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The travelling architect’s eye: photography and automobile vision

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The Travelling Architect’s Eye: Photography and Automobile Vision

Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the status of travel-photography and is based on the hypothesis that the automobile revolutionized the way architects perceive the city. It focuses on a close examination of the photographs taken by architects John Lautner, Alison and Peter Smithson and Aldo Rossi during their travels, with special emphasis on those taken from the automobile and while encountering places for the first time. The main hypothesis that it explores is that the view from the car changes the architecture of the city, as well as the relationship between architecture and the city. It explores this hypothesis through the investigation of the above-mentioned case studies, contributing to a broader understanding of what is happening in cases of photography taken from the car. Regarding the theoretical framework on which my interpretation is based, I could refer to Rosalind Krauss’s understanding of photography in “Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View”.

Besides from the photos they thematised in their book entitled AS in DS: An Eye on the Road, depicting landscape views of the British countryside, Alison and Peter Smithson also took many photos during their summer vacations. The main interest of these photos lies in the fact that they employed them in their teaching process and reasoning. The way they treated these photos in order to illustrate their arguments in their teaching, their publications and their projects is an aspect that is scrutinized here. Rossi started taking polaroid photographs during his journeys in the late 1970s, nearly a decade after noting his first impressions in his 47 quaderni azzuri (1968-1986), which are strongly reminiscent of travel diaries, both in form and content. His polaroids, which documented journeys and his whereabouts, include images of boats crossing a river in Bangkok, a Shaker village in Massachusetts, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and constitute a visual diary of the Italian architect and an important source for understanding his use of travel-photography in order to organise his “visual memory”. In John Lautner’s archives, tens of thousands of slides can be found, illustrating trips throughout the United States, Eastern and Western Europe, Scandinavia, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, Thailand, and Egypt. One of my objectives is to show how these photographs of landscapes can inform us on the specific vision that his buildings introduced and vice-versa. Lautner’s travel slides constitute a precious resource since they represent a visual record equivalent to the more usual sketchbook used by many architects to record their study notes. His buildings trigger an ocular-centric vision which cannot but be related to the pre-eminence of landscape views in his conceptual edifice, as emerges not only through his architecture but also through the views captured on his camera when confronted with various landscapes.
Introduction

The objective of this paper is to investigate the status of the photographs and sketches that the architects John Lautner, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Aldo Rossi used to make during their travels by car. Its point of departure is the hypothesis that the view from the car has established a new epistemology of the urban landscape and the territory at large. One of the main reasons I have chosen to focus my research on photographs taken from the car by John Lautner, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Aldo Rossi is the observation that all of them shared an interest in taking photographs from the car and a conviction that automobile transport helps the traveller to grasp urban landscapes and territories in a different manner, offering the possibility to approach the landscape differently and understand its constituent logics in a novel way. Moreover, they were all attracted to the banal beauty of urban and suburban infrastructure. Pivotal for understanding what is at stake in the case of street photography, urban photography and photography from the car are the exhibitions “The Car and the Camera: The Detroit School of Automotive Photography” (Detroit Institute of Arts, 1996), and “The Open Road: Photography and the American Road Trip” (Milwaukee Art Museum, 2018). The latter was based on the interpretation of the photographic road trip as a genre in its own right, tracing photographic road trips from Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank – whose 1955 travels resulted in *The Americans* (1958). The exhibition “Open city: street photographs since 1950” (Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 2001 and Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., 2002), but more importantly “Lee Friedlander: America By Car” (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2010) are also valuable for this study. The latter displayed a collection of 192 images taken by Friedlander from his car. Pioneers in the domain of street photography are Robert Frank and Walker Evans. The former embarked on a photographic project, in 1955, with the objective “to photograph freely throughout the United States, using the miniature camera exclusively” (Alexander 1986, 13). Younger photographers who also specialised in street photography are Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand and Diane Arbus. Ed Ruscha’s self-published book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) is also an important reference regarding the “snapshot aesthetics” characterising the act of taking photographs from the car. The common ground among these photographers was the elaboration of a “snapshot aesthetics” capturing contemporary urban life in its ordinariness and banality.

There has as yet been no comprehensive research centred on photographs taken by architects during journeys by car. However, an important study dealing with the influence of the car on the perception of the architecture of the city and the aesthetics of urban highways is Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John Myer’s *The View from the Road* (1964). Reyner Banham’s seminal book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) places the car at the centre, as does Alison Smithson in the much less known *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road* (1983). The latter refers to “a new kind of freedom offered by the car” (Smithson 1983: 23), as well as to “the new sensibility resulting from the moving view of landscape” (Ibid.: 47). In parallel, she insists on the necessity to “generate a rethinking of the many basic assumptions related to our ‘inherited’ way of seeing landscape and towns” and to establish “a fresh understanding of what sort of places we wish to build towards” (Ibid., 23). *Travel, Space, Architecture* (2016), edited by Miodrag Mitrasinovic and Jilly Traganou, examines the influence of mobility on architecture in the global era. Traganou observes that “the valorization of distance, has […] characterised contemporary architectural discourse” (Traganou 2016, 21), examining the manner in which much of the architecture theory promoted by renowned practising architects has emerged as a result of their journeys. Urban historian Christine Boyer, in *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (1996), has shed light on the relationship of the act of travelling, in the case of architects, with the simultaneous perception of “travel narratives, history books, historical painting, and architectural ruins” (Boyer 1996, 228). She also interpreted “[t]raveling, visiting museums, studying maps, gazing upon architecture, and even observing a city’s plan” as optical means
employed by architects in order to organise their “visual memory” (Ibid., 230). The importance of travel for this organisation is evident in the case of Aldo Rossi, who took notes in his 47 so-called *quaderni azzuri* (1968-1986), strongly reminiscent of travel diaries, both in form and content. On the cover of many of them, he noted the travels to which each one pertained. The paper intends to address in a systematic way how the “snapshot aesthetics” of the architects’ act of taking photos from the car reveals their core epistemological concerns and is informative regarding the key issues of their architectural design strategies.

1. The case of John Lautner: Los Angeles and buildings as equivalents of cameras

American architect John Lautner, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, practiced primarily in California, focusing on the design of residential buildings of which the main characteristic, pivotal for my research, is their strategy of enhancement of panoramic views. One should not forget the significant connection of John Lautner’s work with the specific cultural and geographical context of Los Angeles. As Joh Yoder underscores regarding Lautner, “[a]lthough popular magazines celebrated his projects during his design prime in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, architectural periodicals largely ignored his work” (Yoder 2014, 45). Playboy and other popular magazines, for instance, published Lautner’s projects when specialised architecture journals did not. Of great importance for my research are Lautner’s own photographs and slides taken during his travels. The fact that he used to take his own photos gives us the opportunity to closely examine his vision regarding not only his own buildings, but also the different landscapes he encountered during his many travels. In his archives, tens of thousands of slides can be found, illustrating trips throughout the United States, Eastern and Western Europe, Scandinavia, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, Thailand, and Egypt. These photographs of landscapes can inform us on the specific vision that his own buildings introduced and vice-versa. Lautner’s own travel slides constitute a precious resource allowing to suggest an answer to this question, since they represent a visual record equivalent to the more usual sketchbook used by many architects to record their study notes. His buildings trigger an ocular-centric vision which cannot but be related to the pre-eminence of landscape views in his conceptual edifice, as emerges not only in his architecture but also through the views he captured on camera when confronted with various landscapes. Lautner’s work is closely connected to the automobile-centred style, called “Googie”, a term introduced by Douglas Haskell in the February 1952 issue of *House and Home* magazine in order to describe Lautner’s 1949 design for Googie’s coffee shop, now demolished.

Lautner’s buildings can be understood as apparatuses that were conceived with the primal purpose of accommodating views. This understanding of his buildings as equivalents of cameras is informed by the fact that, on many of his sketches and drawings, he notes the words “eyelids” and “eyelashes”. Regarding the primacy of panoramic views for his buildings, Lautner noted: “Usually in the hills you have a panoramic view that people are interested in right away, and so most of my things are curved.” (Lautner 1986, 15-19). In these words, it becomes evident that Lautner’s houses operate as cameras. Lautner’s buildings open to a panoramic view of the landscape all at once. Regarding the way in which Lautner’s spaces seek to embrace views all at once, the following words are telling: “When standing on a site I search for its particular and unique expression with all my senses. The sweep of my eye and what it embraces merge through years of work and experience with all I have learned and come to know”. Regarding his choice to construct Chemosphere’s glass surfaces that tilt inward at the top, Lautner had also noted: “I wanted it to work like a penthouse overlooking the Valley. I purposely sloped the glass in so when you stand up against it you can’t look straight down. You are forced to look at the magnificent view.” (Lautner 1991, 25) Lautner’s photo of Elrod House where the residence is depicted next to the automobile invites us to reflect on an analogy between
the automobile as a dispositif of encountering new landscapes and the residence as a dispositif of embracing visually the surrounding landscape (Fig. 1).

![Figure 1. John Lautner, Elrod house, Palm Springs, 1968. Credits: Photo by John Lautner (Lautner personal collection)](image)

The automobile appealed to Lautner – in contrast with the architectural critic Reyner Banham who did not start driving before his 40s – and his photo-shots taken during trips are often the quick views or snapshots of a moving viewer. Worth mentioning is the contrast between Banham’s admiration for Los Angeles and Lautner’s scepticism towards the city. Symptomatic of Lautner’s unenthusiastic first impression of Los Angeles is his following declaration: “Oh it was depressing: when I first drove down Santa Monica Boulevard, it was so ugly I was physically sick for the first year I was here”. This contrast between the two men’s opinions on the city should be understood in conjunction with how each of them photographed landscapes during their travels. Banham was enthusiastic about the drive-centred culture of Los Angeles, as becomes evident not only in his seminal book Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies (1971) but also in his early article “Vehicles of Desire” (1955).
2. The case of Alison and Peter Smithson: the capture the ordinary and the “as found”

British architects Alison and Peter Smithson stand amongst the most influential of post-war architects. Central to their work was a concern with the ways we identify ourselves with places in a context of change. They were, arguably, among the protagonists of the New Brutalism, and were also members of The Independent Group art movement, along with photographer Nigel Henderson and sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, and the group of architects known as Team 10. The photographs included by Alison Smithson in her book entitled *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road* (1983), which was cut in the plan-shape of the car (Fig. 2). It was the result of observing the landscape on journeys from London to Wiltshire in the countryside of South-West England, where The Upper Lawn Pavilion – Alison and Peter Smithson’s weekend home, also known as the Solar pavilion – was located. Driving a Citroën DS, they captured impressions corresponding to what we could call repetitive travel, since they were taken during their car-drives back and forth from their weekend house (Fig. 3a, fig. 3b). Interestingly, the Smithsons acquired several Citroën DS models in succession: first the less expensive ID, then the DS 19, and finally the station wagon DS Safari. Besides the photos thematised in *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road*, depicting landscape views of the British countryside, Alison and Peter Smithson also took many photos during their summer vacations. The Smithsons also used some photographic series, which are part of their archives – such as the views taken from the car in regions of Southern France including Marseille and Toulouse –, in a rhetorical way in their teaching, publications and conferences. These photographs do not function as raw data since they were selected and edited according to the rhetorical objectives of the architects. In this sense, photos were employed by the architects under study as an analytical tool serving to inform their designerly attitude.

![Figure 2. Interior side of the cover from Alison Smithson, *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road*. Baden: Lars Muller Verlag, 2001.](image-url)
Alison Smithson, in the introduction to *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road*, describes the book as “A Diary of a Passenger’s View of Movement in a Car”. She also notes that “the passenger view from the front seat of a car in the early seventies was worth recording”. Otto Das claims that the descriptions included in this book “try to develop new notions about the role of the car in architecture and town planning, seen from the motorway, the road, the street, and from the parking-lot”. Thought provoking is the third chapter of the book entitled “Aspect 3: The New Sensibility Resulting from the Moving View of Landscape”, which can help us better grasp how ways of seeing are conceptualised in the new context of mobility due to car travelling. Characteristically, regarding the role of the car in this mutation, Alison Smithson notes the following: “Our sensibilities have been affected by our use of our ‘room of wheels’ but also, there comes a new awareness of the responsibilities inherent in our comfortable view of just anywhere. Our idea of quality of space, our will to bring though quality in all things, these should also be affected by our possession of a cell of perfected technology” (Ibid., 111). *Changing the Art of Inhabitation: Mies’ Pieces, Eames’ Dreams, The Smithsons. (1994)* and *The Space Between: Alison and Peter Smithson (2017)*, are illustrated with drawings and photographs mostly by the Smithsons themselves. These photographs can help us understand the importance of capturing the identity of places and of daily life for these architects, who were particularly interested in the notion of “sensibility of place”. The possibility to capture various impressions from the car while traveling contributed to their endeavour to grasp what they call “sensibility of place”. Alison Smithson gave much significance to the act of seeing and was convinced that it was of major importance for inventiveness in architecture. Peter Smithson writes, in a manuscript entitled “1956 . . . The DS: The H.O.F. (AND DUBROVNIK)”:  

My memory tells me that in 1956 Citroën launched its first post-war car, the Citroën D.S. It was a miraculous wholly new idea of a car. Its body-panels were visually and actually separated . . . water passed between them and was collected in a gutter-pressing behind; flowing out by air-pressure and gravity at low level. It was an aesthetic of explicit joints.

DS = DEESSE = GODDESS
ID = IDEE = IDEA

This short text by Peter Smithson refers to Roland Barthes’s renowned ode to the DS, “The New Citroën,” in Mythologies (1957), where he calls the DS the Déesse (the Goddess), equating it with the “great Gothic cathedrals.” [Barthes 1972, 88] Another text that is also useful for understanding how Alison and Peter Smithson used photography is Andrew Higgott’s “Memorability as Image: The New Brutalism and Photography”. Ordinariness acquires a new status and becomes a source of invention for the Smithsons, who were attracted to the “as found”. Photography was for them a means that could capture the ordinary and the “as found”. Their close relationship with Nigel Henderson, who was like them a member of the Independent Group, should also be taken into account in our endeavour to comprehend how the Smithsons perceived the means of photography in general, and more specifically during journeys by car. Henderson’s work, and especially his street photographs taken in London’s East End between 1949 and 1953, is pivotal for understanding how photography was instrumental in conceiving representation as the effort to grasp the variable rather than the objective appraisal of reality.

3. The case of Aldo Rossi: how “human living expresses itself in a concrete way”?

The Pritzker-winning Milanese architect Aldo Rossi, who had also achieved distinction as a theorist, artist and pedagogue, taught at the ETH as visiting professor (Gastdozent) between 1972-1974 on the invitation of Swiss architect and collage artist Bernhard Hoesli, Chairman of the Architecture Department of the ETH (1968-1972) and founder of the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) within the ETH, along with Paul Hofer and Adolph Max Vogt, and its director (1976-1980) and known for his redefinition of the first-year architectural curriculum at the ETH Zürich. Rossi’s seminal book The Architecture of the City (1982), originally published as L’architettura della città (1966), figures among the most influential books of contemporary theory of architecture and urban design and has been a major reference as far as the relationship between architecture and the city is concerned. Rossi started taking polaroid photographs during his journeys of the late 1970s, nearly a decade after noting his first impressions in his quaderni azzuri. His polaroid photos, which documented journeys and his whereabouts, include images of boats crossing a river in Bangkok, a Shaker village in Massachusetts, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and constitute a visual diary of the Italian architect and an important source for understanding his use of travel-photography in order to organise his “visual memory”. An ensemble of photographs by Rossi, taken through a car windshield during the 1980s and 1990s (Fig. 4), is informative regarding the way his travel in various areas of the United States influenced his understanding of the city. Among the photos he took during this period, one can find several photos depicting facades of stores he encountered while travelling by car, such as a Lebanon Supermarket in Massachusetts (Fig. 5).

Figure 4. View of a street from a car windshield, United States, 1980s–1990s. Credits: Aldo Rossi fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). PH1996:0069:006
The polaroid photographs by Rossi do not only stem from his journeys in the United States, but also from his travels by car in France, Greece, and Italy, where Rossi took photos of facades of stores and advertisements he encountered while driving. I could refer to a photo of a fake palm tree and Ristorante Pizzeria sign along the road taken somewhere in Italy during the 1980s–1990s, a photo of a parking lot with a young boy in Dole in France in July 1980, as well as to a photo of the facade of a butcher’s shop somewhere in France in the 1980s–1990s. Observing Rossi’s above-mentioned photos, a question that emerges concerns the extent to which Rossi’s perception of advertisements, facades of stores and signs from the car differs from the “pop agony” defined by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972).
Martino Stierli’s *Las Vegas in the Rearview Mirror: The City in Theory, Photography, and Film* can help us better grasp the specificity of Venturi and Scott Brown’s vision in their above-mentioned book. In 1968, Venturi and Scott Brown started teaching a seminar at the Yale School of Art and Architecture titled “Learning from Las Vegas”, which was the seed of what, four years later, would become *Learning from Las Vegas*. In the latter work, co-authored with Steven Izenour, one can read: “It is significant that Fremont Street is more photogenic than the Strip. A single postcard can carry a view of the Golden Horseshoe, The Mint Hotel, The Golden Nugget, and the Lucky Casino. A single shot of the Strip is less spectacular; its enormous spaces must be seen as moving sequences” (Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour 1977, 35). The authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* thus privileged film over photography as a means of capturing the signs of Las Vegas. Stierli, in *Las Vegas in the Rearview Mirror*, refers to Tom Wolfe’s influential “Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can’t hear you! Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!!” (1964), and interprets the new recognition of commercial and popular signs during the 1960s and 1970s employing W.J.T. Mitchell’s definition and analysis of the “iconic turn”.

One of the aims of my research is to examine to what extent Rossi’s vision differs from that of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour and to question whether it could be interpreted as part of the same “iconic turn” to which Stierli refers in the above-mentioned book. Regarding the impact of Rossi’s encounter with different American cityscapes during his travels by car, his following statements during an interview with Diana Agrest for *Skyline* in 1979 are particularly important: “I have seen huge complexes of one-family houses in California and mobile-homes in Texas, as well as the new buildings in New York City, and, personally, I don’t have any moralistic feelings toward these works; I even found them stimulating” (Rossi 1979, 5). Rossi, during his stays in the United States, was not only interested in the typology of the skyscraper. He showed a particular interest for other typologies found in the American cities, as becomes evident in his statement mentioned above. Rossi maintained that his theory of typology acquired a special value in the case of Manhattan because of the typology of the skyscraper. He notes that “typology has a particular value [in] N.Y. or Manhattan with the type of the skyscraper” and gives the following definition of typology: “in fact by concept of typology I mean the concept of a form in which human living expresses itself in a concrete way.”

An interesting question that arises is to what extent his photos of the various typologies he encountered while driving from one American city to another could be interpreted as gestures aiming at grasping how “human living expresses itself in a concrete way”.

Conclusions

Rosalind Krauss’s understanding of photography in her article entitled “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View” and particularly to her claim that “photography is an imprint or transfer off the real” [Krauss 1986: 110] is useful for interpreting photos taken from the car by Lautner, the Smithsons and Rossi. Krauss, in *The Optical Unconscious*, also refers to Walter Benjamin’s “Small History of Photography” (1931), where the latter states that photography “with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret”, claiming that “[i]t is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious just as we discover the instinctual unconscious though psychoanalysis” (Benjamin quoted in Krauss 1994, 178). In “Photography in the Service of Surrealism”, Krauss underscores that “what the camera frames, and thereby makes visible, is the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs” (Krauss 1985, 35). We could claim that the point of convergence of the architects under study – John Lautner, the Smithsons and Aldo Rossi – is their desire to savour the uncontrollable impressions to which

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2 Aldo Rossi, typescript of a lecture given at Pratt Institute in 1980, Aldo Rossi papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
one is exposed when travelling by car. Their intention to capture certain images that are part of these continuous alternating impressions brings to mind “the constant, uninterrupted production of signs” to which Krauss refers.

The point of convergence of the architects under study is their desire to savour the uncontrollable impressions to which one is exposed when travelling by car. Their intention to capture certain images that are part of these continuous alternating impressions brings to mind “the constant, uninterrupted production of signs” to which Krauss refers. Another useful reference for understanding the role of photography in the construction of a designerly rhetoric is Roland Barthes’ “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), where photography is described as “a new space-time category, spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then” (Barthes 1977, 44), as is Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.

To conclude, I consider important to underline that the “snapshot aesthetics” characterizing the photographs that the architects John Lautner, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Aldo Rossi used to take while traveling by car demonstrate that the act of capturing contemporary urban life in its ordinariness and banality was at the very heart of the way they conceived architecture and urban design. Roland Barthes’s following remarks regarding photography, in “The Rhetoric of the image”, is pivotal for interpreting this capacity of the photographs to record reality in its immediacy, which was the main reason for which these architects gave so much importance to taking photographs from the car during their journeys: “the photograph is able to transmit the (literal) information without forming it by means of discontinuous signs and rules of transformation”, in the sense that “the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of ‘transformation’ but of ‘recording’” (Barthes 1977, 44). Similarly, W. J. T. Mitchell’s claim that “[t]he photograph occupies the same position in the world of material signs that the “impression” does in the world of mental signs or “ideas” in empirical epistemology” (Mitchell 1986, 60) could help us better grasp how the above-mentioned architects employed photography from the car as a tool serving to organise their visual memories, at a first place, and transpose their visual impressions into architectural design strategies, at a second place. This interaction between the capture of visual impressions through photography from the car and its incorporation in their designerly methods is of major significance for understanding what was at stake in the architectural and urban design thought and practice of John Lautner, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Aldo Rossi.

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