Output 4:
Modernism in Miniature: Points of View. Exhibition held at the Canadian Centre for architecture, Octagonal Gallery, 22 September - 08 January 2012.

Abstract

The exhibition ‘Modernism in Miniature: Points of View’ explored the intersections between the model boom of the early twentieth century and the parallel explosion of mass media in architectural culture. The project was rooted in the preliminary work done by Deriu during his residence at the CCA Study Centre as a Visiting Scholar in 2007. He was subsequently invited to carry out further research at the CCA archives and to curate this exhibition. Drawing primarily, though not exclusively, on materials from the CCA collections, the show illustrated various means by which architectural models were produced, reproduced, and disseminated to the public. The exhibition was installed in the CCA’s Octagonal Gallery and included photographs, magazines, film, and additional source materials that illustrated a variety of visual practices that contributed to position the architectural model as a preeminent tool of design and representation within European and American modernism. These objects were grouped according to six interrelated themes, which were presented in such a way as to create visual links between primary and secondary sources. The exhibition was widely reviewed in the international press and gained wider impact through a website, which has been further developed after the show to include selected images, installation shots, and downloadable materials, along with the video of Deriu’s curator’s talk delivered on the opening day.

Deriu was invited to present his project at the conference ‘Still Architecture: Photography, Vision and Cultural Transmission’ at the University of Cambridge, 2012. The same year, he was also invited to give a lecture at Nottingham Contemporary Art Centre, in conjunction with the exhibition of model photographs by the German artist Thomas Demand.

Key Words

Photography, imagery, architectural models, modernism
Context

The exhibition ‘Modernism in Miniature: Points of View’ was conceived by Deriu as a guest curator at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal and realised in collaboration with the CCA’s curatorial and design staff (fig.01). It was proposed as an exhibition that drew primarily on the Centre’s unique resources with additional items to be loaned or reproduced from other collections. The project underwent several iterations and was finally carried out in 2011. Deriu’s curatorship included a further period of in-depth research in the Centre’s library and archives, during the spring 2011, during which he unearthed a larger body of historical materials illustrating the multiple encounters between architectural photography and model making in the period 1920-1960. The exhibition opened to the public from 22 September 2011 to 8 January 2012.

General Description

Drawing primarily, though not exclusively, on materials from the CCA collections, ‘Modernism in Miniature: Points of View’ illustrated various ways through which the miniature architectural model was reconfigured through photography and disseminated to the public. The exhibition was installed in the CCA’s Octagonal Gallery (fig.16a,b) and included photographs, magazines, and additional source materials that illustrated a variety of visual practices that contributed to position the architectural model as a preeminent tool of design and representation within European and American modernism. These objects were grouped according to six interrelated themes. Each theme was presented through a selection of images displayed in large vertical cases and accompanying printed material in a horizontal case, thereby creating visual links between primary and secondary sources. The themes were:

Object and Image: Tools of Communication between Architect and Client (fig.10)
Foundations: Explorations of New Design Practices in Avant-Garde Schools (fig.11)
Shifts in Perspective: Model Photography and the Expression of Architectural Volumes (fig.12, 13, 14)
Recurrence: Image Circulation and the Making of a Modern Icon (fig.15)
Visual Constructions: Photographic Synthesis and Sequence of Model-Making Process (fig.06)
Art of Simulation: Composite Photography and the Quest for Illusion (fig.05)

The display comprised of 147 objects in total, including 34 original photographs, composite photographs, 83 contact prints on one frame, 16 books and periodicals, 1 video, 3 reproductions, 2 booklets, 1 digital interface for further readings. All texts were in English and French. It opened with B.V. Doshi’s wooden model of the Villa Chimambhai, designed by Le Corbusier for
The mayor of Ahmedabad in 1951-53, along with a series of 84 contact prints of the model photographed by Lucien Hervé (fig.10). Other exhibits included rare footage from Pierre Chenal’s film, L’architecture d’aujourd’hui. To complete the display, a series of computers allowed visitors to read or download selected texts from the relevant literature of the period.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in the project:

1) How did photography impact the revival of model making in the early twentieth-century?
2) What was the agency of the ‘model photograph’ within architectural culture, and in particular with regard to modernism?
3) How was this imagery disseminated, and to what effects?

Aims and Objectives

1) To explore the historical relationship between photography and the architectural model

Architectural photography and architectural model making have been subjects of extensive research and scholarship over the past decade and a half, and yet their intersections have seldom been explored. The exhibition revisited the so-called model boom of the inter-war period, when the architectural model was reinstated as a preeminent tool of representation in architectural practice, after a period of decline during the nineteenth century. This historical phenomenon has largely been explained in practical and aesthetic terms, as the 3-D model responded both to the needs to communicate design to the client and to the modernist shift towards a new objectivity. Technical innovation, such as the introduction of cardboard and other light-weight materials (fig.02), made the miniature architectural model more expedient than ever. (fig.09)

The research uncovered another aspect of this history that, however widespread, had not been investigated in depth before: that is, the impact of photography and mass media (exhibitions, magazines film) on the production and reproduction of architectural models. At the same time as photography exerted a profound impact on the development and circulation of modernist architecture, it also contributed to reconfigure the model as image. (fig.08) The exhibition showed that the historical encounter between photography and the model did not leave the latter unchanged.
Its object-hood was constantly mediated and transformed within the symbolic economy of representation inaugurated by the mass media, and in particular the illustrated magazine. No sooner was the model back in vogue than it was reduced to a two dimensional picture which could be manipulated and harnessed to endless visual effects. While photography helped to revive the role of the model, at the same time it destroyed its aura as a unique, original object and paved the way for its progressive de-materialization in the age of computer modeling and digital design.

2) To explore the characteristics of the ‘model photograph’, and its specific agency within the modernist image repertoire

By intersecting the histories of architectural photography and model making, the project explored the nature of the model photograph as a distinctive genre. This particular class of images embodied a new relationship between 2-D and 3-D media that emerged in the first half of the 20th-century, when the revival of model making was accompanied (and sometimes determined) by the medium of photography and its possibilities of reproduction. Photographs were used in different aspects of the design process, from the record of a study model to the presentation of a project to the client. The exhibition presented a variety of historical examples of these uses, ranging from architectural education to competitions and publications. Thus the introduction of model making in the curriculum of avant-garde design school in the 1920s, such as the Vkhutemas (fig.11) and Bauhaus (fig.02), went hand in hand with the recording of models on camera and the diffusion of model photos in the books and magazines of the time. Rather than being a mere process of documentation and dissemination, the photography of models took a life of its own, as it were, bringing about an imagery that became itself an object of study and in some cases acquired a cult status. This was the case, for instance, of an iconic project such as Ivan Leonidov’s Lenin Institute and Library (his graduation project at Vkhutemas), whose model photographs were exhibited in Moscow and quickly constructed one of the visual manifestoes of the constructivist movement. (fig.07)

The research brought up historical evidence of how the spatial and temporal qualities of the architectural model were both reconfigured in the field of photographic vision. A section of the exhibition dwelled on the visual possibilities offered by the camera to visualise the model from various points of view and to express architectural volumes either through single, synoptic images or through series of images taken from different angles. Photography made it possible to visualise the miniature model in ways that often abstracted it from its context as a pristine, platonic object – as, for instance, in the work of Le Corbusier and J.J.P. Oud. (fig.06, 13) Another section of the exhibition explored the temporal quality of model photographs, which gained prominence in the architectural press also through the cinematic use of strips and sequences. These served to demonstrate, for instance, the flexibility of interior spaces, the work of moving devices, or the assemblage of prefabricated buildings.
(e.g. Fuller’s Dymaxion House). Photography was instrumental to documenting modern architecture as a process, and it therefore produced images that were not only records of objects but veritable visual constructions. Conversely, the camera was also used effectively to capture the act of model making itself, by framing the model and its makers within portraits that have also become part of the modernist iconography. (fig.03, 04)

Finally, the exhibition cast a look at the composite image of model obtained through the technique of montage, a particular subset of model photography that emerged in the early 1920s and was later perfected in the hyper-realist montages produced in the 1950s and 60s by professional photographic studios such as Rafael Landau (for Oscar Niemeyer) and Hedrich-Blessing (for Mies van der Rohe). The highly sophisticated montages of van der Rohe’s models of the 1950s constitute the apogee of this particular art of illusion, and at the same time mark an end point to the curatorial narrative. (fig.05, 06)

3) To illustrate the various tools and channels of dissemination of this imagery

A further aim of the project was to chart the discourse on model making and model representation that emerged during the high modernist period. Hundreds of historical magazines, books, and catalogues were researched and a selection of this literature was included in the exhibition. (fig.09) Photographs of models became a pervasive means of architectural representation in the interwar period, either complementing architectural drawings through a novel form of three-dimensional view, or in some cases supplementing graphic media altogether. The image repertoire of the Modern Movement was saturated with model photographs, and some of the best-known projects of the modernist avant-garde were chiefly (if not only) known through such images. A whole section of the exhibition was devoted to the theme of ‘Recurrence’, whereby a very small number of model views in some cases established the canonical image of an architectural project and endowed it with cult status. Mies’s Glass Skyscraper project was the case study on display. (fig.15) While the project shows how model photographs became a staple of architectural publications across the world, it focuses on few magazines that made a particularly prominent (and different) use of this imagery: L’Architecture Vivante, which acted as a clearing house of modernist architecture in 1920s France; and The Architectural Forum, which hosted not only a number of features about the virtues of the architectural model as a marketing tool, but also carried many such images to illustrate major projects (such as,
The research combines archival study and theoretical interpretation, informed by critical discourse on architectural media and representation. The search for primary sources was mostly conducted in the CCA collections, where Deriu had the benefit of working initially as a Visiting Scholar at the Study Centre then as a Guest Curator for the subsequent exhibition. Some objects that were required to complement the CCA’s holdings were researched and obtained from other repositories (MoMA; RIBA; the Chicago History Museum).

The selection of objects for display was discussed in detail with the curators of the photographs and models collections at the CCA. The selection of Le Corbusier’s Villa Chimamnubhai model and respective photographs by Lucien Hervé, as the opening feature of the exhibition, required detailed research into the circumstances of that project and the various iterations of the model as well as the correspondence with the client, which were enabled by the archival files at CCA. The ca. 90 original contact prints made by Hervé had themselves to be organised and curated in a specific case displayed next to the model. (fig. 10)

A considerable part of the research concerned historical publications and required a comprehensive study of the literature that evidenced the discourse about architectural models (and the use of model photographs) in the period 1920-1960. The research, analysis, and selection of primary sources was corroborated by the study of contemporary literature on architectural representation and model making. Furthermore, the project gained its conceptual edge from the critical interpretation of the historical material that was based on theoretical research. Notions of miniaturization, simulation, and hyper-realism were central to this critical interpretation, as articulated in greater detail in the essay for the Camera Constructs book and the EAHN conference paper.

Research Methods

notably, the Rockefeller Centre in New York City) over the 1930s. Furthermore, the project also made reference to the use of architectural models in film, and the exhibition included an extract from the rare documentary L’architecture d’aujourd’hui made by Pierre Chenal for and with Le Corbusier in 1930.
Dissemination / Impact

As outlined in the Summary, the overall research project led to two scholarly outputs as well as an exhibition project. The essay for the book Camera Constructs was based on a previous paper delivered at the eponymous conference held at the University of East London in 2006. The paper was largely revised for the edited publication, an interdisciplinary volume of the highest calibre that comprises the latest scholarship on architecture and photography. The other scholarly output was presented at one of the main conferences of architectural history in the world, being the second biannual International Meeting of the European Architectural History Network. Furthermore, Deriu was also invited to present various aspects of this research at the University of Cambridge (international conference ‘Still Architecture: Photography, Vision and Cultural Transmission’, 2012) and at the Nottingham Contemporary Art Centre, where he gave a public lecture in conjunction with the exhibition of model photographs by the German artist Thomas Demand (2012).

The exhibition ‘Modernism in Miniature: Points of View’ was on show at the CCA Octagonal Gallery, Montreal, between 22 September 2011 – 8 January 2012 (P01). A permanent exhibition webpage was designed on the CCA website, which includes a bibliography, links to selected items in the CCA collections, and samples of period literature scanned for the reader’s use:

The website also includes a clip of Deriu’s Curator’s Talk, which was held in the CCA Auditorium on 22 September 2011 and broadcast live on the internet.

A press conference was held at CCA the day prior to the exhibition opening. Articles and reviews in the architectural media include:

Caramellino, G. ‘Il Modernismo in miniatura.’ Il Giornale dell’Architettura 99, November 2011, p.28 [fig.P02].


Hocherau, A. ‘La médiatisation de l’architecture avant la lettre.’ Voir, 13 October 2011, p.35 [fig.P03].


Simonneau, T. ‘Sur les traces de la troisième dimension.’ Le Délit, 27 September 2011, p.15 [fig.P04].
Evidence

Fig. 01 Exhibition poster, CCA building façade, Montréal, September 2011
Fig. 02 Detail of a paper study for Josef Albers’s preliminary course at the Bauhaus, Dessau, Germany, after 1928. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver print, CCA Collection
Fig. 03 Theo van Doesburg working on the model for a private house, Paris, France, 1923. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver print, CCA Collection
Fig. 04 Daniil Fridman and Gleb Glushchenko with a model for the Building of Industry, Sverdlovsk, Soviet Union, 1930–1931. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver print, CCA
Fig. 05 Condominio di Sanremo, Italy, project by Carlo Mollino and Mario Roggero. Composite photograph, 1946 or after. Photographer: Carlo Mollino, gelatin silver print, CCA Collection
Fig. 06 Unité d’Habitation, Marseille, France, project by Le Corbusier, view of unassembled elements of a study model, 1945–1952. Photographer: Lucien Hervé, gelatin silver print, CCA Collection
Fig. 07 Lenin Institute and Library, Moscow, Soviet Union, diploma project by Ivan Leonidov, model view, 1927. In SA: sovremennaia arkhitektura, no. 4-5, 1927, CCA Collection
Fig. 08 Centrosoyuz Palace, project by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, model views, 1929, In L’architecture vivante, Spring 1930, CCA Collection
Fig. 09 Advertisement for the model making firm Perfecta. In L’architecture d’aujourd’hui, no. 9, 1935, CCA collection
Fig. 10 Installation view: ‘Object and Image’ section. Model for Villa Chimanbhai, Ahmedabad, India, project by Le Corbusier, 1953–1954. Wood with plastic inset and later balsa wood additions, joined with finishing nails and adhesive, CCA collection. Photographs of a model for Villa Chimanbhai, Ahmedabad, India, project by Le Corbusier, 1951–1953. Photographer: Lucien Hervé, CCA collection
Fig. 11 View of an exhibition of study models for caustic soda processing towers made by students for the exercise “Functionally Specific Task in the Demonstration of Volume and Space”, Vkhutemas, Moscow, Soviet Union, after 1923. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver prints, CCA Collection
Fig. 12 Installation view: ‘Shifts in Perspective’ section Wall frame: Building of Industry, Sverdlovsk, Soviet Union, project by Daniil Fridman and Gleb Glushchenko, four model views, 1930–1931. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver prints, CCA Collection. Johnson House, Pinehurst, United States, project by J. J. P. Oud, four collages of the model view, 1931–1932. Unknown photographer, cut-out gelatin silver prints mounted on cardboard, CCA Collection
Horizontal case: Selection of 1920s–1930s architectural magazines carrying illustrations of the Glass Skyscraper for Berlin, Germany, project by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe
Fig. 13 Johnson House, Pinehurst, United States, project by J. J. P. Oud, collage of the model view, 1931–1932. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver prints, CCA Collection.

Fig. 14 Building of Industry, Sverdlovsk, Soviet Union, project by Daniil Fridman and Gleb Glushchenko, model view, 1930–1931. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver prints, CCA Collection Collection

Fig. 15 Installation view: ‘Shifts in Perspective’ section
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Fig. 16a, b Exhibition Layout Plans

Press

P. 01 Modernism in Miniature: Points of View Exhibition Press Release
P. 02 Caramellino, G. ‘Il Modernismo in miniatura.’ Il Giornale dell’Architettura 99, November 2011, p. 28
P. 03 Hocherau, A. ‘La médiatisation de l’architecture avant la lettre.’ Voir, 13 October 2011, p. 35
P. 04 Simonneau, T. ‘Sur les traces de la troisième dimension.’ Le Délit, 27 September 2011, p. 15

Video

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Press

You are cordially invited to attend the press visit of the exhibition

Modernism in Miniature: Points of View
22 September 2011 – 8 January 2012

Thursday 22 September 2011, 11 am
Octagonal Gallery
Canadian Centre for Architecture
1920, rue Baile, Montreal

In the company of Davide Deriu, curator of the exhibition

Modernism in Miniature: Points of View, an exhibition curated by Davide Deriu, Senior Lecturer in architecture at the University of Westminster, London, explores the encounter between photography and model-making in the period between c. 1920–1960. Focusing on model photography as a distinctive genre, the exhibition suggests that the so-called ‘model box’ was intricately bound up with the explosion of modern mass media. Channeled by the illustrated press, miniatures reached out to a wide public and in some cases, acquired a cult status that has endured to this day. By revisiting a widespread yet often neglected imagery, the exhibition provokes questions about the relationship between media and architectural culture and the specific impact of photography on the perception of miniatures.

Kindly confirm your attendance by contacting:
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1920, rue Baile, Montreal
514 939 7926 www.cca.qc.ca/modernism

In collaboration with

Video

V.01 Davide Deriu, ‘Modernism in Miniature’, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 23 September 2011
Il Modernismo in miniatura

Punti di vista: fotografia e modelli di architettura tra il 1920 e il 1960

MONTRÉAL (CANADA). È un ritratto di Daniil Fridman e Gleb Glouchtchenko, intenti a osservare il plastico del loro progetto per l’Industria Sverdlovsk, ad aprire la mostra «Modernismo in Miniature». Un’immagine più che eloquente, che non solo sintetizza il complesso rapporto che da sempre lega l’architetto al suo plastico, ma riassume i temi di questa piccola e raffinata esposizione dedicata all’incontro tra la fotografia e il modello di architettura, che raggiunse la sua piena affermazione nel secondo dopoguerra.

Oggetto di attenzione crescente negli ultimi decenni, la maquette vanta una gloriosa tradizione, offuscata lungo il XIX secolo dall’affermazione del beau dessin di tradizione Beaux-Arts e dalle nuove tecniche di riproduzione. Saranno gli anni venti a inaugurarne una fortunata stagione, marcata dall’incontro tra la riscoperta del modello da parte della cultura architettonica e la diffusione dei mezzi di comunicazione di massa. È al nuovo status acquisito dal plastico con la sua riproduzione (e al ruolo che la sua immagine assume nella costruzione del repertorio visivo dell’architettura moderna), che guarda la mostra allestita dallo studio 1218 A all’interno della Octogonal Gallery, dove trova posto parte del ricco corpus di fotografie, plastici e pubblicazioni provenienti dalla collezione del CCA, costruito dal curatore Davide Deriu a partire dal 2007.

Una selezione critica e rigorosa che restituisce la complessità del panorama attraverso cinque sezioni tematiche (Origini, Cambiamenti di prospettiva, Ricorrenze, Costruzioni visive e Arte della simulazione), introducendo altrettante questioni: il nuovo uso «popolare» del modello per l’insegnamento e la pratica d’architettura (si pensi alle immagini dei lavori degli atelier di design, tra Bauhaus e Vkhutemas); l’influenza di alcune vedute, talvolta manipolate dall’architetto, che hanno fatto la fortuna critica dei progetti; la presenza d’immagini ricorrenti sulle riviste d’avanguardia che hanno contribuito a creare icona e immaginari del Movimento moderno (è il caso dei progetti europei di Mies van der Rohe); il ruolo della fotografia nel documentare attraverso sequenze la realizzazione del modello (dal monumento alla III Internazionale alla Dymaxion di Buckminster Fuller), ormai protagonista indiscusso della stampa specializzata per la visione idealizzata dell’architettura che permette Rivelatore, infine, l’uso del fotomontaggio che prende forma in dagli anni venti (Corbett) e acquisita una sua autonomia disciplinare divenendo una vera e propria ossessione per gli architetti nel dopoguerra (da Mies a Oscar Niemeyer a Carlo Mollino).

A illustrare il rapporto tra l’oggetto e la sua immagine (e il nuovo ruolo che il modello assume come strumento per la comunicazione con il cliente e con un pubblico più esteso) è la splendida maquette in legno della villa Chimabhai progettata da Le Corbusier ad Ahmedabad, cui fanno da sfondo i 90 scatti del modello di lavoro a opera di Lucien Hervé. Molteplici sono i temi che la mostra introduce, come l’uso strumentale del modello «urbano» da parte di architetti e urbanisti del Movimento moderno per promuovere le proposte utopiche e visionarie che anticipano la città del futuro, tema qui solo abbozzato attraverso il video L’architecture d’aujourd’hui, che ritrae Le Corbusier intento a illustrare la sua Ville Contemporaine.

Gaia Caramellino

«Modernism in Miniature. Points of Vi e v», a cura di Davide Deriu, Cca, Montreal, fino all’8 gennaio
28

P.03 Hocherau, A. “La médiatisation de l’architecture avant la lettre.” Voir, 13 October 2011, p. 35.
ARTS VISUELS

Sur les traces de la troisième dimension

Modernisme et maquettes au Centre d’architecture de Montréal.

Thomas Simonneau
Le Débit

Le modernisme paraît déjà bien loin de nos jours, mais c’est sans compter le riche patrimoine architectural qu’il nous a légué et qui nous entoure quotidiennement. C’est en effet pendant cette période que se développe une nouvelle perception du volume, de la maquette et de l’architecture en général. Vendredi dernier, le Centre Canadien d’Architecture (CCA) proposait aux mordus d’architecture, comme aux simples curieux, de découvrir des travaux miniatures qui sont à l’origine de projets colossaux comme celui du monument à la troisième Internationale à Petrograd.

Deux salles ont suffi pour accueillir cette exposition modeste mais finement mise en forme. Parmi la centaine de personnes présentes, beaucoup de jeunes griffonnent, bloc-notes à la main. Quelques imprimés rouges sur les murs accompagnent les différentes photographies de maquettes signées Le Corbusier ou encore Buckminster Fuller. Une des œuvres principales de ce dernier se nomme la «Dymaxion House», conçue pour réaliser d’importantes économies lors de la production en chaîne des maisons mais aussi de garantir un environnement moderne et confortable au client. Les photographies des maquettes exécutées par Le Corbusier révèlent quant à elles le génie de l’architecte à travers le concept du «système modulaire d’unité d’habitation», une «visibilité nouvelle du travail en maquette qui coïncide avec l’avènement de la photographie», selon l’introduction de l’exposition écrite sur un des murs. Ces photographies reconstituent les différentes étapes de construction de la maquette, illustrant ainsi le véritable processus à la fois artistique et mécanique. Par un jeu minutieux de cadrage et de composition, la maquette est transposée dans un champ visuel où elle semble flotter, libre de toute gravité. La photographie de maquette permet donc de représenter l’œuvre sur un arrière-plan neutre à une échelle ainsi indéfinie que seul le spectateur peut déterminer. Il s’agit de laisser courir son imagination et son interprétation personnelle tout au long de l’exposition.

Les propos du commissaire Davide Deriu lors d’une conférence aux alentours de dix-neuf heures suggère également un lien fort entre le traumatisme de la Première Guerre mondiale, l’apparition de médias importants et ces photographies singulières et décalées. La société en général est en pleine période de transition ainsi que son art et ses artistes. Ils découvrent et innovent, permettant ainsi à la plupart des édifices photographiés de s’approprier des formes jusque là imaginables. On croise donc des formes insolites, ovales ou pointues et l’usage de matériaux et de techniques qui rompent totalement avec les normes de l’époque.

Sur un ton un peu plus détendu, le CCA accueillait également le duo de DJs Leboeuf et Laviolette dans le cadre de l’exposition. Mélange réussi d’un style musical contemporain et d’Art moderne dans un bâtiment chaleureux. Le vernissage de Modernisme en miniature avait donc de quoi attirer l’attention des amateurs d’événements culturels de la métropole montréalaise, quels que soient leurs intérêts.