“Advertising agency, Back office”
This paper discusses critically the notions of ‘space’ and ‘representation’, both essential elements of the architectural photograph. The analysis is underpinned by the notion, first championed by the philosopher Henri Lefebvre, that space is produced and not merely found. It asks the question of what type of space do photographs produce when their subject is architecture, architectural photography being the genre par excellence concerned with the representation of space. The paper proposes to discuss this question in relation to the space of the office, arguing that this is a defining space of modernity and which is far from disappearing. Through the exam of photographs of offices by Ezra Stoller, Jacqueline Hassink and Lynne Cohen, the paper proposes a critique of the objective mode characteristic of architectural photography, offering a detailed analysis of the visual codes through which it produces its meanings and arguing that it is profoundly implicated in the production of corporate and, by extension, capitalist space.
Photographs do not merely represent space, they create space too through their representations. Although related, as referent and image are bound together and determined by each other, there is difference between the space in the photograph, and the space of the photograph. The philosopher Henri Lefebvre has been one of the first to propose that space is something produced and not merely found. Space in this understanding is not only geometric, but moreover social, produced by the way we inhabit it, conceive it and represent it. Although it has been long established and accepted, the notion remains nevertheless marginal to photographic and in general visual analyses. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre challenged the received notion, inherited from the 17th century and in particular the philosopher Rene Descartes, of space as *res extensa*, that is, as extension, measurable through a mathematical coordinate system and therefore as a universal substance. Differently, space is also perceived from a determined bodily point of view and thus is not abstract but concrete, produced namely by the way we inhabit it. Lefebvre proposes three intersecting and interconnected *moments* of social space, that correspond, respectively, to the “perceived-conceived-lived/described”\(^5\): 1) *spatial practice* is the material expression of social relations in space (an office, for instance); 2) *representations of space* refers to conceptualized space, “the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers ... the dominant space in any society”\(^5\) (in relation to the office, it comprises the disciplines of office architecture and design but also organisation theory or organisation psychology); and 3) *representational space*, which means space “as directly lived through its associated images and symbols” by inhabitants, users or as “described” by artists, writers, philosophers, the space passively experienced “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate”, overlapping physical space and “making symbolic use of its objects”, and is essentially non-verbal in nature. As Lefebvre points out, the distinction between the three moments is only relatively autonomous. The separation between representations of space and representational spaces, in particular, may not even exist.

What type of space do photographs create then when their subject is architecture, ‘architectural photography’ being the genre par excellence concerned with the representation of space? In particular, how do photographs of interior space participate in the production of the space of that interior? To discuss these questions, let us consider a specific space: that of the office. Born with the Industrial Revolution for the processing of data at an industrial scale, the office has been a ubiquitous, defining space of life in industrialised and service-based society. Not only as the workplace where the majority of people work, but also as a symbol of corporate power, materialized in the imposing skyscrapers that have come to define the urban landscape of cities around the world, the activities developed in their interiors impacting on the whole of society. Until when it will remain so, it is not clear. For now, in metropolises such as London, offices dominate the urban centre and, more than ever, they lend the city its visual identity.

If as this paper contends, the (photographic) image does not merely reproduce the office, how does the image produce the office? Offices, especially those located in vast high-rise speculative open floors (a form adopted in the 1830s when the office as a building type appeared in the City of London\(^3\)) are a legacy of modernism and Taylorism and configure what the political theorist Fredric Jameson terms as an “extreme isometric space”. Their right angles and deep space encourage, the paper will argue, representations that not only create ‘good’ compositions but that produce a highly ordered and powerful space, which subdues questions of spatial power relations (the conceived) and social power relations (the inhabited).

Considering for instance the portfolio of photographs by the architectural photographer Ezra Stoller of the Seagram building in New York. Designed by Mies van der Rohe with interiors by Philip Johnson and completed in 1958 to serve as the headquarters for the Seagram company, the world’s largest distiller of alcoholic beverages at the time, the Seagram was considered to be the height of modernist, functionalist workspace. As
architectural critic Franz Schulze puts it, the building is “the *sine qua non* of late-modern skyscrapers … [it] defined ‘modern classicism’ … and became the ultimate in commercial prestige architecture”7. Offices in particular had received the attention of modernist architects, who conceived them as ‘machines for working in’. Le Corbusier for instance wrote enthusiastically about “admirable office furniture” as one of the most significant new objects of modern life8. Subsequently, glass box skyscrapers in the *International Style* became the dominant type of office architecture worldwide, spread by architectural firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), formed in 1936.

architecture critic Franz Schulze puts it, the building is “the *sine qua non* of late-modern skyscrapers … [it] defined ‘modern classicism’ … and became the ultimate in commercial prestige architecture”7. Offices in particular had received the attention of modernist architects, who conceived them as ‘machines for working in’. Le Corbusier for instance wrote enthusiastically about “admirable office furniture” as one of the most significant new objects of modern life8. Subsequently, glass box skyscrapers in the *International Style* became the dominant type of office architecture worldwide, spread by architectural firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), formed in 1936.

**f1. Seagram Building**


In this portfolio, Stoller employed black-and-white, low contrast film, photographing the spaces from a neutral camera position, that is, parallel to the picture plane. All the planes in the images are in sharp focus, indicating the use both of a tripod and a small lens aperture. From a semiotic perspective, this set of technical choices privileges the ‘informational’ codes of the medium at the expense of its ‘expressive’ codes (blur, cut-off edges, camera tilt, human movement), typical of the reportage documentary mode9. Usually referred to as *objective mode*, this visual approach conveys a distanced, disengaged position, connoting neutrality and ‘objectivity’. However, the subjective and the objective modes refer to differences in the way documentary photographs look and how they signify, and not to their intrinsic conformity with reality. As the photography theorist David Bate puts it, “the idea that one picture is more objective than another only really means that one has hidden its ideology within a rhetoric of neutrality and description, while the other flaunts its codes of subjective investment”10. In Stoller’s photographs, the office at the Seagram building becomes then a neutral, if not elegant and therefore desirable, space. Even its workspaces, such as the so-called typing pool (f2) are made to look glamorous through their juxtaposition to the allure of the high-rise, by photographing the room in a way that emphasises the impressive view from the glass window panels (which would probably require the blinds to be lowered in order to shield the worker from the exterior light). We are far here from Jacques Tati’s comic and witty satire of modern life, the film *PlayTime*. Released in 1967 and therefore contemporary with the Seagram and Stoller’s photographs, the film mocks the perfectly geometrical environment of the modernist office, set within glass walls and its grey, functional interiors, where Tati makes office workers move at straight angles to the desks’ layout, or typists to sit at a perfectly straight angle to their chair.
Working not as a commercial photographer but as an artist, Jacqueline Hassink has addressed the space of the office to effects that are close to those of Stoller’s portfolio, this paper argues, in spite of her work’s intended critical stance. Comprising two parts, the first made between 1993 and 1995, and the second (which will be the focus of the subsequent analysis) between 2009 and 2011, The Table of Power shows the boardrooms of the largest European corporations, as listed in the American business magazine Fortune. Hassink describes the difficult and time-consuming process for obtaining access to the boardrooms, taking her two years to obtain access to twenty-nine corporations from forty contacted. Hassink’s aim was to witness and reveal to the general public this secluded, mostly private space, created to house those who hold the power to decide inside corporations, that are themselves powerful (non democratic) agents in society.
The photographs show the boardrooms devoid of people, with the tables at the centre and the chairs neatly arranged around them. They were made from the vantage point of a person standing in the room, from a frontal or slightly lateral perspective. Hassink used a tripod and a medium format camera. Wide angle lenses allowed her to frame not only the tables but also the architectural space of the room—floor, walls, windows, ceiling. Only available light was used. The vertical lines in the photographs are all parallel to the frame of the picture. Hassink calls this neutral visual approach a “strict, registering, architectural eye”\(^4\), implying with the expression that the intervention on her part was minimal or non-existent, since the camera-machine registered the subject as it presented itself in front of the lens. Moreover, that this activity of registering without more (“strict”) is proper of architectural photography (the “architectural eye”). Thus Hassink seems to be saying: these are the boardrooms of Europe’s most powerful corporations, occupying in this way a naïve realist position that crassly fails to acknowledge the photograph itself and the work that this is doing. If the photographs convey neutrality, the photographs themselves are not neutral. As Bate makes clear, “the points-of-view, chosen by the photographer, are a crucial decision for the signification and later meanings given to the subject matter in the picture”\(^5\). Bate designates this as a process of visual construction, whereby “the camera-photographer represents a scene to the viewer like a painter or theatre director constructs a ‘scene’ for actors”\(^6\). In the same way, the look of the photographed boardrooms—neat, serious, imposing, powerful—is the result of the visual codes used to construct the picture, that is, as arguments of the picture. Hassink’s description of how she selects the point-of-view of her photographs is elucidative here. As she puts it, “entering each boardroom I…. walked around the table looking at it from different angles. Characteristic elements in the room, together with the view, decided the angle from which the table would be photographed”\(^7\). The “view” that Hassink will then ‘reproduce’ through her “registering eye” is in fact a constructed scene, created through the use of wide angle lens and a particular camera height. This tableau renders the space of the boardrooms in a scale that is not that of a human being standing in the room, presenting a view that is not accessible to the human eye as such. It creates a nearly panoramic view of the room, a total vision that, together with the descriptive power of photography, lends the photographed boardroom its own particular power.

In this way, the photographs in *The Table of Power* confirm the expectations of the spectator towards what such spaces (the boardrooms) look like, in other words, the effect of their rhetoric amounts to reaffirming the generally received idea of the corporate world as powerful. If this effect might be coherent with Hassink’s postulate that the boardrooms are the very symbol of corporate power, such is not however a necessary effect of the representation of that room—a different visual strategy would have produced a different argument about the same space. Which is to say, would have produced this space differently, a different type of space. Hassink’s photographs provide detailed descriptions of the boardrooms and give visibility to a largely hidden and inaccessible space to the general public. To be sure, this is important as it enlarges the ambit of the visible. However, this paper argues, *The Table of Power* does not offer a critique of capitalist space as was its intention, instead it participates in the very production of that capitalist space, by producing corporate space (the photographed boardrooms) as opulent and therefore powerful—an image of power that corporations themselves pursue publicly and ostensibly, namely by choosing imposing skyscrapers as the location for their offices.

Hassink’s photographs have this effect due to their (uncritical) deployment of the codes and strategies of architectural photography that are implicated in the production of those generalised meanings. These codes refer to perspective and composition, among other variables. The geometrical system of perspective is built into the photographic camera and lens, producing images that imitate the human eye perception. However, when the camera (that is, the film or image sensor) is not parallel to the projection plane, perspective ‘distortion’ occurs: vertical lines do not look parallel but instead they
converge (the effect of buildings ‘leaning’ within a picture) or diverge, an effect that does not occur in human vision because the brain automatically ‘corrects’ the distortion. In result, photographs that present these distortions interfere with the illusion of three-dimensionality the image affords. In photographs of interiors for instance “even slightly off-kilter verticals quickly make interior shots look strange” 18. As a result, “an unwritten rule dictates that architectural photographers generally try to keep vertical lines vertical in their images” 19. Architecture historian and critic Peter Blundell Jones points out that perspective correction is dictated by the frame of the picture. When the image echoes the frame with the geometry of the scene, perspective “allows one to feel that one could almost step into the space, and walk to the other end of the building”, which gives the spectator a psychological “sense of control” that is “reassuring”20. The perspective effect in a photograph depends exclusively on the viewpoint and therefore perspective correction dictates which ones are the ‘right’ camera positions.

The other main determinant of camera position in architectural shots is composition. As one manual defines it, composition is “the controlled ordering of the elements in a visual work as the means for achieving clear communication (…) enabling [the photographer] to influence the viewer physically, emotionally, and intellectually”21. More simply put, composition refers to how space is organised within the frame to make visual arguments and create meaning. Manuals invariably include ‘shooting’ techniques and formulas like the golden section, the rule of thirds, and other geometrical relations like symmetry, for achieving good composition, generally understood as that achieving “balance, harmony, or order”, and thus producing a “pleasing photograph that captivates the spectator”22. This “imaginary force, [this] real power to please” of the “well composed” photograph is due, photography theorist Victor Burgin argues, to its capacity for prolonging our “imaginary command of the point-of-view, our self-assertion” that occurs in virtue of our identification with the look of the camera23. “Good composition”, Burgin writes, “keeps the eyes of the spectator away from the edges of the frame, delaying the moment when this encounter will happen and the spectator will lose their imaginary command of the look, to relinquish it to that absent other to whom it belongs by right –the camera”24.

In architectural photography, good composition involves not only making the architectural subject look “attractive” (a feature of the trade, according to architectural photographer Julius Shulman, one of the most celebrated practitioners of the genre), it also requires conveying its “essential structural and design elements”25, in order to achieve an “authentic representation of the inner values of a building”26. In photographs of interiors, where what is portrayed is not a “solid body that fills space” but “the space enclosed by an external structure”, the focus is on the “relationship between the building and its fixtures and fittings”, and the aim is to produce “realistic-looking [and] interestingly composed, well-lit images with a clear message and feeling”27. In this way, frontal shots, where walls are oriented parallel to the sensor/film plane, are generally “pleasing … but unspectacular … too two-dimensional and flat” if the room is small, but “dynamic” in larger rooms, as the horizontal lines will converge, and ideal if the room is symmetrical and the aim of the photograph is to emphasize its symmetry28. Shooting diagonally into the space produces images that convey a “feeling of style and depth” but it may be “too dramatic” and create “inharmonious compositions” in narrow spaces29. The camera height in particular has an impact on composition: eye level height (approximately 6ft above ground level) produces “natural-looking” interior shots, as the spectator “instinctively recognises” this position, while lower camera positions increase the “risk of objects within the space blocking the view of others”, makes “individual furniture pieces less important” and places emphasis rather on the “texture and expanse” of the floor covering30. Lenses have also a great influence: wide-angle lenses induce a “quality of spaciousness and extended perspective”, but they can also create “misleading proportions”, the rule of thumb consisting in selecting the lenses’ focal length “as short as necessary but as long as possible”31.
The presence of objects and how they are positioned is also crucial: everyday objects like newspapers and fruit bowls “immediately grab a viewer’s attention” and can “detract from … the room’s design”, therefore “purely architectural interior shots often appear almost clinically uncluttered”32. In the same way, surfaces and the floor should be spotlessly clean, showing no fingerprints, smudges, or dirt; it is advisable that photographers “carry a cleaning cloth for removing dust and grease”33. The positioning of furniture is key: “chairs that aren’t quite aligned with a vanishing point axis or tables that are not quite aligned with a wall can cause unwanted tension in an image”34. Shulman explains how, for a set of photographs of a bank interior, he created a “sweeping perspective … by lining up the chairs in the foreground workspaces – even the casters were straightened!”35. Hassink used the same technique to photograph the boardrooms, arranging the chairs, if they had not been cleaned just before she took the photograph36. Space arranged to look neat and orderly is therefore necessary to produce images, like those in The Table of Power, that foreclose tension and convey a sense of balance and order.

How can then photographs represent differently? How can they intervene in these dominant systems of representation, eschewing the “most revealing point of views” that guarantee “good composition”, “truly well-balanced photograph[s]” and “graphic photographic statements”37? Such ‘correct’ viewpoints dictated by precise visual ‘rules’ produce images which are subsequently used for various purposes and circulated in different contexts, namely for feeding the work of architects and designers, for corporations’ marketing, annual reports, and many other corporate material, in office design and architecture publications, in the myriad online forums, blogs and websites on the ‘best’ or ‘coolest’ offices, and that define our very sense of what and how an office (and, by extension, corporate space) is. As one manual puts it, “if you deliberately bend the rules of photography … you have to make sure that this artifice is clear at first glance so that the viewer isn’t led to believe that the photographer simply wasn’t in control of the situation”38. In order to produce space differently, this paper argues, the photographic image must overcome what are ideological uses of photography by institutions who define “our sense of coherent recognisable styles in photo-practice … of what is ‘appropriate’ to certain types of photography as opposed to others” by employing visual styles “taken for granted … concerning the selection, construction and repetition of particular motifs, camera angles, grades of paper, and so on”39. How?

An example can be found in the work of the late photo artist Lynne Cohen. Starting in the 1970s, Cohen has investigated the domestic and institutional interior space, relentlessly photographing living rooms, men’s clubs, public halls, showrooms, classrooms, laboratories, spas, military facilities, shooting ranges and, in lesser measure, offices.

The Table of Power

f4. “Corporate office”

“Corporate office”\(^{40}\) (f4) shows a frontal, elevated view of an office furniture arrangement. The floor is carpeted and the wall behind the desk, parallel to the frame, is (clumsily) papered with a sky and clouds motif wallpaper. The chair is at the centre of the composition, facing the camera frontally, in an uncanny position, as if looking back at the camera. The large, heavy panelled desk and the padded, velvety chair convey privilege and power, an effect enhanced by the soft light of the table lamp that contrasts with the typical fluorescent, harsh lighting of open plan offices. The sky in the background alludes to top floors in high-rise office buildings. This is the office of a powerful person, someone in the top ranks of the corporate hierarchy (or the furniture designed for such person). The spectator is placed by the photograph on the other side of table, in the position of the interlocutor. As Cohen puts it, “[t]he positioning of the furniture makes it crystal clear who is in charge. It draws a line between them and us”\(^{41}\).

\[\text{f5 Untitled}\]


In the book \textit{Camouflage}\(^{42}\), an untitled photograph (f5) shows what seems to be a reception area. The layout and furnishings of the space are unequivocally those of an office: the high, tiled ceiling fitted with tile lighting, the carpeted floor, the metallic desk where a telephone lies, the absence of decoration apart from two plants in pots. Everything is placed at right angles: the square desk, the panelled walls, the entrance to the corridor and the private office, the tiles in the ceiling, the frame of the picture. This is the perfect orderly, functional, productive office space envisaged by Modernist architects after Taylorist ‘scientific’ management theories and parodied by Tati (see above). Cohen is able, through her framing and visual strategy, to present an image of this space that is both concrete (this is an actual office in the world) and abstract (this is how these offices are designed to look like), singular (this is how this particular office looks) and universal (any office looks like this).

Differently from Stoller’s and Hassink’s photographs, the neutrality in Cohen images is carefully constructed. As Cohen puts it, she has tried to “heighten the illusion of neutrality by flat lighting, symmetry and deep focus … [which] gives the pictures a cool, dispassionate edge. It makes them seem immaculately conceived while camouflaging the all-but-incomprehensible stories they seem to convey”\(^{43}\). Made with an 8 x 10" view camera, the photographs convey extraordinary pictorial detail, and are frequently printed in large sizes. Contrary to Hassink's
the space of the photograph

claims of a “strict, registering, architectural” framing, Cohen’s framing is carefully orchestrated to produce a certain effect, that Cohen defines as a dissolution of the “barrier between the space depicted and the room in which the viewer is standing”, in a way that what is shown “creeps up on the viewer”44. “What the picture is about”, Cohen aptly states, “comes from the choice of subject matter and how it is turned into a photographic object”45.

The juxtaposition of Stoller’s, Hassink’s and Cohen’s work on offices highlights how photographs produce the space of the office. The differences between them cannot, as demonstrated, be reduced to the different genres within which they operate. Nevertheless, genres do set boundaries for the ways that images are produced, distributed and received, namely regarding the purpose they serve. As Shulman put it, architectural photographers are in the business of “selling architecture to the public”46. The historian of architectural photography Robert Elwall also acknowledges this aspect but in order to criticize it. For him, images become “substitutes for reality”, their “promotional power … [and] dramatic visual impact … selling to an unwary public a glossy dream of perfection attained that leaves the audience unprepared for the shock of the real”47. For Jameson, buildings in photographs have remarkable and distinguishable qualities that they lack in the actual world. In his own words, architectural photographs show “real colour”, “brilliance”, “phosphorescence”, offering a commodity that affords “avid relish”, where what is consumed first and foremost “is the value of the photographic equipment … and not of its objects”48.

The purpose of architectural photography appears thus to place it, this paper argues, together with other representations of space in the sense of Lefebvre’s use of the expression, rather than with representational space, that is, as a form of conceiving space rather than the result of inhabiting it and ‘describing’ it. It is in this sense that the thesis of architecture historian Beatriz Colomina, when she argues that modern architecture is a form of mass media49 (and the office, as discussed above, is largely a product of modern architecture), can be understood. In Colomina’s words, architecture “is built as image in the pages of magazines and newspapers. This is not just because architects are … making advertising images of their spaces … but before that, the image is itself a space carefully constructed by the architect”50. The relationship between architecture and images is so profoundly intertwined, she argues, that “images are the new architecture (...) [and] an endless flow of images now constitutes the environment. Buildings become images, and images become a kind of building, occupied like any other architectural space”, so much so that “photographers … become architects”51. Insofar as architectural photography is observant of the ‘rules of good composition’ that guarantee its semiotic operability within the codes of the architectural trade, architectural photography as a genre and a mode of photography participates in the conception of the office, producing an image of order and power that resonates with the corporate ethos and as such provides visual expression to corporate and more widely capitalist aims. Other ‘right’ points-of-view are needed in order to produce this space differently, but pursuing them may simply not be within the scope of the genre.

endnotes

1. Such is the argument put forward by Representational Machines. Photography and the Production of Space edited by Anna Dahlgren, Dag Petersson and Nina Lager Vestberg (Aarhus University Press, 2013).
andreia alves de oliveira

11. The boardroom is the room in the office where the 'board' of a corporation, constituted by the top executives with the power to decide on the most important corporate matters, holds its meetings.
27. Ibidem, 121 and 129.
34. Ibidem, 125.
40. The photograph is reproduced in several of her monographs: in both editions of *Occupied Territory* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1987, 2nd ed. 2012), and also in *No Man’s Land* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001) and *Nothing is Hidden* (Scotiabank and Steidl, 2012).
the space of the photograph

45. Idem, 30.
51. Colomina, “Media”, 43.

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CV

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