

ARCHITECTURAL AND PHOTOGRAPHIC CONSTRUCTIONS

I look for buildings that are a bit ugly, that have been a little bit forgotten. These buildings have secrets to be explored. This architecture has become polluted, marked by time. I am interested in the way in which places lose their purity through uninvited intrusions such as the tower blocks that undermine the arcadian illusion at Park Sans Souci in Potsdam. I am not interested in glorifying architecture, as the glossy images in architectural journals and monographs do. I could not photograph a new building in the same way as I photograph architecture in *Concrete*. New things do not interest me. As an artist I am not interested in architecture such as Herzog and de Meuron's, that is all about propaganda. I prefer buildings that do not proclaim their own heroism. My only question for architecture built today is whether it will have aged nicely in twenty years or not.

My interest in modernity is in its relation to the passage of time. I like the quality of time becoming a bit unclear: one can guess how the buildings I photograph once were, and might be in the future, but at the moment they are in a transitional stage between being new and old. Because modernism had the specific intention to be always new, places like the South Bank Centre, intended for the future when built, have a particular potency. Concrete architecture bears the traces of when it was poured, and staining and wear from time, while also being immovable and permanent, almost eternal. The perception of concrete is poised between its original utopian associations with progress and the future, and now with the perceived failure of modernism.

My objectives are different from those of an architect—I am not interested in creating buildings, or in generating ideas for new architecture, but in creating images. I come to architecture as an outsider and I want to maintain this distance. For me architecture is evidence of something having occurred, and I ask what it is that happened and try to make an image that frames this question. I like to ask what people were thinking about when they conceived such projects, and how people see them now. I like to ask whether people think differently living in concrete or wooden buildings. But my photographs are so tightly cropped, closed, that the presence of people becomes irrelevant. You could say that the absent person is not a potential subject, but the inquisitive viewer who questions whatever it is that the photograph evidences. Or perhaps people are no longer relevant to the *idea* of architecture today?

Concrete is nature! Massive and heavy like mountains. My current project is to find the Magic Mountain as Thomas Mann describes it. But after travelling to the Alps and searching for it there I realised that I was looking in the wrong place, and that it is to be found in the places in which we read Mann's book, in the city around us. Concrete is also used to withstand weather, to shelter and distance man from the elements. Nature is thus present in concrete as its enemy.

Modernism is not my sole interest. In our age we have access to so many cultures, they have all become part of the modern world. Anyway, in the future the theme of modernism will probably become less central to my work. Recently I was in Switzerland photographing traditional wooden chalets. In the *Documenta 11* exhibition in Kassel I exhibited a screen made of six aluminium panels, into five of which I punched patterns sourced from various periods and places—Vienna, New Delhi, St. Lucia, Lagos and Kassel—and on the sixth panel I printed one of the images from *Concrete*. But presented together it is not obvious where the patterns originate from. In every area of the world people have a similar interest in decorating the skins in which they are surrounded—the skins of their bodies, clothes and buildings and their patterns and ornamentation. These patterns are a kind of code language.

These codes say: We are beautiful, we belong together, look at us. It's the expression of the identity of a group in every culture, in every time, every place.

Adolf Loos wrote that 'ornament is crime', but I don't agree. I find a lot of patterns in modern architecture, but I perceive them in a very different way to that in which Loos understood ornament. For me the structured elements in modern buildings are patterns or ornaments. And it is these that I show in my photographs. Decoration is even embedded within the textured material of concrete. Whereas pre-modern architecture is about an assemblage of parts—doorways, colonnades, hallways—modernism strips these parts away, already reducing itself down to a surface—or an image. The macro focus of the *Concrete* series asks how this surface is constructed. I am interested in the slippage between ideas of construction, structure, pattern and ornamentation. Structure and form are not only functional and engineering ideas, but also images. And conversely ornaments are also a construction. A place like the South Bank Centre is both a physical construction, and also an aesthetic structure; albeit one that is very difficult to read because the material it uses—concrete—is so natural, pure and raw. This first aesthetic structure is then manipulated and overlaid with other structures by the way in which I as a photographer compose my photographs, and again by the

way in which individual images are assembled and presented together. Whereas the earlier *Speckergruppen* consisted of single hermetic images, in *Concrete* paired or grouped images, often almost identical with only a slight change of viewpoint, are always presented together in polyptychs. The photographs thus work together to construct something that exceeds the possibilities of the individual image. In other people's work, such as H el ene Binet's work, images are structured in a way sympathetic to the architect's intentions, the photographer seeking to understand and support their aesthetic ordering. But in this regard my work is perhaps more provocative in that although I might like the subject, I will reorder it and make it into a new statement that is removed from the original building.

You don't quite know where you are looking from in my photographs. The tactility of a subject, even if it is a public building, is something that often we are not allowed to explore. I am interested in the tension between tactility and image. I like this uneasy distance! Unlike mainstream architectural photography, which seeks to explain a building, albeit in a particularly positive light, in my work the information needed to interpret the image is excluded from within the frame. The photograph then poses a question. It's good to ask questions! In this sense the *Concrete* series asks about the meaning of the word 'concrete': concrete is both a material, and the state of being embodied, definite, real. But my work is not a psychoanalytic exploration of doubts about my identity! I simply make images of the world as it is around me.

Jennifer Allen wrote an article on the *Concrete* series titled 'Concrete My Love'. I feel that this emotive, declarative title is both not mine and mine. The words 'My Love' are hers, but when she told me them, they felt right, and made me smile. The work is emotional and desperate at the same time. When I photographed the Universit at K oln at the beginning in 2002, I walked around with no particular aim, my path just happened to cross with the building, but it came to consume my attention. I am passionate about concrete. To photograph a building takes perhaps a few hours, but after that I touch the material for weeks or more. There is something very intimate about this closeness. One year later, in London, 2003, concrete depressed me. I already knew that this would be the last work for *Concrete*.

I am not trying to construct an architectural archive or a typological survey like the Bechers. My work is a subjective reflection and if I am going to build an archive of what surrounds me, it will require the addition of landscape and people, not more and more brutalist buildings.

I am not interested in questions such as whether photography is an art or not, whether it documents or creates. I appropriate pre-existing things, make them my own. I search for things that have a universal quality, like ornament. But when I make them the subject of my photographs they lose their original context. I am not ego-less or simply a witness to the world. But I do not claim authorship for the specific contents of each image, as if I were a painter. I claim authorship for the conceptual construction of the work. The German word for this process is *aneignen*—to appropriate, or to ‘make mine’. A model for what I do is not the artist but the author, who constructs something new from pre-existing words, language and subjects. I always present images side by side in polyptychs, so the viewer, rather than being invited into a single frame, must scan across the plane of the wall, to build for themselves a composite idea of the subject. This grouping of images in polyptychs is an act of structuring or ordering that reinvents the original subject. Multiple views of a single building also introduce a suggestion of narrative, of some sort of undescribed event having taken place—again asking questions! This follows the tradition of collage that began with movements such as Dada that experimented with construction and deconstruction as art practices. Digital era computer-based image manipulation is the latest evolution of these techniques.

The programmatic nature of the computer and the way it allows things to be structured and assembled interests me. We have to work in the nature of the era in which we live. All my work is produced using digital technology, rather than traditional film and prints made in the darkroom. Photographic technology is always developing and it is foolish to try to resist, or to claim that digitally produced images cannot be art, as used to be said of 35mm or colour film. In the *Speckergruppen* the limits of early low resolution cameras and crude software resulted in images that felt very manipulated—just like early Techno music in which the crudeness of the technology resulted in a very artificial sound. But now in *Concrete* it is not possible any more to directly identify the influence of digital technology—like contemporary digitally mastered music CDs. I have always used the available technology to produce the highest possible quality images: it is the desired effect of the final image that dictates how much I manipulate the image, not any concern for documentary truthfulness!

Changes in the way architecture is thought about interest me, rather than changes to the way in which *it* is produced, and so in depicting 20- and 30-year old buildings using contemporary technology my actions are akin to those of the DJ who remixes existing music. I am fascinated not only by the way in which buildings and materials age and change, but by the

way that they are seen and thought about changes, as they fall out of fashion and become forgotten. The same songwriter trying to write one beautiful love song in the 1920s, another in the '50s and a third in the '80s would each time produce something different, because creative work is always a product of its time. What I do in photographing buildings a few decades old is akin to making a remix of an old song, making it into something new, and this is also an act of homage, a romantic engagement.

Heidi Specker (written with Tim Wray)

The above text is the result of a conversation between Heidi Specker and myself, conducted in Berlin in summer 2006, and will be included in the book *Camera/Constructs*, to be published in 2007. The interview followed Specker's participation in the *Camera/Constructs* conference on architecture and photography, held at the University of East London (at which I teach) in April 2006.

We invited Specker to speak at the conference, not only on the obvious grounds that throughout her career she has taken modern architecture as a recurring subject, but also because of the particular challenge that her work presents to how architecture is conceived of, built, experienced and represented—as the manifesto above makes clear. Specker returns time and again to architecture of a particular age, modern and yet no longer new, for her subject matter. And yet much as she clearly loves modern buildings, and is drawn to the curiously indeterminate places created by modernity, her work might be seen as a provocation to the tenets of modernist architecture. She refuses to adopt the kind of dynamic viewpoints, pioneered by Moholy-Nagy and characteristic of classic architectural photography, that flatter modern buildings, and fails to celebrate their formal heroism or social agenda.

The qualities in modernity that Specker does celebrate are seldom those that modern architects feel altogether comfortable with. She does not allow any hints of human occupation to enter into the frame of her photographs. Instead there is a recurrent tendency in her work to strip away contextual references and reduce architecture to pure pattern, or even ornamentation, finding a beauty and stillness in places where we have forgotten to look for it.

The stripping away of clues as to context also results in the viewer not knowing how to place or locate themselves in relation to the subject. Her photographs, unlike for example

Marc Atkins', do not invite the viewer in. Looking at Specker's work, there is a strong sense of our—and the photographer—being an outsider, though not altogether alienated; there is nothing snatched or 'in passing' about her photographs. Specker observes buildings tenderly, almost compulsively. There is a compelling personal, emotional aspect to her studies of architecture, almost as if she is creating not building studies, but portraits. The recurrent close observation of these subjects makes them familiar to us, but we are never given too many clues, and are limited to closely cropped fragmentary views that deny us a complete sense of the building, leaving us our relation to it ambiguous and poised between belonging and not.

Specker's work could be identified as belonging within the particularly German tradition of architectural photography established by Bernd and Hilla Becher, who constructed typological surveys of industrial structures that they photographed from deliberately neutral viewpoints with minimal perspectival and tonal drama, locating the photographer as a detached, anonymous observer unengaged with the subject before them. There are echoes of the Bechers' work in the multiple views of architecture that Specker groups together, but any initial appearance of neutrality towards her subject matter is on closer observation dispelled. Specker frames her subjects altogether differently to the Bechers, provoking questions about their identity rather than categorising them; and the polyptychs she constructs explore her personal relationship to the subject and creative appropriation of it, rather than serving to construct a typological archive.

Tim Wray