

The background of the cover is composed of large, expressive brushstrokes in various shades of teal and dark blue. These strokes are layered and curved, creating a sense of movement and depth. In the center-right area, there is a square patch with a distinct, grainy texture, possibly representing a material or a specific architectural element.

COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

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The background is an abstract composition of swirling, layered brushstrokes in various shades of teal and dark blue. A prominent, dark, textured square is positioned in the center-right area, appearing to be a physical object or a different material layered over the paint.

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DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

TOMO I

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COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

del origen de la modernidad
a la era digital

TOMO I

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(EDS.)

COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

Granada, 2024

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ISBN(e) 978-84-338-7371-2

Edita:

Editorial Universidad de Granada

Campus Universitario de Cartuja

Colegio Máximo, s. n., 18071, Granada

Telf.: 958 243930-246220

Web: editorial.ugr.es

Maquetación: Noelia Iglesias Morales

Diseño de cubierta: Francisco Antonio García Pérez (imagen de fondo: detalle de *Blue on almost white*, Nikodem Szpunar, 2022)

Imprime: Printhauss

Printed in Spain

Impreso en España

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IV Congreso Internacional Cultura y Ciudad

Comunicar la arquitectura: del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

Granada 24-26 enero 2024

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The Role of Illustrative Photography in the Early Modern Historiography

El papel de la fotografía ilustrativa en los inicios de la historiografía moderna

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Abstract

A principios del siglo XX, la cuestión de las imágenes que acompañan al texto adquirió un valor fundamental. La literatura centrada en la arquitectura moderna y contemporánea, que se constituiría como la primera historiografía, estuvo marcada por un enfoque exegético, pero más a menudo apologetico. La contribución examina el papel de la fotografía ilustrativa en la primera historiografía moderna de 1927 a 1941, desde la primera edición de Platz hasta el libro fundamental de Giedion. Los resultados de este estudio muestran cómo la relación entre iconografía e historiografía va más allá del ámbito de una fructífera relación de apoyo mutuo entre “documento” e “interpretación”, asumiendo un significado preciso de elecciones motivadas, a veces lleno de valores ideológicos incluso antes de ser figurativo, como demuestra la predilección por la fotografía más que por el dibujo.

In the early 20th century, the question of the images accompanying the text assumed a fundamental value. The composite literature centered on modern and contemporary architecture, which was to constitute itself as the first historiography, was marked by an exegetical but more often apologetic approach. The contribution examines the role of illustrative photography in the first modern historiography from 1927 to 1941, from the first edition of Platz up to the seminal book of Giedion. The results of this study show how the relationship between iconography and historiography goes beyond the scope of a fruitful relationship of mutual support between “document” and “interpretation”, assuming a precise meaning of motivated choices, sometimes full of ideological values even before being figurative, as demonstrated the predilection for photography rather than drawing.

Keywords

Fotografía de arquitectura, historiografía moderna, historia de la arquitectura
Architecture photography, modern historiography, history of architecture

Throughout the 20th century, but with greater evidence in the first half of it, and referring to the composite literature on modern and contemporary architecture –marked by an exegetic, and more often, apologetic approach– the relationship between iconography and historiography, goes beyond the purpose of an even fruitful relationship of reciprocal support between “document” and “interpretation”, assuming the strict meaning of intentionally motivated choices, sometimes charged with “ideological”, rather than figurative connotations.

Some “pieces”, hitherto recognized as being fundamental for the conceptualization of the canonical historiographical image of the Modern Movement, and seminal for their successful narrative model¹, are books in which a relatively limited number of images is accessed through the text, such as Henry-Russell Hitchcock’s *Modern Architecture*² (1929), and Walter Curt Behrendt’s *Modern Building*³ (1937). But the well-known text-book by Gustav Adolf Platz, *Die Baukunst der neuesten Zeit*⁴, with its first edition of 1927, the undisputed forefather of an enduring historiographical lineage, combines the articulated, conceptual, and critical structure of the essay part, with a rich array of tipped-in plates for many independent aspects, later reprinted and further enriched with some significant “cancellations” in the 1930 edition.

In those “heroic years”, on the other hand, not infrequently the text, even when taking on a certain critical consistency, is primarily conceived as an introduction to the images, capable of providing an unequivocal interpretation, or at least, suggesting a “didactic” exegesis, as it is the case, though atypical for the subsequent critical success, of the pamphlet *The International Style*⁵. The text, co-authored by Philip Johnson and published in 1932, in connection with MoMA’s international exhibition, lies a well-defined program, developed by Hitchcock, on the basis of the recent experience of Modern Architecture. Its objective was to make the author’s arguments more accessible to the large audience, also making use of a wider iconographic apparatus⁶, organically interwoven with the written text.

However, the written part does not have an equally effective critical slant in other successful publishing ventures. Compressed into a few pages, it is reduced to the role of a mere preface to the iconographic apparatus. In these *Bilderbüchern*, among which Walter Gropius’

¹ See M. L. Scalvini, M. G. Sandri, *L'immagine storiografica dell'architettura contemporanea da Platz a Giedion* (Rome: Officina, 1984).

² See H.-R. Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture. Romanticism and Reintegration* (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1929).

³ See W. C. Behrendt, *Modern Architecture. Its Nature, Problems and Forms*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937).

⁴ G. A. Platz, *Die Baukunst der neuesten Zeit, Im Propylaen* (Berlin: 1927; II ed. magazine, Berlin: 1930).

⁵ See H.-R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, *The International Style. Architecture since 1922* (New York: Norton, 1932); the 1966 reprint carries in the appendix the essay by the same Hitchcock, *The International Style Twenty Years After*, which appeared in the August 1951 issue of *Architectural Record*, while the Italian transl. (Bologna 1982) is noted for the introductory note by T. Benton. On these issues, see *Storia di un'idea di architettura moderna. Henry Russell Hitchcock e l'International Style* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2001).

⁶ See T. Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 12-14.

Internationale architektur (1925) is also to be counted, it falls above all to the selection of the images, and only rarely also to the underlining offered by a particularly incisive sequence⁷, the task of immediately communicating the implicit cultural setting. Thus, in particular, it is immediate to note how the meaning of “modern” which in 1927 inspired the largely “ecumenical” setting of the substantial volume by J. G. Wattjes, *Moderne Architectuur*⁸ –later echoed, as far as ecumenism is concerned, by Arnold Whittick in *European Architecture in the Twentieth Century*⁹, which ranges from Scandinavian national-romanticism to Central European Neue Sachlichkeit, does not seem at all subject to the censorship of a strict ideological orthodoxy, absolutely evident, instead, in other texts, with a more or less explicitly declared militant character—. Different from time to time, the generous sequence of images can incontrovertibly identify classicism, appropriately revisited, as the most authentic “lead thread” of contemporary architecture, as Marcello Piacentini argues in the pamphlet published in 1930, *Architettura d'oggi*¹⁰, or to demonstrate, instead, the unstoppable rise of the avant-garde, as they intend to document the well-known *Internationale neue Baukunst* by Ludwig Hilberseimer¹¹, or *Der Sieg des neuen Baustils* by Behrendt¹², both printed in 1927, in connection with the exhibition at the Weissenhof in Stuttgart, or even *Die neue Baukunst* (1929) by Bruno Taut¹³, or even the first, well-known collection of “fotomodelli”¹⁴ edited by Alberto Sartoris, *Gli elementi dell'architettura funzionale*¹⁵.

In most cases the iconographic settings are focused on architecture, with the exception of some circumscribed and well-targeted forays into the territories of engineering. Sometimes, however, the historiographical setting, aimed at identifying and signalling, in a more or less

⁷ In most cases, in fact, the sequence of images corresponds either to a mere alphabetical order for architects (*The International Style*), or to groupings by country: the sequence of the latter can be inspired both by vaguely geographical criteria (*Moderne Architectuur*; *Architecture today*) as for a simple alphabetical sequence (*Gli elementi dell'architettura funzionale*).

⁸ See J. G. Wattjes, *Moderne Architectuur, in Norwegen, Denemarken, Duitsland, Tsjecho-slowakije, Oostenrijk, Zwitserland, Frankrijk, België, Engeland, en Ver. Staten v. Amerika* (Amsterdam: Uitgevers, 1927); the apparatus is primarily composed by overall photographic shots, to which are added a smaller number of drawings of various kinds; at the end, in some sort of small appendix, are included plans and planimetric schemes of a part of the illustrated buildings.

⁹ In the first volume (London: 1950) there is no coincidence that the image chosen by Whittick to flank the title page on the left presents a suggestive view of the Stockholm City Hall by Ragnar Östberg, defined in the text as “a child of romance”, and the subject of a chapter, the XXIV headed “Tradition, Romanticism, Simplicity, and Originality” (187,192), which contains an admiring description.

¹⁰ M. Piacentini, *Architettura d'oggi* (Rome: Cremonese, 1930).

¹¹ L. Hilberseimer, *Internationale neue Baukunst* (Stuttgart: Hoffmann, 1927).

¹² W. C. Behrendt, *Der Siegesneuen Baustils* (Stuttgart: Wedekind & Co., 1927); the “victory”, quoted as the heading, has to be related with the «fight» which was the heading of another preceding paper by the same author, *Der Kampf um den Stil im Kunstgewerbe und in der Architektur* (Stuttgart-Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1920).

¹³ B. Taut, *Die neue Baukunst in Europa und Amerika* (Stuttgart: 1929).

¹⁴ J. Gubler, A. Abriani, Alberto Sartoris, *Dall'autobiografia alla critica* (Milan: Electa: 1990), 118-138.

¹⁵ A. Sartoris, *Gli elementi dell'architettura funzionale. Sintesi panoramica dell'architettura moderna* (Milan: Hoepli, 1932).

convincing way, homologies and parallels between architecture and other cultural fields, also requires images to range in the domains of applied arts, painting, sculpture and graphics, to better prove the absolute necessity and coherence of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, as demonstrated by the refined and complex, though instrumental, historiographical sketch proposed in 1936 by Nikolaus Pevsner in *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*¹⁶, with the well-calibrated sequence of illustrations: preceded and followed by paintings by Munch, the two "pictures" of the Hôtel Tassel reveal with the evidence of their sinuous lines the aesthetic coherence of an era, and the fundamental contribution of Art Nouveau, in a much more convincing way than does not happen instead in the case of *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), where, in a chapter, Sigfried Giedion briefly recalls and combines the theories of Einstein and those of Minkowski, while the paintings of Braque and Mondrian are proposed to exemplify that concept of "space-time", in which the most significant and peculiar trait of recent architecture is recognized¹⁷.

Proposing a meaning of "taste" not too distant from that outlined by Lionello Venturi, in his *Storia dell'architettura moderna*¹⁸ Bruno Zevi opens the sequence of out of the text tables, in 1950, with a sort of historiographical synthesis, purposefully dedicated to the evolution of taste, that is, to the first of the four "possible answers", that he himself suggested in reply to the question "why did modern architecture arise?"¹⁹; and here, the comparison between a pompous eighteenth-century dress and a modern suit, between a late nineteenth-century car and a late forties custom-built one, between a sumptuous rococo armchair and a 1938 chair, anticipates the metamorphoses of the architectural form proposed, in a distillate way, in the illustrations that immediately follow. Therefore, to the evidence of the images is often given the task of synthesizing the development of the story, revealing its irrefutable plots; what can better demonstrate the importance of those "baroque roots" –on which the first part of *Space, Time and Architecture dwells*– than the immediate juxtaposition between Tatlin's spiral monument and the dome of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza? And, in Pevsner's text, the many "naturalistic" forms –decorative, architectural, graphic– of Art Nouveau compared with the wallpapers of William Morris, do not intend, perhaps, to underline, well beyond the effective scope of his thought, the role, here apodictically assigned to him, as the founding father of "modern movement"?

Passing easily from history to news, as these first fundamental critical surveys often aspire to do, the iconographic systems must play a further, fundamental role: they are, above all, responsible for documenting how the new architecture has truly found an effective implementation of its constructive principles. As it is evident when leafing through, both *The International Style and Modern Building*, the photographic shots of buildings actually built

¹⁶ N. Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).

¹⁷ S. Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1941).

¹⁸ See B. Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1950).

¹⁹ Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna...*, at the beginning of chap. I, "La genesi dell'architettura moderna, 19 et passim".

prevail to a large extent, even though sometimes, only as ephemeral presences of ephemeral events, such as the well-known Esprit Nouveau pavilions in Paris 1925, or of Germany in Barcelona 1929.

What is more, the idea of the “neutrality” of photography was so, strongly, and widely, rooted at this time, that in Platz as in Sartoris, in Hilberseimer as in Wattjes, in Pevsner as in Zevi, it does not seem necessary to point out, in the captions or elsewhere, the names of the photographers. Hitchcock indicates the author of the images only when he is somehow forced to do so, for instance, when they are supplied by his English friend Frank Yerbury, secretary of the Architectural Association²⁰. Yet the cases, precisely from the Englishman Frank Yerbury²¹ to the Italian Giuseppe Pagano²², in which the interpretative role, of the militant critic overlaps and merges with that of the photographer, are not at all rare. A number of images, featured in Giedion’s “partisan” books, were taken by the author himself, who with his shots also contributes to the illustrations of other volumes, such as that of Taut of 1929. Certainly the “autograph” images, printed in *Space, Time and Architecture*, appear less rigorous, in their cuts, than the “professional” ones, a little too full of crowds and cars; however, even when they frame well-known works, they focus on little-known, yet significant, details for the critical and interpretative framework of the successful text-book: for example the ingenious metal structure of the main deposit of Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris by Henri Labrouste, the “open spaces” of the offices on the ground floor of the house in rue Franklin by Perret, the refined texture of the bricks in the Amsterdam Stock Exchange by Berlage, the singular capitals of the pillars in Wright’s Larkin Building.

Leaving aside post-war Italian instances, such as those of Roberto Pane²³ and Paolo Portoghesi, however, there are not many authors who, like Giedion, take the necessary shots by themselves. On the contrary, analyzing the long sequence of “histories” of modern and contemporary architecture, just as it is possible to uniquely identify certain genealogical lines, along which the interpretative theses and critical assumptions are transmitted, book after book, sometimes even the faults, it is equally possible to recognize image cloning processes, and not just because –as is the practice of specialized avant-garde magazines – clichés circulate from one editorial office to another, from one country to another, from one publisher to another. For example, in designing the substantial equipment of illustrations for the *Storia dell’Architettura Moderna*, printed by Einaudi in 1950, Bruno Zevi, while inspired by Mumford’s *The Culture of Cities*²⁴ for the graphic structure, as far as the materials are concerned, he literally cuts out the text-books in his possession, as evidenced by the

²⁰ See H. Robertson, F. R. Yerbury, *Travels in Modern Architecture 1925-1930* (London: Architectural Association Publications, 1989).

²¹ I. Jeffrey, A. Higgott *Frank Yerbury: Itinerant Cameraman. Architectural Photographs 1920-1935* (London: Architectural Association Publications, 1987).

²² See *Giuseppe Pagano Fotografo* (exhibition catalogue) (Milan: Electa, 1979); C. De Seta, *Il destino dell’architettura. Persico, Giolli, Pagano* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1985).

²³ F. Mangone, “Roberto Pane e la fotografia”, in *Fotografia per l’architettura del XX secolo in Italia. Costruzione della storia, progetto, cantiere*, ed. by M.A. Crippa (Milan: Laterza, 2017), 160-173.

²⁴ L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938).

mutilated copies of the works of Platz or Behrendt, still present in his archive, as well as those of various repertoires of "photomodels", such as the post-war *Encyclopédie*, in two volumes, by Sartoris²⁵.

Photographic journeys

The interest in photography that developed in the avant-garde circles between the 1920s and 1930s, and, above all, in that of the Bauhaus, owing to the talent of Laszló Moholy-Nagy, in no way excludes, indeed postulates, an investigation into the artistic and expressive of this medium. Nonetheless, a sort of sachlich *aura* persists and consolidates around photographic shooting, especially when it takes architecture as its object: "... almost as if the photographic image were to emerge through transparency from the built object, and that the photographic *imago* of the architecture belonged to the architect"²⁶. It is no coincidence that all the major leaders of contemporary architecture have exercised a strict control over the illustrations of their works to be put into circulation: for instance, most of the photographs proposed in the successful book by Hitchcock and Johnson, *The International Style*, were provided by the architects themselves. And against any claim to objective representation, photography reveals itself to be a medium endowed with a remarkable ductility to deception.

First of all, the photos are not infrequently retouched, as can be easily deduced, for example, from the comparison between the different "versions" of the same shot of the Stuttgart railway station by Paul Bonatz published by Platz and Piacentini respectively. Nor are other tricks of lesser importance: the forcing of the contrasts of black and white certainly contributes to defining the "style" of the buildings illustrated in Hilberseimer's successful volume in terms of dramatic volumetric and chiaroscuro contrasts, almost aimed at "obtaining the effect in relief of a model"²⁷. Furthermore, the propensity, recurring both among designers and among critics, to consider architectures significant in themselves and for their own intrinsic language, in self-referential way, so to speak and therefore regardless of the relationship established with the surrounding context, often entails the need to "remove" from the background of the shot anything that does not appear in perfect harmony with the work shown. It therefore happens that from the shooting of the service station in Cleveland by Clauss & Daub, published in *The International Style*, the nearby Victorian house appears to have been "expunged", while in the successful images of the Schröder house in Utrecht by Gerrit Rietveld, which from the *Elementi dell'architettura funzionale* of Sartoris transmits to the Zevian *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, the traditional brick "semi-detached house" remains almost completely hidden, to which Rietveld's abuts.

If the modernity of the medium and its alleged neutrality and coherence with the lines of the Neue Sachlichkeit lead to a clear preference for the photographic medium, the interest in architectural drawing did not disappear at all. Limited in number, often compressed in

²⁵ A. Sartoris, *Encyclopédie de l'architecture nouvelle* (Milan: Hoepli, 1948).

²⁶ See Gubler, Abriani, *Alberto Sartoris...*, 126.

²⁷ Gubler, Abriani, *Alberto Sartoris...*, II 9.

size and sometimes redesigned from scratch to homogenize the stroke, the graphics are nonetheless very present in the illustrative kits of these stories of contemporary architecture and, for many reasons, sometimes interconnected. First of all, because the overall photographic images, albeit suggestive, which recall metaphysical atmospheres and Cubist volumetric compositions, are not enough to explain the more rational logic of the planimetric composition, or the complexity and coherence of the structural articulation: as happens in the case of the theater of the Champs Elysées, illustrated by Giedion in *Bauen in Frankreich*²⁸ also through the suggestive axonometric cross-section of the reinforced concrete frame, “signed” by the Perrets. And secondly because, according to Boullée’s fortunate definition, architecture is the art of conceiving, of the “concevoir”, even before the Vitruvian art of building²⁹.

There are therefore cases in which it is necessary, with an original graphic, to make the author “to speak” directly: to tell his refined chromatic sensitivity, as happens with the perspectives of Joseph Maria Olbrich published by Platz; or again to grasp the immediacy of the creative gesture, as happens with the expressionist sketches, and of Mendelsohn in particular, which from Platz to Zevi assume the role of “icons” of the modern. But it is also necessary to document the elaborations of the avant-garde in the strict sense, destined by their very anticipatory and “experimental” nature to remain on paper: not only visionary works such as A. Sant’Elia’s *Città Nuova*, or the meta-projects of the “Gläserne Kette”, but also viable projects which have been “unjustly” denied the deserved realization, such as that of Le Corbusier for the Palais des Nations in Geneva, whose misfortune in the competition seems at least in part compensated by the conspicuous historiographic fortune³⁰.

In fact, some significant ideological positions are articulated around the graphic representation as well, complex though often implicit. Just as in the texts supporting the Neues Bauen the great Beaux Arts tradition is rejected (depending on the case, ignored or violently contested), so its most typical forms of graphic representation are discarded: large watercolor and “set” plates, “artistic” bird’s eye perspectives. Preferences gradually move towards more “objective” types of representation, such as planimetry and above all axonometry, the latter dear in parts to “radical” architects such as Hans Wittwer and Hannes Meyer, but also to many other exponents of the so-called German rationalism of the 1920s and beyond, naturally not excluding Gropius in the cases of many Siedlungen projects, from Törten to the competition for Spandau-Haselhorst, but also in that of the upper-class houses at the Wannsee. And while Enrico Griffini³¹ focuses on plans in the Rational construction of the

²⁸ S. Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich. Eisen und Eisenbeton* (Leipzig-Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928).

²⁹ “Qu’est-ce que l’architecture? La définirai je avec Vitruve, l’art de bâtir? Non. [...] Vitruve prend l’effet pour la cause. Il faut concevoir pour effectuer”. It is well known that the manuscript by É.L. Boullée *Architecture. Essai sur l’art* was published for the first time by Helen Rose, in 1953.

³⁰ I. Delizia, F. Mangone, *Architettura e politica. Ginevra e la Società delle Nazioni, 1925-1929* (Rome: Officina, 1992).

³¹ See M. Savorra, *Enrico Agostino Griffini. La casa, il monumento, la città* (Naples: Electa, 2000).

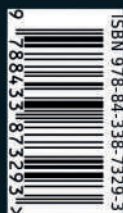
house, printed by Hoepli in 1932, Sartoris focuses, instead, on axonometry in *Gli elementi dell'architettura funzionale*, printed by the same publisher and in the same year.

In the second half of the twentieth century the iconographic equipments became more complex, more heterogeneous: inevitably the discourse became more confused in many respects. Doubtless the circulation of many well-known black and white photographs, which in the meantime have become "period", which crystallize the image of the buildings in the phase of their early youth, ignoring the transformations undergone and the signs of time, continues. As in the case of Wilde's portrait of Dorian Gray, but in some ways with sometimes inverse roles between reality and representation, the images now live a completely independent life from that of the building they represent: they give ample fortune, and always critical and spatial interpretations new, at the ephemeral Mies Pavilion in Barcelona; they crystallize the memory of a masterpiece erroneously considered "destroyed", such as the Aaltian library of Viipuri; above all they avoid dealing with the dramatic aging of many icons of the modern, and above all of the most celebrated model districts, from the Weissenhofsiedlung to the Pessac complex built by Le Corbusier for Henry Frugès. However, alongside the "evergreen" persistences, and often in the absence of an overall coherence, new images integrate the iconographic settings: not only more up-to-date or vintage photographs that have never been published before, such as those of the Barcelona Pavilion³² by Mies during the construction, such as to dispel any doubts, and to eliminate any imaginative hypothesis on the structure of the roof slab, but also and above all new "original" drawings, sometimes unpublished, gradually found, above all in the crucial eighties, when the centenaries of the births of various now deceased «great masters» are celebrated, including Gropius, Mies, Le Corbusier, from hagiography we move on to historical excavation, while in their archives jealously guarded materials become available. With the passing of the last decades of the twentieth century, and following important critical revision works of the season of the first historiography, the "militant" one of Pevsner and Giedion, but not only, the extraordinary expansion of the iconographic repertoires available, both for "genres" both for the quantity of available documents, makes the choices made even more significant, by an architectural historiography that no longer wants to be "partisan", as for the images to be placed in dialogue with the texts.

Conclusions

From this we conclude that the more the architecture of the heroic decades of the 20th century, certainly not less, but indeed, perhaps much more than that of other periods, has, so to speak, given rise to the self-production of some real "icon", whose circulation has largely gone beyond the circle of more or less specialized texts, to rise –also owing to the use of photography– to the glories and omens of the "common place": an example for all, and certainly not the only one that could be quoted, the recursive, misleading image of Wright's "house on the waterfall".

³² See J. P. Bonta, *Anatomia de la interpretación en arquitectura. Reseña semiótica de la crítica del Pabellón de Barcelona de Mies van der Rohe* (Barcelona: Gili, 1975).



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