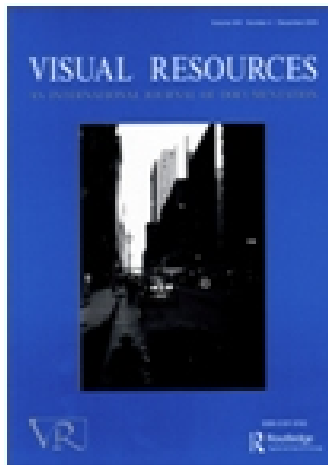


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R. M. Schindler and the Photography of the American Scene, 1914–1918

Eric Lutz

Shortly after immigrating to the United States from Vienna in 1914, the architect R. M. Schindler (1887–1953) purchased a portable camera and began ambitiously surveying the built landscape of the Midwest and Southwest. He focused on the urban fabric of Chicago and the residences of Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as on expressions of rural vernacular architecture. The camera became an active tool in Schindler's dialogue with his new surroundings and in the articulation of his emerging modernist aesthetic. His large body of pictorial work has, until now, largely eluded historical attention and scholarly assessment, yet yields important new insight into the interaction between photography and architecture during the early stages of modernism in the United States. Schindler pioneered a contextual and spatially active mode for interpreting the built environment while pursuing an expansion of the role that photography could play in the creative life of the architect.

Keywords: Schindler, Rudolph Michael, 1887–1953; Architectural Photography; Modernism; Chicago; Wright, Frank Lloyd, 1867–1959

Up until the early part of the twentieth century, the practice of architectural photography was in the hands of a small number of professional photographers who could handle the complicated processes and equipment. Only the advent of the portable snapshot camera encouraged architects to take their own images. R. M. Schindler (1887–1953), the first European modern architect to immigrate to the United States, was a pioneer of this option. Though not a photographer when he arrived in Chicago from his native Vienna in 1914, Schindler's dramatic encounter with the jarring urban realities and vast natural expanses of the United States inspired him to set aside his sketchbook and pick up a portable camera (Figure 1).

Over the course of the next decade, Schindler created more than twelve hundred images, now housed at the Architecture and Design Collection at the University of California, Santa Barbara.¹ An analysis of these images generates a vivid chronicle of his visual activity during the formative part of his career, and advances a radical new



Figure 1 R. M. Schindler. The Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co. department store (Louis Sullivan, 1903) at the intersection of State and Madison Streets, the so-called “busiest corner in the world,” 1914 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

mode for interpreting the built and natural landscape of the United States. In Schindler's hands, the camera was an instrument for personal expression and dialogue with the new environment he was trying to understand, assimilate, critique and ultimately improve through his intervention as a practicing architect. Where other architects picked up the camera for specific purposes and limited durations, it became an active tool in Schindler's creative development and was critically situated in the articulation of his new modernist vision. His camera work has, until now, largely eluded historical attention and scholarly assessment, yet it yields important new insight into the interaction between photography and architecture during the early stages of modernism.²

Most of Schindler's photographic activity took place in the Midwest during the mid-1910s at the start of his career in the United States. With the skyscrapers of the Chicago School and the residences of the Prairie School, Chicago was a stimulating place for Schindler. His youthful exuberance and natural curiosity were channeled into photographic explorations, which in turn helped him find his bearings in this new locale.³ Charles Moore has described Schindler as a “vulnerable” architect who was highly sensitive to his environment.⁴ The portable camera, in its capacity to rapidly record and absorb external stimuli, was particularly well suited to this aspect of Schindler's artistic temperament. It speaks to the seriousness of his photographic work that he did not leave the pictures accumulated over the years in a haphazard

state, but carefully organized them into categories. The schema is detailed on a page, handwritten by Schindler in 1915 (Figure 2). He created nine main headings, ten subdivisions and ten further divisions to classify his images. This system reflects overlapping concerns: the mapping of his physical environment in categories 1 to 6, and the cataloguing of his diverse creative endeavors, from architecture and sculpture to portrait photography and drawing, in categories 6 to 9. Yet, the organizational schema that Schindler devised did not develop evenly along the lines that he set out, as *Street Scenes* and *Architecture* quickly became the largest groupings.

Schindler's earliest images manifest the muted effects of the Pictorialist conventions of the period, but he quickly outgrew that in favor of sharper, high-contrast images that evince a more spontaneous and spatially active approach. With his wide-angle lens, Schindler created broad foregrounds and deeply funneled vistas that imbued his images with a sense of movement. In one view of Jackson Boulevard he even incorporated his shadow into the broad foreground (Figure 3), asserting a subjectivity to the act of picture-taking that rubs against notions of either aesthetic detachment or documentary objectivity. Schindler's interest in experiential three-dimensional space, as opposed to the more visually oriented issues of style and ornament, steered him away from the conventional rendering of facades and details toward the more challenging and elusive task of conveying the somatic experience of architecture.⁵ Indeed, he embraced photography, in part, because it was more effective than traditional media at engaging with and clarifying the new kinds of experiences encountered in the American metropolis.⁶ Advances in technology had produced shifts in the perception of time and space, particularly in the condensed areas of Manhattan Island and the Chicago Loop, whose pace and scale disorientated visitors.

Schindler was not interested in generating a picture of Chicago that was static, picturesque and easily apprehended. Illustrations from periodicals and guidebooks seem to have had little influence upon his thematization of the city, his subject matter or pictorial style. Rather, he was motivated by an inclusive view of the boundaries of architecture, and delved into the diversity and flux of the city, working from a variety of vantage points to examine the city's ordinary aspects—its intersections, boulevards, commercial architecture, back alleys, apartments, construction sites, train lines, parks and churches. His general approach to looking at the modern city was informed in large part by the theories of urban development of Otto Wagner, his mentor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Author of *Moderne Architektur* (1895) and *Die Grosstadt* (1911), Wagner believed that architects should respond to modern urban conditions and needs. His functional approach to urban planning taught Schindler to consider the city in its entirety and to analyze it in terms of its constituent parts.⁷ Schindler's impulse to explore visually the larger environment was also conditioned by the younger architect and cultural critic Adolf Loos, whose views on the nature of modernism were disseminated through his informal salon at the Museum Café, his essays and his walking tours of Vienna.⁸

In his photography, Schindler preferred the grounded, man-on-the-street perspective, though he also experimented with bird's-eye views from skyscrapers,

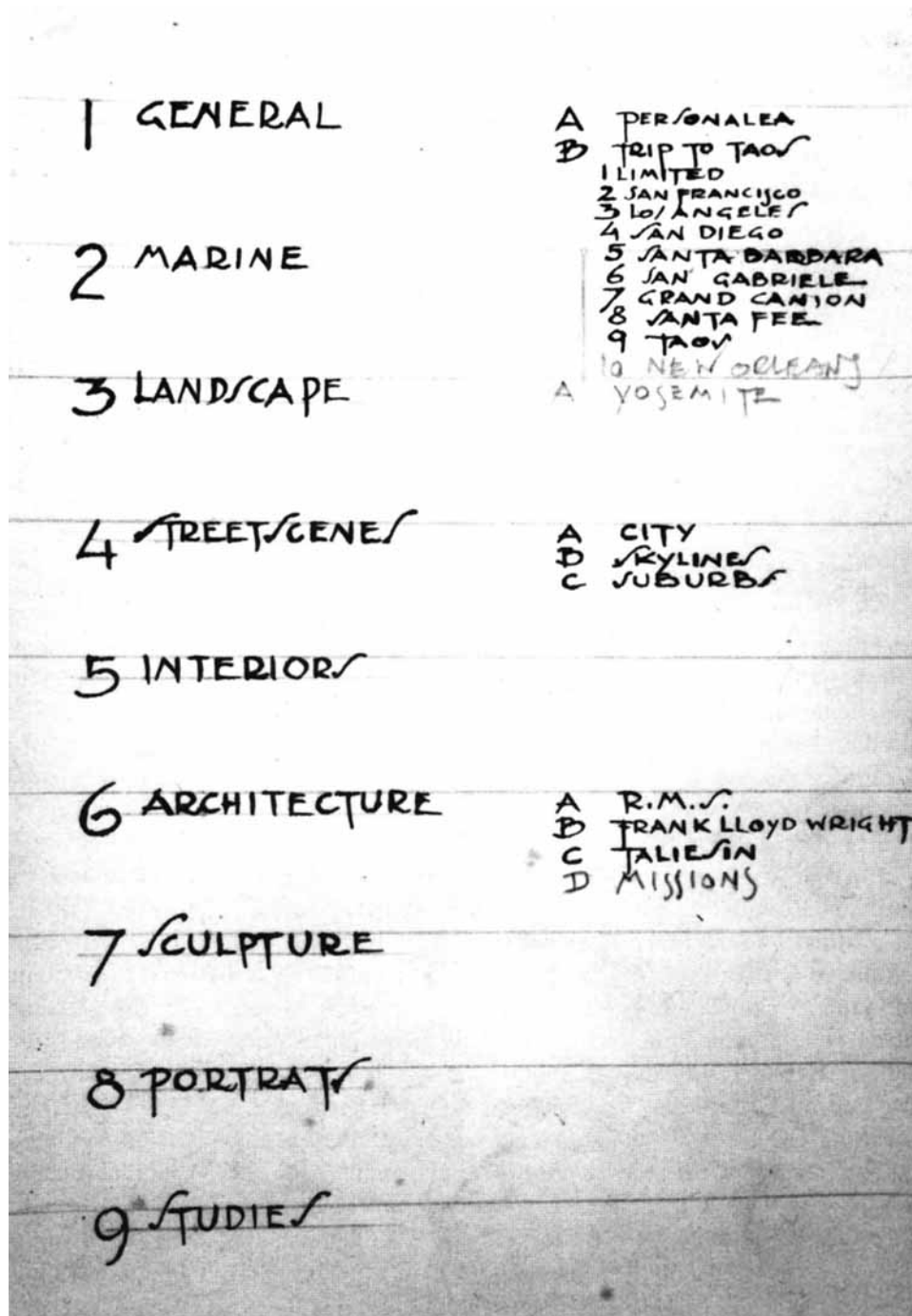


Figure 2 Figures generated by Schindler for the organization of his photographs, 1915 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).



Figure 3 R. M. Schindler. Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, 1916. Schindler's shadow is visible in the foreground (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).



Figure 4 R. M. Schindler. State Street, Chicago, 1915. View from the fourteenth-storey offices of the architectural firm Ottenheimer, Stern & Reichert who employed Schindler from 1914 to 1917 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

both looking out over the city in a panoramic fashion, and peering onto the streets below. In one of a series of images from the fourteenth-storey window of his office at the firm of Ottenheimer, Stern & Reichert, Schindler adopted an oblique perspective down to State Street that captures the vertiginous sensation of such a view, reducing the hurried businessmen to looking like so many ants (Figure 4). The pronounced diagonal orientation of this composition became a leitmotif in both his photography and architecture that he employed for its ability to cut across and to dramatize spatial relationships. Schindler was exploring the potentialities of the hand-held camera at a historical moment when there was a growing awareness that its freedom from conventionalized modes of seeing and representation could suggest new directions in art. To this end, the art critic Sadakichi Hartmann wrote in 1910: "The photographer interprets by spontaneity of judgement. He practices *composition by the eye*. And this very lack of facility of changing and augmenting the original composition drives the photographer into experiments."⁹ Schindler was in a unique position to exploit this potentiality in the use of the camera as he was not encumbered by prevailing photographic conventions and practices.¹⁰

Indeed, until he appeared on the scene, much of the interaction between architecture and photography stemmed either from the activity of commercial photographers who were concerned with the promotion of finished architectural

works, or from fine-art photographers whose engagement with the built environment was mediated by select aesthetic issues, often deriving from modern painting. With formulaic illustrations that reveal little contextual information, contemporary architectural books and periodicals often provided inadequate visual accounts of the American cityscape.¹¹ Alternately, modernist photographers in New York City utilized architectural subject matter as material for their reductive formalist investigations—compressing space, limiting field of vision and abstracting form.¹² In approaching photography from a specific professional perspective outside of the field of graphic art, Schindler pushed it in new directions: broadly investigating the character and fabric of the American cityscape, while negotiating the stylistic and conceptual boundaries between documentary and fine art.

The terms of Schindler's dialogue with the built environment were not only informed by his architectural interests and burgeoning design sensibility, but also by his cultural background and his outsider perspective as a European. He engaged his subject matter with an inquisitiveness and acuity of vision that few Americans could have possessed. Schindler himself recognized the particular advantages of his perspective. In lecture notes he wrote: "Outsider—Sharper view/European—Accent Amer. Character."¹³ The markedly different nature of Schindler's native Vienna made his encounter with Chicago quite dramatic. Vienna was one of the most culturally sophisticated cities in Europe, whereas Chicago was comparatively crude, young and preoccupied with the expansion of its business interests. Though many European visitors were infatuated with American technology, Schindler brought a critical eye and often focused on the dark underbelly of the conditions of modernity.

In particular, the dominance of commercial over artistic interests in the architectural field prompted Schindler to take a disapproving view of Chicago's architecture and urban planning, and he singled out only Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright as worthy of praise. In one instance, he pointed his lens up at the ironwork of the elevated train tracks on Wabash Avenue—an oppressive structure that inhabits the middle of the street, largely obscuring Sullivan's Auditorium Building and casting the street life below in its shadow (Figure 5). Schindler's focus on Chicago's train system refers back to Otto Wagner's vast public transportation system, the *Stadtbahn*, his most lasting contribution to modern Vienna. Preferring decorated or subterranean tracks, Wagner pointed to the aesthetic disadvantages of the elevated train, which "disfigures a street in a very perceptible way."¹⁴

Schindler was particularly disturbed by the absence of a coherent civic and cultural area in Chicago and he found ways to communicate this photographically. For an image of City Hall, he adopted a vantage point in a shadowy alleyway, revealing the clutter of electrical cables, fire escapes and smoke stacks that surrounded it. Schindler also focused much of his attention on the Art Institute of Chicago, whose location in Grant Park allowed him to explore it from numerous perspectives, considering its relationship with the buildings and spaces around. In a photograph from 1916, the Art Institute sits alone on the right and is framed in direct opposition to the commercial office buildings of Michigan Avenue, packed side by side, that crowd the top left corner (Figure 6). This arrangement appears intentional, pointing to the



Figure 5 R. M. Schindler. Wabash Avenue. Elevated train, 1915. The tower of the Auditorium building (Adler & Sullivan, 1889) is visible at the top (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

diminutive stature of the Art Institute in relation to the office buildings. Indeed, this interpretation is reinforced by a passage from his Church School lecture of the same year. “Feel its misery,” he said about the Art Institute, “look at it—poor little thing amidst the giants, it can only have three stories.”¹⁵

A second image from the same year makes a similar statement, but through an entirely different perspective. Perched on the top of the McCormick Building, Schindler looked out with his camera over the lakefront, a swampy area then dominated by train tracks (Figure 7). The image reveals a radical compositional freedom that finds few parallels among his contemporaries at this time. The viewer’s eye bounces from the adjacent Santa Fe Building, which juts abruptly into the left side of the picture frame, precipitously down to the Art Institute on Michigan Avenue, and then across the lakefront and out into Lake Michigan. The Art Institute seems lost between the forces of commercialism embodied in the office tower looming above it and the train yards clustering around it in the background.

These images find Schindler imaginatively probing photography’s limits in describing form and space by employing the devices of seriality, unusual vantage



Figure 6 R. M. Schindler. Michigan Avenue and Grant Park, 1915. Art Institute of Chicago (Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, 1893) is at right (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

point and asymmetrical composition. At the same time, they reveal that his documentary and artistic aspirations were often embedded with critical underpinnings, and that the camera was a crucial tool in the expression of the problems that he saw. To a large extent, Schindler's objections to the commercial domination of downtown Chicago were not groundbreaking. These had been levied both from within the community, as in Daniel Burnham's *Plan of Chicago*, and from foreign observers.¹⁶ However, Schindler was among the first to attempt to express these visually, and specifically photographically. He recognized that photography could engage directly with the realities of contemporary life, and used the medium to communicate the often disenchanting experiential space of the urban landscape.

Schindler's pictures, along with a collection of notes, were part of an illustrated book project on building and urban planning in the United States that he undertook, though never completed.¹⁷ In adopting an approach that privileged the dense and tumultuous qualities of the urban fabric over discrete designs, he anticipated such publications as Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (*America: An Architect's Photo Album*) of 1926.¹⁸ Yet, where Mendelsohn and other European architects such as Richard Neutra responded most energetically to the formal aspects of the commercial and industrial building types, Schindler's investigation was more complex and inclusive. In his far-reaching efforts, he strove for a topographical and environmental survey that considered not only the immediate relationship of building to site, but also the broader relationship of the built and the natural landscape. This ambitious



Figure 7 R. M. Schindler. Grant Park, 1915. View taken from McCormick Building (now demolished). Santa Fe Center (D. H. Burnham, 1904) at left; Art Institute of Chicago, bottom center; Lake Michigan on right (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

intention is clearly signaled in his organizational system (see Figure 2), which provides categories for the natural features that encompass and are interwoven through the city. For example, his view of the mercantile activity along the Chicago River in his *Marine* category takes in a broad span of material information and is richly textural with its brick warehouses, steel bridges and barges that cluster around the ice-filled water (Figure 8). Further out from the city, he also explored the character of the rural landscape, its local flora and vernacular architecture.

The categories in Schindler's organizational system follow a progression in their ordering that is at once spatial and conceptual, moving from nature to city and from topographical features to specific buildings. Taking the Chicago area as his point of reference, categories 2 through 6 proceed from the surrounding lakes and rivers (*Marine*), farmland and prairies (*Landscape*), to the city (*Street Scenes*)—its outlying areas (*Suburbs*) and its urban core (*City, Skylines*)—and finally to significant buildings (*Interiors* and *Architecture*). His system thus reflects a broadly contextual view of architecture, one where individual designs are imbedded in a regional environment of interrelated man-made and natural features.¹⁹ As such, it pointed in a different direction than the universalizing impulses of mainstream modernism as they developed in the 1920s, anticipating such later urban surveys as Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*.²⁰



Figure 8 R. M. Schindler. South fork of Chicago River, 1916 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

Though Schindler was intently engaged with downtown Chicago during his early years in the United States, one finds a considerable oscillation in his subject matter between the city and the countryside. This oscillation does not merely stem from the contextualizing impulse of his surveying efforts, but also from the close affinity that he developed for the natural landscapes and vernacular architecture of the United States. His extensive pattern of artistic activity outside of metropolitan Chicago exposes just how many elements—cultural, artistic and geographic—were rubbing together at this point in his career, both generating tensions and producing interesting syntheses. Though the city provided a wealth of material for the exploration of design ideas, his photographic style in the countryside reflects a closer and more sympathetic mediation on expressive form and a sense of place.

In the spring of 1915, Schindler photographed the buildings on a farm in northern Illinois (Figure 9). It is interesting to note that Charles Sheeler was simultaneously beginning his well-known photographic studies of barns in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.²¹ There is an overlap between Schindler and Sheeler in their appreciation of the crafted qualities and the clean, unadorned surfaces of the barns. Yet where Sheeler concentrated on capturing specific qualities of form that suggested a continuity between native American traditions and the emerging modern industrial aesthetic, Schindler suggests a different reading. In his framing of the barn in Figure 9, he cuts across its volume, denying a simple planar or cubic



Figure 9 R. M. Schindler. Barn, Fox Lake, Illinois, 1915 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

rendering of its form. His unusually close vantage point establishes a sense of scale, reveals details of its construction, and most importantly communicates a strong relationship between building and site, a sense of local rootedness. The importance of this to Schindler became clearer when he encountered the older, indigenous architectural expressions in the American Southwest later that year.

Schindler set out on the Union Pacific Railroad in August of 1915 for an extended tour of California, Arizona and New Mexico. The trip lasted six weeks and covered

eight major destinations: San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, San Gabriel, San Diego, the Grand Canyon, Santa Fe and Taos. Schindler may have been drawn by the Pan-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco and the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, which were running simultaneously. In addition, he had an invitation from his friend Victor Higgins, a painter from Chicago's Palette and Chisel Club who was spending the summer in Taos. As Schindler's journey commenced across the vast flat expanses of the Western landscape, he began to feel the pull of its liberating potentialities. He divulged his fascination in personal notes: "From the aeroplane the prairie must reveal its large brush strokes of immense scale—we only see thin horizontal projections—the length of which has a suggestive effect—but the sky is infinite."²² He took an especially evocative image of the train tracks and telephone poles stretching on the causeway across the Great Salt Lake in Utah, vanishing on the far horizon (Figure 10).

When he reached the West Coast, Schindler was disappointed in both the fantasy quality of the architecture at the expositions and the haphazard urban growth of the major cities. He was, however, responsive to the architecture of the missions that he visited from Santa Barbara to San Diego. In numerous photographs, he studied their simple yet monumental assemblages of unadorned forms. Yet, this was merely a prelude to the architecture in New Mexico wherein he perceived a more direct and authentic connection of the buildings to their physical and cultural landscape. The



Figure 10 R. M. Schindler. Train tracks on causeway over the Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1915 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

last stop on his train tour was Taos—a small artist colony that was, at the time Schindler visited, beginning to attract attention from the *avant-garde* community. As an area that was primitive and exotic, yet indigenous, it appealed to artists who were turning away from European artistic models as well as seeking refuge from the artificiality of urban culture.

Schindler was impressed and seduced by the seemingly harmonious relationship between the Indian dwellings and their environment, and set about energetically exploring the architectural character of the town and the surrounding area in a series of 76 images.²³ The majority of his photographs find him drawn intently to the forms of the adobe architecture. He generated bold compositions where both ground and structure are animated through the intense light and shadow. In one view, the townscape emerges from the dark shadow of a church (Figure 11). The gently sloping walls and irregular massing of the structures are intertwined in a modulated play of light. As the buildings recede in the expanse space to the right, they appear to merge into the surrounding natural landscape. The undulating profile of the buildings is paralleled by the distant hills, underscoring Schindler's perception that they possess the same organic quality. His correspondence attests to the intensity of his response: "The only buildings that testify to any true feeling for the earth from which they spring," he wrote to Neutra, "are the ancient adobes buildings of the first settlers and their successors—Spaniards and Mexicans—in the Southwest."²⁴



Figure 11 R. M. Schindler. Taos, New Mexico, 1915 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

Schindler also explored a broader relationship of the built forms to the environment, and in the high desert around Taos and Santa Fe he found himself in a harsh and alien environment, as different from the Old World as he could ever have imagined. This stark and elemental beauty generated aesthetic as well as spiritual resonances for him. He couched his encounter with this landscape in the mystical tradition of cleansing and self-discovery. "Christ and Buddha did not go to see the Grand Canyon to find himself," Schindler wrote the following year, "he went into the desert."²⁵ While he only stayed one week in Taos, it was an experience that would have a lasting impact upon him and influence the course of his architectural design. Many of his projects of the 1920s, notably Pueblo Ribera Courts in La Jolla (1924), openly evoke the features and qualities of the adobes, even as they were reworked through a process of synthesis and abstraction. His enthusiastic response to the Southwest presaged his eventual move to California in 1920 and his endeavors there to generate an architectural style suited to its geography, climate and cultural milieu.

With new doors open onto the breadth and beauty of America, and 225 negatives that he had to develop and print, it is perhaps not surprising that Schindler's photographic engagement with Chicago began to dwindle after his trip. However, his investigations in the suburban and rural areas continued. Significantly, he resumed his project of photographing Frank Lloyd Wright structures, begun after his arrival in Chicago in 1914. Wright's innovative designs stimulated Schindler's own notions of the creative possibilities of modern architecture. He took pictures of more than twenty Wright structures in the Chicago area, many of which he had first seen in the Wasmuth portfolio as a student in Vienna. In approaching Wright's work with his camera, Schindler usually did not seek generalized views, but instead sought out unusual angles that revealed select aspects of construction, formal expression and siting. He also built up composite views using a serial approach that not only drew upon differing angles from a given photographic session, but from revisiting buildings over several years.

Schindler was particularly attracted to Wright's Coonley house in the suburb of Riverside, which stretches out into and engages the landscape more than any other of his Prairie houses. In 1915 Schindler took a distanced view of the garden front. He was likely drawn to this elevation because it is where the boundaries of the house are most fluid. The structure appears to cascade downward from the roof over the patio toward the reflecting pool and yard. Two years later, Schindler moved in closer to that area of the house with tighter framing (Figure 12). The planter, wooden pergola, sculptural door molding and stained glass are knitted in a layered composition that borders on Cubist abstraction. Schindler abandoned his documentary impulses and freely used the elements of Wright's architecture as an artistic point of departure. We can see him exploring compositional issues that he would translate to his own architecture. His photographic interpretation of the Coonley house anticipates the tension between voids and projections, structural and sculptural elements, indoors and outdoors, that are seen in the elevations of his residences in California.

The building by Wright that had the largest impact on Schindler was his famed studio-residence, Taliesin, which was nestled in the hills of Spring Green, Wisconsin.



Figure 12 R. M. Schindler. Coonley Residence (Frank Lloyd Wright, 1908), Riverside, Illinois, 1917 (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

In late 1917, Wright offered Schindler employment and steered him away from Chicago to this country retreat. First constructed in 1911, and rebuilt on a larger scale in 1914, Taliesin revealed possibilities for the integration of building and nature that had not been explored in Europe. This was expressed in the rusticity of its materials, in the informality of its plan following the contour of the hillside, and in its larger siting within gardens, roads and farmland. Taliesin is a very large complex and is a sophisticated articulation of Wright's design principles that yields the impression, according to Neil Levine, of a "single continually expanding space."²⁶ For this reason, it presented a unique challenge through which Schindler demonstrated his prowess as an architectural photographer.

Schindler lived and worked at Taliesin between the spring and fall of 1918 and photographed the house and its grounds in a series of 96 images.²⁷ These are not only artistically probing, but historically significant. Wright rebuilt Taliesin after a tragic arson fire in 1914, and again after an electrical fire in 1925. Photographs of the second incarnation are extremely rare.²⁸ In one of his more encompassing views, Schindler recorded the inner court from the hill (Figure 13). He adopted a vantage point beneath one of the large oak trees in the garden. As a result, all four corners of the image are filled in with dark vegetation, generating an edenic view of a house framed by nature. This recalls the description of Taliesin given by Schindler's wife Pauline: "As fittingly ensconced in its landscape as a cat curled in a basket."²⁹ This

vantage point is also significant because it focuses on the knuckle of the house, just to the right of the entrance loggia, where it bends around the hillside. The asymmetricality of Wright's L-shape arrangement, which generates numerous diagonal axes, was a departure from the strong centralized planning that characterized most of his Prairie homes. Schindler, who had been using oblique angles in his photographic work in Chicago for several years, was particularly receptive to this aspect of Wright's design.

In another view from below the house looking south, Schindler homed in on the diagonal emphasis of the stepped volumes and roof lines of the bedrooms that lead to the most outward point, the living room terrace (Figure 14). In his proximity to the house, he sacrifices the comprehensibility of the overall layout in order to dramatize the expressive movement of the architectural elements that unfold along the terrain. Schindler also generates a dialogue between the rectilinear geometries of the man-made structure on the left and the organic tangle of leafless branches—almost Art Nouveau in appearance—on the right. This image reveals his success in translating the spatial dynamics of Wright's building into two-dimensional photographic terms and works within his serial approach to describe the complex spaces of Taliesin.³⁰



Figure 13 R. M. Schindler. Taliesin (Frank Lloyd Wright, 1911, rebuilt 1914), Spring Green, Wisconsin, 1918. View from hill into court, entrance loggia at center (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).



Figure 14 R. M. Schindler. Taliesin, 1918. Looking south toward the living room terrace (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

There was such a dovetailing of aesthetics between the two architects that Schindler's selective framing of Wright's Taliesin could prefigure aspects of the appearance of his own later projects in California. Yet though Taliesin was an important source of artistic inspiration for Schindler, one should be cautious not to overestimate Wright's influence. One must credit Schindler with the ability to recognize, absorb and synthesize the lessons of siting and planning. Indeed, he quickly moved beyond Wright, boldly using diagonal elements in the milder climate of southern California to establish a greater intimacy with nature by cutting across the boundaries of indoors and outdoors, beginning with his own studio-residence, the Kings Road House in West Hollywood of 1922.

In a construction view, Schindler dwelt on the elementality of the house and its direct connection to its site in which space flows both visually and physically from the interior rooms to exterior gardens (Figure 15). It is significant that for this house—the first mature expression of his architectural sensibility—Schindler photographs from inside, giving us an experiential view to communicate, not just the form, but a deeper meaning of this house and the blurring of boundaries that it encourages. Looking southwest from the unfinished guest studio, he traces the transition of the indoors to the outdoors, of the built to the natural, as the viewer's eye moves from the concrete wall and fireplace, to the window framework, and to the fields beyond. In the quiet early evening hour when he framed this image, the shadows stretch, with



Figure 15 R. M. Schindler. Kings Road House (R. M. Schindler, 1922), West Hollywood, California. Guest studio, 1922. Construction view (Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara).

near horizontally, from the wooden beams onto the adjacent wall, causing the picture to delicately waver between representation and abstraction, between architecture as image and architecture as object.

Schindler's photographic activity shifted at this point in time from the personal investigatory impulses that characterized his early camera work to more public promotional concerns that accompanied the establishment of his architectural practice. Though he continued to take photographs of his projects during construction, his own use of the camera dwindled and he began using the services of professional photographers to make finished views of his projects.³¹ Yet, his extensive interest in, and experience with, photography continued to play a significant role in his career through his collaborations with photographers and his editorial involvement in the presentation of his projects in architectural publications.

Schindler provides an inventive and multifaceted model for how the fields of architecture and photography may be brought to engage in a cross-fertilization. He pioneered an experiential, contextual and spatially-active mode for interpreting the built environment, while pursuing an expansion of the role that photography could play in the creative life of the architect. As a result, his images are capable of sustaining a multiplicity of readings, from architectural documents and aesthetic compositions, to narratives of cultural encounter and artistic development. In his dialogue with the American architectural scene, there is a formal liveliness and an

intensity of engagement that communicates the exuberant sense of possibility that he felt at the very birth of both photographic and architectural modernism.

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This article stems from my dissertation, *The Architect's Eye: R. M. Schindler and His Photography*, under the direction of Ulrich Keller, Bruce Robertson and Kurt Helfrich in the History of Art and Architecture program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Part of this material appeared at the 2004 CAA conference in the Modern Architecture panel organized by David Van Zanten, who provided numerous helpful suggestions. I also wish to thank Volker Welter, whose comments strengthened this article. Illustration Credits: All images by R. M. Schindler. Reproduced courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Notes

- [1] Schindler's photographic archive at the Architecture and Design Collection at the University of California, Santa Barbara (hereafter ADC/UCSB) consists of medium-format negatives from a Kodak Vest Pocket camera and gelatin silver contact prints. Most of the prints have identifying information written in pencil by Schindler on the back: date and place typically appear first, followed by subject matter and then technical notes. In addition to those images at UCSB, there are a small number of prints in the Esther McCoy papers at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and negatives in the Richard Neutra papers in Special Collections at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.
- [2] Images that were reproduced in architectural publications during Schindler's life were devoid of credits, while subsequent scholars—including Esther McCoy, David Gebhard, Barbara Giella and Kathryn Smith—have used select photographs in a historically contextual and documentary manner that does not involve any aesthetic or conceptual analysis. Schindler's photographs came to the Architecture and Design Collection in 1967 as part of Mark Schindler's bequest of his father's archives. There, they remained uncatalogued and hence largely unknown and unused, with the exception of those images that specifically documented his architectural projects. In 1998, while working as a curatorial assistant, I became aware of the full extent of Schindler's photographic activity and undertook the first comprehensive study of this material.
- [3] There is no evidence that Schindler had used a camera in Vienna; no photographs survive from that period, nor do photography classes appear on his transcripts at the colleges he attended. The large number of poorly focused or processed prints from his first year in America points to the fact that he had no previous experience with photography and was self-taught.
- [4] Charles Moore, "Schindler: Vulnerable and Powerful," *Progressive Architect* (January 1973): 136.
- [5] This spatial interest was prefigured in Schindler's theoretical treatise, *Modern Architecture: A Program*, written in Vienna in 1912, which identifies space as the essential medium of architecture in the twentieth century. His own translation is reprinted in Judith Sheine, *R. M. Schindler* (London/New York: Phaidon, 2001), 80–81. Schindler's ideas were later elaborated in "Space Architecture," *Dune Forum* (February 1934): 44–46. After he established his architectural practice in Los Angeles in 1921, Schindler explored the

potential for spatial elaboration in modern architecture, creating new types of living spaces marked by complex sectional plans, the interpenetration of indoors and outdoors, and unique integrations of building and site.

- [6] See Christopher Phillips, "Twenties Photography: Mastering Urban Space." In *1920s: Age of the Metropolis*, edited by Jean Clair (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), 209–225.
- [7] On the topic of Otto Wagner and city planning, see Eve Blau and Monika Platzer (eds), *Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe, 1890–1937* (Munich/New York: Prestel, 1999), 73–82; August Sarnitz, "The Wagnerschule and Adolf Loos." In *R. M. Schindler: Composition and Construction*, edited by Judith Sheine and Lionel March (London: Academy, 1993), 20–37.
- [8] On Loos' walking tours of Vienna, see Janet Stewart, *Fashioning Vienna: Adolf Loos's Cultural Criticism* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 153–161.
- [9] Sadakichi Hartmann, "On the Possibility of New Laws of Composition," *Camera Work* 30 (1910): 24.
- [10] Schindler's photographic style finds little precedent in photographic work being produced in Vienna in the 1910s. Further, his archive yields no evidence of contact with professional photographers in Chicago, or that he knew about and was influenced by the developments in the *avant garde* in New York City.
- [11] Frank Lloyd Wright's Wasmuth portfolio of 1911 was the most sophisticated publication on American architecture available at that time. It was released in two separate parts: an assemblage of plans and renderings of Wright's projects, and a smaller collection of photographs of his completed works (Frank Lloyd Wright, *Frank Lloyd Wright Chicago, Achtes Sonderheft der Architektur des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1911)). Schindler saw one of these editions while a student in Vienna. Though it stimulated him to see the work of Wright firsthand, it left him with a lopsided perception of Wright's impact on Chicago. Other sources of visual information on American architecture were either meagerly illustrated, such as H. P. Berlage's *Amerikaansche Reisherinneringen* (Rotterdam: W. L. & J. Brussee, 1913), or narrowly focused on particular building types and styles, such as Paul Graef's *Neubauten in Nordamerika* (Berlin: Julius Becker, 1899). Although European magazines, such as *Deutsche Bauzeitung* and *Der Architekt*, followed developments in America, their reproductions of buildings—typically stripped of foliage, human subjects and peripheral structures—only provided isolated glimpses into the architectural scene, leaving foreign architects without a firm sense of geographic context.
- [12] The most prominent photographers were grouped around Alfred Stieglitz, his gallery "291" and publication *Camera Work*. These included Paul Haviland, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Karl Struss, Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler. They were instrumental in charting a transition from a Pictorialist to a Modernist sensibility in the 1910s.
- [13] Schindler, "Plan of Chicago," n.d. (c. 1917), 8. Unpublished manuscript, ADC/UCSB. The efficaciousness of the outsider perspective has been demonstrated in the work of such artists as Erich Mendelsohn, John Gutmann and Robert Frank who made unique contributions to the visual interpretation of the United States in the twentieth century.
- [14] Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to this Field of Art*, introduction and translation by Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988), 111. For a discussion of Wagner's views on the impact of train lines on the image of the city, see Fritz Neumeyer, "Iron and Stone: The Architecture of the Großstadt." In *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, edited by Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center of the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993), 117. Schindler's photograph of the elevated train also embodies certain stylistic parallels with Wagner's renderings, particularly in its angled perspective and the integration of pedestrians.

- [15] Schindler, "Plan of Chicago," 3.
- [16] Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett, *Plan of Chicago prepared under the direction of the Commercial Club* (Chicago, IL: The Commercial Club, 1909). On the topic of European responses to Chicago's development, see Arnold Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow: Europeans, Chicago's Loop and the World's Columbian Exposition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 9–23.
- [17] While Schindler relayed his ambition to author an illustrated book to his compatriot Richard Neutra in a letter in 1919, it is unclear why he did not follow through on his intentions. It is likely that Schindler, who moved to California in 1920, became too preoccupied with the establishment of his architectural practice to devote the necessary time to such a project. It was Neutra, who joined Schindler at Kings Road House in Los Angeles in 1925, who ended up taking over this project. Schindler made his photographic archive available to Neutra during the production of *Wie baut Amerika?* (Stuttgart: J. Hoffmann, 1927) and *Amerika* (Vienna: A. Schroll, 1930). A variety of his images were reproduced in these publications, but were uncredited.
- [18] Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (Berlin: R. Mosse, 1926), reprinted as *Erich Mendelsohn's "Amerika"*, translation by Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover Publications, 1993).
- [19] This approach was brought to bear on his projects, and is manifest in his design of the Buena Shore Club (1917), his first major commission, which was constructed on the bank of Lake Michigan, north of Chicago. As Schindler described it in the local paper, the beach was the literal starting point in the design process, and the building grew organically in height from that point, knitting its vocabulary of geometric abstraction into the landscape (R. M. Schindler, "The Buena Shore Club Described by its Designer," *The Chicago Israelite* (22 December 1917): 3).
- [20] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, introduction by Anthony Vidler (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000; first printing, New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
- [21] On the topic of Sheeler's photography, see Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown* (Allentown, PA: Allentown Art Museum, 1997), 56–71; Wanda Corn, "Home, Sweet Home." In *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 293–337.
- [22] R. M. Schindler, "Writings, 1914–1940," p. 47. Unpublished manuscript, ADC/UCSB.
- [23] David Gebhard was the first to consider Schindler's experience and artistic response to Taos (see David Gebhard, "R. M. Schindler in New Mexico, 1915," *New Mexico Architecture* (January–February 1965): 15–21).
- [24] Schindler to Neutra, probably January 1921, translated in August Sarnitz, *R. M. Schindler: Architect* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 205.
- [25] R. M. Schindler, Church School of Design lecture, Part II, p. 3. ADC/UCSB.
- [26] Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 93. On the topic of Taliesin, see also Kathryn Smith, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin and Taliesin West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).
- [27] Because of lighting considerations and the limited scope of lenses, Schindler found the camera more restrictive in capturing interiors. This was a problem he faced in the documentation of the interiors of his own projects.
- [28] The first Taliesin was well documented by the Chicago architectural photographer Henry Fuermann (see "The Studio-Home of Frank Lloyd Wright," *Architectural Record* 33 (1913): 45–54; Charles R. Ashbee, "Taliesin, the Home of Frank Lloyd Wright, and a Study of the Owner," *Western Architect* 19 (1913): 16–19; for a brief discussion of this work, see Anthony Alofsin, "Photographic History." In *Taliesin, 1911–1914*, edited by Narciso Menocal (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 124–136).

- [29] Pauline Schindler, "Taliesin in 1919," typed manuscript (n.d.), p. 1. Smithsonian Archives and American Art, Esther McCoy papers, Box 15.
- [30] It is interesting to note that, as an amateur photographer himself, Wright would certainly have viewed parts of Schindler's archive. In particular, he would have been attracted to the pictures of Santa Fe and Taos, since he was actively exploring aspects of the primitive as sources of inspiration. Thus, the medium of photography was an important currency at Taliesin—facilitating Schindler's study of Wright's architecture, while enabling Wright to see the geography and indigenous building of the Southwest through Schindler's eyes.
- [31] Schindler worked with over twenty photographers during the course of his career, including Viroque Baker, Ernest Pratt, Edward Weston, Brett Weston, Jessie Tarbox Beals and Julius Shulman.