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Book Review: LC Foto: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer

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Abstract

Widely regarded as the most influential architect of the twentieth century, Le Corbusier wrote more than fifty books, nearly all of them with extensive illustrative text. Yet in these books he almost never used the photographs he himself took. Rather, the books are most often illustrated with photographs that Le Corbusier appropriated from other publications, nearly always modifying, cropping, and ordering these images before placing them on his pages. Books made from these pages ultimately formed collections; and these collections became essential to Le Corbusier's promotion of his view of modern architecture and modernist ideals. Photography was at the heart of this endeavor.

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism

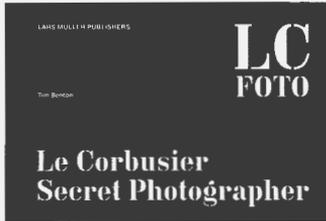
Comments

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Editors' Introduction: Photography and Preservation <i>Iñaki Bergera and Jorge Otero-Pailos</i>	iii
Imag(in)ing Paris for Posterity <i>Sabrina Hughes</i>	1
Proving Preservation: Boston Subway Construction Photography, 1894–1897 <i>C. Ian Stevenson</i>	17
High-Speed Ruins: Rubble Photography in Berlin, 1871–1914 <i>Miriam Paeslack</i>	33
Photography versus the Historical Record: The Role of Photography in Rouen's Gros-Horloge Restoration <i>Franca Malservisi and Maria Rosaria Vitale</i>	49
Richard Nickel's Photography: Preserving Ornament in Architecture <i>Sarah Rogers Morris</i>	67
Preserving Collective Memory through Photography <i>Ana Tostões and Ana Maria Braga</i>	83
Book Review: <i>LC Foto: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer</i> <i>Daniel Naegele</i>	99
Exhibition Review: <i>Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes</i> <i>Hélène Lipstadt</i>	103
Artist Intervention: <i>Apparitions</i> <i>T. John Hughes</i>	

LC Foto: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer

Tim Benton
Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013



Widely regarded as the most influential architect of the twentieth century, Le Corbusier wrote more than fifty books, nearly all of them with extensive illustrative text. Yet in these books he almost never used the photographs he himself took. Rather, the books are most often illustrated with photographs that Le Corbusier appropriated from other publications, nearly always modifying, cropping, and ordering these images before placing them on his pages. Books made from these pages ultimately formed collections; and these collections became essential to Le Corbusier's promotion of his view of modern architecture and modernist ideals. Photography was at the heart of this endeavor.

Because of the importance of photography to modernism in general and to Le Corbusier in particular, Tim Benton's *LC Foto: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer* is of great interest. Benton is one of many fine architectural historians that Le Corbusier has attracted over the past three decades. His books on the architect include the 1984 *Villas of Le Corbusier, 1920–1930*; the 1987 catalog *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century*; and the 2007 *Rhetoric of Modernism: Le Corbusier as a Lecturer*. An excellent architectural photographer himself, Benton has conducted research into the medium and its association with architecture for decades. In *LC Foto*, he examines numerous photographs that Le Corbusier took during two periods, 1907–17 and 1936–38, organizing these photographs into thirteen albums and reproducing many that have never before been published.

The initial half of the book, "Jeanneret's First Photographic Campaign, 1907–1917," examines the early photographs made by Le Corbusier before he adopted the pseudonym "Le Corbusier," some six hundred photographs taken mostly on Jeanneret's now-famous *voyage d'orient* of 1910–11 and first documented by Giuliano Gresleri in 1985. Benton reveals his archival findings chronologically, aligning the photographs with the young Jeanneret's first, second, and third cameras, elaborating with authority and insight on the properties of each instrument. He presents these photographs in four albums, each containing photographs taken at four different times. By aligning the cameras that Jeanneret owned during each of these times with the photographs that he made, Benton determines convincingly which images were made when and

how the images were affected by the limitations of the equipment employed. He tells us about the cameras, lenses, and films available to the amateur photographer at different times, describing the costs and capabilities of each, and explaining why Jeanneret chose *this* camera over *that* one. These detailed discussions of the day's commonly available photographic equipment, as well as informing us of Jeanneret's situation, tell us a great deal about the nature of popular image making in the early part of the twentieth century in general.

The second half of the book, titled "Le Corbusier, the Cinema, and Cinematographic Photography, 1936–38," is concerned with photographs and films that Le Corbusier made with what Benton describes as a "small 16mm film camera equipped with a stop-frame feature." Benton found some of this film still undeveloped at the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris. Other short films that Le Corbusier made were featured in Jacques Barsac's three-part documentary on Le Corbusier made for French television in 1987. In *LC Foto*, Benton reproduces them as stills in nine albums, while providing "QR patches" behind, which are "seven montages of film sequences shot by Le Corbusier on his Siemens camera" (4).

Benton doesn't simply tell us about the photographs, he *shows* them to us, generously exhibiting the photographs that he found in a refreshingly matter-of-fact, "see for yourself" manner. The nine 1930s albums consist of photographs of Le Corbusier's mother, wife, and dog; of a month in Rio; of an ocean liner; of a beach at Le Piquey; of the rocks of Plougrescant, Brittany; of Algeria; and of the house Eileen Gray designed at Roquebrune, E1027. Many of the photographs are what Benton terms "snaps." Few are artistically original, though. The most unusual of the photographs—photographs of stacked building materials, of the deck of the SS Conte Biancamano, of tides and sands, or the "views from above" of Villefranche—follow themes and forms set out earlier in the films of Le Corbusier's friend Sergei Eisenstein, or at the Bauhaus in the 1920s, or, to an extent, in the popular-press photography of the 1920s and 1930s. And though Benton makes no mention of it, the forty-four one-meter-square photographs that once composed the 1933 Pavillon Suisse photomural—images acquired and assembled by Le Corbusier and his partner Pierre Jeanneret in the course of a few days—anticipate those made later by Le Corbusier, beginning in 1936.

The least convincing aspect of this superb book is a subtitle that contends Le Corbusier was a "secret photographer." Certainly, Le Corbusier was a photographer, though there's no evidence to suggest that he ever worked the photographs he took as we might expect a professional photographer to do. Clearly few people knew the extent or specifics of his photo-

graphic activity. As Benton notes, he was opposed to architects adopting photography as a means of recording visual images, believing instead that one should draw what one sees, thus registering “sight” somatically, not mechanically. Yet he, himself, dabbled in photography. Perhaps because of this seeming contradiction, he kept his photographic activities private, refusing to be photographed with a camera in his hand. There is no secret here, though, simply an affair—more private than public—that was left unannounced.

But now, fifty years after the death of the most influential architect of the twentieth century and more than a century after the first of the found exposures were made, the photographs that Benton has brought to light are overwhelmingly wonderful. The images created by a man renowned for image making tell of events not known to us, showing us Le Corbusier’s way of seeing things, telling us what he saw and where he went to see it. In images, not words, the photographs tell us about the people he knew best, about his interests in the meeting of land and water, and of the beauty he found in an ocean liner’s geometries. They record visually the wonder of the sea’s eternal sway made manifest in the sand and the silhouettes of boats and ropes and rocks on the shore. Describing the conditions under which the images were made, Benton underscores the importance of what Le Corbusier saw to Corbusier’s life as a painter and an architect. By attaching filmmaking to events in Le Corbusier’s life, he informs our understanding of the architect, telling us with greater precision where Le Corbusier was at various times in his life. More important, he reminds us that Le Corbusier saw the world in motion, recording not only its “look” but also its “time.”

Benton’s manner of determining what happened when and his extensive discussions of the workings and availabilities of photographic equipment place photography in the service of preservation. In the early 1920s, Le Corbusier’s activities were largely iconoclastic, and he employed photography to support these iconoclastic endeavors. He set out to upset the existing order, theorizing a new order appropriate to contemporary twentieth-century conditions, using photography to both dynamite the old and establish the new. Ninety years later, Le Corbusier’s revolutionizing order has itself become traditional. Not directly concerned with the Le Corbusier revolution, Benton’s book offers a means of knowing Le Corbusier and his situation through the exhibition and analysis of the architect’s own private play with photography. The photograph is an “index of reality.” In recording what was, it suggests what to preserve. It is persuasive and factual, providing evidence that will be understood differently by different eyes. Its facts are polyvalent. The medium by which it is re-presented

assists its persuasion. With regard to the photographs presented in *LC Photo: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, this medium is *that* book, a new and good context, Benton's not Le Corbusier's.

Biography

Daniel Naegele, PhD, is an architect and teaches architecture at Iowa State University. His articles on architecture, architectural photography, art, and art history have been published worldwide and translated into eight languages. He is editing *The Letters of Colin Rowe* to be published in 2014.