

In Extremis

Architecture photography in the twentieth century was haunted by the paradigmatic shot of F.L. Wright's Fallingwater: architecture imposed on pristine nature as a triumph of man's will. But this was soon to change, as it was realized that architecture would gain enormously when shown in its true colors, as a human-scale intervention embedded in the vastness of nature. This wasn't only a matter of proportional relation in a competition for attention but rather an issue of overall attitude: landscape had become the real protagonist.

As such, landscape sets its own rules for architectural encroachment. A fully aware architect may now draw inspiration from this imposing, majestic relationship and translate it into a human tribute to the landscape like a religious offering. The photographer, if alerted to such intimate relationships, would then advance his own rendition in harmony with the interaction of these two agents: nature as the protagonist and the architect as an interpreter.

As such, architectural landscapes eventually began to reflect new concepts of nature and of man's response to it. The quick depletion of genuine natural settings due to overcrowding of the planet triggered a search for the hermit's paradise set further out in the wilderness, while new technological advances permitted the colonization of previously uninhabitable areas. Superman's glacial abode in the Arctic perfectly reflects this notion. More significantly and perhaps more subtly, urban ecology notions also affected attitudes toward city life and began to seep into architectural design. Architects were called upon to furnish a boundless habitat, equivalent to *natura naturans*, seemingly based on the art of immateriality. If harsh climatic conditions dictated the use of compact, defensible built mass, the opposite would hold in vulnerable, translucent objects set in the urban milieu. As the 'new nature', this artificial environment within grasp of contemporary man could help create an effect similar to those notions of majestic tranquility springing from nature's contemplation.

An outpouring of new, exciting architecture has thus emerged world-wide to satisfy this widely-felt need. As new paths in design were being explored, the ways of looking at architecture itself, from the past or the present, were equally affected. Nothing was more conspicuous than the influence this approach had on architectural landscape photography. E. Attali's work lies squarely within this challenging and hazardous field of constant experimentation and ferment.

E. Attali was able to unearth and fully expose the overpowering presence of nature in works of architecture nesting in remote, inhospitable landscapes on the outer limits of the known world. She also managed to disguise other landscapes, relatively tamer and more familiar to us, by turning them into similarly ominous and forbidding environments. Her approach entailed the exploitation of oblique, exaggerated angles of vision and extreme lighting conditions – the long shadows created at dawn or the setting of

mysterious darkness at dusk. The transformation then of perceptiveness is complete: architecture often “floats” or “glimmers” in an artificial void reminiscent of the pitch black skies encompassed by spaceships.

But her even more distinct accomplishment is her capacity to apply such novel ways of looking at architecture in the contemporary urban environment. This new awareness of nature has directed her to emphasize the fluidity and transparency belying modern architecture. This resulted into a search for fractured planes severed from their context, the interplay of abstract details brought out by the incidental passage of light, the multiplication of layers that refuse identification. Nature’s involvement is made explicit by reflected trees and greenery on glass panes or latent by the narcissistic multiplication of architectural elements reproduced by the same process, so as to create an outlandish ‘landscape’. This impression is accentuated by controlled tonal reversal: long exposures create dazzling strips of artificial light which help create a ‘surreal’ atmosphere.

Such techniques block out the conventional representation of a building as a reminiscence of standard drawings and replace it with a perceptive richness closer to that encountered in a dense forest floor where glimpses of shimmering light penetrate the darkness produced by multiple layers of foliage. Some photographs go even further since they emphasize the penetration or encirclement of architecture by nature, seen as either framed view or actual close physical contact. Under such circumstances architecture is depicted as a frail, insignificant intruder to the natural setting. By such a process of x-raying architecture Attali bisects its mass and allows its inner structure, its fragility to emerge. This notion is sometimes further exploited by reducing architecture to a mere strip in the background of a landscape; in this manner the Renaissance custom of allowing a landscape to occupy the distant background of a painting is reversed.

The daring exclusion of man-made structures from a landscape is a further proof of Attali’s determination to go beyond architecture as a compulsory ingredient to a depiction of architectural landscape. In such views, architecture is ever-present because these seemingly ‘uninhabited’ images of nature directly refer to architectural properties: monumentality, abstractness, rhythmic repetition, or uniform texture. With the help of a rigorous set of allusions, architecture thus returns as a grand metaphor. Its presence goes much deeper than the conventional colonization of natural landscape by structures and buildings. Attali’s keen perception can foresee this eventual shift of roles and record it convincingly on film.