

Der Baumeister

cover of annual bound volume. *Der Baumeister* 30 (1932)

a photograph is a photograph is a photograph: architectural photography in *der baumeister* 1927-1933

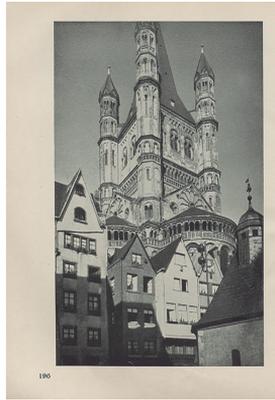
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This paper explores the use of photographs in the German mainstream architectural magazine Der Baumeister between 1927 and 1933 under the editorship of architect and author Guido Harbers. While at first glance, the magazine and its imagery appear to resemble other architectural periodicals of the time, a second look reveals a number of photographs with uncommon characteristics. A close reading furthermore suggests an unusual relationship between photographs and text in several of the magazine's articles. On the one hand, they implicitly or explicitly bring up matters of photography, and either acknowledge the presence of photographs in articles, address their specific pictorial qualities, or appropriate them in order to highlight particular architectural characteristics. On the other, there is a noticeable lack of rigour in the authors' use of photography, and their intentions remain unclear. The paper discusses two articles on architectural projects, which reflect the aforementioned ambiguity. In the first instance, it sheds a light on the particular use of photographs, and goes on to suggest that a diverse photographic practice existed within the architectural mainstream of the interwar period which has not yet been fully explored. Secondly, the paper argues for the existence of an underlying process of negotiation, as the journal's authors in question explored their own relationship with the role of architectural photographs in their work. Drawing on Theodor Adorno's thoughts on the role of the cultural critic and the dissonance of art, the paper finally suggests that the ambiguities and journalistic dubieties which the paper identifies, reflect the inherently ambiguous status of architectural photographs as reliable representations of architecture and as autonomous images.

keywords Der Baumeister, Architectural photography, Journalistic practice, Guido Harbers, Interwar period

In June 1932, the monthly architectural periodical *Der Baumeister* published an article, which on the first glance, is a typical example of architectural publishing of its time. On eight pages, the magazine's editor Guido Harbers discusses the qualities of the *New Protestant Church St Matthew in Düsseldorf*, as well as the challenges related to designing protestant churches in general. The article features a comprehensive text, illustrated by a considerable number of photographs. A second look, however, reveals that the last two pages do not seem to belong to the rest: The large photographs they feature are different in respect to their style and they also show different churches (**f1a** and **f1b**). A close reading finally reveals an unusual relationship between photographs and accompanying text.



f1_Neue Evangelische Matthäikirche Düsseldorf

a and b. Guido Harbers, *Der Baumeister* 30, 6 (1932): 195-196

The caption underneath the first of the two pictures identifies it as a “[v]iew of the tower of St Antony in Basel”, names M. E. Haefeli as the architect, and credits Harbers with the photograph. In the short paragraph that follows, the author provides information regarding the photograph on the following page, which does not feature any text. Yet, it also explains his rationale for appending these two pages to the article:

“The comparison of this enlarged pocket camera photograph with St. Martin in Cologne (photograph Benno Schachner) on p. 196 and the Düsseldorf church (picture of tower p. 194), aims to encourage a more thorough analysis of the architectural means that were utilized (scale, surface structure) to the effect of exterior scale impressions and to the effect of expression of subjective attitude and composure”.

Hence, the paragraph specifically names photographs as the means through which the buildings are represented and hence creates the readers' awareness of their presence. It also provides information on the particular equipment, a small amateur camera, used for one of the photographs. Finally, it draws attention to the fact that this picture is a detail of a larger original photograph. The relevance of all these aspects is not readily apparent though. In this paragraph Harbers also specifies firstly, the material he wants his readers to study, namely the two additional photographs, as well as the picture of St Matthew on the previous page (**f2**), and secondly, what they should concentrate on, namely the scale and surface

the second additional photograph, credited to Schachner (**f1b**), was taken in a less extreme upwards angle, again only the upper part of the medieval St Martin church is visible. The rest of the building is concealed by a row of narrow historical houses, which accentuate the monumentality of the building, an impression further increased as the frame appears too small to contain the entire building and cuts off the spire. In short, neither of the two photographs seems particularly suitable to study the aspects Harbers instructs his readers to focus on. In fact, it could even be argued that amongst the three photographs he refers to, the most informative is the picture of St Matthew (2) which he regards as unfortunate; it clearly shows the building's materiality, the bricks, and even mortar joints, as well as the tower in its entirety. The preoccupation with and simultaneous disregard of architectural photographs and their qualities, which transpires both in the selection of photographs as well as the author's inconclusive comments, also emerges elsewhere in *Der Baumeister*, for example in an article featured in the November issue of 1931.

The focus of this piece is the Villa Tugendhat designed by Mies van der Rohe, which it discusses as an example of *The 'New Line' in Detached Single Family Houses*. The article is clearly dominated by photographs of the building, taken by a non-identified photographer. In respect to their style and quality, the pictures comply with the standard for professional architectural photography of the time, and showcase the spaciousness of the open plan design, the large windows and use of expensive materials, as well as the villa's setting. On the first page, a short introductory text provides a list of what the magazine considers the main characteristics of the new design approach to single family houses. Information on the Villa Tugendhat, however, is not provided in a coherent text, but in separate paragraphs, located in between photographs of the building.

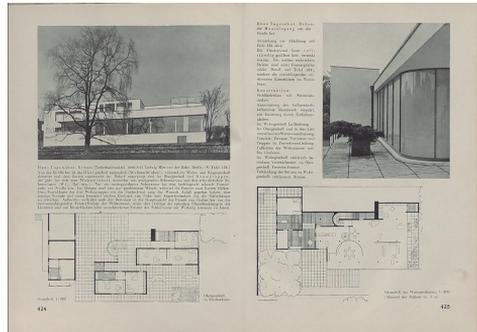
The first picture of the Villa Tugendhat shows the building in a garden view, partially concealed by trees and shrubs (**f3**). Together with the partly overshadowed lawn, the plants form a dark frame, which contrasts pleasingly with the white building and light sky in the centre of the picture. In the paragraph underneath, the author opens with some general remarks on the building and its difference from traditional designs. Following a comment on how the villa opened up towards the garden while it appeared quite nondescript if viewed from the street, his focus shifts quite unexpectedly though as subsequently he explains that:

"The photograph excellently conveys the latently spun emotional and energetic tension between the white, horizontally oriented corpus of the house, embodiment of precise and expeditious technology, and the contrasting trees, whose individual freedom and singular arbitrariness nonetheless integrates into an ensemble of organic and meaningful arrangements, and finally the bushes and lawn, contributing to the scale impressions with filigree pinnate foliage".

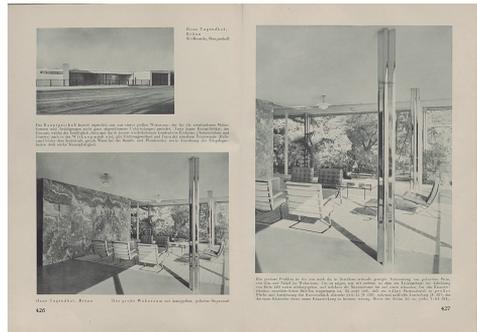
It becomes evident that the main concern of this detailed description is not so much the quality of the architecture, but more the picture's proficiency to generate the specific scene. Hence, rather than the focus of attention, the building becomes a motif for the interplay between the artificial and the natural.

On the next double page, the author's attention returns to the building before he makes another reference to the building's photographic representation, specifically the image on the top of the left page, which shows the villa yet again from the garden (**f4**). Judging by the baldness of the trees, however, the picture was taken in winter, as well as from a position closer to the building and with a slightly different angle. Only a single tree ever so slightly obscures the villa, which is otherwise pictured in its entirety. On the opposite page, positioned next to a photograph of the entrance area, the reader finds a short "[n]ote regarding the illustration on top of page 424". By first informing the reader that the "wall of windows can be opened respectively lowered *entirely*", it provides some information on a particular design feature shown in the photograph. Subsequently, however, the author once again shifts his attention to the image and what it conveys, as he points out that the "white

“[I]n order to exemplify what we mean, the figure above features a partial close up of the photograph from the bottom of page 426, which shows an omission of the marble wall except for a narrow strip which is indispensable for grasping the space. It appears that precious stone material, when installed in large dimensions with significant surfaces, overpowers and diminishes the room's proportions, while a more restrained application is quite capable of enhancing the by all means classical of this new spatial ambience”⁴⁶.



f4_Die 'Neue Linie' im alleinstehenden Einfamilienhaus
Der Baumeister 29, 11 (1931): 424-425



f5_Die 'Neue Linie' im alleinstehenden Einfamilienhaus
Der Baumeister 29, 11 (1931): 426-427

Hence, the author not only discloses the purpose of providing the two photographs side by side, but also the manipulation of them to construct his claims. The result reiterates yet again a peculiar contradiction. On the one hand, the author presents the photographs as his principal means for generating a particular image of the room. Having said that, however, he neglects to acknowledge that therefore, his argument is based entirely on a purely *photographic* impression. The comparison of the two photographs seems to support

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his assertion that a more limited use of onyx would create a more pleasing and less overwhelming scene, as indeed, the situation shown in the larger of the two images appears more balanced. However, the black and white photograph renders the yellow onyx wall and the green foliage in front of the windows into similarly looking, visually busy textures⁷. In the image, they blur into a more or less homogenous field, which stretches almost across the entire frame. Decimating the amount of onyx visible by cropping the photograph therefore also reduced the proportion of the picture occupied by this texture. Hence, rather than to demonstrate the supposedly pleasing effect of a restrained use of onyx, the pictures actually present an exercise in pictorial composition.

Examples for critics' unreflecting reliance on photographs in their judgement are by no means rare and have been discussed by scholars such as Juan Pablo Bonta⁸. The same applies to cases of photographs which were manipulated to create and distribute a desired image of a building⁹. What sets this case apart though, is the author's openness in respect to his strategic use of photographs, as well as the inconsistencies and flaws it reveals. The forthrightness in the authors' use and conception of photographs, which emerges on numerous occasions in these articles, is indeed an unfamiliar and in fact unexpected attitude of architectural writers¹⁰, who, to quote Robert Elwall, "too often treat photographs as if they were the buildings themselves and not particular interpretations of them"¹⁰. Yet, in both articles discussed here, the authors' general acknowledgement of the autonomy of photographs is contradicted by instances of outright disregard for it. The emerging picture is riddled with inconsistencies. If we contemplate the possible rationale for this somewhat idiosyncratic approach to architectural photography, it is certainly important to take into consideration the historical context in which these articles appeared. In the first decades of the 20th century, the significance of photography in society changed dramatically, which is reflected for example in the writings of Walter Benjamin on photography¹¹. This period also brought upon considerable shifts in the relationship between photography and architecture and marks the beginnings of modern architectural photography¹². Therefore, it could be assumed that in the early 1930s, the *Der Baumeister* authors had not quite reached the level of proficiency of working with and understanding photographs, which others, particularly architects and critics of the avant-garde, had already mastered and demonstrated. However, let me propose a different hypothesis. Firstly, I suggest that in their writings, the *Der Baumeister* authors actively, albeit not necessarily consciously, negotiated and explored the potentials of architectural photographs for architectural criticism. Furthermore, I believe that in these articles the ambiguous status of architectural photographs emerges; as reliable documents on the one hand, and conversely, as autonomous, subjective pictures on the other.

In many instances, the articles discussed here, demonstrate a lack of clarity, and indicate the authors' uncertainty in relation to the role of photographs. Following the notion that these occurrences are signs of a lack of professionalism, this implies that a more advanced state of understanding and control over the medium had not yet been achieved, either individually or historically, thus giving it a negative connotation. According to Theodor Adorno, however, a fundamental axiom of what we commonly regard as a higher level of proficiency entails a disregard of the dissonance inherent in any kind of art¹³. Therefore, I argue, two different, yet not unrelated issues need to be taken into consideration: The role assigned to the author, and the dissonance respectively ambiguity of photographs. By 1927, *Der Baumeister* was an established, mainstream architectural magazine with considerable circulation numbers, catering for the architectural profession. It is unexpected and unusual to find the magazine's architectural critics commenting on the qualities of photographs of the buildings they discussed, and even more so for them to disclose their strategies and as a result, also the flaws in them. By doing so, I argue, the *Der Baumeister* authors disregarded their role as knowledgeable art critic or judge of art, who is expected to provide trustworthy information for others to correctly understand and evaluate architecture¹⁴. According to Adorno, this reputation of cultural critics is however "accidental with respect

to their objective qualifications" and much rather the result of economic requirements¹⁵. Yet, assigning them the role of reliable expert also conforms with what he describes as a societal "intolerance of ambiguity," an impatience with what is ambivalent and not strictly definable¹⁶. Art however, he claims, "has always desired dissonance", and even if according to Adorno this desire is generally "suppressed by the affirmative power of society", I propose that in *Der Baumeister*, symptoms of the dissonance of architectural photographs transpire¹⁷. As in the first decades of the 20th century, the role of photography in society, as well as the relationship between architecture and photography, changed considerably, I suggest, protocols pertaining to the style, status, and use of architectural photographs had not yet fully developed. Furthermore, unlike many architectural publications of the Interbellum period which aimed to either promote or oppose the rise of modern architecture, *Der Baumeister* was not geared towards any of these goals –at least not during the years of 1927 and 1933. In this context and for a short period of time, I assume, some of the *Der Baumeister* authors became receptive for the dissonance of architectural photographs.

This paper and its analysis of the *Der Baumeister* articles offer two different conclusions. Firstly, it indicates that the use of architectural photographs in Weimar Germany was arguably more diverse than the historiography of architectural photography currently accounts for. After all, the articles of *Der Baumeister* demonstrate how some of the magazine's authors aspired to use photographs as more than mere illustrations, and acknowledged their presence as images. Secondly, these articles expose the ambiguous status of architectural photographs, which, as Adorno argues, is inherent to them, but is hardly ever acknowledged because societal as well as disciplinary conventions require their unambiguity. The analysis of the selected articles highlights the authors' challenge to accommodate for the photographs' ambiguous status. Meanwhile, drawing on Adorno, it also suggests that we the readers, regardless whether we are scholars or architects, might be equally challenged by signs of this ambiguous status. The intricate field of conflicting priorities which emerges in the *Der Baumeister* articles will, for one, require further in-depth analysis. For another, the articles also provide a potential starting point for a continued investigation into the optionality of using architectural photography in a way that accommodates for their ambiguity.

endnotes

1. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Guido Harbers, "Neue evangelische Matthäikirche Düsseldorf", *Der Baumeister* 30, no. 6 (1932): 195.

2. *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

3. „Die Neue Linie' im alleinstehenden Einfamilienhaus", *Der Baumeister* 29, no. 11 (1931): 423.

4. *Ibid.*, 425, original emphasis.

5. *Ibid.*, 426.

6. *Ibid.*, 427, original emphasis.

7. George Dodds makes a similar observation in respect to the effect of black and white photography on the foliage next to the Barcelona Pavilion and the marble wall which surrounds one of the reflecting pools. See: George Dodds, "Body in Pieces: Desiring the Barcelona Pavilion", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 39 (2001): 176-77.

8. Juan Pablo Bonta, *Architecture and Its Interpretation: A Study of Expressive Systems in Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979).

9. See for example: Petra Čeferin, *Constructing a Legend: The International Exhibitions of Finnish Architecture, 1957-1967* (Helsinki: SKS, 2003).

10. Robert Elwall, *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography* (London: Merrell, 2004), 8.

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11. See for example: Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography", in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", in *ibid*.
12. As for example argued in: Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 19-23.
14. *Ibid.*, 20.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum Impacts (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), 115-116, original emphasis.
17. *Ibid.*, 110.

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CV

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