

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Rowan Moore, 'Constructing Worlds review – the battered, beautiful and barely credible, Barbican Art Gallery, London', *The Guardian*, Sept 26, 2014

From 1930s America to Pyongyang now, the work of 18 photographers captures the extreme and humdrum nature of buildings

There is a photograph in the Barbican's new Constructing Worldsexhibition of a building by the Mexican architect Luis Barragán which, amazingly, is in black-and-white. What's amazing about this? It's just that Barragán's work is about nothing if not colour, the ochres and hot pinkswith which he saturated sunlit walls. An image of grey shapes like this one by Hiroshi Sugimoto is hardly about Barragán any more, but becomes a more or less compelling image in its own right.

Which is a large part of the point of the selection in this show, whose subject is "photography and architecture in the modern age". It is not greatly concerned with reputations and will give as much respect to a gas station or to the ad hoc, gaudy, more-than-Vegas constructions with which Afghanistan is being rebuilt as it will to the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. There is a discipline called architectural photography, whose practitioners are usually paid by architects to represent their works, but it is not the subject of this exhibition.

There are 18 users of the camera on display, some of them artists who use photography, some photographers of considerable art. Each has a zone to her or himself, arranged in chronological order. At the beginning and end are images of illuminated cities: Berenice Abbott's look down from the Empire State Building, in the late afternoon of the winter solstice in 1932, and Iwan Baan's 2011 evening image of a favela with the towers of Caracas behind.

In between are such things as Simon Norfolk's pictures of war zones in Kabul and Baghdad, and Walker Evans's accounts of America in the Great Depression. There is concrete battered by poverty and tropical weather in Guy Tillim's work in Mozambique. There is a barely credible landscape of rubbish and habitations in Bas Princen's *Mokattam Ridge (Garbage Recycling City)*, Cairo of 2009, and monster dams and bridges in Nadav Kander's views of China.

The work on show is not, however, exactly documentary. It is more artful than that, most obviously in Andreas Gursky's large tableaux of repetitious modernism in Montparnasse, Paris, or the Dantean circles of the Sé subway station, São Paulo. Gursky uses digital manipulation to create a reality which is not the one on the other side of his lens. In the Montparnasse piece his concern is to remove the distortion of perspective: in the one of São Paulo he multiplies the number of levels that the station actually has.

To put it another way, it is an enhanced form of reality, a way of capturing a truth in what he sees and creating a new artefact out of it, which is what photographers do always. Evans does it with the way he frames a frontal view of a "Negro church", and Abbott does it with her dynamic compositions of skyscrapers, and of advertising signs and hanging laundry in 1930s New York. A Thomas Struth view of the World Trade Centre, with the flutings of Doric columns in the foreground, becomes a strumming of vertical lines.

A common quality is a sense that structures are standing in for human life that is momentarily out of shot. The images are often de-populated but, like Evans's modest-but-proud churches, or Struth's emphatic apartment blocks in Pyongyang, describe cultures and values. There is a Simon Norfolk battle scene on the edge of Baghdad, in which you see little more than a damaged archway and a bucolic, but also damaged, avenue of trees. There are also Ed Ruscha's aerial photographs of empty parking lots, with spots of oil in each space, accumulated over many parkings of cars. In the lot of *Good Year Tires, North Hollywood*, the spots fade the further they are from the store, for the simple reason that people will park, when they can, as close to it as possible.

Stillness and detachment, even resignation, are common moods. The subject might sometimes be violence, poverty or degradation, and you might guess and share the photographer's feelings, but they

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don't command you to do something about them. And, if we are often shown extremes, we are also shown the humdrum and the banal, as in Stephen Shore's captures of sunbelt cities in the 1970s. And then, after all, there are recognised works of architecture, even if, in Sugimoto's picture of Barragán, the architecture is not easily recognisable. It is even harder to recognise in Luisa Lambri's studies of Frank Lloyd Wright houses, where slivers of ornamented window frame appear out of dark surroundings. But there are also some professional architectural photographers who transcend their trade's hazard of flattery and therefore dullness. These include Lucien Hervé, who gave Le Corbusier's buildings in Chandigarh the look of eternity, and Julius Shulman, who created paradisaical images of glass modernism in postwar California. Also Hélène Binet, here represented by contemplative photographs of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, when not yet completed.

By the time you see these photographs, however, your eye has been trained by Abbott and Evans to see the famous buildings without their usual aura, even though Shulman posed his interiors with models. They are rather further incidents of inhabitation, reimaged by the photographer, not fundamentally different from the hanging laundry and the wooden church. And then you come to Hilla Becher and her late husband Bernd, who together spent decades photographing Ruhr water towers on grey days, in monochrome, with unvarying centralised composition, which seemingly dull subject matter reveals a circus of surprising structures. Hilla Becher has composed a wall of these specially for the exhibition, which reminds you as clearly as possible that photography is not just description but a work in its own right.

Constructing Worlds is based on a simple idea – it's of photographs of buildings – which makes you wonder why it isn't done more often. It neatly addresses the notorious problem of architecture exhibitions, which is that you can't get buildings into a gallery, and so have to resort to secondary depictions of them: here the primary artefacts are the photographs themselves, whose physical presence, their scale and surface qualities, are an essential part of the experience.

It is curated by Alona Pardo and Elias Redstone, who says that there is a narrative to the exhibition. I can't see it myself – there's more a set of sensibilities. It could, indeed, be a bit of a mess, with what are widely divergent approaches and subjects, but it doesn't feel like one. It is more a wander through some terrific work, helped by a simple basic idea. If you want more, you can go to both the Barbican's catalogue, which doesn't precisely match the exhibition, and Redstone's new book *Shooting Space*, which concentrates on photographs of new buildings in this century.

It is also helped by the exhibition design by the architects Office KGDVS. They nicely expand and contract their spaces to suit large and intimate works, and occupy the Barbican gallery with sufficient boldness to deal with its overbearing concrete pillars and its heavy balustrades. They make of it a little city, allowing glimpses as if of other people's apartments into galleries on the other side of the show. Nor are they above a little postmodern joke, as when they make a rotunda to house Luigi Ghirri's pictures of the buildings of Aldo Rossi, who liked rotundas.

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/sep/27/constructing-worlds-review-barbican-photography-architecture-modern-age>