



# BACK TO REALITY

**PHOTOGRAPHER JUERGEN NOGAI HAS WORKED ON THE REALIZATION OF MANY ARCHITECTURE BOOKS. HE ARGUES FOR A GREATER RESPECT FOR REALITY: 'I THINK PEOPLE ARE GETTING TIRED OF HAVING TO LOOK AT A FAKE WORLD!'**

*Text Katya Tylevich / Photos Brin Morris*

In the eyes of those Los Angeles architecture snobs who say ‘mid-century modern’ with the frequency that others say ‘um’, German-born photographer Juergen Nogai has just taken the Lord’s name in vain. ‘It’s not all about Julius Shulman,’ he says, laughing.

Nogai and I are standing in the bright Santa Monica bungalow where he lives, works and harbours upwards of 70,000 photographs in small file cabinets, one of which he opens now, mumbling, ‘L, Lautner, John. M, Myers, Barton. But where is . . . ?’

Nogai looks up at me. ‘We’re in the digital nirvana of crashing hard drives. At least I know these photos will be here 100 years from now,’ he says. Then, casually: ‘Unless there’s a fire.’ This from the man who owns sole copyright to all the photographs he and Shulman took in their ten years of intensive collaboration, during the final decade of Shulman’s life. Nogai is currently lending 80 such photographs (130 more come from the Getty Research Institute) to the biggest ever Shulman exhibition, which is travelling through Europe now and will be for the next five years. The show features two sections: photographs by Shulman before 2000 and ‘The Last Decade’, photographs by J. Shulman & J. Nogai Photography.

‘When I moved to LA in 2000, Julius had to learn that I was not his assistant. I had been working for years already, had my own studio in Germany, and maybe at that time had even had more publications to my name than he did.’

Nogai says this all good-naturedly. In fact, he’s the one to bring up Shulman throughout our talk – warmly, without my prompting, because I actually want to pick a different part of Nogai’s brain, not just the ‘Shulman lobe’.

Nogai is among the most practised and opinionated architectural photographers in the field today. He has countless file cabinets’ worth of experience working with leading publishers of architecture books, including Abrams, Taschen, Rizzoli, and Monacelli. Nogai is no stranger to architecture magazines, or to Hollywood celebrities wanting headshots of their noteworthy cribs. So I meet with Nogai to hear his informed thoughts (and, I hope, rants) about the representation, misrepresentation and significance of architecture on page and on screen. And we get to that. But not before I ask him the most obvious question in the world.

#### **How did you and Julius become work partners?**

We met in 1999, when I was working on the *Case Study Houses* book [Taschen, 2002], which used mainly Julius’s photographs. He was 89 at the time and not so well known in Germany – I think Taschen did a great job of changing that. It was a strange meeting, but that was it; I didn’t think I’d ever see him again. Two weeks later, Julius calls: ‘I have a job for us.’ Okay! We do the job in LA. I go back to Germany. Weeks later my phone rings

in the middle of the night. ‘Where are you?’ he says. ‘Come home. We have a lot of work to do.’ So I moved to LA where I worked with Julius, began my own business and, at the same time, produced several books with Abrams, Taschen, Monacelli and so on.

#### **How involved are you in the production of such books?**

I would say I work closest with editors at Abrams, Taschen and Rizzoli. I like to collaborate. Sometimes it’s easier to do so abroad, where it’s not so crazy with copyrights. There you can agree on something with more or less of a handshake. In the US there are many more papers to sign. Contracts do protect the photographer, but it gets absurd. There’s also a lot of talk about teamwork in America, but many people are afraid of it and choose to work alone. I actually think the point of being a social being is to collaborate. I like working

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with editors, when I can. And when I work on a book I feel completely free to tell the story I want through my photographs.

#### **Really? Is complete freedom a typical experience for an architectural photographer working with publishers?**

Don’t ask me! [Laughs.] I know it’s a completely different experience from commercial photography, where a client hires you to solve a problem – to create a certain *appropriate* image of a space. The architect wants to get more jobs and you want to get more jobs – that’s commercial photography.

#### **What do you mean by ‘appropriate image’? Can a photograph be too good?**

Sometimes I see a photograph and think: Aha! You are trying to hide something. Let’s put it this way: a house is never exactly what the architect envisioned it could be. Why? Because the architect has a client. So sometimes the architectural photographer comes in and the

architect says: ‘Show this house the way I wanted to build it.’

But you know what? A photographer cannot just do everything the architect wants. It’s a matter of respect. If there were no clients, there would be no architecture. A client has the right to put ‘cosy’ furniture in a home, even if the architect doesn’t like it. It’s like Julius – everybody thought he had such wonderful taste, and he did – but when Raphael Soriano went to visit the home he had built for Julius and saw the furniture, he yelled: ‘What did you do to my house?’ Julius said: ‘It’s not *your* house; it’s *my* house.’ Julius always accepted the fact that people want a comfortable life and that sometimes modern furniture just isn’t very comfortable.

#### **Does that acceptance somehow translate into the photographs you and Julius took together?**

Julius and I really saw eye to eye on one thing: when there’s a coffee cup left on a table you don’t touch it; you show that somebody just got up and walked out of frame. Somebody lives in that house: *show* it. A lot of architectural photographers simply do not.

Julius’s work had elements of what the Bauhaus photographers did – you know, light person, dark shadow; dark person, light situation. I don’t know if Julius ever read about this or studied it; maybe it all just came from his belly. It doesn’t matter; he had a great sense of *feeling* for composition, for the *drama* of a house. What he really created was this new kind of documentation of American life.

#### **Do you see any kind of new documentation style emerging in architectural photography today?**

I guess it depends on which publisher you look to for evidence. There are magazines today that only want what I call ‘furniture store’ photos, which are in no way about the architecture but about business and getting ads from furniture makers into the magazine. Those magazines and their ‘perfect’ photos say nothing about how a home functions, whether it works, whether the bookshelves of a built-in library are actually too high for the homeowner to reach.

There are also many glossy architecture books that show only beautiful homes of wealthy people with big gardens and – again – that *furniture*. Come on! Where is the *story* of that house? A good architectural photograph should take you through the entire space so that you can understand it without having to see a floor plan.

#### **Is there a flip side to all this bad news?**

Well, I do have the feeling that more and more architectural photographers are figuring out that a photograph doesn’t need to be sterile in order to be good. We are not photographing an architect’s model of a house, after all – we used to do that, before architects had computers – no, we’re photographing something real. »





I also think people are getting tired of having to look at a fake world. It's like when you're driving through Los Angeles. You look up at the billboards and see a fake world of beautiful homes for beautiful people on beautiful TV sets. Then you look down and see reality: barbed wire, a homeless person walking with a shopping cart, and some hut that's falling apart. It's an example of the two extremes we live with.

Ultimately, what I'm saying is: reality is very important. It's very important that we photographers get back to reality and show people: *this* is what happens in *this* house. Though, I should say, I have lived in Los Angeles for ten years now, and I have never had to work so hard to show reality. That's a real message to us photographers.

#### What's the message?

It's easy to fake it. Don't fake it. For example, maybe people don't know any more that there's black-and-white photography. That's important. I'm not talking about Photoshop; I mean the real black-and-white negative. I fight hard for the preservation of film photography. No digital photograph will bring us what film does. Digital photographs are very crisp. They're crystal sharp, and they're *more* than what the eye sees. They're synthetic. But film gives you that which the eye really sees. It feels so much more human. Hey, maybe if I were a press photographer I would go out with a digital camera, get the photos I want fast, deal with my press agency fast – okay. But this is architectural photography. Why should I do it digitally? Even if it takes an extra hour to develop and scan a film photograph, so what? Don't we have *time* any more?

#### I wonder how that question goes over with your publishers and editors.

Well, at least one editor – at Abrams – loves it. No, honestly, I do see more and more editors and photographers beginning to honour this approach. Architectural photographs are time documents, and they need to be physical objects in order to be *timeless*. You need to be able to touch them, feel them, move them around by hand. Yes, I'm a purist and a minimalist, but I don't mean to sound like a grandpa. It's not that I wish I were a photographer working in 1920 or 1940 – that's not my world. I live and work in 2010, but I still want my photographs to be 'human easy'.

You know, a very strong influence for me is Bauhaus. It's my culture. I have a huge archive of Bauhaus designs and images. And their philosophy was that there should always be a connection between life and object. Architecture and design is always connected to the human being, and I think that's a very important thing to convey through photographs.

**So, you look back at Bauhaus for stimulation; do you also look at what's new in architectural photography?**

Oh, I look at new publications. Some of which I have to put away very, very quickly. [Nogai picks up a few of the architecture and design magazines that are scattered throughout his house, the kind typically sold at airports.] Who's photographing this stuff? Well, I know who's photographing it, because I also did a lot of advertising work. [Laughs.] But look: dead photos, dead images, no atmosphere, a waste of paper, a waste of paint. How many times did I do something for a magazine like this and think: For *what*? They print it, it's out for a week, then it's on to the next issue and the photographs are in the trash. No, for me it's about the magazines that I can collect and go back to again a year later. And those magazines exist. And I don't think that the iPad or anything like it will push good architecture magazines or really good architecture books off the market. I think those things will stand next to each other on the shelves.

## 'IT'S VERY IMPORTANT THAT WE PHOTOGRAPHERS GET BACK TO REALITY'

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#### But does the addition of the iPad to that shelf change the role of the architectural photographer?

Well, stills aren't enough any more. If we're going into a digital medium like the iPad, articles will need to be accompanied by images people can touch and move through. Of course, all of this has to be done correctly, so that we don't end up presenting architecture through some kind of animation where you expect Pac-Man to come from around the corner. I've even seen architecture documentaries where I've thought: Wrong! No! Don't zoom there! So we definitely have to find a new language for motion architecture.

#### Is that the new frontier?

Something is happening now. Actually, I'm in talks with a film company that's starting to produce motion pictures about architecture; they are contacting several big architecture firms

and want to produce new kinds of movies, maybe as part of a greater architecture education program or for something like the iPad. But they came to me because they don't know how to compose and capture architectural objects on film. They've asked me to direct. So you see? I might not like it, but I do understand that the world is changing. If you reject new media as a way to communicate your message, then why have a message at all? «

### Photographers whose work has influenced me

The first three that come to mind are **Brassaï**, **Henri Cartier-Bresson** and, in particular, **André Kertész**, with his sense of light and his very emotional and poetic photojournalistic approach to describing life as he felt it – although, as he often admitted, it was not always the *true* reality.

Then, of course, there is **Ezra Stoller** and his very disciplined way of photographing architecture using structure, overviews and details, which truly convey the essence of a building, although the intense clarity and sharpness of Stoller's images could in some ways be a little too cool.

I admire **Ken and Bill Hedrich** for their ability to work out shapes and structures under perfect light conditions. Their photographs reveal a talent for reducing complex architectural structures to *detailed views*, while still explaining the essence of the building in a way that it is often more interesting than showing the entire building.

**Reinhart Wolf** is another multi-talented photographer who's inspired me. He photographed everything from coffee beans to skyscrapers. Wolf gave every image a kind of necessity, with his unbelievable precision and his purist compositions, which were without superfluous decoration.

The work of **Bernd and Hilla Becher** – systematic and precise photography of industrial and functionalist architectural objects – both intrigues me and evokes a bizarre feeling. By using mostly flat lights and plain, straightforward views, they raised seemingly boring images to their full power in the organized grids of their presentation. No one image stands out because of dramatic light or extremes of perspective, which is exactly what makes it possible to look at and compare them in a neutral, unemotional way.

And I save for last my dear friend and equal partner, **Julius Shulman**. We worked together for a decade, and in the course of that relationship I learned through his intense focus on the composition of each photograph how to capture the *story* of a building. He always tried to show how buildings functioned for the people who were working and living in them.

Juergen Nogai