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A SINGULAR VISION

CITE TALKS WITH PHOTOGRAPHER JULIUS SHULMAN

In his seven decades as an architectural photographer, Julius Shulman has created a body of work matched by only a select few. Though best known for his definitive record of early California modernism, in which he introduced to the world the works of, among others, Richard Neutra, Raphael Soriano, Gregory Ain, and R.M. Schindler, Shulman has spanned the globe in search of memorable buildings. Admired for his natural sense of dynamic symmetry, his feeling for light, and his down to earth approach to his craft, Shulman has influenced whole generations of photographers who have followed him. His work is featured in *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman* by Joseph Rosa and the recent autobiography *Julius Shulman: Architecture and Its Photography*. Last October, Shulman visited Houston to deliver a lecture as part of the Rice Design Alliance series Changing Focus: Photographers View Place. While in town, he visited with Nonya Grenader and Danny Samuels of Cite and offered reflections on his long career.

Cite: It has been said that you came to architectural photography by chance. In 1936, you were taken by a friend to see the Kun House in Los Angeles, designed by Richard Neutra. What is your memory of that event?

Shulman: It was quite scary, and I'll tell you why. Just before that visit, I had been at Berkeley, and had taken pictures around the campus with my vest-pocket camera. I took photographs of some of the old classical buildings of the University of California campus, which to me were attractive as a photographic statement. I sold those photographs in the campus bookstore for \$2.50 apiece. I was able to develop the prints at night in the kitchen, with a little portable enlarger I had brought from Los Angeles. So I became a photographer without realizing it. I needed to improve, but I was training myself.

So when I went to see the Neutra house, I took half a dozen photographs with my vest-pocket camera. I had the camera mounted on a tripod, did some form of basic things, and I didn't know quite why. But even with that old vest-pocket Kodak I was taking photography seriously. I used every photo I took and produced pictures that today are still being used. Now, when I saw the Neutra house, it didn't dawn on me what it was. It was a modern house, but I didn't come away with any thought that, wow, it's a great modern house. I had never thought about it. I had never met an architect until the end of that week, when Neutra saw the pictures. I went over to see him on Saturday, March fifth, a very fateful day. He wanted to know, are you an architectural student? Are you a student of photography? How did you achieve these pictures? But it's a natural association in my mind to make good compositions of whatever I photograph, whether it's a landscape, or a picture of a building. And mind you, this was the first modern house I'd ever seen. The term "modern" hadn't entered ever in my life. It was a house. It appeared strange to me, and I had never seen such a house before. Yet the compositions were very valid.

Cite: Neutra then introduced you to other significant architects such as R.M. Schindler, Gregory Ain, and Raphael Soriano. During your career you came to know so many architects, how did you select the architect to design your own home?

Shulman: When I got my property it was 1943, and after the army in 1945, I was dreaming about talking to Schindler and Gregory Ain and Richard Neutra and Soriano. And I thought, hey, why don't I get these architects together some night and form a consortium? It was ridiculous, but I was naive, and of course I dropped it quite quickly. And then I thought, well, who should I have to design my house? I thought Soriano was a wonderful, creative man. Anyway, Soriano designed my

house, because I liked what he was doing and I liked him personally. He was ordered to be sympathetic, even though I had to agree with him about having a steel frame structure. I'm fortunate I did agree with him, because after the earthquakes we've had, our house has never had one slight crack. Our windows in the studio are ten feet square, big glass plates. Nothing broke. No separation between walls, columns, steel frames. So I respect Soriano as an architect.

Cite: You've worked with so many distinguished architects, which of their buildings are most memorable to you?

Shulman: I don't think of the buildings so much as I do the people. I mention in one part of my book *Julius Shulman: Architecture and Its Photography*, I said, here I was working among the giants of the architectural world. And I was more impressed by the people than I was by their work. The result was, for example, when I met Walter Gropius at Cambridge in 1963, we spent a whole morning in his office talking not about architecture, but about other people. I especially recall conversations with Frank Lloyd Wright during a week at Taliesin West. I remember saying to Wright — the second day, I think, we were having lunch — you know Mr. Wright, I've attended many architects' conventions, and often the scuttlebutt, the conversation between meetings, is about other people. And you're the subject of many conversations. And in most cases they say, oh, he's a ... they don't quite call you a bastard, but they call you belligerent and arrogant. And he sort of chuckled, and I think he was taken aback by anyone daring to be so open. We had a very wonderful one-to-one relationship from that day. So he asked questions, we talked. He asked me partly about that belligerence thing, and he said that those people who made such comments didn't even know him. It's sad, he said. I met most of the men who were prominent in that world, most of them are long gone now, but I carry away their memories,

and I recount many of those in my book.

Cite: You were talking to some Rice architecture students about Charles and Ray Eames. You seemed to understand the Eames' spirit of invention, not just their buildings....

Shulman: Invention is the right word. Everything they did was an invention. Charles Eames was a remarkable industrial designer, graphic designer and photographer. I've always said publicly that Eames was genuinely a Leonardo da Vinci type of person. Eames could do anything. He was brilliant. What a mind. And he could express himself to students and to corporation presidents equally. And Ray was great in her own right. They were an amazing couple.

Cite: In your lecture at the Museum of Fine Arts you showed your photographs of a very early Frank Gehry house. And Gehry wrote the introduction to your recent autobiography.

Shulman: Yes, he mentions how we began our acquaintance in the 1950s. He was studying ceramic design at the University of Southern California under Glen Lukens. Lukens said to Gehry, "Your ceramic forms are very beautiful. You should think about studying architecture." He then invited Gehry to see his new house that Soriano had designed. Gehry went to see it, met Soriano, and then and there decided what he wanted to do.

Cite: Commenting on your work, architectural historian Esther McCoy said that your major concern was always the light. You've photographed everywhere, not just California. How do you adapt to the changes?

Shulman: (Laughs.) That's a question that comes all the time. In my book *Photography of Architecture and Design*, I have a series of photographs showing the Paul Getty estate in Sutton Place,

continued on page 28

PHOTOS BY JULIUS SHULMAN

Case Study #8 (Eames House),
1958, Pacific Palisades, California.
Charles Eames, architect.
(Pictured.)



Far left, top: Gonzalez House,
interior, 1972, Houston.
Karl Kamrath, architect.
Top left: Gonzalez
House, exterior, 1972.
Far left, bottom: Charles
Lawrence House, interior,
1972, Houston. Charles
Lawrence, FAIA, architect.
Bottom left: Charles Lawrence
House, exterior, 1972.

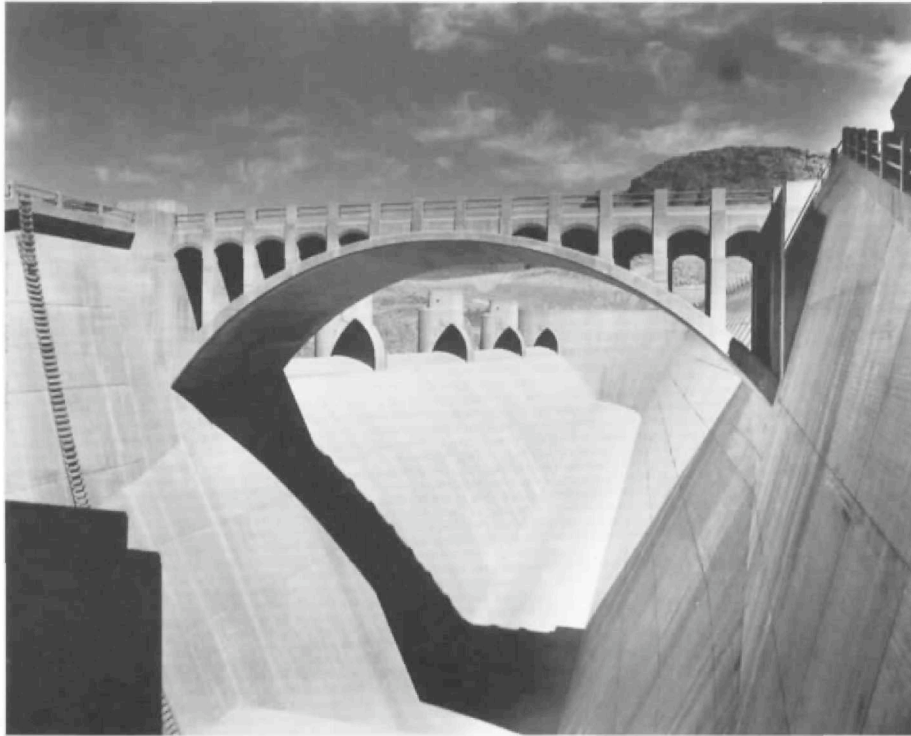




Singleton House, 1960, Los Angeles. Richard Neutra, architect.



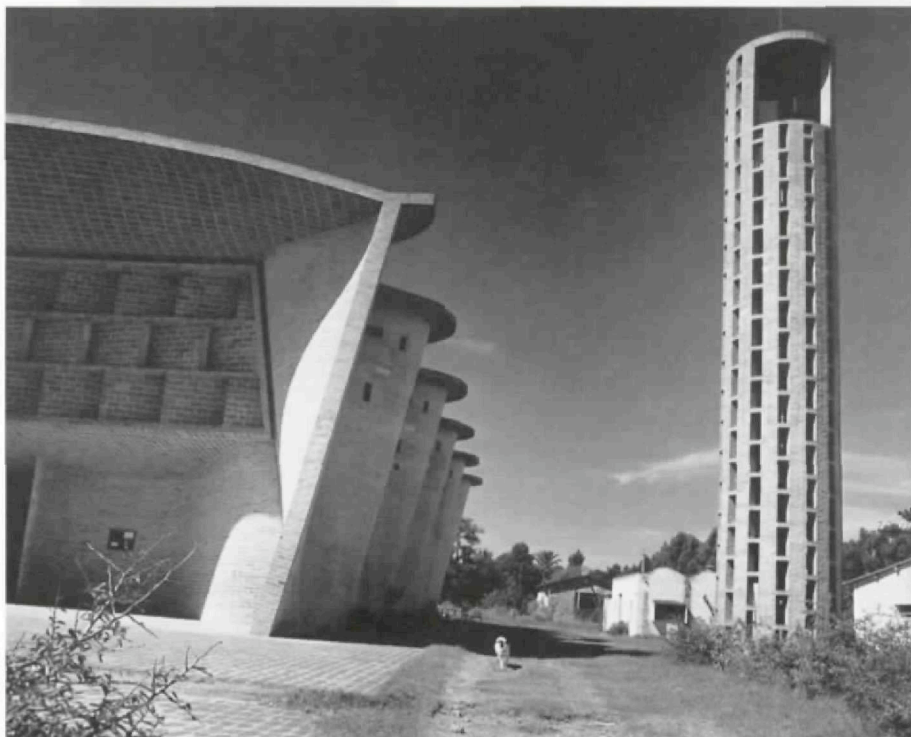
Kun House, 1936,
Los Angeles. Richard Neutra,
architect.



Boulder Dam, 1936, Boulder, Colorado.



The Cathedral, 1977, Brasilia, Brazil. Oscar Niemeyer, architect.



Catholic Church, 1967, Atlantica, Uruguay. Eladio Destag, architect.



Greene House ("Prairie Chicken"), 1963, Norman, Oklahoma. Herb Greene, architect.

Below: Julius Shulman house and studio under construction, 1949, Los Angeles. Raphael Soriano, architect.



Below: Steeves Residence, 1959, Brentwood, California. Frank Gehry, architect.





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continued from page 23

London, and I also have a series of pictures of the home of the Molson family in Canada. The houses are thousands of miles apart, but I show with the pictures that the exposure was exactly the same – f32 at a 15th of a second with a red filter. I can remember that because it's my life, it's my vocabulary. So there's your answer. I did the same thing when I went to South America, which is in the opposite direction. Or when I worked in Japan. It's a fallacy. Even the Eastman Kodak company, in the little books they publish for amateurs and whatever, always say, well, light's different. I disagree. Light is light. The sun is the sun. We have only one sun. So far.

Cite: McCoy noted that you hardly ever had to go back to take another shot.

Shulman: Not "hardly." I never went back. All over the world, wherever I traveled. As I jokingly say, people call me one-shot Shulman because I take one negative. Well, actually two transparencies, one for me and one for my client. I never bracket my exposures.

Cite: And you never use a light meter?

Shulman: No. I had a light meter in 1936, when I began my professional work. After a few months I gave it up. It was useless. I was leaning on it like a crutch, and I didn't need it. I knew the light, and I knew how to create use of the light, as Esther McCoy mentioned. And I used it to advance the photography. A meter wouldn't help.

Cite: Not to get too technical, but you mentioned in your lecture that you used three types of film: black and white film, color negative film, and color slide film all the time.

Shulman: First I would take the black and white picture. Then I would change the lighting to apply to a color interior, using a blue flash bulb, before the days of strobe lighting. But I would try to exercise control of the lighting so that I'm not going to have flat, washed out lighting. The secret of my photography has always been to recreate the forms, the structures, of a building, interior or exterior. So I shot a color transparency. Then I took a color negative often, because from the color negative you can make high speed

color prints. Then I would take a color slide for my lectures, a 35 millimeter slide. You could make slides four by five also, but I shot directly on Kodachrome 64. People say to me, "Why don't you try Fuji film?" or whatever else. The difference it makes is when you project a slide on the big screen. Some of the pictures in my lectures are 40, 50 years old. They go way back. So what difference does it make what kind of film it was? But you pick up the technical aspect. You should know your film and then apply that knowledge, using it as successfully as possible, as intelligently as possible.

Cite: And the black and white film you use?

Shulman: Tri X. I began with Eastman Double X film, which they stopped making. In their desire to make high-speed film, Eastman has stopped making their best film. Everything is speed. They made infrared film, which I used extensively. Eastman Kodak did stories on my infrared photography in their commercial magazines. But then they changed that film to a high-speed film. They compromised the quality of the film as it used to be. It was a slow-speed film, but for architecture it worked fine.

Cite: You were in Houston in the 1950s and again in the 1970s to work for architects such as McKie and Kamrath and Caudill Rowlett Scott. Your photo of the Charles Lawrence House [page 24, far left, bottom] is an example of the distinct relationship you see between the inside and the outside of a building.

Shulman: Now, people have commented about [my dividing the Lawrence House photo] in the middle. I did it purposely, because I wanted that wall of glass interceding the composition to be powerful, to show that inside and outside were balanced alike, yet each of the spaces were respected. So that to me was a very important picture.

Cite: The Gonzalez House by Kamrath seems similar — the dialogue of inside and out.

Shulman: That is one of my favorites, because of the lighting. First of all, we allowed the sunlight to penetrate. I waited until the sun could penetrate the living room so I didn't have to add light.

Cite: You've indicated you like the participation of the architect.

Shulman: Oh, I love it. Especially in the days when Polaroid was involved with photography. How nice to slip in a four-by-five sheet of Polaroid film into my camera, and pull off the paper, and have some beautiful black and white image. And that's where I would discuss the composition with the architect. The architect would look at the picture, look at the building, and the sensible ones who knew about composition in their own work would say, "What would happen if you moved your camera here?" and I would look and say, well, you're right. Very often they were right. What is it that happens when an architect says to me, "Oh, you know better than we do. Go ahead and do it your own way." I could, but that's not the point. It was the enjoyment of the conversation, of discussing these kinds of issues. Neutra was the other extreme. He insisted on having control. That's all right. Whatever idiosyncrasies we had, it was okay. It was part of our lives. And we did perpetrate this very remarkable architecture.

Cite: You take this challenge of recording architecture very seriously. In the introduction to your autobiography, you say, "The photographer, therefore, assumes a role of tremendous responsibility in reporting literally, as a communicator. The mind, the dexterity, the ability of the person with the camera can achieve the vehicle by which the image of architecture is transferred to the publication and the people of the world." Most people will not see most buildings. Some of the buildings you've shot don't even exist anymore.

Shulman: That's the joy of photography. When I was working on *Julius Shulman: Architecture and Its Photography*, I reviewed my archives with my editor, Peter Gossel. He took back to Germany with him 1,000 photographs; he then eliminated a number, so we have 500 in the book, I believe. But it's rewarding to me that, after 62 years, this new book and *A Constructed View* by Joseph Rosa will go hand in hand, and they should bridge any possible gap which could exist in the work.

Cite: When we walked in the Museum of Fine Arts for your lecture, you were

taken by the space. You seemed to like it.

Shulman: Oh, yes. Why not? It felt good. I don't try to observe technically. This is a problem of many critics who write, and architectural professionals, if you don't mind. They take things too seriously. Do architects have a sense of humor? No, they don't. Sometimes I come into a room, and think, this is exciting, or charming ... that's all.

Cite: Speaking about humor in buildings, and the incapacity of architects to express humor — the one period when architects did make an attempt at that, the period of post-modernism in the 1980s, led to your total disenchantment with architecture at that time.

Shulman: What's amazing about post-modernism, for the sake of another label, is that the results of this period portrayed not a client's structure, house, whatever kind of building it was, but portrayed an exercise on the part of the architect. It was a wasteful exercise.

Cite: Would you say that architecture has recovered yet, to be worthy of photographing?

Shulman: Well, I believe it's changing. More and more students I've observed all over the country are beginning to turn away from the complications of post-modernism, again for lack of a better label. You shouldn't try to label architecture. But that's why contemporary work, modernism, is such that it doesn't require a definition. It's there. It stands there as an entity. And therefore, the public has to learn to observe it. It's like the detail of Neutra's Singleton house [page 25]. It's only one relatively minor element in the photography of the entire house, but it's the picture that grasps the impact of what architecture can prevail upon to entice people to have a more intelligent outlook on the profession of architecture.

Cite: After 62 years as an architectural photographer, you remain busy. What are your upcoming projects?

Shulman: I have five more books that I've planned with the publisher, Taschen. I'm working on cycles of 20 years now. I suppose I'm working towards [the age of] 120.... ■