

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Hugh McEwen, 'Lies, damned lies and photography', *BD Online*, October 1, 2014

Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age, Barbican Art Gallery. Until January 11, 2015

In 2006, Iwan Baan photographed the Jinhua Architecture Park as it was being completed. Four hours' drive south of Shanghai, the park was curated by Ai Wei Wei in memory of his own father, the poet Ai Qing.

Baan's photographs showcased the pavilions by 16 invited international practices, such as Pritzker laureate Wang Shu, Fernando Romero and Herzog & de Meuron. They depicted crisp contemporary forms and meditative pavilions emerging from the mist by the Yiwu river, populated by fleeting visitors. The images spoke of international expos and depicted the park as a catalogue of world-class architects.

When I visited just two years later, during the summer of the Beijing Olympics, the scene could not have been more different. Pavilions boarded up, paths overgrown, and walls vandalised, the showcase of architecture was its antithesis. The Bridge Tea House could not be crossed. Buchner & Bruendler's Manager Room was vacant, but the Multifunctional Space had become a squat. And while the public toilets were locked, Toshiko Mori's Newspaper Stand had recently been used as one.

Everyone has their favourite anecdote of just how different the photography of architecture can be from reality, and some of the best are curated by Alona Pardo and Elias Redstone in *Constructing Worlds*. Whether it is how the photographer chose the one moment in an entire year that the fleeting image they wanted could be captured, or that they broke into a construction site to capture its essence before completion.

Constructing Worlds at the Barbican Art Gallery gathers 18 international photographers who present architecture as art, as experience and as anthropology. They are not concerned with honesty, but to evoke a character of architecture. Each photographer distorts their subjects through repetition, choreography or even blatant airbrushing. H el ene Binet might visit the buildings before they are complete, and Guy Tillim presents megaprojects that have fallen into disrepair, but each photograph plays on the viewer's assumption that they depict the reality of a building, when in fact each one is a carefully constructed ideal, used to express the photographer's art.

Starting upstairs in the Barbican Art Gallery, the chronological exhibition catalogues the development of this faux documentary approach from the 1930s to the present day. Originally via importing a tradition of critical documentary photography of the city in Paris, American photographers began to celebrate buildings, through Berenice Abbott's beautiful images of New York's heroic skyscrapers and Walker Evans' study of the Deep South's vernacular architecture.

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Twisting this documentary tradition, photographers worked with architects to present idealised versions of their buildings for publications. Julius Shulman presents the Case Study Houses as visions of a perfect home, with models acting out lifestyles to be sold in glossy magazines. While Corbusier's Chandigarh is presented as a piece of sculpture through stark black and whites by Lucien Hervé.

The development of this photographic tradition is made apparent through the exhibition, with Ed Ruscha, Stephen Shore and Thomas Struth all picking up on the documentation of architecture without architects found in the earlier work of Evans. The best-known architectural documenters Bernd and Hilla Becher taught at the Dusseldorf school, tutoring both Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, who then feature in the second half of the show.

In this contemporary second section downstairs in the gallery, the ability of photographers to produce an atmosphere through their photographs of architecture is explored. Sometimes joyous, at other times eerie, these characters are often evoked through the pictures' demand for us to inhabit them. Whether through an attractive scene, an unbelievable view, or the viewer being the only person who exists in depopulated images. Luisa Lambri carefully draws our attention to the changing qualities of light through the day through a narrow door. Simon Norfolk has a journalistic tone to his intimate pictures of military bases, asking us to imagine the story behind them. And Baz Princen's giant scenes of globalisation makes us wish we were there.

The exhibition does not look to change how we see architecture through photography, or how architecture is provided as a mediated subject, but it does explain the impact of how it at once can document the general and also make us feel the acute particularity of the spaces captured by the lens. Throughout, the images are presented as examples of a tradition of the documentation of general typologies, but these become specific as we see them and invest our own feelings and memories in the shots. Through this, what were blurry or typical examples are made personal. Somewhat fittingly for me, the show ends with Baan's images of the shanty town inside the incomplete office block of Torre David. In a reverse of the Jinhua Architecture Park, here the residents have been evicted and Chinese investors are to return it to its original grandeur. Once again, the photographer presents a reality that only existed for his camera.

<http://www.bdonline.co.uk/culture/lies-damned-lies-and-photography/5071233.article>