesthetic and architectural beliefs and experiences. I apply recent research from the cognitive neurosciences to explore how we respond to architectural photographs in general, and the iconic image in particular. I conclude that the two- and three-dimensional realms work in concert to influence our engagement and embodied experience of architecture.

Introduction

The Case Study House program, initiated by *Arts & Architecture* magazine in 1945, produced some of the most well-known Modern masterpieces of the 20th century in the Los Angeles region—and some of the most reproduced photographs of Modern architecture worldwide. Julius Shulman, the primary photographer of the Case Study House program, produced images that were instrumental to the documentation and dissemination of Modernism in Southern California during the mid-twentieth century. Shulman’s photographs of the Case Study Houses garnered immense attention, with one photograph in particular capturing the spotlight. His famous photograph of Stahl House (Case Study House #22, designed by architect Pierre Koenig) remains one of the most iconic and reproduced images in the history of Modern architecture (Figures 1 & 2).¹

¹ Throughout this paper, the ‘iconic image’ or ‘iconic photograph’ refers to a particular view or focal point through which the house becomes well known, through reproduction of the published image. Pierreluigi Serraino. “Framing Icons: Two Girls, Two Audiences: The Photographing of Case Study House #22” in *This is Not Architecture: Media Constructions*, ed. Kester Rattenbury (London: Routledge, 2002), 131.



FIGURE 1

Julius Shulman. *Image of Stahl House (with two women pictured)*. 1959.

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FIGURE 2
Julius Shulman. *Colour image of Stahl House (with two women pictured)*. 1959.
© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10).

The photograph, which Shulman dubbed ‘Two Girls,’ depicts two women leisurely engaged in conversation while perched on sofas with the lit-up nightscape of Los Angeles below. It is almost as though the women are suspended in a glass case high above the city—a dramatic scene made possible by the glass and steel frame of the Modern house.² An unconventional approach to traditional architectural photography, which is often devoid of any signs of inhabitation to let the architecture be the focus, this consciously constructed image is very much fixed on the two women and the modern lifestyle they appear to embody. The presence of the women breathes elegance and humanity into the otherwise geometric composition made up of architectural lines and the grid of city lights below. Rather than occupying the forefront, as in a typical architectural image, the architecture instead serves more as a backdrop for a staging of the ‘good life’ (perhaps pointing to a conscious decision made as part of an underlying agenda to “sell Modernism to the masses”,³ rather than to serve as a document of the architectural space and form). Still, the photograph somehow manages to encapsulate the formal simplicity and aesthetic elegance of Modern architecture, while simultaneously offering a glimpse of the ‘ideal lifestyle’ that such design principles might offer the inhabitant.

So what is it about Shulman’s genre-bending, architecture-meets-lifestyle composition that is so alluring? Why have people repeatedly attempted to recreate the composition of ‘Two Girls’ when they visit the site? What are the neurological promptings that make this an iconic image that resonates with viewers on such a deep and enduring level? In this essay, I consider the now-

² Serraino, 127.

³ Shulman famously asserted that “good design is seldom accepted. It has to be sold.” This aim seems to be at the heart of the unique photographer-architect-editor relationship and advertorial nature of the program. Wendy Kaplan, *California Design, 1930 – 1965: “Living in a Modern Way”* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 289.

famous Stahl House (Case Study House #22) and the iconic photograph attached to it as I examine the roots of its iconic status, its role in perpetuating the legacy of its subject, and what this might reveal about our aesthetic and architectural beliefs and experiences. The photograph prompts a series of questions such as: why do some architectural images speak to us while others fail to resonate? What is it about the black and white image with the two girls that has captured attention for generations, retaining its iconic status so many decades after it was originally made? What is the significance of the relationship between the built form and the published photograph that was unique to the scope of Case Study House program? How does a photograph influence our relationship with the actual building or site? What are the neural underpinnings that have prompted the reproduction and desire to re-create the image through re-enactment? Ultimately, I submit that the constructed image and the role of embodiment (both spatial and simulated) contribute to the momentum and enduring legacy of Stahl House, as I will demonstrate in this paper. Using Shulman's iconic photograph 'Two Girls' as a key point of inquiry, this paper aims to demonstrate how architectural photography—and the iconic image in particular—influences our relationship with the built environment on a conscious and non-conscious level.

This paper examines the iconic status of the photograph in terms of aesthetic experience, and investigates its relationship to its built counterpart—that is, how the photograph impacts our engagement with the architecture itself through conscious and non-conscious processes. I analyze the photograph according to three key theoretical touch points: architectural photography; tourism and the iconic image; and embodied simulation theory. Through these three lenses, I argue that 'Two Girls' works on different levels of embodiment, as a result of the interplay between the published photograph and the built structure. Throughout the following sections of this paper, we will explore the roots of the

photograph's iconicity, how it influences the architectural experience, and the factors at play that contribute to this notion of the 'embodied image.'⁴

The Case Study House Program

The Case Study House program was initiated in 1945 by *Arts & Architecture* magazine in response to a need for new mass housing following WWII. Conceived by editor John Entenza (1905-1984), the program invited architects to submit proposals for experimental houses that used economical materials and new techniques, making them relatively inexpensive and easy to reproduce. Although *Arts & Architecture* promoted the Case Study House program as a means to address post-war housing demands, the aim to disseminate Modernist ideals to the public was also on the agenda. Commissioned, sponsored, photographed and published by the magazine, the experimental houses would serve as prototypes with the potential to physically demonstrate the benefits of Modern living for post-war society.

Of the 36 accepted designs, 24 houses were actually constructed over the 17-year span of the program—leaving several of the most inspired designs unrealized in the material world.⁵ The six Case Study houses that were built during the first three years attracted over 350,000 visitors. Despite this overwhelming public response, few of the houses were replicated in subsequent years. However, although the aim to create a replicable template for the Modern house was less successful, the overarching influence of the initiative on Modern architecture is immeasurable. The program yielded some of the most famous

⁴ Architect and architectural scholar Juhani Pallasmaa posits that images can be multi-sensory with the capacity to address our mental and imaginative realm, evoking embodied and emotional responses. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

⁵ Elizabeth A.T. Smith, *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 13.

pieces of mid-century Modern architecture in Southern California—including Eames House (Case Study House #8), Stahl House (Case Study House #22), and several other works by renowned ‘starchitects’ such as Richard Neutra, Charles Eames, Pierre Koenig, and Eero Saarinen, to name a few. Furthermore, the published photographs of the houses have become some of the most reproduced images of Modern architecture worldwide.⁶

The Photographs

Julius Shulman (1910-2009) was the primary photographer of the Case Study House program. With no formal training in photography, Shulman fell into architectural photography somewhat by accident after catching the eye of Case Study architect Richard Neutra.⁷ After working with Neutra on several projects, Shulman’s work quickly gained notoriety within the Modern architecture community of Los Angeles. His unique photographic eye was sought out by architects and editors alike, including the editor of *Arts & Architecture*, John Entenza.

Over the decades, Shulman’s photographs have continued to be in high demand throughout various architectural, construction, academic, and mainstream media publications. Shulman kept an immaculate archive of 260,000 colour and black and white prints, negatives and transparencies, enabling him to fulfil such requests up until he bequeathed his collection to the Getty Research Institute in 2005.⁸ As a result, Shulman’s legacy is very much alive today,

⁶ The trajectory of the iconic Case Study House images can be traced back their original publication within the pages of *Arts & Architecture*, which found an audience nation- and worldwide. Shulman’s unique approach to photographing the houses produced an aesthetic that found relevance in both the architectural and popular media. In the architectural press, it was architectural historian Esther McCoy—also a contributor to *Arts & Architecture*—who first published a comprehensive account of the Case Study program. McCoy’s seminal work, *Modern California Houses: Case Study Houses, 1945-1962* was published in 1962.

⁷ Serraino, 129.

⁸ “Julius Shulman, Modernity and The Metropolis,” J. Paul Getty Museum, accessed November 9, 2018, <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/shulman/>.

perpetuated through the continued reproduction of his images—with the most well-known example of his oeuvre being his ‘Two Girls’.

‘Two Girls’ in the Media

Whereas architectural photographs are typically minimally staged in order to let the architecture be the focus, Shulman’s unique approach is evident throughout his body of work. As Pierluigi Serraino writes in the essay “Framing Icons: Two Girls, Two audiences: The photographing of Case Study House #22”:

Radically, he often uses not only props but people, usually excluded from all architectural photography, and he arranges them to emphasize – sometimes to hide – various aspects of the building: to mimic a cantilever or to hide a shadow. His goal is to suggest occupancy and to activate desire in the viewer for a comfortable lifestyle in a modern home. To file down the sharp ideological edges of Modernism for the palate of the general public, Shulman frames together domesticity and steel – such as by placing a cocktail in the foreground of his compositions. ‘Wouldn’t you like to have a martini here?’ Shulman likes to ask when he explains his photographs to viewers.⁹

Considering the appealing content of ‘Two Girls,’ it is perhaps unsurprising that the photograph made its way from architecture and design periodicals into mainstream popular media, such as *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Examiner*. Architectural historian Alice T. Friedman attributes this broad interest in mid-century buildings such as Stahl House to the “skillful ways in which their architects and interior designers deployed the tools of merchandizing and fashion photography to capture the public imagination.”¹⁰ In her book, *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture* (2010), Friedman argues that it was “glamourized” images such as Shulman’s ‘Two Girls’ that introduced the notion of glamour—with its links to Hollywood and consumer culture—to a mainstream

⁹ Serraino, 129.

¹⁰ Alice T. Friedman, “American Glamour 2.0: architecture, spectacle, and social media,” *Consumption Markets & Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 6 (2017): 575.

audience.¹¹ She notes that such images “reflect a carefully calibrated appeal to viewing habits, ‘ways of seeing,’ and sensory expectations shared by a broad cross-section of American consumers accustomed to looking at photographs and watching movies.”¹² Propagated further by the rise of digital media today, it is likely due to this mainstream popularity that this image is still highly circulated across various forms of media. As Pierluigi Serraino notes, the popularity of the image in turn drives engagement with the site: “Capitalizing still on the popularity of that image, Case Study House #22 today enjoys the unconditional support of the cultural infrastructure at a global scale.”¹³ Perhaps appealing to both a sense of nostalgia and contemporary cultural values, the image continues to evoke awe among its viewers and inspire first-hand experiences of the site itself.

Architecture and Photography: Kindred Mediums

Photographic Approaches

There is a tension in scholarly accounts about the relationship between photography and the built architectural work. As previously stated, the traditional architectural photograph rarely includes the presence of people, or other signs of human inhabitation. Andrew Higgott notes in *Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture and the Modern City* (2012): “whereas architecture is usually experienced as a background stage for life, in architectural photography it must be brought to the foreground, which can only be achieved when other foreground elements are suppressed.”¹⁴ As such, it is common for architecture, especially interiors, to be stripped of any elements that might distract from the architecture itself.

¹¹ Friedman, 576.

¹² Friedman, 576.

¹³ Serraino, 134.

¹⁴ Andrew Higgott, *Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture and the Modern City* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 46.

Beatriz Colomina, in *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (1996), offers an insightful analysis of Modern architect Le Corbusier's principles as the photographer of his own buildings. For him, she submits: "architecture is a conceptual matter to be resolved in the purity of the realm of ideas, and when architecture is built it gets mixed with the world of phenomena and loses its purity."¹⁵ She goes on to assert that, once architecture enters the two-dimensional space of the page (i.e., the published photograph), it returns to the realm of ideas.¹⁶ By way of striking contrast, Colomina notes the views of early Modern architect Adolf Loos, who stated that he was most proud of his buildings that did not photograph well, for they relied on embodied experience to be fully realized. In Loos's own words: "It is my greatest pride that the interiors which I have created are totally ineffective in photographs. I have to forgo the honour of being published in the various architectural magazines."¹⁷ Perhaps Loos was weary of photography's aestheticizing tendencies or risk of presumed realism, aware of the photographer's power to portray an ideal that is unattainable in built form.¹⁸ In light of this dilemma, some architects in the 1950s and 60s opted for alternate forms of representation—either opting to convey occupancy and everyday use, or framing the image in such a way that leaves the viewer to imagine the whole for themselves.¹⁹ As previously stated, Shulman's 'Two Girls' seems to employ both of these solutions, through the use of inhabited space and an unconventional framing of the architectural form.

¹⁵ Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 83.

¹⁶ In 'Two Girls,' Shulman uses a carefully constructed image of the built form to convey the idea of a "better life" through "good design."

¹⁷ Higgott, 47.

¹⁸ Higgott, 60.

¹⁹ Higgott, 47.

As previously noted, Julius Shulman's photographs of the Case Study houses stand in sharp contrast to the conventional, stripped-down architectural photograph. Not only did his architectural subjects photograph well, they were literally built to be photographed and published in the pages of *Arts & Architecture*, as they were commissioned by the magazine.²⁰ As such, I suggest that there is a significant interplay at work between the two- and three-dimensional realms that is unique to the Case Study House program and the editor-architect-photographer relationship.

The Dimensions

For decades, the photographs of the Case Study houses have inspired engagement with the physical sites through publication and reproduction. In the case of Stahl House, the photographs were circulated over and over again through various forms of media, assuming new meaning as they were engaged in various realms of discourse. Through popular media (and now social media), the photographs have continued to inspire first-hand experience with the space (evident in the droves of people who still travel from all over the world to visit the house). In other cases, given that many of the houses are now private residences or are no longer extant, it would seem that the responsibility now lies with the photographs to somehow communicate, or simulate, the embodiment of past changed, or recreated architectural spaces. It is a kind of simulacrum in different terms, whereby the photograph must serve as a proxy for the 'real thing'.

²⁰ While Shulman's oeuvre includes famous photographs of several other Case Study houses—including Koenig's Case Study House #21 (Bailey House) and Charles and Ray Eames' Case Study House #8 (Eames House)—no photograph parallels the iconic status of 'Two Girls'. Certainly, Koenig's elegant Modern design and the dramatic siting of the house contribute to the essence of the image. With masterful framing, lighting, and use of models and props, Shulman brings it all together to create a unique photographic experience, offering viewers a glimpse of the "good life."

The fact that the Case Study houses were constructed, always with the intention of being photographed and published in the pages of *Arts & Architecture*, differentiates this building program from others, as the photographs serve as a unique driving force behind the project and its legacy. Despite the immense influence on Modernism as a result of Case Study houses such as Stahl House, the intention of the houses being replicated as templates for Modern living was never realized.²¹ Rather, as my analysis indicates, it was the images that perpetuated the legacy to which the houses themselves seem supplementary, rather than the other way around. Peoples' point of connection is first to the iconic image, which later inspires an encounter with the actual site. As a result, there is a kind of reciprocal connection at play, which I think is unique to the scope of the Case Study House program.

The Iconic Image

Architectural historian Mary N. Woods writes, in *Beyond the Architect's Eye: Photographs of the American Built Environment* (2014): "Photography and the culture of images tells us much about what we document, theorize and preserve. How well spaces, buildings and landscapes photograph or not ultimately affects whether we value or dismiss them."²² Certainly, the iconic imagery of Stahl House has been instrumental in cementing its place in the Modern canon, while securing its legacy in terms of preservation for years to come. That the house was part of the famous Case Study House program is certainly significant, but the widespread dissemination of its iconic image(s) is perhaps the driving force behind its perceived value and enduring legacy. Indeed, people all over the world have seen the photographs and been inspired to visit. But how does an iconic image such as

²¹ Smith, 13.

²² Mary N. Woods, *Beyond the Architect's Eye: Photographs of the American Built Environment*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), xviii.

‘Two Girls’ affect our physical experience of the building in the material realm? How does it shape our expectations and behaviours, and influence the way we interact with the actual site?

As Mary N. Woods noted, in her recounting of a visit to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater house, a certain degree of strife was involved in climbing to the exact vantage point from where photographer Bill Hedrich had taken the iconic photograph of the house. Still, she felt obligated to achieve the shot, feeling that the Fallingwater experience may somehow be “inauthentic or incomplete without paying obeisance to Hedrich’s vision.”²³ Depending on the viewer, the inclination to recreate the iconic image depends on how much they remember, or even value the architecture and the image. For example, an architecture buff might seek to better understand the ideas behind the architecture, or the photographer’s intent behind the constructed image. Employing the tourist’s gaze, on the other hand, a person may only be concerned with proving they were there and that the experience is somehow ‘authenticated’.

Photography and Tourism: The Quest for Embodiment

On a visit to Stahl House in May 2018, it was clear to me that the iconic image of ‘Two Girls’ was undoubtedly figuring in the minds of many visitors.²⁴

Upon reaching the other side of the privacy wall that shields the residence from the street, the group was clearly awestruck by the scene: a crystal blue swimming pool glistens alongside the elegantly simple glass and steel structure that encases a tastefully designed interior—all perched seemingly precariously above the sprawling vistas of Los Angeles below. Upon taking in the striking view, it’s

²³ Woods, xxii.

²⁴ A first clue may be that, of the three tours offered daily, the evening tour is consistently sold out months in advance. Of course, I cannot help but assume that this is due to the fact that the iconic image depicts a night scene.

difficult not to conjure images of 'Two Girls' in one's mind (especially considering that you approach the house by a similar angle from which the photo was taken). As such, it did not take long for visitors to begin attempting to position themselves for the ultimate photo op, attempting to re-create the image through which they had come to know the architecture. I, too, found myself attempting a photo from a similar vantage point (Figure 3), although I would have had to assume a much more precarious position in order to mimic Shulman's vantage point when he shot 'Two Girls' (Figure 4).



FIGURE 3
Exterior image of Stahl House. 2018.
Source: Photo by author.



FIGURE 4

Image of photographer Julius Shulman photographing Stahl House. 1959.

© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10).

Missing from my photo, of course, are people occupying the space where the two women were depicted inside the glass of the living room. As the tour went on, however, it was interesting to observe the majority of my tour mates having themselves photographed in the corner seats of the living room where the women had sat—with their appointed photographers shooting from (or close to) where they thought Shulman’s vantage point would have been. This behaviour exemplified that the iconic image does indeed impact our physical encounter with the space—perhaps even hindering our experience, considering what we might miss while we are pre-occupied with our quest to re-create the iconic image.

In an assessment of the published image ‘Two Girls’, Pierluigi Serraino suggests: “The reader’s consumption of that photograph was not only a way to enter into a privileged community, but also an opportunity to indulge in a form of virtual voyeurism.”²⁵ We can perhaps see how the image might afford the viewer these opportunities, and perhaps we can now understand how one might take the experience a step further by assuming the role of photographer. However, I submit that by engaging with the space according to the constructed photograph (i.e., assuming the role of the model), the viewer then becomes the embodiment of that ‘privileged community’, and also the subject of the voyeur in the replicated image. By not only re-creating the iconic image, but actually inserting oneself into that image, the beholder thereby assumes the role of both creator and subject. We will explore this creator-subject-beholder relationship further in the following section on architectural photography and neuroscience.

²⁵ Serraino, 132.

Architectural Photography and Neuroscience: The Embodied Image

Embodied Simulation: Empathy and Aesthetics

A key point of investigation in this study stems from an increasing body of research in relation to our embodied experience of architecture from a host of scholars spanning the disciplines of architecture, art history, and the cognitive and biological neurosciences. Key scholars working in this area include architect and theorist Harry Francis Mallgrave, and cognitive neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese—both of whom have extended their theories of architectural embodiment to the static object or image. Relevant to the present study of embodiment and architectural imagery is Gallese’s theory of embodied simulation. Likened to the notion of empathy, embodied simulation is a basic functional mechanism in social cognition that combines the embodied theory of perception with mirror neurons. The embodied theory of perception has to do with the fact that vision is always a multimodal process, engaging sensorimotor, visceral motor and affect-related and emotion-related brain circuits.²⁶ That is, vision relies on the other senses in order to effectively process visual data. Mirror neurons are essentially motor neurons that become activated during either the execution of an activity, or the observation of the same activity being carried out by another person. In other words, through a combination of embodied perception and the activation of mirror neurons, we are able to achieve embodied simulation—which means we are capable of experiencing actions, emotions or sensations when we see them enacted, expressed or felt by others.

²⁶ Vittorio Gallese and Alessandro Gattara, “Embodied Simulation, Aesthetics, and Architecture: An Experimental Aesthetic Approach,” in *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment and the Future of Design*, ed. Sarah Robinson and Johani Pallasmaa (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 164.

Interestingly, embodied simulation is also engaged when these actions, emotions and sensations are presented to us through static images, thereby opening up the notion of embodied simulation to aesthetic experience.²⁷ As Gallese notes, this discovery is significant for our experience of both art and architectural space, in that it sheds new light on the connections between body, empathy, and aesthetic experience: “The very nature of our body allows us to experience gravity, force, and pressure, and thus makes the enjoyment of contemplating a Doric temple, or the feeling of being elevated when entering a Gothic cathedral, possible in the first place.”²⁸ Considering that vision is a multimodal process, and that the theory of embodied simulation extends to our reception of static images, it seems very likely that we possess the capacity to ‘embody’ architectural photographs.

If we apply the concept of embodied simulation to the ‘Two Girls’ image, we could conclude that the beholder has the capacity to mirror the postures, gestures, and body language of the women in the photograph. The viewer could feel the ease of leisurely conversation, the ambiance of the Saturday night atmosphere, and the glow of the city lights below. Ultimately, the viewer could capture the spirit of the lifestyle and feel what it’s like to embody the ‘good life’ through Modern design. Through an art historical lens, this could perhaps help us better understand the aims of the photographer, architect, and the Case Study House program as a whole. Despite the photograph’s seemingly timeless appeal, it also encapsulates a particular moment in place and time, and an important part of our cultural and social history.

²⁷ Davide Massaro et al., “When Art Moves the Eyes: A Behavioural and Eye-Tracking Study.” *PLOS ONE* (2012): <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0037285>.

²⁸ Gallese and Gattara, 163.

Embodied Simulation: Creator and Beholder

Beyond our embodied connections to the aesthetic content of an image or space, embodied simulation theory suggests that we also have the capacity to “emulate the actual motor expression the artist used when creating the artwork”.²⁹ This is made possible through a combination of emotional reaction and sensory-motor activation related to image perception. In other words, we are able to ‘feel the artwork’ as a result of being able to mirror the gestures implied in the art-making process. Gallese explains:

Artistic images are effective because they are the outcome of both the artist’s creative production and the effect that the images elicit in the beholder. The aesthetic value of works of art resides in their potential to establish a link between the intentional creative acts of the artist and the reconstruction of those acts by the beholder.³⁰

Returning to ‘Two Girls’, we have seen how the image might elicit certain feelings and sensations in response to its content by way of embodied simulation. However, to identify where the image establishes a link between the “intentional creative acts of the artist” and the “reconstruction of those acts by the beholder” is a little more complex.³¹ Speaking strictly of the image itself, the creative intent of the maker could be seen in the portrayal of a better life through good design. The creator’s intent is to sell Modernism to the public, and his creative process includes constructing the photograph in a way that will convey this message of optimism to the public. The beholder then reconstructs those acts by mirroring the gesture of the creator, perhaps in this case by choosing to align him/herself with the viewpoint of the photographer and finding resonance in the composition. However, once we reintroduce the material realm—or the subject of the photograph—the beholder then has the ability to reconstruct the

²⁹ Gallese and Gattara, 172.

³⁰ Gallese and Gattara, 168.

³¹ Gallese and Gattara, 168.

creative acts of the artist quite literally. In the case where the viewer seeks to re-create the iconic image, as previously discussed, the image has presumably elicited such a perceptual response that the beholder feels compelled to not only mirror the creative act, but to literally enact it. As a result, to quote Gallese, "...the physical object, the product of symbolic expression, becomes the mediator of an intersubjective relationship between creator and beholder."³²

³² Gallese and Gattara, 163.



FIGURE 5
Julius Shulman. *Colour image of Stahl House (with architect Pierre Koenig pictured)*. 1959.
© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10).

The Embodied Image

The staged setting and dramatic black and white aesthetic of ‘Two Girls’ imparts a sense of theatricality, inviting the viewer to project herself into the scene and perhaps aspire to become one of the well-dressed women depicted.³³ Absorption into such a scene empowers the viewer to imagine, or psychologically adopt an elevated social status—one that allows for leisurely evenings spent engaged in social activity, surrounded by beautiful architecture and stunning vistas. The image conveys an “optimal balance between reality and believable fiction,” thereby making the scene, and the lifestyle it depicts, seem all the more accessible to the viewer.³⁴ Further, the black and white aesthetic contributes to a timeless appeal, whereas colour images, as scholar Kim Biel notes, introduce historical specificity. Observing a colour image taken from the same angle as ‘Two Girls,’ but instead depicting a man (the architect, Pierre Koenig) standing by the window, Biel notes that the saffron couch, the orange striped rug, and the man’s powder blue jacket all work to locate the scene in a particular place and time (see Figure 5).³⁵ As a result, the colour image may run the risk of mirroring reality too closely, while the black and white version offers a sense of dramatic elitism that appeals to the fictive or aspirational quality of the image.

³³ A similar phenomenon was illustrated in Bonwit Teller’s “Warhol Window,” whereby shoppers were drawn psychologically and physically into the store via a compelling window display. Cécile Whiting, *A Taste For Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10.

³⁴ Kim Biel, “The Myth of Black and White Modernism: Color Photographs and the Politics of Retrojective Looking,” *Visual Resources*, Vol. 31, No. 3-4 (November 2015), 132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973762.2015.1073972>.

³⁵ Biel, 132.

The very fact that Stahl house (Case Study House #22) exists in the physical world— existing to be photographed—lends itself to the realism of the image. The photograph serves as empirical proof that this place exists, while the staged scene incorporates an imaginative sense of fiction that begs to be re-enacted. At the time of the photograph’s original publication, that is, when the house was built, the re-enactment was meant to manifest by way of the public adopting Modernism via the model homes presented through the Case Study House program. Since then, the photograph has taken on new meaning, inspiring new forms of re-enactment that relate to contemporary currencies and phenomena within popular culture.³⁶ With the democratization of the camera and ubiquitous dissemination of digital images, through such platforms as Instagram, the image now serves as a form of inspiration for re-enactment, perhaps intended to elevate one’s status in new ways. Instead of inspiring viewers to literally adopt the Modern lifestyle by purchasing a Modern home, it is the celebrity quality attached to the photograph that inspires re-enactment today. As a result, tourism of the home itself can perhaps be reduced to “a search for the photogenic,” while also rendering the reproduced image into an overdone “cliché”.³⁷ Be that as it may, it is important not to ignore the neural and psychological underpinnings that set these behaviours into motion, perpetuated by exposure to the iconic image. As I.C. McManus and Katharina Stöver note in “Mute, motionless, variegated rectangles: Aesthetics and photography” (*The Psychology of Aesthetics and the Arts*) (2014): “Psychology has hardly considered the hypnotic, magical involvement with photographs, especially those that have become iconic by publishing and re-publishing, and hence seeing and re-seeing, sometimes to the point where

³⁶ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2015), 32.

³⁷ Wells, 33.

an image is no longer seen as such.”³⁸ To this end, I find it plausible that such pursuits that are influenced by repeated exposure to the iconic image may result in a phenomenological experience (both individual and shared) that perhaps transcends the image itself.³⁹

Conclusion

While the Case Study House program sought to provide replicable templates for Modern architecture to the public, in the end, it produced some of the most iconic and reproduced architectural photographs of the mid-twentieth century. One remarkable image, ‘Two Girls,’ captured the spirit of the time and the city, and spanned media genres to captivate public attention. The strategically constructed and carefully staged photograph straddled the line between reality and fiction, thereby helping viewers to not only see *what was* (the Modern architecture), but to imagine *what could be* (the glamorous lifestyle that such design could provide). Shulman’s aptitude for creating dramatic scenes that infused the essence of the architecture, its relationship to the landscape, and the utopian spirit of Modern domestic life was evident throughout his photographs of the Case Study Houses.⁴⁰ These photographs were instrumental in helping to transition the perception of Modernism in California from a socially and intellectually elite concept to a reality that meant a better life through good design was accessible to everyone. In this sense, the program’s aim to sell Modernism to the public could

³⁸ I.C. McManus and Katharina Stöver, “Mute, motionless, variegated rectangles: Aesthetics and photography” in *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Aesthetics and the Arts*, ed. Pablo P. L. Tinio and Jeffrey K. Smith, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 246.

³⁹ During my interior tour of Stahl House, particularly in the living room area, I experienced the feeling that I had been there before. I can perhaps attribute this phenomenological response to repeated viewings of the image, which produced a sort of imagined reality or fictive memory of the actual space.

⁴⁰ Much scholarship has been dedicated to the Case Study House program and Shulman’s contribution to a utopian rhetoric. See, for example: Dianne Harris, “Case Study Utopia and Architectural Photography” in *American Art*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer 2011) 18-21; Joseph Rosa, *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 54.

be considered a great success. The staged, theatrical effect of the photographs worked as a point of entry for popular audiences, drawing connections to Hollywood and consumer culture.⁴¹ Given a prevailing fascination with celebrity and consumer culture today, as well as the accomplished fame of Stahl House and its iconic photograph, these devices continue to work on mainstream audiences.

The enduring appeal and success of Shulman's photographs, and their contribution to the lasting legacy of the Case Study House program, can be attributed to his unconventional approach to architectural photography. Today, emerging discoveries in the cognitive neurosciences offer us new insights into how we experience imagery, and the responses it elicits. This new knowledge, I argue, helps us better understand why Shulman's approach was so effective in captivating the viewer and conveying the appeal of Modern architecture, and why the image retains its iconic status still. Shulman's constructed images afford the viewer the opportunity to become an active participant in the image that is presented to them—while simultaneously helping them realize how the architecture might influence their lives. Shulman's strategic use of people and props in his photographs help the viewer to 'embody the image' on a non-conscious level, thereby influencing a connection to the photograph—and the architecture, the lifestyle, the city—on a conscious level. Further, I posit that the Case Study House images of Julius Shulman were so successful because they depict Modern architecture as we experience it—as a backdrop for life, but also as an active force that shapes our cognition and wellbeing, as neuroscience suggests.⁴²

⁴¹ Friedman, 575.

⁴² Harry Francis Mallgrave, "Know Thyself": Or What Designers Can Learn From the Contemporary Biological Sciences," in *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design.*, ed. Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasmaa (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 16.

In creating the Case Study House program, editor John Entenza's idea was that "people would not really understand Modern architecture unless they saw it, and they weren't going to see it unless it was built."⁴³ It is interesting that the published images are what drove—and continue to drive—people to see the built architecture. Speaking of the Case Study House program and *Arts & Architecture*, Esther McCoy asserted: "No single event raised the level of taste in Los Angeles as did the magazine. A magazine as flat as a tortilla and as sleek as a Bugatti with little advertising and no financial backing became the greatest force in the dissemination of information, architectural and cultural, about California."⁴⁴ Shulman's carefully constructed images, such as 'Two Girls,' enabled viewers to see themselves in the scene, thus inspiring engagement with the architecture itself. In the case of 'Two Girls' and Stahl House, this exchange is still very much active today, as my analysis suggests. That the photograph holds the power to inspire not only visits to the physical site, but also a desire to re-enact and re-create the two-dimensional image suggests that the architecture has become supplementary to the iconic photograph. The architecture, famous in its own right, can be seen as the ultimate draw—but it is the photograph, and everything that it promises, that drives engagement with the site. Working in concert, the photograph inspires, and the architecture physically facilitates an embodied encounter with the iconic.

⁴³ Thomas S. Hines, *Architecture of the Sun: Los Angeles Modernism 1900-1970* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2010), 508.

⁴⁴ Hines, 509.

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