

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ARCHITECTURAL ENVIRONMENTS:
THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ERIC MENDELSON AND WOLFGANG TILLMANS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the development and implications of a critical mode of inquiry into the architectural environment as it is articulated in the photographic projects of German artists Eric Mendelsohn (1887-1953) and Wolfgang Tillmans (b. 1968). These projects are understood as being in opposition to a conventional subordination of photography to architecture. The architectural photograph has consistently been reduced to the role of a tool in the proliferation of structures of global capitalism, facilitating the rise of homogeneous and disconnected built environments. Through an examination and comparison of Mendelsohn's 1926 book *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* with Tillmans' 2014 video installation *Book for Architects*, this thesis argues that the visual strategies employed in these works reflect similar concerns regarding the state of architectural practice, providing alternative avenues of inquiry for architects, and highlighting the necessity for deeper engagement with the phenomenological qualities of the architectural environment.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of globalized spatial practice has resulted in the proliferation of architectural models that appear dissociated from any cultural context and which reject vernacular traditions in favor of a totalizing and autonomous status within the built environment. It has become necessary for artists and architects to investigate the implications of practicing their trades within the framework of a system of global capital. Artists and architects in the 20th century have continually sought to develop alternative methods of seeing and interpreting the environment as a means of subverting and questioning the notion of infinite reproducibility that characterizes much of contemporary expression. Often these are strategies that rely upon the sublimation of architectural and photographic practice into a critical structure. This structure, which is characterized by the use of photography to explore often overlooked or easily dismissed elements of architecture is significant in its fracturing of traditional methodologies. The concept of utilizing a photograph to break down and present alternative approaches to architectural spaces may be understood as a means of both absorbing and rebelling against the notion of a global artistic or architectural tendency.

The relationship between architecture and photography has traditionally functioned in a distinctly capitalistic mode, where the image serves the architecture. Photography in this mode may claim to facilitate an experience of both local and worldwide processes of spatial engagement and development, but it is ultimately subordinated to the processes of capital that drive architectural growth. The concept of a critical photographic mode is inherently opposed to the tendencies of established architectural photography, treating image and architecture on equal

terms as a means of deconstructing the space and revealing the processes that have implicitly shaped the built environment for more than a century.

Working in the early 20th century, the architect Eric Mendelsohn compiled a set of images from a trip to the United States in 1925 that reflects a distinctly analytical mode of seeing and understanding the built environment. Mendelsohn's *Picture Book for Architects* was ostensibly designed to display a vision of the United States for his peers in Germany, while presenting a commentary on the buildings and places that he experienced.¹ Almost a century later, in 2014, photographer Wolfgang Tillmans presented a project of a similar name, *Book for Architects*, that utilized a set of strategies similar to Mendelsohn's work as a means of expressing what the artist perceived as elements of architecture whose significance in the everyday life of their users was underappreciated by architects.² These two projects form the nucleus of a critical mode of architectural photography, which is focused on the breakdown of the traditional relationship between architecture and the image. This critical method of photographing seeks to reveal the degree to which architecture that has been colonized by the tendencies of global capitalist production has resulted in the desensitization of the individual and the fragmentation of the built environment.

Architectural photography as it is commonly understood in the contemporary moment is a practice that utilizes visual strategies derived from Modernism. Photographers such as Lucien Hervé, Julius Schulman, and Ezra Stoller, working in the period surrounding the second world war, contributed to the development of contemporary modes of seeing and interpreting structures through images, a methodology that is inextricably bound to the way in which the function of the

¹ Michele Stavagna, "Image and the Space of the Modern City in Erich Mendelsohn's Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten," *Schriften der Bauhaus – Universität Weimar* 120/48 (2008): 339.

² Louisa Buck, "Wolfgang Tillmans: Journeys into Space," *The Art Newspaper* 23 (2014): 44.

structures themselves was understood at the time in question.³ Architectural practice in the 20th century has been dominated by principles established by icons of Modernism, such as the *Congrès Internationaux D'Architecture Moderne*, the Bauhaus, and other notable groups from the period of the 1920s. The impulsive growth of capitalism has brought with it a seemingly infinite repetition of form with regard to the shaping of spaces that humans inhabit, stretching Modernist principles of functional simplicity to their logical ends in an effort to spread accessible, straightforward architectural models. The photographic medium enables artists to test the limitations of both physical and phenomenological constructions in the image as well as in the architectural space. Through the incorporation of decades of Modernist vision, including the visual strategies developed by László Moholy-Nagy and Le Corbusier, and by underscoring the significance of pre-Modern modes of visualizing the built environment, it is possible to propose an alternative mode of seeing and interacting with architecture that synthesizes these methodologies into a critical strategy for examining the built environment and its inhabitants.

The relationship between photography and architecture is an intimate one, stretching back to the beginnings of the photographic medium. Evident as early as Niépce's experiments with light-sensitive materials in the 1820s, the presence of architectural forms in photographic images has served myriad purposes, advancing both mediums in a symbiotic relationship that persists into the contemporary moment. The shift toward the notion of a genre of 'architectural photography,' took place in concert with the early moments of Modernism, where architects and photographers collaborated, in a loose definition of the term, to effectively market architectural

³ Julius Schulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors*, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1962), 2-4.

forms.⁴ This commodification of architecture that took place in the early 20th century, indicated by the rise of mass-produced buildings and the spread of what Corbusier called “machines for living,” was dependent upon photography to present an aesthetic, and often spectacular, agenda to the world.⁵ The desirability of the architecture was directly dependent upon the framing of the photograph, and in this sense the photographers who produced these images were as responsible for the success of the Modernist style as the architects who had designed the buildings.

The images of Schulman and Hervé, which were created at the height of Modernism from the 1920s through the 1960s, are defined by both their indexical nature as well as their interest in hinting at the phenomenological qualities of the structural experience. The manipulation of light and shadow, coupled with the aspirational staging of figures and furniture to complete photographs that glorified the architectural space, seen in images such as Schulman’s *Case Study House No. 22*, from 1960, resulted in the advancement of architecture over the image, elevating the functional simplicity and beauty of the structure above the pictorial qualities of the photograph. These images, with their high-contrast depictions of visually perfected spaces, set the tone for decades of work that would follow. The images produced in this vein are, today, perhaps more likely to grace the cover of a mass-produced architecture magazine than the walls of a gallery space, due to no fault in their aesthetic qualities, but as a result of their function within a network of capitalized images that serve to advance the practice of architecture.

The subordination of photography to architecture, while a primary concern of contemporary photographers, must have been a distant thought in the projects of architects such as Eric Mendelsohn, whose 1926 volume *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, or *America: A*

⁴ Claire Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 129-39.

⁵ Beatriz Colomina, *Architectureproduction* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1988), 16.

Picture Book for Architects, served to simultaneously critique and document the development of urban and rural structural forms in the United States. *Amerika* represents a significant moment in the formation of an early Modern understanding of the built environment, insofar as it describes the manner in which an architect working in the interwar years sought to investigate the potential for architecture to shape experience, and vice versa.⁶ Mendelsohn was struck by the degree to which individuals had become desensitized to the chaotic surroundings of large American cities, and his photographs reflect an abiding concern for the state of the individual, and the implications of an architecture that is driven by overproduction.⁷

Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects* was a two-channel video installation depicting architecture and environments encountered by the artists during his travels around the world. The project was housed in the central pavilion of the 14th International Architecture Exhibition, or the Architecture Biennale, in Venice. The sole artistic production in a space dominated by the "elements of architecture," which included rooms devoted to the concept of such fundamental components as the window, the wall, the floor, and the fireplace, the project was aimed squarely at practicing architects. The act of situating a series of photographs, much less the abstract notion of projecting, and thus denying physical form to, a series of images in the corner of a room, within a pavilion dedicated to the didactic, straightforward presentation of architectural principles, is indicative of the manner in which the exhibition's designers viewed the function of photography in contemporary architectural practice. Tillmans' exploration of the environments

⁶ Sabine Hake, "Visualizing the Urban Masses: Modern Architecture and Architectural Photography in Weimar Berlin," *The Journal of Architecture* 11 (2006): 526.

⁷ Kathleen James-Chakraborty, "Proportions and Politics: Marketing Mies and Mendelsohn," in *From Manhattan to Manhattan: Architecture and Style as Transatlantic Dialogue 1920-1970*, ed. Cordula Grewe (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2005), 52.

that shaped his experiences around the globe becomes representative of the dissociated nature of architectural practice, raising questions about the implications of a global architectural practice.

The comparison of Mendelsohn's *Amerika* to the *Book for Architects* presented by Tillmans almost a century later reveals a return to, and a refinement of, critical modes of engaging with the field of architecture. These two projects typify an approach to the examination of the implications of processes of capital on the built environment and those who inhabit it, highlighting the unique, expository nature of photography within the context of architectural practice.

CHAPTER 2

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS A TOOL FOR THE ARCHITECT

The earliest known photograph that survives today, dating from around 1826, depicts a view from the upstairs window of Joseph Nicéphore Népice's estate in Le Gras, capturing the rooftops of the structure and the countryside that unfolds beyond in a grainy, hazy image that in its current state allows the viewer to just barely discern the vaguest notion of solid lines and shapes.⁸ This image, and those that were created in the short time between 1826 and the official announcement of the photographic medium by William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in 1839, is concerned almost exclusively with recording a view of buildings and landscapes.⁹ While this inherently motionless subject matter would have been of particular convenience due to the extremely long exposure times required by early photographic processes, it is notable nonetheless that architecture has played a role in the development of photography from its outset.

The years immediately following 1839 were characterized by a number of innovations in the field of photography, and architecture was a constant point of reference for many of the scientists who concerned themselves with perfecting this alternative process of capturing their surroundings. The indexicality of the photographic image lent itself to the creation of a visual chronicle of the rapidly changing urban environments in the late 19th century, and several photographers working in and around the city of Paris utilized the medium to record the destruction of the historic warren of medieval neighborhoods that characterized the 'old city' and

⁸ Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Prentice Hall, 2011), 12.

⁹ Anders Dahlgren, "The Photographic Image in Architectural History," in *Architecture, Photography, and the Contemporary Past*, ed. Claes Caldenby et al. (Stockholm: Art and Theory, 2014), 41.

the subsequent construction of distinctly modern, rigidly organized districts that reflected the growth of industry and a distinct shift in aesthetic taste.¹⁰

When Gustave Le Gray set out to document the monuments of Paris in 1851 as part of the *Mission Héliographique*, the establishment of a collective memory and the preservation of historical visual information were paramount concerns.¹¹ The photographs created by Le Gray and the four other photographers who took part in the *Mission* were guided by an early documentary impulse, which resulted in images that were structured to capture as much of a particular architectural object as possible, including the urban context in which it was situated.¹² The tendency to closely examine and record various elements of one's surroundings is described by Michel Foucault as a particular characteristic of the 18th century, or the 'Classical age,' and the reformation of archives in the 19th century is understood as a method whereby historians were able to free the recorded object from the rigid ordering of Classical thought and reintroduce it to the "interruptive violence of time."¹³ Thus, the *Mission Héliographique* acknowledged the placement of architecture in the continuum of urban development through the arrangement of photographs in a didactic order, facilitating the creation of a historical narrative that would allow future generations to understand how the fabric of Paris had appeared and functioned in a bygone era.¹⁴ In this sense, the collection of images depicting French monuments that resulted from the

¹⁰ Shelley Rice, *Parisian Views* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 3-4.

¹¹ Joan M. Schwartz and James R Ryan, *Picturing Place: Photography and the Visual Imagination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 21.

¹² The concept of "documentary" photography as it is currently understood did not emerge until the early 20th century. Filmmaker John Grierson first defined the term in 1932. See: John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," in *Nonfiction Film: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Richard Meran Barsam, 19-31 (New York: Dutton 1976).

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 131-2.

¹⁴ Joan M. Schwartz and James R Ryan, *Picturing Place*, 24.

photographic practices of Le Gray and his compatriots forms the underpinnings of a forward-looking archive, recording the contemporary built environment not as a means of critiquing trends in architecture, but instead seeking to reorient the manner in which the archive interacted with the construction of an historical narrative.

Architectural photographer Cervin Robinson's *Architecture Transformed: A History of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present*, presents the relationship between the image and the built environment as a shifting historical narrative, one that moves from a formal study of light and form in the articulation of space, which characterized much of the photography produced before the first world war, to an ostensibly more objective, interrogative mode that utilizes juxtaposition and perspective as a means of sparking critical interest in a subject.¹⁵ The manipulation of the formal qualities of architecture and the image as a means of interacting with the built environment represents an early example of the way in which photographers viewed their medium as a potential factor influencing architectural practice. However, the ability of the photographer to consciously manipulate how architectural space was depicted through the lens of the camera proved to be a significant element in the growth of the medium into a critical practice. The shift that took place from early moments of the medium when the legitimization of photography as a fine art-form was paramount and the photographic object was considered to be a means of supplanting painting in the pictorial representation of reality, to the beginnings of a seemingly objective documentary image-making that ultimately developed into an articulate language for describing architecture and its relationship to people and its surroundings, is the primary trend that defined the field from its inception to the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cervin Robinson, *Architecture Transformed: A History of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 2-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

Robinson argues that the revival of interest in the study of medieval and classical architectural forms during the period concurrent with the development of early photographic media provided “considerable impetus for the growth of architectural photography [and] defined its main subject matter.”¹⁷ This historicized architectural mode, which was advanced by A.W. Pugin in the book *Contrasts*, published in 1841, and by John Ruskin, in his influential essay *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, from 1849, understood the need for the use of photography as a means of ensuring authenticity. The reproduction of forms from the past was the primary goal of revivalist architecture, and the indexicality of the photograph allowed it to provide the “data needed to fulfill [the] program,” of the style.¹⁸ The photographers of the early 1850s were working in a manner that was most similar to the creation of architectural renderings, utilizing the photograph as a means of surpassing the accuracy of traditional processes of recording structures. Robinson states that as a result of this tendency to mirror the methods of architectural drafting, the images produced during this period most closely resemble elevation and perspective drawings. The photographs made by the *Mission Héliographique* are primarily elevations, which provide “clarity unencumbered by context, flatness, linearity, and above all accurate rendering of proportions.”¹⁹ In Robinson’s interpretation of the influences of architecture on the early development of photography, the image is primarily a tool for the architect who desired to create a factually accurate recreation of a historical structure.

Within Robinson’s framework the works of Le Gray and the *Mission Héliographique* from the 1850s may be understood as the beginnings of architectural photography as an objectively documentary practice. By contrast, the contributions of luminaries such as Eugène

¹⁷ Robinson, *Architecture Transformed*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Atget and Frederick H. Evans from around the turn of the century are seen as belonging to a more emotive tradition, which was concerned with a phenomenological approach in the examination and representation of the various qualities of architectural space.²⁰ The fractured nature of these two approaches to interacting with the built environment are representative of larger uncertainties within the fields of art and architecture during the period. The result of this uncertainty was a return, in the years immediately following the first world war, to a minimal, functionalist aesthetic that sought to strip the emotive capabilities from both architecture and the image as a means of returning to a state where form was reflective not of historical romanticism, but of technological growth and rapid production.

In the book *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, published in 1941, historian and architectural critic Sigfried Giedion frames photography as an analytical tool in the interpretation and definition of modern architectural forms. Giedion links modern architecture to the Cubist collage, a fragmented series of overlapping and intersecting shapes and forms that ultimately serves to create a representative structure as a means of articulating shifting notions of space from the absolute, static perspectives of the Renaissance to an expanded, relative notion of referential interactions.²¹ The Futurist investigation into the significance of time through the representation of movement is also significant in Giedion's argument, in that the rejection of "subjective" and "realistic" notions of time in favor of a mode that embraced simultaneity ultimately resulted in an expansion of optical perception similar in nature to the achievements of the Cubists.²² The treatment of space-time in the years immediately preceding

²⁰ Ibid., 81.

²¹ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1941), 436.

²² Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture*, 444-5.

the first world war lends significance, in Giedion's discussion of architectural history, to the photographic process as a means of capturing the fragmented nature of modern architectural forms. In this sense, the works of Atget, Evans, and even the Pictorialist images of Edward Steichen and the dramatically lit photographic studies produced by Charles Sheeler, are indicative of a desire to interact with and understand the relationship between the photograph and its referent, in this case the built environment, through the act of deconstructing the individual elements that contribute to the formation of the experience of architectural space. The deconstruction of the experiential qualities of one's surroundings directly informed the experimental images made by Harold Edgerton in the 1940s and 50s.

Edgerton's stroboscopic images are discussed by Giedion as exemplifying the ability of the photograph to capture, in two dimensions, a simultaneity of time and a multiplicity of perspectival space. The photograph may, in this sense, function as a primary tool for the interpreter or critic of architecture by enabling the visualization of spatial and temporal forms that are perhaps not able to be grasped by the human eye, but which become visible through the optically enhanced technological medium.²³ The significance of this enhanced vision may be fully understood when applied to the works of Mendelsohn and Tillmans, as both photographers manipulate the spatial qualities of both the image and the architectural object as a means of revealing the latent psycho-social qualities of the environment.

Art historian Beatriz Colomina writes on the relationship between the architect and the photograph in the essay "Le Corbusier and Photography," published in 1987, stating that Corbusier found the camera to be "a tool for idlers, who use the camera to do their seeing for

²³ Ibid., 447.

them.”²⁴ The rejection of photography as an analytical tool by a practicing architect is in contrast to the propositions of Giedion and Robinson that viewed the photograph as a tool for exploring the elements of architecture which are invisible to the naked eye, and such a dismissal hints at a disconnect between the drawing, the traditional visual tool of the architect, and the photograph, a distinctly technological and modern medium. However, in Colomina’s book *Privacy and Publicity*, published in 1994, the author discusses the complex relationship between the architect and the products of mass-media, hinting that while the photograph was not for Corbusier a tool for envisioning architectural environments, it became a constant influence in his work with regards to the replication and reproducibility of structures.²⁵ Indeed, she suggests, Corbusier’s early photographic explorations of the built environment, which took place during his travels around Europe during the 1910s, are characterized by an interest in the repetitive surface textures of structures and walkways, emphasizing the role of the camera as a means of capturing not only details, but also the experience of being in a particular place through the reproduction of its minutiae.²⁶

Colomina discusses the notion of architecture in the middle of the 20th century as a product of commodity fetishism, where the architect is both acutely aware of and unconsciously influenced by the structures of mass-media and hyper-production. Corbusier’s fascination with the products and experiences of everyday life and the effects of mass-media on the creation of cult-like experiential situations directly informed his understanding of the relationship between reproduction and the architectural form, and in this sense the architect becomes an actor in the

²⁴ Beatriz Colomina, “Le Corbusier and Photography,” *Assemblage* 4 (1987): 8.

²⁵ Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 107.

²⁶ Robinson, *Architecture Transformed*, 88.

articulation of repetitive structural forms in the built environment in a manner that is complementary to the photographer's reproduction of images. While Mendelsohn's *Amerika* was published several years before the first meeting of the *Congrès Internationaux D'Architecture Moderne* in 1928, a similar understanding of the functional and representative possibilities of the photograph is present in the volume.

Where Colomina discusses the concept of photography as a tool for the understanding of architectural experience, architectural historian Claire Zimmerman sees a more reciprocal relationship between the mediums. Zimmerman traces the history of design development in the 20th century through an analysis of the relationship between architecture and photography in the 2014 book *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century*. The book's title hints at the manner in which architecture is understood as having been directly influenced by the widespread adoption of photography, primarily in the years following the first world war, and the author discusses two distinct periods within the history of architectural photography. The first period, where the image is a surface that the viewer may step into as a means of experiencing the spatial and temporal qualities of the architectural form, is reminiscent of the types of image-making discussed by Giedion and Robinson, where the photograph may function to enable a quasi-phenomenological experience.²⁷ The second period is defined by a treatment of the photographic, and by extension the architectural, surface that is characterized by resistance to visual and physical penetration, and which underscores a growing alienation in both fields of practice. This second type of architectural photograph is understood as a common element of everyday existence, one that is effectively a product of mass-media and which results from a shift away from empathetic modes of interacting with the built environment. Such apathetic integration is

²⁷ Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture*, 306.

perhaps more closely reminiscent of Corbusier's description of architectural photography as a tool for the lazy, those who allowed the camera to do the seeing for them, though this is indeed not the case when the image-making process is understood as a Modernist trope. Ultimately, Zimmerman identifies a third path in the architecture-image continuum, where the photographic object becomes a literally and physically constructed space that ultimately fails to reconcile the previous two modes but succeeds in restoring a dynamic quality to the image and its referent.²⁸

In *Architecture Transformed*, Robinson states that the contemporary moment of the late 1980s had once again become concerned with the depiction of the qualities of light, and that this shift would, in turn, result in the reemergence of a hard and analytical mode of architectural photography in upcoming years.²⁹ However, it is not adequate, nor indeed is it entirely possible, to reconcile the concept of a re-emergent dynamism in the image with the capitalistic overproduction of images and environments in the period since 1945, and as such a more complete understanding of the functional aspects of the photographic medium must be articulated with regard to its role in the architecture of the contemporary moment. The blending of space, time, and elemental qualities within the architectural photograph becomes a means of assuming a critical stance on the plight of the built environment, and such an image lends itself to the construction of a forward-looking practice that is centered around the identification of, and interaction with, an architectural continuum rooted in globalized spatio-temporal practice.

In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, published in 1991, Frederic Jameson discusses the implications of globalized capitalism, or what he refers to as

²⁸ Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture*, 290.

²⁹ Robinson, *Architecture Transformed*, 185.

“multinational capitalism.”³⁰ The development of capitalist modes of technologically-driven production has, in Jameson’s view, resulted in the elimination of the autonomy that cultures and individuals had previously enjoyed. Jameson argues that a lack of historical grounding in fields such as architecture has resulted in the evolution of a style distinguished by pastiche, wherein bits and pieces of the past are re-contextualized in a seemingly arbitrary manner.³¹ The spread of capitalism across the globe has brought with it this style of ahistorical pastiche, which has resulted in built environments that lack cultural context through which they may be understood.³² These capitalist influences are seen as manifesting themselves in a new type of aesthetic production characterized by homogeneity and driven by the manufacturing and consumption of objects. The implications of a de-contextualized global architecture become a significant element in the discussion of the fractured nature of experience in the built environment.

³⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³² *Ibid.*, 63.

CHAPTER 3

ERIC MENDELSON: EXPRESSIONIST ARCHITECTURE AND MODERN VISION

In the fall of 1924 German architect Eric Mendelsohn travelled to the United States in the company of film director Fritz Lang, a journey that had a direct and lasting impact upon the careers of both men.³³ Lang spent time in New York City and Los Angeles before returning to Germany, where in 1927 he realized a vision of the totalizing structures of modernity stemming from his experiences in America in the film *Metropolis*. Mendelsohn compiled his photographs and musings on the state of the American built environment in the book *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, which was published by Rudolph Mosse, owner of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, in 1926. The volume contains 77 heliogravure reproductions of photographs by Mendelsohn and Lang, but which are credited entirely to Mendelsohn. The size of the half-cloth book, which was bound simply with tan, board covers, is roughly 24 centimeters wide by 35 centimeters high, and this uncommonly large publication, coupled with the sparse quality of the text and images placed within the volume, results in a great deal of blank space, reflecting both the expense which the publisher was willing to lavish upon the project and the consciously conceived narrative structures present throughout the work (Figure 1).³⁴

The unique arrangement of images and text is a more obvious indication of the narrative structure of the book, where the placement of images of different sizes and the poetic relationship between text and photograph seek to illustrate the disjointed, though harmonious, functional aspects of the cityscape. The images in the work are not purely objective

³³ Lawrence Bird, "Lumen opacatum: Flesh in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*," in *Chora, Volume Six: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, ed. Alberto Pérez-Gómez et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 2-3.

³⁴ P. Reyner Banham, "Review: *Amerika, Bilderbuch eines Architekten* by Erich Mendelsohn," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 38 (1979), 301.

representations of buildings and environments, nor is the text a protracted descriptor of the architectural qualities of American cities. The mediums of text and image serve to represent, in a strikingly effective and stark manner, the multifaceted and deeply subjective nature of Mendelsohn's interaction with the spaces that he visited through the presentation of critical viewpoints related primarily to the architect's understanding, from a European point of view, of the often deeply unsettling relationship between capital and urbanity.³⁵ The manner in which this relationship had affected the shaping of the way in which the man on the ground experienced his surroundings is felt through the pictorial qualities of the images, and the distinctly critical tone of the text. The volume serves to simultaneously express Mendelsohn's deeply conflicted feelings on the rise of technologically-mediated, modern environments, and the state of architectural practice within this space, typified by the rise of "Cathedrals of Commerce."³⁶ The resulting series of images and accompanying texts present a highly developed, and distinctly Modern mode of investigating the potentialities associated with the proliferation of capitalist structures. The manner in which Mendelsohn went about representing the spaces and architectural media that he encountered during his time in America underscores the significance of the journey within the development of an early Modernist way of seeing and necessitates an examination of the context from which *Amerika* emerged.

Eric Mendelsohn was born on the 21st of March, 1887, in in the town of Allenstein in East Prussia. The town was centered around an *Ordensburg*, a fourteenth century castle constructed by Teutonic Knights, and a cathedral, both of which embody a distinctly restrained

³⁵ Hake, "Visualizing the Urban Masses," 527.

³⁶ Eric Mendelsohn, commenting on the Woolworth Building, in an article for *Berliner Tageblatt*, October 16th, 1924, in: *Eric Mendelsohn: Letters of an Architect*, ed. Oskar Beyer, (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 67.

Gothic manner typical of Northern Europe. Mendelsohn spent his formative years in the romantic and picturesque old town, and architectural historian Arnold Whittick, in his early biography of the architect, postulates that the sight of these Medieval and Gothic structures, whose architectural cues informed much of the construction that radiated outward from the city center, had an effect upon the manner in which Mendelsohn would view the world and understand the role of architecture throughout his career.³⁷ Mendelsohn attended Berlin Technische Hochschule for two years before transferring to the Technische Hochschule at Munich, where he graduated with a degree in architecture in 1912. A brief two-year period of frenzied activity followed Mendelsohn's graduation, during which he interacted with members of various German Expressionist movements. Mendelsohn worked with Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, the figureheads of *Der Blaue Reiter*, whose essentialist views were influential in the formation of Mendelsohn's own notion of the functional aspects of architecture, where the character of a building is ultimately determined by its purpose, which is directly expressed through the design of a structure.³⁸

Mendelsohn's interactions with the Expressionists in the years before the first world war likely impacted his understanding of the emotive, dynamic qualities of the cityscape, and were influential in Mendelsohn's adoption of a distinctly Expressionist architectural mode following the war.³⁹ Upon completion of his military service in 1918, Mendelsohn wasted no time in returning to architectural practice, completing one of his most well-known projects, the Einstein Tower at the Astrophysical Institute in Potsdam in 1920 (Figure 2). The tower served as an observatory to aid in the study of Einstein's newly-proposed theory of relativity, and its form

³⁷ Arnold Whittick, *Eric Mendelsohn* (New York: F.W. Dodge, 1956), 34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁹ Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 117.

was described by the scientist as ‘Organic,’ due to its intricate technical layout and the schematic relations of various parts of the structure.⁴⁰ The Einstein Tower represents one of the most significant manifestations of Expressionist architecture, a proto-Modern movement focused on the exploration of the technical, physical, and functional limits of buildings, and it is the notion of exploring alternative methodologies in both practice and observation that characterizes many of Mendelsohn’s later projects.⁴¹

Mendelsohn’s approach to architectural practice during the interwar years may best be described as a desire to “redevelop the language,” of architecture as a means of re-orienting his practice with regard to the treatment and understanding of space.⁴² The organic shapes of structures such as the Einstein Tower are the direct result of a treatment of buildings as symbolic forms, which ultimately serve to underscore the architect’s desire to abdicate the norms of the period. Through the rejection of stylistic tendencies that would ultimately represent a passive acceptance of the status quo, Mendelsohn created buildings that focused on expressing both their functional and emotive aspects by embracing alternative strategies of constructing and manipulating space. Writing in the early 1980s, architect Bruno Zevi described Mendelsohn’s works as being “in motion in ways that go beyond Neoplastic decompositional devices,” underscoring the significance of malleable structural elements in the composition of buildings that ultimately “sensitize the material to its very limits.”⁴³ This is a strategy that provides an alternative to the “fourth dimension” postulated by the Modernists as a dynamic means of assembling planar elements which fostered an independence of movement within the structure,

⁴⁰ Whittick, *Eric Mendelsohn*, 23.

⁴¹ Kathleen James, *Eric Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴³ Bruno Zevi, *Eric Mendelsohn*, (London: The Architectural Press, 1982), 13-14.

but which would result in the reconstruction of what Zevi described as “closed and reactionary volumes.”⁴⁴ The irregular volumetric structuring of Mendelsohn’s works, seen in projects such as the Sternberg, Hermann, and Co. Hat Factory at Luckenwalde, Germany, from 1923, reflects a desire to intermingle a weightlessness of form with a distinct and solid sense of physicality with regard to material and function, an approach more akin to the creation of a sculpture than the throwing of a utilitarian vessel (Figure 3). Mendelsohn’s treatment of architecture as an experiential field, where the functional and phenomenological qualities of the space were coincidental factors, neither of which could, or should, be excluded from the final product, is reflected in the manner in which he viewed the built environments of large American cities. The images reproduced in *Amerika* serve to quite literally illustrate the manner in which the architect understood the aesthetic and functional roles of buildings, and they underscore the idiosyncrasies of Mendelsohn’s vision.

In 1903, German sociologist Georg Simmel published the essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” which described and analyzed the effects of the city upon the individual. Simmel proposed that the person living in the metropolis constructs a shell of rationality to protect their inner emotional life from the “social technological mechanism,” resulting in the assumption of a particular psychological state that is calculating, intellectual, and most significantly, desensitized.⁴⁵ The psycho-social construct of desensitization is, according to Simmel, necessary to protect oneself from sensory overload within the space of the city. Simmel states that “if the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city should be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to

⁴⁴ Zevi, *Eric Mendelsohn*, 13.

⁴⁵ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 14.

each of whom he has a positive relationship, one would be completely atomized internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition.”⁴⁶ The implication of desensitization is, in this sense, that it effectively prevents the individual from seeking to employ small-town modes of interaction within the urban environment, resulting in a protective “shell” that provides for the rationality of the individual when confronted with an unceasing flow of stimuli.⁴⁷ The use of the camera, in Mendelsohn’s interaction with the city, becomes a means of breaking down the concept of desensitization and effectively re-orienting the viewpoint of the individual through the capturing of simultaneous visual and sensory elements.

The detachment and calculation of the individual who has become a part of the metropolis is replaced with an engaged interest in the dynamic processes of the city, though the image provides a filter that ultimately prevents the overstimulation of the viewer by allowing for a selective engagement with its subject matter. Simmel’s description of the metropolis as a space that necessitates the construction of a mental armor to guard against “internal atomization,” seems at first glance to be a deeply negative assessment of the implications of capital as it had manifested upon the environment, but the notion that the individual could retain the functional aspects of their life within such overwhelming conditions speaks to the potential positive outcomes of the constant presence of a vast array of stimuli.⁴⁸ The ambiguity of the implications of experiencing urban spaces upon the psyche is reflected in the manner in which Mendelsohn presents the American landscape.

The introductory text by Mendelsohn is critical of the manner in which Americans had treated their surroundings, stating: “This country gives everything: the worst strata of Europe,

⁴⁶ Simmel, “The Metropolis and Modern Life,” 15

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15.

abortions of civilization, but also hopes for a new world.”⁴⁹ The photographs and short textual descriptions present throughout the book underscore both the triumphs and perceived failures of architectural practice in the United States, hinting at the deeply conflicted nature of both Mendelsohn and the field of architecture as a whole with regard to the treatment of individuals within urban spaces and the implications of globalized capital-driven processes of construction. Mendelsohn describes the relatively young nation as having “just recently grabbed its money [and] in exchange it has strained its vast resources, has hung its population on the flywheel of the exploitation machine and has lent its existence an expression whose lack of culture cannot be concealed by a coat of paint or increased verticality.”⁵⁰ Thus the architect has directly addressed the plight of those who inhabit the metropolis, and the manner in which the spread of newfound wealth and capital in America had effectively annihilated any perceptible or unique traces of cultural development in favor of a mechanistic and technologically driven rush toward progress and development.

The visual perspectives employed in many of the images present in *Amerika* are unique due in part to their nontraditional nature, which was influenced by contemporary photographic practice insofar as their angularity and atypical framing reflect an understanding of space and the manipulation of forms that is rooted in the theories of the “New Vision” proposed by László Moholy-Nagy in the mid 1920s, during his time at the Bauhaus. This “New Vision” was characterized by the incorporation of a variety of de-familiarizing devices, such as extreme up and down angles, fragmentary close-ups, abstracted forms, overlapping exposures and figural

⁴⁹ Eric Mendelsohn, “Vortwort,” in *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (Berlin: Rudolph Mosse Buchverlag, 1926), IX.

⁵⁰ László Moholy-Nagy, “A New Instrument of Vision,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 94-5.

elements, in a style that was akin to the Surrealist experimentations with perspective and spatial understanding that was taking place in France at roughly the same time.⁵¹ Moholy-Nagy viewed photography as a medium through which the artist could potentially explore reality in a more meaningful and complete manner than was offered through the use of the naked eye, and in this sense the camera became a tool for deconstructing conventional ways of seeing and interpreting the environment.

The approach to engaging with the environment advocated by Moholy-Nagy was directly linked to Giedion's understanding of the overlapping conceptions of space and time within architectural space, utilizing a fractured representation of form as a means of visualizing the simultaneity that Giedion identified as a primary functional characteristic of newly developed, tumultuous urban spaces. The photographs included in *Amerika*, when read through the lens of "New Vision," become an illustrative compendium of alternative viewpoints centered around the experiential qualities of the bustling city, as viewed from the sidewalks and streets that wound across the floors of the urban canyons whose sheer walls of skyscrapers characterized the major economic and population centers of the United States.

These images also reflect an interest on the part of the photographer and the larger body of German architects in the culture and way of life present in the United States at the time, an interest which is often termed "Amerikanismus."⁵² This abiding interest in American culture had become notably influential in many of the architectural designs in the immediate period following the first world war, and Mendelsohn's view of the United States was undoubtedly

⁵¹ Department of Photographs. "The New Vision of Photography." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nvis/hd_nvis.htm.

⁵² Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge, 1893-1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 88.

colored by this trend. However, much of *Amerika* is dedicated to poking holes in the myth of the superiority of cultural and urban trends in the United States, as the images and text present in the volume illustrate.

In a review of *Amerika* published in 1926, El Lissitzky describes the act of looking through the volume as producing a thrill akin to viewing a dramatic film, and states that “in order to understand some of the photographs you must lift the book over your head and rotate it.”⁵³ Lissitzky points out that the representation of “America” present in the volume is not an all-inclusive notion, but he insists that the images from New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Buffalo are exemplary of the constructions that the “finance capital” of the United States has produced and that Mendelsohn has, in his images, excerpted a few architectural specimens for the European viewer to study. Mendelsohn structured the book in sections, or chapters, that reflect his understanding of both the structural role of Americanism within the European discourse, and underscore the manner in which he was approaching the material present in the environments that he was experiencing for the first time.

The opening section of the book, entitled “Typically American,” begins with an image of the Manhattan skyline, with the Brooklyn Bridge silhouetted against a jagged and uneven background of buildings whose verticality is without any referent, and thus it is impossible for the viewer to discern any notion of scale among the structures (Figure 4). The very next image, which looks from the street upward toward the façade of the Equitable-Trust Building on Broadway at an oblique angle that is at once unsettling and intimately familiar, provides an immediate and imposing sense of the mass and dominance of the structures which, in the

⁵³ El Lissitzky, “The Architect’s Eye,” in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Philips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 221.

previous image, were merely slats in a white picket fence (Figure 5). The dramatic contrast between the white, stone façade of the Equitable Building and the darkly shadowed overhanging rooflines of the buildings surrounding the photographer at street level heighten the anxiety of the image, framing the Equitable Building as a monolith thrusting upward toward the light from a dark and dense street-level. Several pages later the viewer is presented with another stark contrast in light and dark, with the silhouette of Trinity Church, a Gothic-style cathedral, superimposed in front of a series of skyscrapers (Figure 6). Lissitzky, paraphrasing the text provided by Mendelsohn which refers to the church having been founded as a place of worship by adventurers who had come across the sea, describes the contrast as “ [a] church, founded by the first sea pirates, against a background of skyscraper banks, the churches of the latest land pirates.”⁵⁴ While Mendelsohn’s text is less overtly critical of the implications of the relationship between the structures, the image leaves little to the imagination with regard to the perceived critique. The spire of the church, once the tallest structure in the United States, is handily eclipsed by its surroundings, its intricate, repetitive stone tracery mimicked by the dentils decorating the soffits of the cornices present on the subtly classicized buildings that rise up in the background.

The chapters following “Typically American” are titled “Exaggerated Civilization,” “Center of Money – Center of the World,” “The Gigantic,” “The Grotesque,” and “The New – The Coming.” The chapter concerned with “The Gigantic” depicts the various phases of skyscraper design, beginning with an oblique view of the Woolworth Building, which looks up at the façade from an angle that could only be achieved if the viewer was standing on the sidewalk directly in front of the building, craning their neck upward toward the copper-gilded façade that

⁵⁴ Lissitzky, “The Architect’s Eye,” 223.

appears to stretch infinitely skyward (Figure 7). The text that accompanies the image states that the upkeep for the façade costs \$200,000 a year, an ostentatious display of wealth that could seemingly only be found on the streets of the American city. The Woolworth is representative of the first phase of skyscraper design, where ornamentation takes center stage and the entire structure is pushed up against the plane of the street. The second stage, where ornamentation is stripped back and the height of the building is effectively allowed to speak for itself, is seen in another image of the Equitable-Trust Building which is seen in a hazy, low-angle photograph that captures the entirety of two sides of the building, highlighting the presence of larger windows and a streamlined exterior design (Figure 8). The Third stage, where the building begins to taper as it reaches higher, a result of new building codes designed to address the canyon-like qualities that had become dominant in many cityscapes, is exemplified by the Shelton Hotel, where Mendelsohn comments on the greater emphasis on mass as a means of controlling space (Figure 9). The still-under-construction Chicago Tribune building is described by the architect as being eight months into its building program reminiscent perhaps of the Cologne Cathedral in its seemingly interminable slowness of construction when considered within the context of American and, more specifically, capitalist conceptions of time. Mendelsohn describes the structure as regressing to “New York’s romantic Woolworth delirium,” stating that Chicago was looking to the future through a lens harshly tinted by the past, a fruitless exercise that would ultimately never achieve the construction of the “spiritual supremacy of a cathedral” for the press (Figure 10).⁵⁵ “The Gigantic” concludes with eight images of grain elevators taken around Chicago and Buffalo, forcing a comparison between the industrial and financial detritus present throughout the United States that Mendelsohn visited,

⁵⁵ Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, 42.

and evoking an understanding of functional spaces that is at once critical, with regard to the manner in which the skyscraper and the grain elevator are reduced to merely referential forms, and insightful with regard to the architect's envisioning of slimmed-down decorative programs that ultimately reveal the purely utilitarian values of the building (Figure 11).

Throughout *Amerika*, Mendelsohn employs a method of seeing space and architecture that is characterized by the capturing of foregrounds in deep shadow, with backgrounds highlighted and starkly lit, oblique viewpoints that reveal the dimensionality of structures from often low vantage points, and a general sense that the photographer is concerned not with the depiction of actual life in the city, for there are relatively very few actual people present in the images, but instead the effects of capital and wealth upon the city, and in turn, the effects of this newly colonized city upon the unseen individual. The influence of Moholy-Nagy's "New Vision" is evident in the treatment of the pictorial space in Mendelsohn's images, and the experimental, and often experiential, qualities of his photography. These images are ultimately a deeply critical exploration of an environment that had previously only been known to the architect through the cult of "Amerikanismus" that was so pervasive in the culture of his native Germany, and their unsettling qualities undoubtedly reflect the conflicted feelings that the architect held for the duration of his journey.

The buildings, cityscapes, and urban environments presented in *Amerika* not only serve to depict, for Mendelsohn's contemporaries in Europe, a realistic vision of the United States, but also to warn of the possibility that the impending spread of this uniquely capital-driven architectural mode may not be a necessarily positive step in the development of architecture. While architecture in the United States had not yet reached the homogeneous, globalized aesthetic point that would eventually result from decades of development in the Modernist

tradition of functionalist, essential design strategies, it was already beginning to lack the soul found in the vernacular traditions of Europe. This soullessness is reflected in the last few images in the book, where Mendelsohn has gone in search of some defining uniqueness, or an indication of the use-value of the buildings that surround him, and ultimately discovers the back sides of high rises, where fire escapes and exhaust vents hint at the possibility of functional characteristics. These images are one of the few indications of positive potential found in *Amerika*, a glimpse of a still-present representation of functional, dynamic qualities within the increasingly stifling, desensitizing city. The fragmented nature of the urban environment, and the desensitization of the viewer that results from the phenomenological qualities of these spaces, is mirrored in Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*. The breakdown of traditional modes of viewing and engaging with the environment is, in Tillmans' project, taken to an extreme, resulting in a series of images that further highlight the uncertainties concerning the fate of the built environment and its inhabitants presented in Mendelsohn's series of photographs.

CHAPTER 4WOLFGANG TILLMANS' *BOOK FOR ARCHITECTS*

In the preface of the catalogue for the 14th International Architecture Exhibition, entitled *Fundamentals*, which was held in Venice in 2014, architect and director of the exhibition Rem Koolhaas outlined a series of goals centered around the articulation of a response to what was seen as the “body blows” dealt by Modernism to architectural practice over the course of the 20th century.⁵⁶ The primary question posed by Koolhaas and the organizers of the exhibition was: “Has national identity been sacrificed to modernity?”⁵⁷ The answer to this question of absorption of individualistic architectural practice, it seems, is not particularly straightforward, due in part to the difficulty of expressing a global survey of architecture within the scope of a single exhibition. However, throughout the course of the exhibition, the statement that architects in the contemporary moment, across the globe, are engaged in “Absorbing Modernity,” appears to gain traction when understood as a rebellious notion. Instead of presenting a homogenized architectural scheme, the representatives from the sixty nations included in the exhibition are able to describe the ways in which their practice has been beaten, but not broken, by the weight and force of Modern architecture, and through the weathering of these blows their architecture has flourished as they seek to propose alternative strategies for creating spaces for humanity.

Tillman’s project may be understood within the context of *Fundamentals* as providing an alternative methodology for the visualization of architectural spaces that have been directly affected by the widespread adoption of modernism and the processes of capital that have shaped

⁵⁶ Rem Koolhaas, “Absorbing Modernity: 1914-12014,” in *Fundamentals: 14th International Architecture Exhibition*, ed. Rem Koolhaas et. al. (Venice: Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2014), 22.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

it into its current form. *Book for Architects* functions not as a representation of any one place, space, or time, but as an amalgamation of the photographer's experiences of contemporary environments. The project presents the fractured and disconnected nature of architectural practice, and asks the architect to consider the implications of rarely discussed elements in the everyday lives of those who live and work in their buildings. Where Mendelsohn's images sought to take a representative sample of the macrostructures of the urban environment as a means of critiquing the manner in which these spaces shaped the lives of those who interacted with them on a daily basis, Tillmans' ostensibly seeks to capture these same environments from a perspective that hints at the potential for the viewer, in this case the architect, to effect change through the identification of often ignored elements.

Wolfgang Tillmans was born in Remscheid, Germany in 1968 and lived and worked in Hamburg until 1990, when he enrolled at the Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design in England. Following the completion of his studies in Bournemouth, Tillmans moved to London, where he has worked for the majority of his career since 1992, with brief interludes spent in New York City, Hamburg, and Frankfurt. Tillmans' early photographic practice centered on the documentation of his circle of friends and his daily life, and his practice has since developed to encompass a wide variety of graphic genres. Tillmans was awarded the Turner Prize in 2000 for a series of exhibitions that "strikingly engage[d] with contemporary culture while challenging the boundaries between art and photography and between the genres of portraiture, documentary and still life."⁵⁸ The use of photography as a mode of investigating environments and challenging the status quo within established genres of art has distinguished

⁵⁸ "Turner Prize 2000 Artists – Wolfgang Tillmans," Tate Modern, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/turner-prize-2000/turner-prize-2000-artists-wolfgang-tillmans>.

Tillman's practice within the field of contemporary photography. Many of his projects are unique in their open-ended approach to the ordering and presentation of images and thematic structures, resulting in an oeuvre that is characterized by eclecticism and unconventional strategies concerning the depiction of contemporary subject matter, but which is ultimately underpinned by a coherent, yet subtly articulated vision.⁵⁹ Tillmans is not an architectural photographer in the traditional sense; he is not commissioned by architects to make cleanly styled, straightforward images of their projects for use in brochures and presentations, nor does his work appear on the covers of well-known architectural periodicals, such as *Architectural Digest*. By virtue of the fact that Tillmans' practice is focused on looking outward, at the spaces within which the rituals of daily life are enacted, and toward the environments through which he passes on his journeys around the world, it is no surprise that architecture has consistently played a role in his image-making process.

Tillmans travelled to thirty-seven countries and to every continent between 2008 and 2012 while working on a project titled *Neue Welt*.⁶⁰ Conceived by Tillmans as an exploration of the state of the world twenty years after he had first begun to look through the lens of a camera, the project resulted in numerous exhibitions and a catalogue of the same name which was published in 2012.⁶¹ The project also enabled the photographer to realize a collection of images centered around the subject of architecture, which Tillmans described as being an influential, yet infrequently discussed element that is a constant presence in everyday life in the 21st century, a factor that unconsciously shapes the experiences and feelings of users in ways that were not

⁵⁹ Michael Wilson, "Wolfgang Tillmans: Andrea Rosen Gallery," *Artforum*, 2010.

⁶⁰ Wolfgang Tillmans, interview by Andres Lepik, in *Zoom! Picturing Architecture and the City*, ed. Andres Lepik et. al. (Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015), 171.

⁶¹ "Wolfgang Tillmans: Neue Welt," David Zwirner Books, accessed April 24, 2017, <https://davidzwirnerbooks.com/product/wolfgang-tillmans-neue-welt>.

necessarily intended by the architect, or lack thereof, who designed the structure. Ultimately, Tillmans was unable to discern an appropriate setting for the exhibition of these architecturally-centered images, due to the photographer's belief that "as soon as more than thirty percent of the images are focused on architecture, the show becomes an architecture exhibition."⁶² The photographs languished within Tillmans' collection of images, grouped together under the tentative title "Book for Architects" until the existence of the images was communicated by one of Tillmans' former assistants to noted architect and urbanist Rem Koolhaas, who was directing the upcoming 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale. The situation of this body of images within the context of an exhibition devoted entirely to architecture proved to be both fortuitous to the photographer and highly meaningful to the success and lasting influence of Koolhaas' ambitious program, which was centered around a deeply critical take on the current state of architectural practice.

The Fourteenth International Architecture Exhibition, also known as the Venice Architecture Biennale, opened in June of 2014. Directed by Koolhaas, the Biennale was designed to "perform an audit of architecture, asking: What do we have? How did we get here? What can we do, and where do we go from here?"⁶³ The Biennale was organized into three main components, the first of which was titled "absorbing modernity," and consisted of the pavilions of sixty-six countries located at the Giardini, the Arsenale, and elsewhere throughout the city in the tradition of the Biennale, all of which were focused on a single theme: the history of their respective modernizations from the period between 1914 and 2014. These pavilions were intended to portray the destructive forces of modernism and the manner in which each nation

⁶² Wolfgang Tillmans, "Hasselblad Award," (lecture, The Hasselblad Foundation, Gothenburg, Sweden, December 1, 2015).

⁶³ Koolhaas, *Fundamentals*, 17.

was individually stripped of its identity, battered into submission, and yet somehow survived, to form a collective portrait of resilience and to present the role, whether substantial or otherwise, of architecture within this calamitous milieu. The Central Pavilion, titled “elements of architecture,” housed Tillmans’ project. The aim of this space was to explore the “often overlooked but universally familiar elements of architecture [and] the history of each element, [through which] architecture is revealed as an amalgamation of very ancient and some current components.”⁶⁴ It was within this framework of deconstructive exploration that Tillmans’ *Book for Architects* was originally displayed as a tool for examining the multifarious and yet deeply interconnected nature of architectural practice across the globe.

The third section of the Biennale was titled *monditalia*, and focused on the state of Italy as a representative and emblematic condition for the current global situation “where many countries are balancing between chaos and realization of their full potential.”⁶⁵ *Fundamentals* represents an ambitious take on the illumination and exploration of a perceived impasse in architectural practice, one that is a direct product of modernization and which cannot be fully understood without the construction of alternative pathways of visualization.

Tillmans describes the title of *Book for Architects* as being born from a desire to engage in dialogue with architects, and to provide feedback as to how he sees architecture functioning in the real world, a task that was inherently opposed to the notion of an idealist architecture that effectively shuts out the real world in favor of a perfection that is, in part, a product of photography’s influence on the field.⁶⁶ The artist discusses the perfected and consciously

⁶⁴ Koolhaas, *Fundamentals*, 17. In this passage Koolhaas advocates for the study of architectural elements under a “microscope,” so as to identify “unsuspected (hi)stories and qualities.”

⁶⁵ Koolhaas, *Fundamentals*, 17.

⁶⁶ Wolfgang Tillmans, “The Hugh Edwards Lecture: Wolfgang Tillmans,” (lecture, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, June 4, 2015).

fabricated perspectives found in contemporary architectural photography as representing falsely constructed narratives of the experience of buildings, presenting architecture as an entity that is autonomous from the influence of reality. The phenomenological qualities of the built environment play a major role in Tillmans' works from the past decade, and within *Book for Architects*, he explores the manner in which photographs are able to function as representative structures for the presentation of experiences to the viewer, and as a means of highlighting the inadequacy of perfected viewpoints in achieving a similar goal. In this sense, Tillmans' photographs function in a similar manner as those of Mendelsohn, adopting viewpoints that are both irregular and highly familiar as a means of illustrating the manner in which the photographer moves through and engages with his environment.

Through the assumption of alternative methodologies of seeing and presenting buildings and their surroundings for interpretation by the viewer, Tillmans created a body of work that was not judgmental of contemporary architectural practice, but which was instead engaged in a critical discourse concerning the role of the architect in the experiences of everyday life. The images in *Book for Architects* are arranged in a manner that oscillates from specific, highly detailed studies of particular elements of architecture, to seemingly random groupings of images that depict unidentifiable spaces and places, creating a disquieting trip through space and time that underscores the plight of architecture, and highlights the lack of awareness that most viewers have of their surroundings.⁶⁷ The curious nature of many of the images in the exhibition is no doubt a product of the concept that they could have been made anywhere, at almost any time in

⁶⁷ Paula Kupfer, "Range Rover: With Metropolitan Museum of Art and David Zwirner Presentations, Wolfgang Tillmans Displays His Genre-Defying Versatility," *Surface* 122 (2015): 108-9.

the last twenty years, and the viewer could have passed by such a place or space everyday for years without ever considering its significance. The disappearance of architecture into the background of everyday life becomes the focus of Tillmans' project, and through a close study of his surroundings, he begins to bring these often ignored elements to the forefront of the viewer's attention, exposing many of the issues that lie at the heart of architectural practice.

The fact that *Book for Architects* is a book in name only is not as incongruous as it may seem at first. The format of the project is both a practical and conceptual decision on the part of the artist, resulting primarily from the inability of the physical space provided within the Central Pavilion to effectively house and display the 450 images that made up the work. As a solution to the issue of presenting so many images in a format that would effectively allow viewers to experience the images as Tillmans intended, he turned to newly developed 4K projection technology, which utilizes more than four times the number of pixels (4096 x 2160) than standard High Definition (1920 x 1080) in order to create an Ultra High Definition image that allowed for less breakup of the images when projected on a large scale.⁶⁸

While the adoption of this new technology may seem slightly out of place when considered within the scope of Tillmans' practice, which is characterized by a traditional outlook that favored the use of film until the mid-2000s and which utilizes Photoshop for its most basic post-production editing features, the artist describes his projections as "trying to steer clear of the language of [Audio Visual], avoiding the fading, sequencing," and other manipulations that often characterize technologically driven projects.⁶⁹ In this way the *Book for Architects* is less a video

⁶⁸ Wolfgang Tillmans, "Wolfgang Tillmans: A Lecture," (lecture, London College of Communication, London, England, June 15, 2015).

⁶⁹ Elias Redstone, *Shooting Space: Architecture in Contemporary Photography*, (London: Phaidon, 2014), 24.

project and more of a “film of stills,” which incorporates technology as a means to an end, enabling the presentation and visualization of images and spaces, and aiding in the translation of three-dimensional spaces from around the into the gallery setting, where an immersive experience could be constructed.⁷⁰ The choice to project the images in the corner of the space was made due to the artist’s understanding that the projection of images onto opposite walls would “create a nervousness” on the part of the viewer, who would constantly be at risk of missing images. This allows for the viewer to immerse themselves in the body of images, working through the elements presented in each pairing as they complement, or conflict with, one another. As a result, *Book for Architects* appears to mimic the structure of a traditional photo book, where two sets of images are placed on opposing pages, which in this case are substituted for walls, and the progression of images is reminiscent of leafing through a volume. The similarities appear to extend no further, though, as the scope and phenomenological qualities of the project differ drastically from the parameters of any traditional bound book, constructing an environment within which the viewer is immersed in the global wanderings of the artist. If the project by Mendelsohn is understood as a critical recording of a journey through the cities of the United States fashioned into the form of a travel album, Tillmans’ *Book for Architects* is something more akin to a frenzied slideshow given to a group of close friends, where the photographer seeks to deliver a rapid fire presentation of everything and anything that he experienced during his time abroad.

The body of images presented in the project is at once compelling and mesmerizing. The close-up shots of various interior details, from the end of a hand-rail that points to a water line

⁷⁰ Wolfgang Tillmans, interview by Andres Lepik, in *Zoom! Picturing Architecture and the City*, 170-171.

leading to a radiator (Figure 12) or the shallow depth-of-field image of a bathroom sink, where the slick, black tiles on the wall reflect a rainbow of colors and hint at a depth and dimensionality hidden in the decorative cladding, indicate clearly that the photographer is deeply interested in the seemingly banal spaces in which he works (Figure 13). In contrast to these carefully composed images, with their mild abstraction and inherently absent sense of place, the photographs of a sleek, glass high-rise at various times of the day seem to indicate a need for a re-focusing of attention on the part of the viewer, from the large-scale to the intimate (Figure 14).⁷¹ However, a greater attention to detail with regard to size and spatial awareness is only a cursory element of Tillmans' overall message, and it is the complete re-framing of the architectural space that ultimately takes center stage when interpreting the body of images as a whole. Critic Julian Rose, in an exhibition review published in 2015, states:

Even more subversive are the photographs whose subjects are almost, but not quite, identifiable as famous buildings. A swath of fussily patterned curtain wall, an aggressively faceted corner, the hint of a dramatic curve--these moments suggest that the highly individualized styles of today's top architects may be more a matter of marketing than reality, ultimately reducible to a remarkably similar set of material palettes, structural systems, and formal strategies.⁷²

The breakdown of the architectural form into various and disparate elements, from an undulating glass curtain wall to a partially demolished interior space, draws similarities between all forms of construction, from the older, vernacular styles of housing depicted in many of the images, to the clean, newly constructed tract houses that occupy other slides (Figure 15). These structures seem to be wildly different, with the only conceivable similarity among them being that they were shaped by the human hand, but upon closer inspection their distinguishing traits begin to literally dissolve into a larger body of virtually interchangeable forms. The concrete

⁷¹ Julian Rose, "Realist Estates: Julian Rose on Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*," *Artforum International* 53 (2015): 137.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 137.

blocks, tile floors, glass panels, wooden doors, and rusticated stones become elements in a larger vocabulary of form and style that unifies the most aesthetically disparate structures based upon an understanding of their functional and spatial qualities.

As the “film of stills” progresses and images flicker on and off of the walls of the gallery space, the viewer begins to discern a pattern of not only shape and form, based upon the vocabulary of architectural elements that is seemingly universal, but also patterns of use and similarities between urban spaces, until eventually it becomes difficult to make out where, or even when, the image on the screen was made. When time and place begin to break down, the transience and spatiality of the structures becomes more easily discernable. While it may be impossible to say where or when an image of a massive façade, with the majority of its windows broken, with overlapping images depicting examples of Brutalist architecture scattered around its perimeter, was ultimately made, it can be understood that the structure is intrinsically linked to the buildings that share its space (Figure 16).

The overlapping of images exemplifies a conscious construction of a dimensionality within the flat plane of the image on the wall, of a space within the work, which is dependent upon the juxtaposition of the unreal, or the utopia, and the extant structures of reality, in order to create an experience that allows for the simultaneous existence of inherently incompatible structures.⁷³ Within the architectural world, where examples of stark, Modern architecture quite literally occupy the same realm as disused, industrial models, Tillmans points out the inevitability of use and re-use in an urban model that is often ill-equipped to deal with the consequences of real people going about their lives within the space. The implications of such a multidimensional coexistence directly contradict the architectural utopia, where the will of the

⁷³ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 18 (1986), 25.

architect is imposed upon the environment in order to create order through homogeneity, and instead the viewer is treated to the revelation of architecture's true form.

At first glance, homogeneity seems to be the opposite of what *Book for Architects* is concerned with, and instead the viewer is struck by the scope and variety of the structures portrayed, from high-rises to cardboard shacks, and the images are by no means uniform in their compositional structures, but after viewing the piece for an extended period, the images and architectural forms begin to blur into a mass of objects, in a similar manner to the way in which the forms of architecture in a major urban space essentially become a single entity when viewed from afar.⁷⁴ The project reorients the relationship between the viewer and the architecture through the manipulation of space and form through consciously framed and executed images, which seek to investigate the environments and structures that are often overlooked and which form the backdrop of everyday life, while also examining the elements that comprise well-known and highly praised projects that lie within the realm of architecture as a commodity. The globalizing nature of architecture that is characterized by an overriding concern with technology, aesthetic refinement, and utopian inclinations is juxtaposed in this series of images with the vernacular and placid structures that serve in a purely functional role in the fabric of urbanity.

Geographer David Harvey, in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, discusses the concept of time-space compression in the contemporary moment through the processes of globalized capital, by which is meant the proliferation of structures designed to further strengthen the relationship between signs, images, and sign systems as opposed to simply producing commodities in the traditional sense.⁷⁵ The acceleration of time and the compression

⁷⁴ Rose, "Realist Estates," 138.

⁷⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990): 300.

and reorientation of space that occurs through the production of images as objects of capital results in an understanding of architecture as a physical force through which hierarchical spatial constructions may be articulated, and which may ultimately aid in the creation of a relationship between object and image that is based purely in the concept of capital.⁷⁶ Tillmans' *Book for Architects* disrupts this flow of capital through the reorientation of the relationship between space, time, and place, commenting on the hyper-accumulation of images in the contemporary moment as a medium through which alternative understandings of the urban environment may be formulated. The object of the architectural photograph is challenged, in Tillmans' work, to be something simultaneously more and less significant than the traditional architectural photograph that is designed to act as an indexical representation that ultimately glorifies the architectural form at the expense of its own autonomy. The photograph should, in this case, explore the 'other' spaces that are almost always excluded from the realm of sign-based imagery, those spaces that are by their nature peripheral and which serve to undermine the established hierarchies of form and function through the mere fact of their continued presence. The photograph also functions within a larger context, where the image of a structure serves not to simply record, or to sell, but to convey an understanding of the elemental nature of architectural practice within a discourse surrounding the implications of architecture in the 21st century, and the role of the architect in the (re)shaping of environments where the individual is subordinated to the will of spatial constructions

⁷⁶ Ibid., 287.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The introductory text by Rem Koolhaas that accompanies *Book for Architects* in the catalogue for the Biennale states: “The photographs represent the impurity and randomness as well as the beauty and imperfection that typify built reality, both past and present.”⁷⁷ This is indeed true of Tillmans’ work, and it may be applied equally in an understanding of Eric Mendelsohn’s *Amerika*. These two bodies of work represent moments in the history of architectural photography where the image becomes a tool for introspection, encouraging the architect to grapple with the notion that reality represents a vastly different set of parameters than what may be considered when creating a rendering of a building with pen and paper. The photograph, in these projects, functions not as a tool intended to spread architecture and capital across the globe, but instead as a means of inspecting the consequences of such actions. The photograph is no longer subordinated to the architectural form, but has instead become an autonomous structure for the critical reappraisal of the role of architecture in everyday life.

The concept of the architect bending the environment to his or her will in an effort to defeat the randomizing processes of everyday reality is, within the context of these projects, revealed to be a fruitless and even senseless proposition, one that is a consequence of the proliferation of technology and capital. What is unique about these projects is that Mendelsohn and Tillmans do not stand in direct judgment of their surroundings, choosing instead to adopt a critical viewpoint that facilitates the identification of perceived incongruities within the built environment. Through this method of expository image-making, the bodies of photographs that

⁷⁷ Rem Koolhaas, “from *Book for Architects*,” in *Fundamentals: 14th International Architecture Exhibition*, ed. Rem Koolhaas et. al. (Venice: Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2014), 312.

comprise each project appeal to the viewer by bringing to the forefront of our consciousness the places, spaces, structures, and elements of architecture that are often completely ignored, those which function silently and unceasingly in the background of commonplace experiences.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Cover of Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.



Figure 2: Eric Mendelsohn, *Einstein Tower*, Potsdam, Germany, 1920.



Figure 3: Eric Mendelsohn, *Sternberg, Hermann, and Co. Hat Factory*, Luckenwalde, Germany, 1923.



Figure 4: Manhattan Skyline, from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.



Figure 5: Equitable Trust Building, New York City, from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.

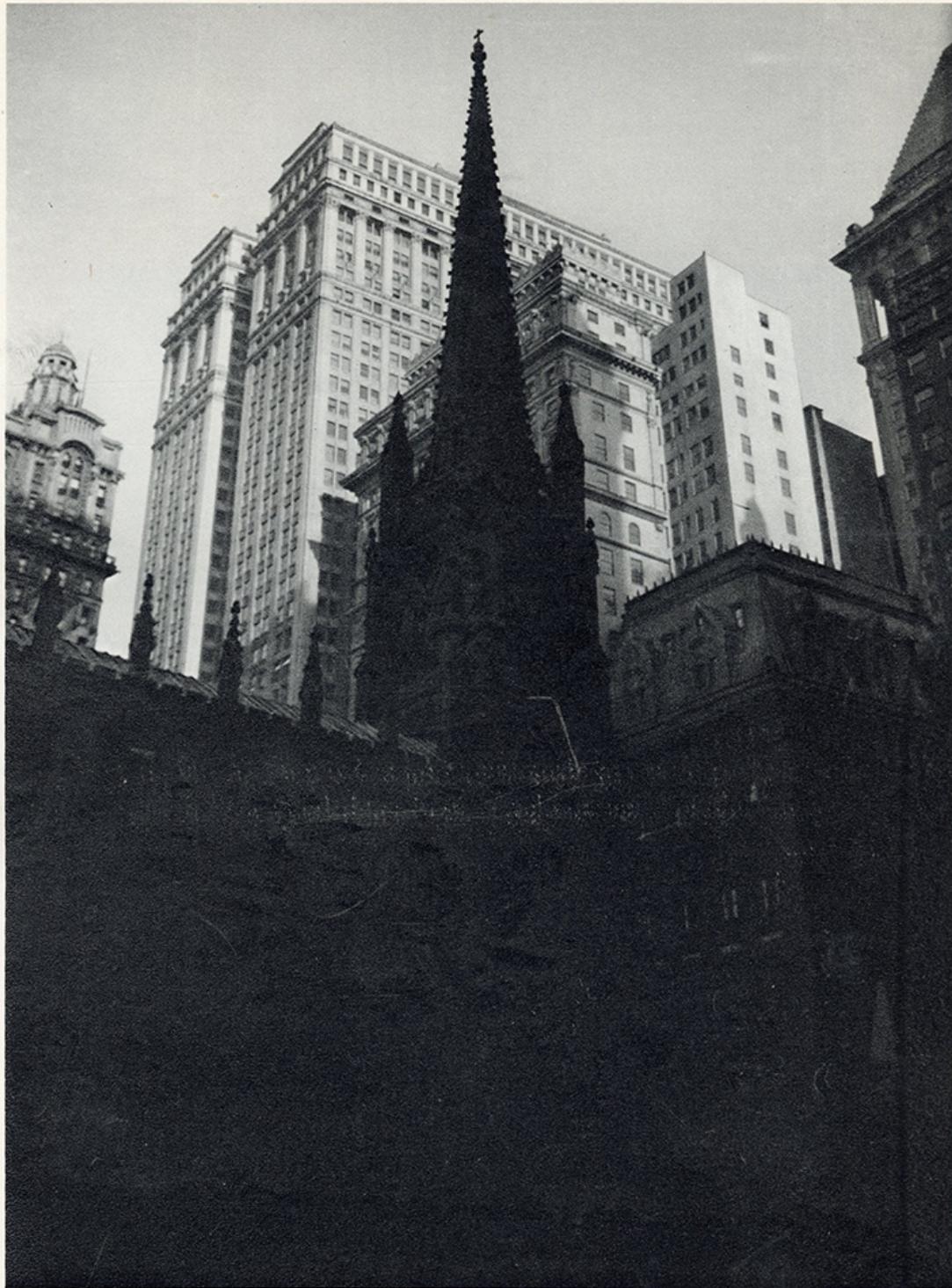


Figure 6: Trinity Church, New York City from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.



Figure 7: Woolworth Building, New York City, from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.

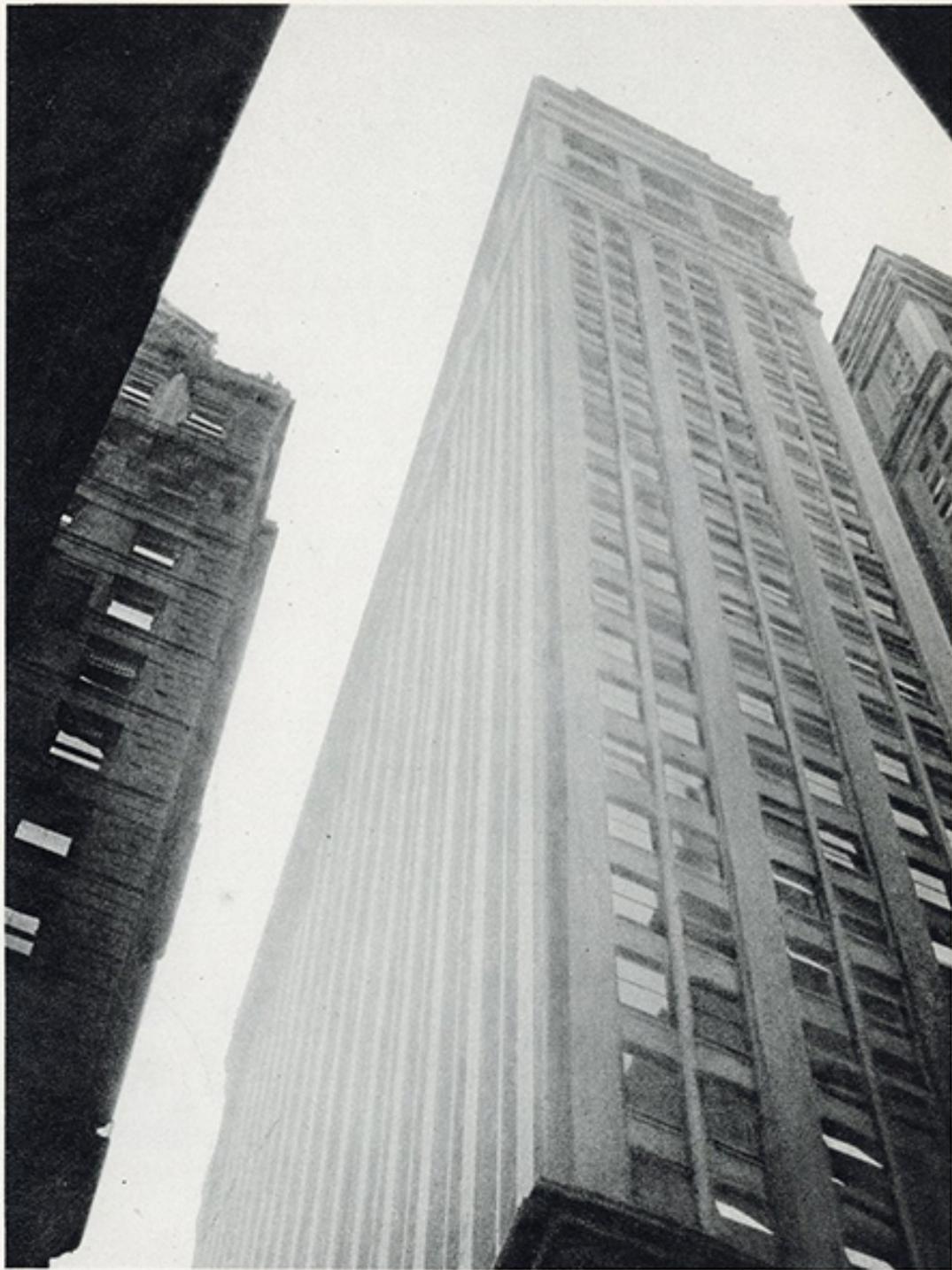


Figure 8: Equitable Trust Building, New York City, from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.



Figure 9: The Shelton Hotel, New York City, from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.



Figure 10: Tribune Tower under construction, Chicago, from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.

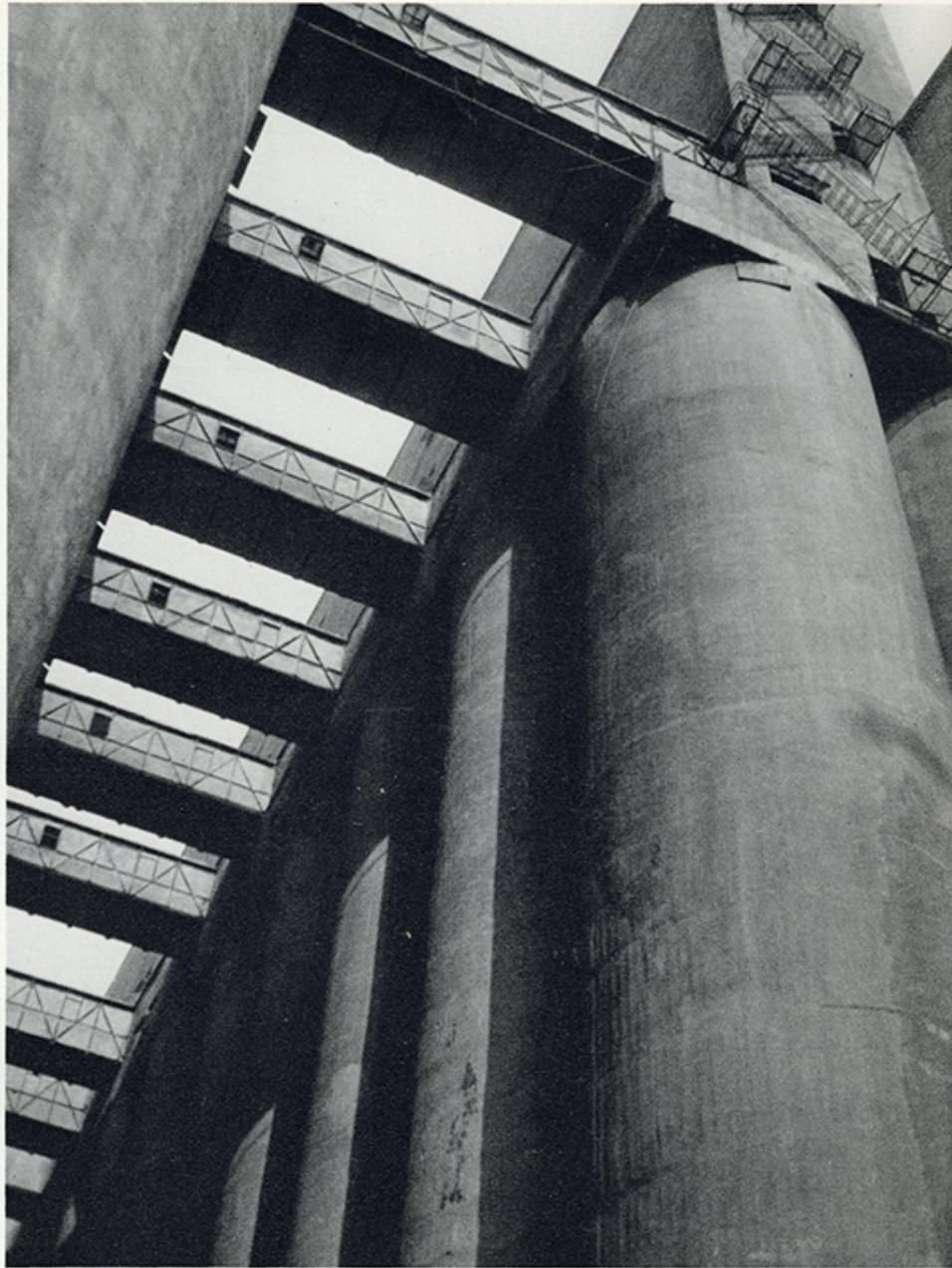


Figure 11: Grain Elevator, Chicago, from Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, 1926.

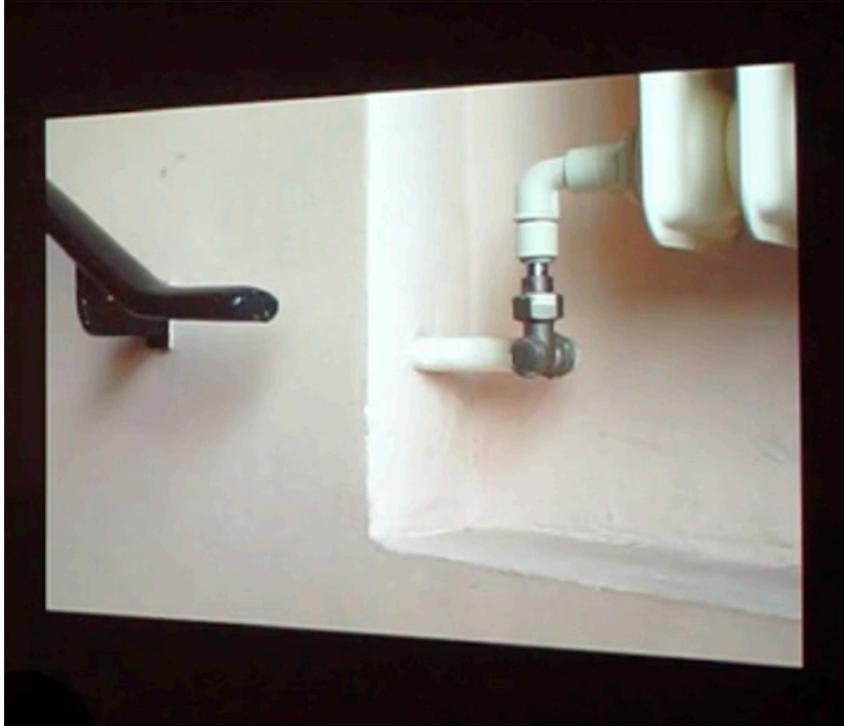


Figure 12: Detail from Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*

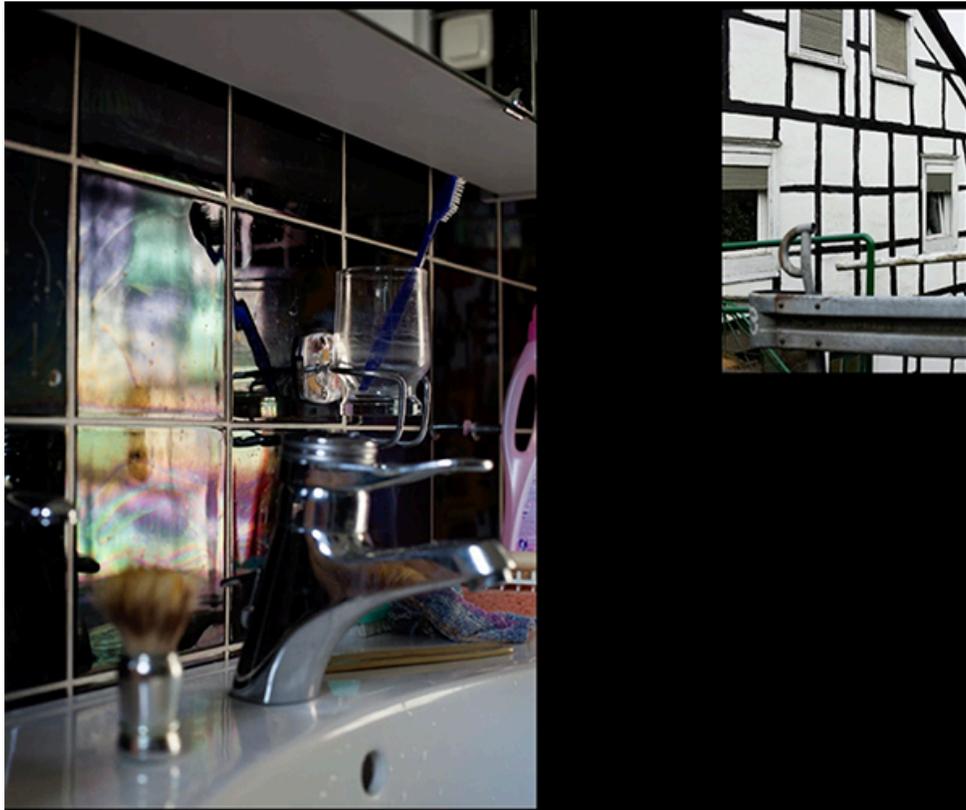


Figure 13: Detail from Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*



Figure 14: Detail from Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*



Figure 15: Detail from Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*



Figure 16: Detail from Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*