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Constructing Worlds: a vision of the modern city

The Constructing Worlds exhibition, shortly to open in Sweden after a residency at the Barbican in London, has a subtitle of Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age. While the images on show tell us a great deal about both these art forms, the Leisure Review also found some insight regarding how we live today.

We live in an urban age and consequently much of the public discourse is directly or indirectly related to how best to build and shape our cities. The debate encompasses every aspect of our culture and every aspect of our understanding of what it means to live and live well in the modern urban environment.

For any culture professional this is the most striking theme of the Constructing Worlds exhibition. It is an exhibition about photography, architecture and the relationship between them but it also explores and exposes changing attitudes to architecture and obliges us to consider the eternal need for buildings to meet the needs of the people who make use of them. The images on show illustrate the distance between the conceptual creation of the architectural project and the often prosaic realities of life in a city; somewhere in the gap sits our understanding of culture.

The first approach to Constructing Worlds is as a photographic exhibition. Here there are great works from great artists, many rarely displayed and some shown in the UK for the first time. The exhibition brings together 250 pieces from 18 leading photographers working between the 1930s and the present, all of whom have in some way changed the way we think about architecture and the way it shapes our environment.

Bernice Abbott's project Changing New York opens the exhibition. Created between 1935 and 1939, the images capture the transformation of New York into the epitome of modernity. Having learned her craft in Paris as an assistant to Man Ray, Abbott returned to the United States to document the changing city. Her images, made in 1932, of the Rockefeller Centre under construction record the striking contrast between the emerging skyscraper age launching from among the low-rise tenements and the brick-built shops. Working at a similar time, Walker Evans was documenting rural America in the Southern states during the New Deal. Commissioned by the Department of Agriculture to undertake a survey of vernacular architecture of the Deep South, Evans provides a chronicle of the steel mills, farm houses and cafés, the boardwalks and roadside shops, the churches and the barbershops that seem to be as far removed from the buildings of New York as it was possible to be.

Only a decade or so later, Julius Shulman's Case Study Houses project was bringing colour and contrast to the experimental domestic architecture of 1950s Californian modernism. These set-piece images show the domestic projects of celebrated architects, including Charles and Ray Eames, in magazine formats and vivid colours, capturing the mood of post-war optimism and glamour. It was something that Shulman was clearly conscious of at the time. Referring to his photograph of architect Pierre Koenig's 1960 Stahl House in Los

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Angeles, titled Case Study House #22, a night-time exterior that shows the lit interior of Koenig's glass-wall construction, Shulman explained: "My wife used to say, 'After all, it's only a glass box with two girls sitting in it.' But somehow that one scene expresses what architecture is all about."

And this is what Constructing Worlds is all also about. From the emergence of the skyscraper and the Californian dream of modernist domesticity, the images move chronologically from the Great Depression through to the establishment of modernism as an architectural tradition in America, post-colonial Africa and India. They show the 1960s architectural heritage of European industry, the suburbanisation of America and Europe and the impact of mass urbanisation in Asia, the Middle East and South America. Bernd and Hiller Becker captured the stark beauty of industrial construction at first in the Rhur of their native Germany and then in the US, UK and France. Thomas Struth adopted a structured approach to image-making, trying to capture the sense of a city in a single image. His 1978 photograph of Crosby Street and Spring Street in New York's Soho showed a city streetscape littered with a tide of detritus, a stark contrast to the vibrant, up-town image New York liked to portray and also to the city it has become.

And as much as Constructing Worlds is about photography and architecture, it is also about people and how they make their lives within, and often in spite of, their surroundings. Guy Tillim's 2008 series, titled Avenue Patrice Lumumba, documents the abandoned luxuries of the late-modernist colonial buildings in Angola, Congo and Mozambique, buildings now stranded as bizarre memories of wealth and power. Bas Princen's Refuge, Five Cities series from 2009 shows the oddities of endless innovation in the urban development of the Middle East. Iwan Baan documents the life of the Torre David complex, originally designed to be a high-rise, high-profile focal point for the financial centre of Caracas but never finished after the banking collapse of 1994. Baan's images show the process of recolonisation by squatters after the building had lain empty for more than a decade years, capturing the innovative and prosaic practicalities of adapting a building for a variety of unintended uses.

Other works in the exhibition serve to illustrate the jarring contradictions of large-scale construction projects in small-scale environments – Nadav Kander's images of traditional riverside activities on the Yangtze taking place under the massive concrete constructions made for bridge and dam projects, along with Simon Norfolk's images of new urban landscapes rising from the rubble of post 9/11 Afghanistan, are particularly striking – but Baan's Torre David series does as much as any of the works to illustrate the importance of people in the context of the building and the city.

As an exploration of photography and architecture, and the relationship between the two, Constructing Worlds is a successful exhibition but perhaps more than anything else it illustrates and documents the changes and enduring truths of urban life, the magnificent and the mundane, the ambitions and the achievements of those who live lives in the gaps and shadows created by the architectural ambitions of those who would be powerful.

Constructing Worlds is at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design, Stockholm from 20 February to 17 May 2015. It was previously at the Barbican in London.

A fully illustrated catalogue of the exhibition, including essays and texts on all 18 photographers in the show, is published by Prestel ISBN: 978-3-7913-6207-6

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