Still from Suzuki's film Ring, 1995
showing media overlap of building photograph, building and filming (Courtesy of Ryoji Suzuki)
mediating photography in the architectural production and dissemination of ryoji suzuki’s “experience in material” series

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Ryoji Suzuki’s projects are not the mediagenic monuments commonly circulating in the mainstream press as manifestations of Japanese architecture. However, media, especially photography, has been integral in the architectural production and dissemination of his “Experience in Material” projects. This paper examines the variable status and roles for photography within the construction and transmission of his architectural explorations. Suzuki’s complex engagement with photography provides a vehicle for considering tensions between architecture and photography. Examining Suzuki’s modes of production reveals productive alternatives that recognise photographs as more than communication tools and eschew consternations caused by creating distinctions between buildings as architectural objects and photographs as representations. For Suzuki buildings, photographs, models and drawings have equivalent status as media for exploring architectural ideas. Photographs are more than documentary devices, they provided a snapshot of ongoing design processes, were incorporated into Suzuki’s design iterations and served as generative tools. Suzuki’s work demonstrates photography facilitating a feedback loop of documenting, designing and disseminating architectural ideas. Analysing the dissemination of Suzuki’s work provides further snapshots of tensions, from debates over the status of photographs as professional promotion or artistic endeavour to the role of photographs as veritable documentation or critical interpretive frames. Suzuki’s projects appeared in commercial architectural publications, but did not always follow standardised formulas. For example, Suzuki avoided common architectural monograph conventions compiling a photo album/essay conceptualised as a further design iteration in Ryoji Suzuki Complete Works (2007), which invited prominent photographers to help (re)present the work. Suzuki welcomed multiple perspectives and fostered openness. Examination of the diverse press coverage of Suzuki’s Sagishima Ring Project (1995) further demonstrates multiple interpretations of architecture through photography. Ultimately, analyses help illuminate interactions, interpretations and intersections between architecture and photography, providing alternatives views and increasing understanding of the mediation of photography and architectural production.

keywords Ryoji Suzuki, Architectural photography, Architectural production
framing

Elias Redstone recently described photography as "the ultimate communication tool for architecture", echoing research by Beatriz Colomina (1996), Claire Zimmerman (2014), and Pedro Gadanho (2014) that reinforced symbiotic relations between photography and the promotion of modern architecture. Complex relationships between architecture and photography continue to evolve in the contemporary period with the parallel proliferation of mediagenic monuments in the press and of populist images through increasing internet and social media venues. Within these contexts, this paper employs Ryoji Suzuki's multiple engagements with photography as a vehicle to consider several key tensions between architecture and photography. The paper analyses roles for photography within Suzuki's "Experience in Material" explorations examining his use of photography as design media, as snapshots of design processes and as a platform to negotiate multiple interpretations of projects. Suzuki's engagements with photography, in the production and dissemination of his work, highlight and provide alternative perspectives on prevalent tensions, ranging from distinctions between buildings and representations, to concerns with photography serving primarily as a documentary and promotional tool, to roles for photography in mediating architectural discourse and knowledge.

Suzuki is an outlier within mainstream Japanese architecture and warrants a brief introduction to contextualise his photographic pursuits. He began an independent architectural practice in 1973 and has produced 58 projects in the “Experience in Material” series, which manifested in buildings, exhibitions, publications and films. Suzuki is an architectural equivalent of auteur filmmakers, rigorously pursuing particular themes while quietly building a cult following. Suzuki's “Experience in Material” label reflects a primary concern with staging architectural experiences. Activating experience is not merely a phenomenological or an existential concern, projects are expected to facilitate both visceral and intellectual engagements. Suzuki also explained that "Experience in Material is more like questioning than answering", and through various media he has been interrogating architectural ideas. Furthermore, he is committed to creating “open circuits” that foster multiplicity. Suzuki resists singularity. His projects can never be captured in a single image and are rarely produced in a single media. Suzuki works iteratively through and across multiple media –drawings, paintings, models, buildings, installations, publications, photos and films.

production, mediating buildings vs. image

The first tension between architecture and photography prodded by Suzuki's mode of architectural production is the differentiation between building objects and image representations. Kester Rattenbury highlighted the distinction noting: “Architecture is driven by belief in the nature of the real and the physical: the specific qualities of one thing –its material, form, arrangement, substance, detail– over another. It is absolutely rooted in the idea of the thing itself.” Yet it is discussed, illustrated, explained –even defined– almost entirely through its representations. Suggesting structural relationships within architectural production, Robert Elwall reminded us of H.S. Goodhart-Rendel's contention that building is a stage between drawing and photographs. On the one hand Akiko Busch maintained that photographs are “never a stand-in for the building [because] architecture is experiential; buildings employ all our senses”. On the other hand, Zimmerman highlighted the need for photos to disseminate architecture but also a need to distinguish product (building) from vehicle of communication (photograph), yielding her differentiation between buildings and photographs as “pictorial avatars”.

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In contrast, Colomina productively collapsed building, images and media outlets into a system of representation, arguing: “the building should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writing, films, and advertisements; not only because these are the media in which we more often encounter it, but because the building is a mechanism of representation in its own right”7. Following Colomina, Suzuki maintained an open relationship with and between media. As demonstrated in subsequent examination of Suzuki’s design processes he treated drawing, models, buildings and photographs equally, working through various media to explore and disseminate architectural ideas. Suzuki’s work reinforces the need to avoid distinctions between building objects and photographic representations and to reframe buildings and photographs as equivalent media with different capacities and circulation8.

production, recording products vs. processes

The association of photography with archival documentary record has fueled distinctions between architectural object and image representation. For example, architects McBride Charles Ryan noted “the whole history of architecture is about the represented image. Sometimes the image is far greater than the building itself”, while the architectural historian James Ackerman affirmed that photographs provide a fundamental resource for historical research9. Goodhart-Rendel’s contention suggested that the photograph was the pinnacle of the design process since it produced a valuable archival record for posterity. However, recognition of roles for photography in design processes broadens perspectives.

Examining Le Corbusier’s engagements with photography Nathalie Herschdorfer and Lada Umstätter argued that “photography is a tool for representation, promotion, dissemination and artistic endeavor”10. While there is an ongoing tension between approaching architectural photography as interpretive document or artistic pursuit, Herschdorfer and Umstätter intimate that as a tool for artistic endeavor photography contributes to design processes. Noting the influence of Mies’ photomontages on architectural production Gadainho argued: “alongside its role in documenting the reality that influenced or received architects’ ideas photography ultimately became integrated in the design process of architecture”11. Suzuki’s work extends the legacies of Le Corbusier and Mies while demonstrating valuable roles for photography within design developments.

Suzuki actively incorporated photography into design processes. For example, Suzuki transformed a reproduction of El Lissitzky’s “Lenin Podium” (c.1924) into a small project for Osaka Folly (#31 1990). Photos of the project were subsequently remixed in Suzuki’s *Loin de Lissitzky* (1990) short film, which celebrated the dynamic configurations of a stable steel base and truss-like tower. For Suzuki photos were not fixed records of final products. Instead photos provided fodder for further expansion of architectural explorations. Photographs played further roles in the development of Suzuki’s layer and gap projects. Suzuki’s work fosters multiplicity through layering of different systems, spaces and materials. Suzuki’s Barrack projects (#14 1985, #23 1987) translated analyses of layers in vernacular buildings into design approaches that further evolved through subsequent projects. Suzuki uses photographs as design media and to capture the process and iterations of design explorations. For the Barracks he photographed a series of building facades, which were the base for his analytical drawings that inspired models, which were the subsequent basis for frottage drawings. All of the iterations were captured as photographic records of the process of exploring layers through diverse media.

Suzuki continued to expand his layering investigations through subsequent building projects, such as House in Higashi-Kurume (#17 1985) and Edge (#20 1987). Photos of these projects often celebrated and accentuated layered compositions.
Suzuki's exploration of gaps followed a similar process. He documented the narrow spaces between buildings in Tokyo generating a twelve photo series, which is now in the Pompidou Centre collection. Empirical observation and recording of existing urban conditions identified phenomenon that Suzuki pursued through building and installation projects. The materialisation of the Tokyo Gap photos is most explicit in the Kohun-ji (#33 1991) and Sagishima Ring (#39 1995) projects.

Suzuki's documentation of vernacular conditions echoed modernist methods that marshalled photography to advance ideals, whether Mendelsohn's photos of industrial landscapes or Le Corbusier's compilations of ships and airplanes. However, Suzuki's translations from documentation to design exploration were clearer and clearly relied on a photographic recording of evolving design processes. Rather than showcasing finished products, for Suzuki photos were instrumental in the iterative cycle of documenting, designing and disseminating ideas. For Suzuki photos provided snapshots of stages within unfolding processes and media for further iterations.

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dissemination, promoting commerce vs. art

Because Suzuki generally treated photos as stages within evolving explorations and relied on photographs as records and registers of architectural ideas, his engagement with photography does not feed prevailing concerns around the commodification of architectural images. For Suzuki photos are not principally promotional tools and not simply Zimmerman’s regulators of architectural commerce, “bad reifications” feeding Frederick Jameson’s cultural logics of late capitalism or contributors to Guy Debord’s society of spectacles.12 Resonating with Joseph Rosa’s reflections on Julius Shulman, Suzuki’s engagements reinforce notions that photographs provide “lens through which a discourse can be formulated to analyse, critique, and reassess the evolution of architecture and its representation”13.

However, Suzuki still operates within Bourdieusian fields of cultural production and the information systems mediating the production and reception of architecture14. Therefore, this section examines how Suzuki’s work negotiated common outlets for dissemination – professional magazines and monographic publications. As with the earlier examination of production, analyses of the dissemination of Suzuki’s work provide vehicles to consider tensions over architectural photography as professional promotion or artistic endeavour and roles for architectural photographs as documentation or interpretations.

Architectural photography publications, such as The Photography of Architecture: Twelve Views (1987), Building with Light: An International History of Architectural Photography (2004), Shooting Space (2014) and Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age (2014), repeatedly reflected on variable roles for architectural photography. Identifiable roles ranged from Julius Shulman’s self-conception as a public relations agent for architects to artists use of the built environment as subject matter to advance larger ambitions to Paul Goldberger’s contention that it is “the photographers responsibility is to give the building the fairest chance to speak for itself” 15. Yet across these publications, and others, tensions between commercial promotion and artistic endeavour prevails. However, examination of two media outlets for Suzuki’s work blurs the distinction. The Kenchiku Bunka special issue on Suzuki and his Experience in Material #49: Ryoji Suzuki Complete Works 1973-2007 monograph demonstrate how Suzuki’s work intersected commercial publication pressures and artistic ambitions in the dissemination of his architectural explorations.

Kenchiku Bunka (1946-2004) was a prominent Japanese periodical. In the December 1998 issue dedicated to Suzuki the editors crafted the volume, which introduced eight Experience in Material and five other projects, to reflect the multiplicity and layering of his work. Projects were presented predominantly through black and white photographs with a single image per page followed by a single page of scaled architectural drawings. Heavily illustrated essays, with individual layouts, were interleaved between clusters of projects. The rigidity of the project sections contrasted the free form formats of the essays. A concluding section introduced Experience in Material projects 1-40 in an eight column spread with a paragraph of text, a data list, and a single black and white image per project. Project descriptions were followed by a detailed timeline of Suzuki’s activities from 1944 to 1998. The issue culminated with full spread construction drawings of the Edge project featured earlier in the issue. Kenchiku Bunka provided a comprehensive overview of his body of work and in-depth essays to explicate the thinking driving explorations. Within the constraints of commercial publishing Kenchiku Bunka fostered some freedom of expression and calibrated the content to the architect’s ambitions. The layering of presentation modes and diversity of media incorporated into the essays resonated with the layered multiplicity prevalent in Suzuki’s work. Rather than defaulting to standardised formats Kenchiku Bunka supported coordination of publication form and content providing a rich platform for presenting Suzuki’s work.
Almost ten years later Suzuki produced his first monograph, but it was an unconventional volume conceptualised as a further design iteration, *Experience in Material #49* (2007). The bilingual English-Japanese book was divided into works and texts. The works section contained 187 pages of black and white photographs of projects organised retrospectively in sequence. Like the *Kenchiku Bunka* project pages, a single image per page predominated but photographs were not constrained to consistent sizes or orientations, causing viewers to continually reorient themselves within the book. Page numbers included the relevant project name and no descriptive captions were provided. Explanatory material was reserved for the text section, which included three commissioned short reflective essays and a detailed project list.

The compilation provided a clinical but fragmented photographic documentation evoking the projects. The publication challenged conventions of glossy full-colour coffee table architectural monographs that commonly serve as promotional and explanatory devices. Echoing Goldberger, the photographs provided a means for projects to speak for themselves. Similarly, the publication was conceived as “cool media”, in Marshall McLuhan’s sense, with low definition for high audience participation. Suzuki resisted colouring readings while fostering open impressions and audience engagement with his work.
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The special issue and monograph represented more artistic approaches to common promotional outlets. In Kenchiku Bunka editors organised content to convey the diversity of production and thinking within the work. They interwove catholic project pages with expressive essay layouts expanding conventions within the Japanese commercial architectural press. In the monograph, Suzuki eschewed conventions creating a photo book to convey the experience of projects devoid of didactic guidance. The compilation combined photos by Suzuki and leading photographers to create a snapshot of his career. The photos also fed Suzuki's ambitions for multiplicity. The combination of photographers and essays provided multiple perspectives and left things open for interpretation. The format simultaneously celebrated the artistic qualities of photographic objects and the projects presented in the photographs. Suzuki's volume bridged the promotional imperatives of monograph publications and artistic ambitions to elevate photos and express architectural ideas.

dissemination, constructing documentation vs. interpretations

The dissemination of Suzuki's work in professional architectural magazines provides further lenses to consider additional tensions surrounding the roles of architectural photographs as documentation or interpretations. Extending Michel Foucault's analyses in The Order of Things (1971), the way architectural photographs are framed and presented conditions the way projects are known and understood. As durable visual records photos construct architectural knowledge and shape discourse. However, as Elwall highlighted audiences “too often treat photographs as if they are buildings themselves and not particular interpretations of them made at particular moments”. We need to become sensitive consumers of architectural imagery rather than assume that photographs represent veritable documentation, especially with the increasing ease of digital image manipulation. Elwall reminded: “our experience of a building has thus often been through a complex process of filtering involving the vision of the photographer and the design skill of the art editor”. Whether texts, textbooks, monographs or magazines project portrayals are constructed through the eyes of photographers, compositions of graphic designers and texts of authors. There is an assumption that architects have agency in communicating their work, but photos of projects are produced through the lenses of photographers, who bring different approaches and points of view to their subject. Photographers may express architectural intents implicitly or explicitly. They celebrate qualities – light, space, form, occupation, etc. – intended or otherwise. They also perform acts of ventriloquism using projects to speak about issues, which may be related or unrelated. Therefore regardless of their documentary role we should consider all photographs as a form of interpretation.

Suzuki was sensitive to interpretations and mediations of projects through photographs and the architectural press. Consistent with his interest in multiplicity Suzuki relished multiple interpretations of his projects. He even publicly noted how different photographers and magazines portrayed his House in Higashi-Kurume.

He demonstrated further sensitivity to the role of photographs in mediating architectural knowledge in the Ring (1995) short film he produced from his Sagishima Ring (#39 1995) project. The film contains three short sequences that juxtaposed photographs of the building with filming of the building. For example, one sequence pans across the North façade from the beach and then zooms into a photo of the North façade attached to the seawall in front of the façade and zooms out to capture the cinematographer filming another sequence from the second floor deck to the wood truss (1:19-1:24). This sequence multiplied media relations, as a film of filming the building combined with filming a still photo and active building. These sequences reinforce the media specificity of building, photography and film, all of which were marshalled by Suzuki as media for exploring architectural ideas. The film sequences also echo Joseph Kosuth's One and Three Chairs.
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(1965) in questioning forms of representation and their relationships. Suzuki layered and distinguished moving image, static image and physical building.

The Ring film represented one portrayal of the project and like the House in Higashi-Kurume, the professional press offered multiple portrayals of Suzuki’s Sagishima project. Variations across press outlets reinforce the need to recognise architectural photography and its layout as interpretive lenses. Each photographer and magazine editor began with the same subject matter, but produced different versions. Brief analyses of the Sagishima project spreads in GA Japan (May 1996) photographed by Yukio Futagawa, Kenchiku Bunka (May 1996) photographed by Tomio Ohashi, Space Design (May 1996) photographed by Shigeo Anzai and Shinkenchiku (May 1996) shot by staff photographers highlight key similarities and differences. Comparisons of press presentations of Sagishima extend questioning of media, representation and interpretation incorporated into Suzuki’s Ring film.

All four portrayals were approximately the same length. They were released at the same time and were oriented to Japanese architectural audiences. Yet, the varied approaches of individual photographers and magazine editors yielded a diversity of interpretations and presentations of the project.

GA Japan represented the most comprehensive portrayal. Over ten spreads, coverage combined an explanatory text by the architect, plan, section and elevation drawings, photos with brief captions, project data, and even a short piece by the client. The title image was an oblique photo taken from across the bay to locate the building in context with its neighbours. The subsequent spread zoomed in to an oblique shot from the northwest. Like the first two spreads, photos were strategically paired. There were several pairs located in the same space but looking in multiple directions –north and west views in the courtyard or opposite directions in the lobby and hallways. There was a spread with views in and along the wood truss and a spread showing the range of sleeping quarters, which was unique to GA. In general, photos dramatised the layering of space and materials. Spreads alternated between colour and black and white photos and were organised by three repeating layouts.

Kenchiku Bunka provided the longest presentation divided into photo and illustrated drawing sections. Like GA, photos in the first eleven spreads appeared as sets. There was a set highlighting the wood truss and a set pairing exterior facades with corresponding interiors to demonstrate the effects of Suzuki’s fenestration strategy. Sets celebrated lighting conditions, layering of planes, material textures and dynamic composition of the courtyard. There was a predominance of full-bleed full spreads composed of either single black and white images or paired colour and black and white pages. Pairings highlighted the effectiveness of black and white accentuation of space, light and shadows, and colour articulation of materials. A second section, in sepia, presented construction drawings with a column of three images with detailed captions narrating moments in the building. Information filled the whole spread, across four repeating layouts.

In contrast, Space Design used a minimalist approach with a title page and eight spreads composed of either full-bleed full spread single images or a single, centred, image on each page. Coverage culminated with a critical essay by Yoichi Iijima augmented with building plans. Photos were predominantly exterior views. Photos alternated between black and white overall images that were cropped, which limited the reading of the building as an object, and colour close-up details. The detail photos dramatised tectonics and photographic composition. There were minimal interior views but a unique set of four images that recognised temporal dimensions through day and night version of the same elements.

Finally, the Shinkenchiku portrayal had the least clear logic and the broadest diversity of page layouts. There were six colour spreads filled with images with brief captions followed by Suzuki’s explanatory essay illustrated with plans and diagrams and interspersed with images. The portrayal concluded with a column of project data. There were some paired photographs.
celebrating the creation of gaps in the courtyard, clerestory conditions and hallway elements. However, the progression of images did not provide a clear narrative, moving from an overall oblique shot from the northeast to a detail of frames and volumes on the west façade to a mixed spread showing a view in the truss, east and south facades and an east façade detail, to spreads presenting interior stairs and hallways and finally courtyard views. All of the photos were colour, and interior and courtyard photos dramatised the play of material, light and shadow.

Suzuki’s ambitions to foster multiplicity resisted singular encapsulations and each portrayal employed a different title image. GA led with an oblique from the northwest and zoomed into a beach level view and Shinkenchiku used an oblique from the northeast. Space Design started with a detail of the south façade followed by an oblique from the southwest and Kenchiku Bunka began with a view in the truss and moved to the north façade viewed from the beach, which Suzuki played off in the Ring film. There was overlap in shot subject matter—oblique views, façades, the truss, courtyard and hallways—but only one photograph, the south façade, was consistent across all four portrayals. However even the repeating south façade photos had subtle differences in frame extents including Anzai cropping the edges of the building in Space Design.

Each portrayal was adjusted to focus on different aspects. Space Design photos used the building to craft architectural compositions. Shinkenchiku photos emphasised material and light qualities. GA photos celebrated spatial configurations and implicit mobile viewers. Kenchiku Bunka photos subtly suggested occupation by pairing interior and exterior experiences, narrating the experience of moments and culminating with a rare explicit inclusion of human presence in a photo that captured the shadow of the building and two figures on the balcony. However, none of the four portrayals revealed the cinematic sequential organisation of spaces spiralling around the courtyard that were embedded in Suzuki’s exploration and were subsequently articulated in the “Sagishima Project and Film” essay in the 1998 Suzuki special issue of Kenchiku Bunka, which replicated only four images from their 1995 portrayal, creating a new remix.

All four portrayals provided particular interpretations and presentations, which were conditioned by the predilections of photographers and the constraints of the periodical. The diversity resonated with Suzuki’s ambitions for multiplicity regardless of whether the portrayals explicitly expressed his intentions. This brief survey of the representation of a single project across several publications reinforces the need to recognise the interpretative nature of photographic documentation and the demand for viewers to become sensitive to the nuanced narratives being mediated through architectural media.

mediations

Examining Suzuki’s multiple engagements with photography illuminated varied roles for photography within the production and dissemination of architecture. His work provided a productive vehicle to reflect on intersections between architecture and photography including prevailing tensions and alternative perspectives. Suzuki’s engagements identify alternatives that contribute to mediating reductive critiques that create sharp distinctions between building objects and image representations and that worry about the circulation of images as capital rather than as architectural ideas, which may be capitalised upon. Suzuki also helps highlight the intersection of documentation and interpretation in the media transmission of architectural explorations through common publication platforms. Suzuki’s multimedia “Experience in Material” explorations confirm the value of photography as key a communication tool for architecture; not as mere representations, but as contributors to design processes, as media for design developments and as a powerful interpretive medium for mediating architectural ideas.
endnotes


4. Goodhart-Rendel claimed: “the modern architectural drawing is interesting, the photograph is magnificent, the building is an unfortunate but necessary stage between the two”. Quoted from Robert Elwall, *Building with Light: An International History of Architectural Photography* (London: Merrell, 2004), 9. Original from *Architectural Design* 49 (10-11) 1979, 98.


7. She argued: “It will be necessary to think of architecture as a system of representation, or rather a series of overlapping systems of representation. This does not mean abandoning the traditional architectural object, the building. The building should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writing, films, and advertisements; not only because these are the media in which we more often encounter it, but because the building is a mechanism of representation in its own right. The building is, after all a ‘construction,’ in all senses of the word”. Colomina, *Publicity and Privacy*, 13-14.

8. For example, if you compare analogous media such as newspaper, radio, television and internet they all have a range of communicative capacities and circulate at different speeds.


18. The publication brought together prominent art photographer Shigeo Anzai and architectural photographers Tomio Ohashi and Mitsumasa Fujitsuka as well as Hiroshi Kobayashi and Takeshi Yamagishi to help (re)present the work.

19. Approaches were also consistent with Suzuki’s continued calls to open “closed circuits”, in this case architectural media machines, with alternatives.


22. Suzuki wrote “This work [House in Higashi-Kurume] has been carried in five magazines including the present issue. The respective photos taken by five different photographers indicate that this house appears completely different to the eye of each photographer”. “Something to Come” in “Closed Circuit”, *Japan Architect* 61 no. 11/12 (1986): 93.

23. In the other sequences, one zooms in on a photo of the courtyard laying on the ground and then pans up to a similar view in the courtyard before spinning around the courtyard (1:07:1:16). The other sequence begins with an oblique photo taken from the northwest corner attached to a post along the edge of the neighbouring site and zooms out to the West facade. Then pans along the top edge of the West façade and flips back to the juxtaposition of photo and façade before shifting camera position to track more detailed pans across the West façade (1:36-1:41).

24. Kosuth’s installation combined a photo of a chair, the physical chair and a printed textual dictionary definition of “chair” prodding consideration of what is a chair, meaning and representations.
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CV

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