
BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Le Corbusier & Lucien Hervé. The Architect & the Photographer: A Dialogue*

Edited by Jacques Sbriglio, Thames and Hudson, 296 pages, 224 illustrations, 2011,
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A painter before he was a photographer, Lucien Hervé (1910–2007) was associated with Le Corbusier for more than fifteen years, from 1949 to 1965. The encounter between the two is well-known: Lucien went to shoot the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille and – as required by a notice posted at the entrance of the building – he sent more than six hundred photographs to Le Corbusier, who replied with the famous statement: “you have the soul of an architect”.

When the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles acquired, in 2002, over 18,000 negatives and colour transparencies taken by Hervé as the official photographer of Le Corbusier, the photographic legacy of the Hungarian-born photographer started to be spread with a series of important exhibitions: we may recall here the shows at the Hôtel de Sully (Paris, 2002), the CIVA (Bruxelles, 2005), the Fondation Le Corbusier (Paris, 2007) and the Palazzo Te (Mantova, 2009).

Originally published in French under the evocative title *Le Corbusier / Lucien Hervé / Contacts* (L'Atelier d'édition, 2011), *Le Corbusier & Lucien Hervé. The Architect & the Photographer: a Dialogue* turns our gaze, perhaps for the first time, away from the artistic importance of the photographs themselves that only indirectly illuminate the architectural value of the images. Jacques Sbriglio, editor of the book, has selected sixteen buildings by Le Corbusier - from Paris to Ronchamp, from Chandigarh to Roquebrune-Cap-Martin: he briefly describes each of them, and illustrates the texts with a selection of contact prints made by Hervé and held today in the Fondation Le Corbusier. In the Fondation there are thousands of contact prints, all assembled on 1,200 colourful pieces of cardboard: 184 of these can now be seen in this new publication. The sheets represent the channel of communication between the photographer and the architect, so the former could select images to illustrate particular aspects of each project. Sometimes Le Corbusier produced sketches from the contact prints and sent these drawings to Lucien Hervé so the photographer could select a particular image from the archive.

Why are these materials so interesting to us?

For at least two reasons. First of all interdependence: only in 1949 did Le Corbusier start his intellectual and professional relationship with a photographer, Hervé. This relationship, a mutual exchange, was to continue until the death of the architect, in 1965. Furthermore, the important result of the collaboration between the two is shown in Hervé's exploration of architectural space seen from a human viewpoint, an aspect of his work that, surprisingly, has not yet been investigated.

The second reason is documentation: it is really important to have available a complete set of printed materials realized by the Hungarian-born master. Even though the Getty Research Institute holds the entire collection of Hervé's negatives related to Le Corbusier, he was well-known as the “photographer with scissors” as he himself used to say: he cropped all his printed images and this aspect gives the original contact prints at the Fondation Le Corbusier a fundamental importance as evidence of what we might call the ‘original cut’.

In the few interviews that he gave during his life, Hervé always spoke about the influence on his photographic thinking of Rembrandt, and the films of Pabst, Vigo, and Eisenstein. This allows us to understand the richness of Hervé's cultural background, and why he gained the esteem of the Swiss-born architect. All the images are shot in different light conditions which makes shadows part of the composition in a very subtle and refined way. Furthermore, looking at the complete contact sheets, it is clear how a cinematic dynamism was generated by the relationship between single shots that should be read as a sequence.

With a preface by Michel Richard, Director of the Fondation Le Corbusier, and two introductions by Quentin Bajac and Béatrice Andrieux, the book indicates the lively context within which Hervé worked. The Fondation Le Corbusier and the Getty, by allowing the publication of this extremely interesting material, will generate new knowledge, not only about the *Architect of the Century* – as he was rightly called in the exhibition of the Barbican in 1987 – but about his photographer, perhaps the architectural photographer of the century, for his role in spread-

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
ing an awareness of Corbu and, among others, of Aalto, Mallet-Stevens, Gropius, Neutra and Niemeyer.

Hervé's atelier is still very active in Paris, a few steps from Trocadéro, in the XVI *arrondissement*. His wife Judith Elkan, with a small group of passionate young people, continues with deep dedication the dissemination of his activity. Besides the institutions, we have to thank them and Thames & Hudson for producing this accessible oblong book: the scholarly analysis of the printed images can now start.

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