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Micheline Nilsen, *Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Photographs—Essays on reading a collection*

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Micheline Nilsen, *Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Photographs—Essays on Reading a Collection* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 202 p, ISBN 9781409409045

- 1 *Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Photographs* is a collection of essays that deals with the relationship between photography and architecture. It is organized along thematic lines rather than chronological ones. The book's innovation is that it focuses less on the historical development of the technique than on the purposes served by nineteenth-century architectural photography, and the discourses that run through it. The corpus is the Janos Scholz Collection of nineteenth-century photographs at the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art donated during the 1980s, whose material originates mainly from France and England.
- 2 The introduction starts with a useful literature review on the subject, together with the milestones in the development of architectural photography. The selective corpus of each chapter makes no claim at comprehensiveness and corresponds to themes planned for future exhibitions.
- 3 Although it is treated extensively elsewhere, a quick first chapter recounts how architectural photography testified to the technical development of the medium. Architecture was convenient as a motionless subject because of the long exposure time required by photographic techniques. In the 1860s, commercial photography took over, providing the expanding and less discriminating consumer market with smaller stock photographs, often compiled in albums for marketing reasons. These are yet to be studied by scholars. Micheline Nilsen also traces the development of the Kodak

snapshot camera for the uninitiated. It was not until the advent of the half tone in the 1890s that the illustrated press started preferring photography to engravings and lithographs. This first chapter is a digest of the literature on the subject. Books are summed up successively but this juxtaposition makes for a rather discontinuous tale and is not really chronological.

- 4 Chapter 2 evokes an issue that had already been touched upon in chapter 1: under the aegis of the French *Commission des Monuments Historiques*, five photographers were charged with documenting national architectural patrimony for future restoration. This campaign was called the *Mission héliographique*. A list of buildings deemed worthy of historic interest had already been published in *Les Voyages pittoresques and romanesques dans l'ancienne France* (1820–1878) so as to create images of a collective memory, but this time, the purpose was also to make a list of buildings in need of restoration and preservation. The photographs adapted the conservative conventions and vocabulary of the “vedute” and closely aligned themselves with the landscape painting tradition. This chapter also mentions the other countries which sponsored missions to document architectural patrimony (Belgium...). This documentary impetus still continues today, with the digital archive projects for instance.
- 5 Chapter 3 analyses photographs of city areas about to be demolished for urban renewal projects and the new urban views after reconstruction (Charles Marville for Paris as “Photographe de la Ville de Paris” in 1862, Thomas Aiman for Glasgow, Georg Koppmann for Hamburg). The author also gives examples of photographs that were not officially commissioned but that similarly dealt with slum-clearing in Paris or before and after archaeological excavations in Rome.
- 6 Chapter 4 analyses photographs on which can be seen the imprint of violent uprisings such as those of the Paris Commune in 1871 and its unsettled aftermath. After a useful chronology of the events, the author underlines how photography captured the devastated city, resorting at times to photomontage. It sometimes served the purposes of anti-Communards, for instance during the manhunt that followed (Appert), but it also served the purposes of the Communards in keeping alive their defiant spirit. The Commune was the first event to photograph the Parisian working class, but portraits were banned as they were considered subversive, unlike architectural photography, whose ruins were somewhat germane to the official photographs of demolition. However, the photographs that are cited as examples evince a sense of order and of visual control and show restored buildings where damage is eradicated (ie. the Vendôme column). This conformism is also evidenced by their conservative respect of academic conventions, as opposed to the impressionists that challenged them at that same time.
- 7 Chapters 5 and 6 tackle photographs of contemporary architectural construction such as factories (for example, the saltworks at Gouhemans by Louis Alphonse Poitevin), the new railroad stations (Gare de l'est), and the engineering *tour de force* of actual rail lines cutting through mountains, as well as other landmarks of progress (telegraph poles, iron bridges) either on national soil or in the colonies. In colonies, these structures of progress asserted the motherland's technological dominance and territorial control (South Africa, Brazil, Argentina...). Photography also recorded milestones in engineering during the international exhibitions. Moreover, photographs were gradually used by architects for their professional practice, who used them as tools and working material and also as ways to document and present their work.

- 8 Chapter 7 centres on photographs of monuments in foreign countries made in the context of geographical explorations, scientific archaeological expeditions or for touristic purposes. After the independence of Greece in 1832, photographs were a means to reclaim from the Ottomans the iconic sites that were symbolically significant for the Greek identity and for the Western world. Constantinou was commissioned by the Athens Archaeological Society to document archaeological sites. Photographs also provided more accurate documentation than what James Stuart (1713–1788) and Nicholas Revett (1720–1804) had compiled for the Society of Dilettanti. The Frenchman Felix Bonfils (1831–1885) and his family shot a great number of photographs of Lebanon, among which some included Western constructions. In the wake of the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt in 1798, photographs were also a way to provide information on monuments and to preserve the memory of their fragile inscriptions (Maxime du Camp (1822–1894) and Francis Frith (1822–1898)). John Thomson (1837–1921) published photographs of the orient accompanied by written observations on his difficulties in shooting a people hostile to foreign presence after the Opium wars.
- 9 Chapter 8 explores photographs of vernacular structures, which are increasingly studied by scholars for their informative potential on social history. Six photographs from Clarence Dinsmore’s 1871 tour of Norway and Siberia provide a sample of predominantly timber vernacular building tradition, but what they meant to the traveller remains unknown.
- 10 Chapter 9 looks at photographs which documented historical preservation and took stock of the extent of restoration on a monument, such as Viollet-le-Duc’s influential albeit controversial achievements. Viollet-le-Duc was appointed to the *Commission des Arts et Edifices religieux* in 1848 by Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870) and undertook extensive restoration campaigns under the July Monarchy (1830–1848) and Second Empire (1852–1870) (Carcassonne, Notre Dame de Paris, Pierrefonds...). Photographs of these restorations were widely disseminated and testify to historic preservation as it was conceived in the nineteenth century, from which we can draw lessons, good or bad.
- 11 A last chapter examines photographic records of growing touristic amenities and opportunities. Eastman Kodak’s marketing of snapshot cameras multiplied amateur albums which commemorated travel, soon supplanting professional photographers. This phenomenon facilitated vicarious “armchair travel”. It contributed to a tendency to organize and classify the world, and even carry on a peaceful imperialist conquest. After examining facilities developed to cater to tourism, the author zooms in on health tourism and structures for therapeutic treatments in the Pyrenees.
- 12 In a very pedagogical manner, Micheline Nilsen sketches the historical background of countries and events so as to frame her analysis. The reader is also provided with a useful conclusion at the end of the chapters. However, Nilsen does not avoid the pitfalls of repetition from chapter to chapter (about the effects of the Kodak snapshot camera, the French state initiatives, to name but a few), but it may be to meet the needs of readers who would chose to read only one or a few chapters. As for the photographs themselves, the commentaries are closely descriptive and very specific as a matter of fact, but they tend to be literal rather than analytical. Unfortunately, some functions of photographs that are put forward are not buttressed by examples (for instance, the chaotic views of the Commune). Nilsen focuses more on France, owing to the number of state initiatives, but much less so on England where there was no such state sponsorship. As Nilsen warns us, the corpus is limited, but we have no clue as to

whether it is a representative sample of photography in general at that time, and therefore whether the author's conclusions can be extrapolated to the rest. The scarcity of women, which we are told is one of the questions the book will address, is brought up only in the second part of the conclusion.

- 13 Nevertheless, the book does offer interesting insights into the purposes of nineteenth-century architectural photography, especially as related to colonial history, and has the advantage of contributing to the definition of this recent field of research.

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Keywords: armchair tourism, health tourism, Carcassonne, Pierrefonds, Notre Dame de Paris, architectural photography, Kodak, Commission des Monuments Historiques, mission héliographique, Voyages pittoresques and romanesques dans l'ancienne France (Les), the Commune, restoration, Saltworks at Gouhemans, Athens Archaeological Society, Society of Dilettanti, Lebanon, Napoleon campaign in Egypt, preservation, Norway, Siberia, Commission des Arts et Edifices religieux

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