Mapping and Touring Through Photography: On Julius Shulman's Photographic Space of Maslon House

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INTRODUCTION

Architectural photography, especially when dealing with domestic interiors, is a practice of observing and arranging spatial relations of objects. It is also a practice of traveling between the objects and acting on them. The photographer locates the camera/lens, re-arranges the architectonic parts and the movable objects, and controls and waits for the proper shadows. The moment of activating the shutter is merely the act of capturing the various features that the photographer has carefully staged. The photographer, in this process of making, maps the space by ordering; and tours through the space by entering, turning, and crossing. The viewer's seeing of the result, the photograph, is the imaginative experience of his/her presence, identified with that of the photographer, who observes the space from behind the camera/ lens and travels in space with the camera/lens. In other words, seeing and knowing a space through a photograph demands our everyday practice of both "mapping (ordering of places)" and "touring (spatialization of actions)," to borrow Michel de Certeau's terms.¹ This study builds on this notion, by drawing attention to a specific case: Julius Shulman's photographs of Richard Neutra's Maslon House.

Shulman photographed the residence on two separate occasions. The two occasions were both in 1963: the earlier take with Neutra on site; and the later take without the architect. To re-photograph a building only after a short while is a very rare case, if not the only case, in Shulman's career. Shulman, in his typically playful tone, explained in an interview this rare instance - why he could not resist photographing the residence twice. Neutra's concept of a house is an empty one. (...) He took out all the art and most of the furniture. Never before had I been so offended! Mrs. Maslon granted my request, and two weeks later I went back and photographed the house the way she lived in it. It was published (...), but Neutra never commented about the publication. [Perhaps he] never realized that I had rephotographed the house.²

Shulman's statement, I think, reveals an obvious but often-ignored aspect of architectural photography; that architectural photography is a mixture authored by two agents and of two disciplines, the architect/ architecture and the photographer/photography, and that the two profoundly differ in various ways, inevitably resulting in discrepancies. Of all such discrepancies, Shulman's statement reveals a significant one: the discrepancies of spatial conceptions, that is, between the space the architect sees and conceives and that the photographer sees and conceives.

My aim is to systematically demonstrate, with the help from studies in spatial perception and cognition, that the earlier and the later shoots of the building indeed exemplify two different spatial conceptions: one governed by the architect, and the other governed by the photographer. The difference is recognized through subtle yet apparent spatial effects. In a nutshell, the architect's space allows the viewer of globally mapping the discrete local spatial grounds; whereas the photographer's space allows the viewer of locating oneself on the place and in action with the objects.

THE SPATIAL EFFECTS

The first step is to examine the pair of photographs, by identifying and discerning the spatial effects.



Figure 1. Maslon House, photographed by Julius Shulman with Richard Neutra, 1963; Rancho Mirage, Richard Neutra, 1962.



Figure 2. Maslon House, photographed by Julius Shulman without Richard Neutra, 1963.

The spatial effects, in turn, will highlight their different *looks*.³ Let us see the two photographs in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1, shot with the architect, features three clusters of furniture or movable objects in the interior space: 1) the near coffee table and the objects on it; 2) the round sofa and the two tables, and 3) the dining table and the chairs.

Figure 2, shot without the architect, features more movable objects, all densely occupying the space. The piano bordering on the near edge of the picture plane, the partial view of the sofa turning its back toward the camera/lens, and the group of furniture including the coffee table, the second sofa (forming an L with the first sofa), the dining table, and the dining chairs over-populate the space from the near to the far.

The difference between the two photographs is in how the movable objects spatialize and what spatial effect such spatialization brings. The clusters in Figure 1 create spatial hierarchies of depth; and thus cover less floor space, drawing our attention to the negative space. The photographic content, therefore, is the space or the depth itself, noticeable through the distinct clusters. Figure 2, on the other hand, creates a space of scattered objects. The photographic content is an aggregation of such figural objects, positively filling up the space. The only negative space in Figure 2, interestingly, is where the coffee table has occupied in Figure 1. The two photographs, in this way, are spatial negations of the other.

The different layouts and effects of movable objects in Figures 1 and 2 reiterate in the different layouts and effects of architectural elements. Because the architectural elements are mostly fixed, the "layout," in this case, refer not so much to the objective locations of the elements as to the locations as projected onto the picture plane (thus the lens or the viewer's retina), resulting from locating and tilting of the camera/lens and framing of the picture plane.

In both photographs, the notable architectural elements include the walls, the floor, and the ceiling; that is, the architectonic planes that enclose the space. The planes, in Figure 1, are depicted to clarify the architectonic quality of the space. The two walls, the floor, and the ceiling form a clear sense of a volume and the entailing concave edges, without obscuring the intersections. The two transparent glass planes, one extending from the near right to the far left and the other approximately mirroring this intersect and form a concave corner slightly off to the left from the center of the picture plane.

Our seeing of the two wall planes and their intersection, of course, only occurs when we *imagine* seeing the otherwise transparent glass. The curtains, the rail, and the steel frame function as props for such imaginative seeing; and their inclusion or exclusion is what governs our seeing of the planes. Exclusion of the left curtain, in Figure 2, is thus significant. Although Figure 2 does include, in actuality, the glass plane extending from the near left to the far center, it fails to trigger our seeing of the plane (the rail on the ceiling is still there, but its effectiveness is far too weak). I should also add that the cluttered furniture hinders the view of the Tjunction between the two walls and the floor. Figure 2, therefore, represents a single plane, nearly parallel to the picture plane. The spatial look, therefore, is relatively frontal; and the space before the viewer is a layered, in comparison to the threedimensional and volumetric space in Figure 1.

THE VISUAL CUES

My description of the spatial effects, nevertheless, remains intuitive. To achieve a more systematic account of our seeing of the photographic spaces, I now turn to a relevant study in spatial perception and cognition. James E. Cutting and Peter M. Vishton offer the most comprehensive study on how we see spatial depth and layout from phenomenal spaces.⁴ To summarize their study, our seeing of space is dependent on the "visual sources of information" or "cues," which function to trigger our seeing of depths and distances between the objects. The authors survey the relevant literature and propose nine such cues; from which I derive five cues that deal with seeing space in still twodimensional pictures - occlusion, relative size and density, height in visual field, and aerial perspective. Before revisiting the photographs, a brief summary is in order, explaining how the cues differ in what spatial information each cue conveys and how effective it is.⁵

- Occlusion occurs and functions when an opaque object partially hiders another from view. It is one of the strongest sources for perceiving spatial layout, as it can be trusted at all distances from where the viewer perceives. Unlike some of the other cues, its effectiveness attenuate little with distance, and generally exceeds and overrides the other cues in various distances. We should note, nonetheless, that the information it carries is ordinal; that is, it informs the relative orders between objects in depth rather than the amount of depths between the objects.
- Relative size and density concerns the measures of the projected retinal sizes and

density of objects or textures. For relative size and density to be effective, the actual sizes of the objects should be same or similar or the actual arrangement of the textures should be relatively regular, but at different distances. The information it carries yield more than simply the ordinal; it potentially yields scaled information.

- 3) Height in visual field refers to the projected retinal location of objects that have their base on a surface. In the case of a ground surface viewed from above the objects, the higher location of an object would indicate farther distance. Under a certain condition, that is, when the viewer's eye (or the camera/lens) is at a familiar height of the eye level, we can approximately know the near-metric distance between objects presented at different heights from the visual angle between them.⁶
- Aerial perspective is determined by the relative amount of moisture or pollutants in air. The objects farther in distance become bluer and decreased in contrast with respect to the objects in the foreground.

What follows is my description of the aforementioned spatial effects in terms of the cues suggested by Cutting and Vishton. What underlies this exercise of discerning the cues in the photographs is the thinking that their availability and effectiveness play a crucial role in constructing the phenomenal space, which I claim to be a critical factor in forming the spatial effect or the *look*.

Occlusion and Height in Visual Field of Movable Objects

The occlusions between the movable objects in Figure 1 occur locally within each cluster of objects. Globally, the three clusters are articulate and distant from one another to form no occlusion. The occlusions are limited at the local scale, and help little in reading the global spatial layout. At the global scale, on the other hand, the strongest cue at play here is the height in visual field - not between the individual objects but between the clusters. The two clusters, both slightly off from the center toward the right, develop a strong spatial axis in depth, which extends toward the sculpture outside. The cluster of the dining table and the chairs effectively occupies the mid-ground between the two clusters, without over-populating the overall space. Because the table, the sofas, and the chair seatings are approximately at the same objective height, our reading of the space, wherein the clusters gradually inform the increase in depth.

In Figure 2, on the other hand, the movable objects densely occupy the space, forming occlusions both locally and globally across the space in multiple directions. The gradual occlusions between the piano, the near sofa, and the series of furniture including the various coffee tables, sofas, dining tables, and chairs, are all jumbled up to suggest finer readings of distances between the objects. The three sculptures that do not engage in the occlusions, two inside and one outside, seem to function as focal points; yet the spatial axes and their intersections are much more complex, in comparison to the relatively minimal layout of Figure 1.

Relative Size and Density of Architectural Elements

The most prominent elements demonstrating relative size and density, in Figure 1, are the steel columns. Gradually reducing in retinal size from the near right to the far left, the relative height of the columns indicates a strong spatial directionality and depth alongside the architectonic plane. The reduction or foreshortening is relatively sharper in Figure 1, thus offers a stronger sense of depth, and in agreement with my earlier observation of the spatial effect.



Figure 3. Maslon House, plan.

The slabs that expand horizontally and limit vertically, which constitute a typical design feature of Neutra's architecture, allow the viewer to easily assume and regard the columns as objectively equal in size and as equidistance from one another. The gradual foreshortening of the retinal size of columns in response to the distance, therefore, seems to yield our proper reading of depth in scale. In the case of Figure 1, however, this is a false reading from a false assumption. The farthest column included in the photograph, in actuality, is distant nearly two times farther from its adjacent one than the regular distance. See the plan in Figure 3 and the analysis in Figure 4: note the three columns engaged to the glass plane are equally distanced, whereas the freestanding column terminating the extended steel frame is distanced farther. Therefore, the sense of depth in Figure 1 is further exaggerated, adding to the already-exaggerated depth due to the larger degree of foreshortening.⁷ The column in question, interestingly, is cropped out in Figure 2. Instead, the nearest column to the right wall, which was cleverly hidden by the curtain in Figure 1, appears in Figure 2. The inclusion/exclusion of the columns in Figure 2 not only resists visualization of the left glass plane that potentially intersects with the right plane, but also minimizes the effect of exaggerated depth by featuring only the columns that are objectively equidistant from one another. The strategy of cropping in each photograph, again, is consistent with the look of each space. The columns in Figure 1 repeat and traverse from the interior/foreground to the exterior/vista, expressing spatial continuity and depth; whereas the columns in Figure 2 form a plane, nearly parallel to the picture plane.

I should also point out the relative size of the four lighting sockets in Figure 1, running parallel to the rail hinting the left glass plane. The sockets are more conspicuous than those in Figure 2, due to the more defined shadows; and contribute to emphasize the presence of the transparent glass plane, which would otherwise be difficult to notice or to imagine. Note also, in Figure 1, the layout of the objects on the coffee table, which form clusters on their own; and the linear patterns on the tabletop indicating relative density, and further emphasizing its horizontal extension form the foreground to the background. The spatial ground of the tabletop is indeed a reiteration of the larger architectural space.

Aerial Perspective of the Objects in Vista

Aerial perspective, in both photographs, is instrumental in depicting the far vista and the landscape as the background, beyond the enclosures of the interior space. There is, however, a notable difference between Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, the trees gradually attenuate toward the converging location of the picture plane, where the two enclosing planes intersect; whereas in Figure 2, no such feature is apparent. The difference, again, conforms to the deeper sense of space in Figure 1, conspired by all available cues; in comparison to the nearly redundant number of cues and their complex relations in Figure 2.



Figure 4. Maslon House, the plan and the analysis by the author. The top shows the camera location and the angle of view of Figure 1 mapped onto the plan; whereas the bottom shows those of Figure 2. Note the angles between the picture plane and walls; and the inclusion/exclusion of columns and objects within the angle of view.

EXEMPLIFICATION OF SPACES THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY: MAPPING AND TOURING

The two photographs, through which I hope to have exemplified the two conceptions of space, are not subject to commonplace categorization of informative documentation nor to that of aesthetic formalization. They are unique representations of architecture and space by being exemplifications; that is, by each referring to a particular kind of spatial conception. Figure 1 exemplifies the space of architectonic elements defining a three-dimensional volume of interior; and the articulate and distinct clusters of objects, merely to communicate their spatial relations. The depth is exaggerated; and exists as a kind of spatial abstraction consisting of the movable objects as foreground, the architectonic elements as midground, and the landscape as the background. The space is something we perceive and conceive, but something we do not engage or act on.

The furniture or the movable objects are familiar things we use regularly, of which we know their approximate dimensions. Reading the ordinal, the scaled, or the near-metric information of depths and distances from the cues of such objects is an everyday practice. The densely populated space of movable objects in Figure 2, in this regard, seem to allow the viewer of such a spatial reading, a kind of everyday reading of space we typically encounter in our own domestic space. The space in Figure 2, in other words, allows for a finer reading of distances between the objects, triggering a sense of engagement with space and the objects.

One might appreciate the cool, poised, and elegant look of the architect's space; perhaps a great deal more than the other photographer's space, if he/she is disciplined in the field of architecture. An architect could indeed easily comprehend, through Figure 1, the space, the form, and the structure, which had for many decades governed our understanding of architecture. Shulman's comment and his second shoot of the "furnished" space, on the other hand, seem to demonstrate how a photographer might see a space. Photographs are particularly effective in propping the details of life. Architectural photographs, nonetheless, cannot simply shoot a reportage. Architectural photographs, because of its subject matter, must address a kind of stasis, permanence. What we see in Shulman's space, therefore, is perhaps a kind of *specious reality*. A space we engage in, but only in a fictitious way.

If we agree that spatial localization and globalization depends on not so much the innate nature of space as how we negotiate our relations between the familiar and the foreign spaces, we find in Shulman's two photographs the operative medium that defines such relations. When the two sets of Shulman's photographs are read together, the interlaced or shifting relations of global and local spaces provide us with a dynamic knowledge of space, where the locals and the global re-define accordingly to trigger rich spatial experience.

ENDNOTES

1 Certeau, Michel de. "Tours and Maps." In *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

2 Shulman, Julius. An interview on September 25, 1992. In Rosa, Joseph, Esther McCoy, and Julius Shulman. *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman*. New York: Rizzoli, 1994. p.51. Rosa adds a brief comment to Shulman's quote and the pair of photographs exemplifying the two occasions: whereas Neutra wanted a staged depiction of space; Shulman wanted the space presented as it was used.

I use the term "look" in the sense that was 3 used by Michael Podro. Podro, in discussing Poussin's The Worship of the Golden Calf; and Poussin's and Auerbach's studies after Titian. Podro argues that the medium-specific or technical conditions imposed on the painters are not so much restrictive as beneficial in conveying the formulative aspects of the paintings, thus triggering the viewer's engagement with the work. Podro calls such depictive qualities of artwork as the "look of the drawing procedure." See Podro, Michael. "Depiction and the Golden Calf." In Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation, edited by Norman Bryson, Michael Holly and Keith Moxey, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991. 4 Cutting, James E., and Peter M. Vishton. "Perceiving Layout and Knowing Distances: The Integration, Relative Potency, and Contextual Use of Different Information About Depth." In Perception of Space and Motion, edited by William Epstein and Sheena Rogers. San Diego: Academic Press, 1995. I use the term "phenomenal space," the space that appears to us through our perception, to distinguish it from the "objective space," which exists as such regardless of how we perceive it to be. The phenomenal space, therefore, is a kind of fictitious space that we imagine through our perception of "props" or "cues"; and includes the spaces we see through two-dimensional representations of space, as well as the spaces we see in actuality.

5 The summary that follows is largely derived from Cutting and Vishton. 1995.

6 "If all assumptions are valid, then 10° of visual angle below the horizon, the width of a fist held vertically at arm's length, is 9m away, assuming an eye height of 1.6m for an observer standing on level ground, and 2° below the horizon, the width of the thumb at arm's length, is about 50m away." Cutting and Vishton. 1995.

7 Another factor related to exaggeration of depth, which applies to both photographs, is the photographer's use of wide-angle lens. For a compelling study on the dynamics between the use of wide-angle lens in architectural photography and the representation of unique photographic space in modernist architecture, see Zimmerman, Claire. "Photographic Modern Architecture: Inside 'the New Deep'." The Journal of Architecture 9 (2004).