

"Impromptu" or "Arrange": an Analysis of Contemporary Architectural Photography According to its Aesthetic / «Improvisación» o «Puesta en Escena»: un Análisis de la Fotografía Arquitectónica Contemporánea según su Estética

Since the emergence of the Modern Movement, architects have hired photographers to document and disseminate their built work, a practice that has intensified alongside the rise of visual and media culture. Today, architectural photography plays a central role in portfolios, publications, and exhibitions, shaping the public image of projects and offices alike. Of particular interest is how architects select photographers whose aesthetic approach aligns with their own design intentions, framing architecture in ways that go beyond mere documentation.

This article proposes a theoretical distinction between two photographic modes in contemporary architectural photography: the *Impromptu*, which captures architecture as lived and inhabited in its real state, and the *Arrange*, which presents the project as a composed and controlled object, closer to the logic of product photography. Through comparative analysis, the study examines how each mode handles degree of control, human presence, context, light, composition, and the relationship between the architectural object and its surroundings — revealing how photographic choices both reflect and reinforce an architect's design philosophy.

Keywords: architectural photography, *Arrange*, *Impromptu*, photographic aesthetics, commissioned photography, architectural representation



Desde la consolidación del Movimiento Moderno, los arquitectos han recurrido a fotógrafos para documentar y difundir su obra construida, práctica que se ha intensificado con el auge de la cultura visual y mediática. Hoy, la fotografía de arquitectura ocupa un rol central en portafolios, publicaciones y exposiciones, configurando la imagen pública de proyectos y oficinas. De especial interés resulta la manera en que el arquitecto elige al fotógrafo según su afinidad estética, enmarcando la arquitectura de formas que trascienden la simple documentación.

Este artículo propone una distinción teórica entre dos modos fotográficos en la fotografía de arquitectura contemporánea: el *Impromptu*, que registra la arquitectura habitada tal como existe en la realidad, y el *Escenificado*, que presenta el proyecto como un objeto compuesto y controlado, próximo a la lógica de la fotografía de producto. Mediante análisis comparativo, el estudio examina cómo cada modo aborda el grado de control, la presencia humana, el contexto, la luz, la composición y la relación entre el objeto arquitectónico y su entorno, revelando de qué manera las decisiones fotográficas reflejan y refuerzan la filosofía proyectual del arquitecto.

Palabras clave: fotografía de arquitectura, *Escenificado*, *Impromptu*, estética fotográfica, fotografía comisionada, representación arquitectónica

01. The photograph as a conscious act

Photography may be understood as a conscious act of constructing an image from reality through framing, light, and selection. The systems of representation and visual imitation are impartial even though they seek to be a faithful reproduction of reality; this is because they use individual translation schemes (Gombrich 1998, 55-78), making the photograph an intentional and subjective product. In this way, the power of the image takes on great value as a vehicle for visual postures and manifestos, especially before the digital era and its overloaded visual experience. Thus, the act of framing to conceive a reality becomes evident also in architectural photography, in which certain elements and “faces” of the project are voluntarily framed, transmitting a reading according to what one wants to capture while discarding — leaving out of the frame — that which does not contribute to the interpretation.

This framing can have an endless number of possibilities and varies according to the eye of the person handling the camera, shaped by their intentions and previous experiences to decide what and how to capture reality. Gisèle Freund refers to this dualism between the truth of the camera as an element of imitating reality and its simultaneous capacity to distort, depending on who frames it:

“The lens, that supposedly impartial eye, allows for all possible deformations of reality, since the character of the image is increasingly determined by the operator’s way of seeing and the demands of his commanders. Therefore, the importance of photography lies not only in the fact that it is a creation but above all in the fact that it is one of the most effective means of shaping our ideas and influencing our behavior.” (Freund [1974] 2001, 8. Translated from Spanish)

An example of this intention — in which the image expresses a visual posture that transcends the merely plastic — is the one presented by Le Corbusier in the Beistegui Apartment in Paris (Image 1). This clearly reflects the intention of showing the relationship between the layered chimney installation — architectural opening and later ornamental addition alike — and the Arc de Triomphe, thus creating a permanent visual dialogue between two apparently unrelated elements. The type of diffusion and pertinence of this image further evokes its usefulness: since it was not part of the official photograph collection of the project, it could be understood as an anecdotal or merely documentary element. However, its expressive power and clear intention invites those who see the image to generate their own dialogues between its two most representative elements — the chimney and the arch.



Fig. 1. *Chambre à ciel ouvert*, Apartment of Charles de Beistegui, Paris. Architecture by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, 1929–31; Louis XV-style fireplace surround added by Charles de Beistegui¹. Photograph by Marius Gravot, FLC L2 (5) 23. Source: Fondation Le Corbusier, accessed 2026.

On the other hand, this same consciousness of framing a part of reality becomes even more evident in plastic exercises linked to a more artistic than documentary sensibility. This refers to modern trends such as the “New Vision” developed by Moholy-Nagy in 1928, and “The New Objectivity” in Germany during the 1920s. In these, the relationship between the eye and the camera takes on a role in which they feed each other, using the camera as something that goes beyond being a means of discovering reality (Freund [1974] 2001, 171). In both tendencies, close-ups, the play of light and shadow, the handling of form, and the subjectivity generated by seeing common elements in multiple ways constitute a new reading of the same reality. In particular, the work of Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897–1966) in the Weimar Republic seeks the plastic composition of his photographs through framing, while also considering the essence of the object itself. Photographs such as Zeche “Graf Moltke” (Image 2) show this way of capturing everyday elements — in this case, a factory building — in which the building is highlighted as the primary element of the image. The play of textures, shadows, and lights makes the photograph an exercise that transcends the purely documentary to reach a more artistic and visual result. Regarding this type of exercise, in which a common element such as a factory is exhibited in another reality through photography, Susan Sontag proposes:

“Photography is not limited to the reproduction of reality, it recycles it: a key procedure in modern society. In the form of photographic images, things and events are put to new uses, given new meanings that transcend the distinctions between beautiful and ugly, true and false, useful and useless, good taste and bad.” (Sontag [1975] 2008, 244. Translated from Spanish)

¹ The abstract chimney opening was part of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret’s original architectural design; the Louis XV-style fireplace surround visible in this photograph was added subsequently by Charles de Beistegui. The later surrealist scenography attributed to Salvador Dalí, which included a mirror and a taxidermied parrot, corresponds to a distinct and later phase of the installation (c. 1936) and is not present in this image (Álvarez 2021, 48).



Fig. 2. Zeche "Graf Moltke" by Albert Renger-Patzsch (1956) Source: Atlas of Places Archive Website - 2026

As noted above, the act of framing ultimately governs photographic composition, giving origin to as many options for seeing the same object as there are eyes. However, the predominant element in each of these unique ways of seeing is aesthetics. This, together with a need for expression, breaks singularity and gives way to results that can be related according to their similarities. Applied to architectural photography, this allows us to analyze photographed works by seeking to understand what is really being captured through the way the image is constructed.

These positions can also be contextualized in approaches such as the one offered by Gisèle Freund when discussing the general tendencies of photography:

"Among the current trends, two major currents can be distinguished: photographers for whom the image is a means of expressing, through their own feelings, the concerns of our time. They feel alluded to by our human and social problems, they live committed. For others, photography is a means of realizing their personal artistic aspirations." (Freund [1974] 2001, 171. Translated from Spanish)

Within the history of photography in general, a parallel can be drawn analogously with architectural photography, generating the same philosophical and artistic concerns but transferred to the act of photographing the architectural project. These framing tendencies, initiated in Germany, can be considered one of the formative influences on what is currently practiced in contemporary architectural photography.

This relationship between photography and architecture is expressed with particular clarity in the use architecture makes of photography for dissemination and representative expression. It is not without reason that since Modernity, architectural projects are understood — and architects are taught from school — primarily through a representative image. However, the representation of architecture through photography presents limitations in explaining space in its entirety (Zevi 1948), confining itself to a single static point and the crop that the format allows. This becomes evident when a project is visited in person: the spatial understanding changes despite having previously analyzed plans, 3D models, and photographs.

The consciousness embedded in the act of photographing carries with it the intentional meaning of a spatial reading. Through the use of multiple images, as is the case in contemporary practice, a discourse is created that allows for pre-recognition of the work before it is experienced directly. This discourse of images, accompanied by an implicit message, reaches the image user, who processes and reinterprets it. Applied to the exercise of architecture, architects frequently design using images encountered through print or digital media, extracting purely visual dimensions of spatial understanding to apply in the design process. This makes the relationship between architecture and photography entirely visual, based on the appearance generated by the image. Many times, the image itself can suggest more than the actual characteristics of the architectural project (Berger and Lampreave 2012, 21), distorting its true meaning and trivializing it. In this way, Pallasmaa observes:

“Even architecture - an art form which, according to Sir Christopher Wren in 1660, should carry ‘the attribute of the eternal’ and be ‘the only thing incapable of succumbing to new fashions’ - has become an area of short-term images. This observation is reinforced when comparing publications on modern architecture with contemporary magazines; the former convey a sense of a culture under construction and in evolution, while the latter seem to usually show individual and passing formal inventions.” (Pallasmaa 2014, 21)

At the origins of photography, its practical usefulness for society was questioned. Even in post-modern times, John Berger continued to ask who could truly make use of photography (Berger [1972] 1980, 58). Yet in its relationship to architecture — initially as a documentary record of monuments during the nineteenth century and later as a source of propaganda and dissemination — photography has always been fundamental to portraying built work, establishing a lasting alliance between the two disciplines. It was precisely this documentary function — the faithful record of monuments and built heritage — that established photography as an indispensable tool for architecture long before the Modern Movement formalized their alliance.

This same documentary capacity also carries a further dimension: photography’s very stillness — architecture rendered motionless within the frame — invites a pause and a return to ‘seeing,’ distinguishing photography from the acceleration of contemporary visual media, and allowing architectural photography to transcend mere dissemination and become part of documentation, analysis, and an essential tool of architectural criticism (Tafari quoted in Pérez Moreno 2012, 20).

This relationship between both disciplines is even more pronounced today due to the widespread diffusion of projects across digital platforms and print media. In Modernity, however, it was an equally close relationship — precisely because of the need for a few powerful images to function as a manifesto. The interesting question, when examining photographs that stand out from the rest, is to explore what Susan Sontag calls the “discerning eye” (Sontag [1975] 2008, 246).

It is precisely this “discerning eye” — the capacity to select, frame, and construct meaning through the photographic act — that becomes most consequential in the context of commissioned architectural photography. When a photographer is hired to document a building, the subjectivity inherent in every photographic act does not disappear; it is channeled toward a specific communicative purpose. The choices made — what to include, what to exclude, how to handle light, whether to wait for life to inhabit the space or to organize it in advance — are not technical decisions alone but expressions of an aesthetic position. The present study proposes that these positions, when examined across a corpus of commissioned architectural images, reveal recurring and identifiable patterns: what this article defines as the Impromptu and Arrange modes. Understanding these modes requires first understanding photography itself as a fundamentally intentional act — which is the purpose of this section.

02. Architecture and photography in the Modern Movement (1920–1960)

The dialogue between framing, aesthetics, and intention explored above finds sustained expression in the relationship between architecture and photography — a relationship that, far from being incidental, has shaped how buildings are understood, disseminated, and remembered. Like architectural composition, photographic framing must negotiate light, rhythm, structure, and atmosphere; photography has therefore supported architecture not only as a documentary tool but as part of its creative and conceptual process.

During the 1920s, with the consolidation of modern architecture as an established movement, a new position emerged in which architects began a dialogue with photographers to create a new paradigm in both fields. This institutional dialogue found a paradigmatic expression at the Bauhaus, where architecture and photography coexisted from the school’s early years — photography initially serving to document the school’s own buildings and objects, most notably through Lucia Moholy’s work, before being formalized as an independent department in 1929 (Schuldenfrei 2013). This relationship, which went beyond a simple client-provider dynamic, was the beginning of a trend that would define architectural communication throughout the twentieth century and into the present.

The intentionality of the photographic gaze fulfils another function in the field of commissioned architectural photography, particularly that focused on the dissemination of a project. Here, the conditions for representing a work and the architect’s need to exhibit their design position in a fixed image condition photography by limiting it to certain elements and aesthetics that are more explicit than interpretative or abstract. The image additionally aims to convey the values of an atmosphere (Rincón 2012, 30) through a plastic visual exercise.

This pursuit of representing a specific work and understanding ways² of seeing results in distinct approaches to photographing architecture. This awareness in approaching the project is not solely a contemporary position. Since the mid-twentieth century, it is possible to distinguish both modes, as evidenced in the comparison of working methodologies — the case of Julius Shulman in the Case Study Houses³ (Image 3) and Lucien Hervé in the projects of Le Corbusier (Image 4). In both cases⁴, the intention of what the architect-designer wants to reflect in the projects is evident, and the aesthetic represented in each image differs accordingly. These approaches would evolve toward contemporaneity together with the conception of the image, the techniques of capturing and reproducing photographs, and the systems of diffusion.

The set mode in which Shulman works is a posture taken to an extreme, resembling the literal mode of fashion or product photography, composing with elements that do not exist in the built work in order to idealize the image. This exercise of completing the image through the staging of elements — in this case, vegetation — during the session shows how the final photograph diverges from reality in order to enhance the promotion of the project (Image 5).



Fig. 3. Case Study House No. 22 by Julius Shulman (1960). Source: Case Study Houses, Taschen 2009



Fig. 4. Unité d'Habitation by Le Corbusier, photographed by Lucien Hervé (1954) Source: artsy.net – 2026

² In this study, the term “ways” refers to the methodological approaches adopted by photographers when engaging with architectural projects, particularly from the period of Modernity onwards. These approaches are broadly understood to oscillate between two methodological tendencies: the “set” approach and the “documentary” approach. By contrast, the term aesthetics is used here to refer to the visual character of the contemporary architectural image, within which the present study proposes the conceptual categories Arrange and Impromptu.

³ It should be recalled that the Case Study Houses program was promoted by the American magazine Arts & Architecture. This context is relevant because it suggests that the photographic documentation of the projects was conceived from the outset as part of their dissemination and promotion.

⁴ Within this framework, the photographs by Julius Shulman and Lucien Hervé can be interpreted as representative examples of the “set” and “documentary” methodological approaches respectively.



Fig. 5. Behind the scenes, Julius Shulman (1960). Source: Julius Shulman Photography Archive, The Getty Research Institute

03. The commissioned image and the digital turn

The 1970s mark not the origin but an acceleration of architectural photography's professionalization. Structures already visible during the Modern Movement — individual photographer-architect alliances such as that between Le Corbusier and Hervé, or editorial initiatives such as Arts & Architecture's promotion of the Case Study Houses — expanded during this decade into a broader and more diversified editorial infrastructure. The proliferation of specialized architecture magazines and the growing number of photographers working across multiple architectural practices, rather than within a single sustained relationship, gradually established architectural photography as an autonomous professional field serving the discipline at large, rather than a small number of individual alliances. This expansion did not yet produce the aesthetic bifurcation this study proposes, but it created the professional conditions — multiple photographers, multiple practices, a shared visual marketplace — under which such distinct positions could eventually emerge and be recognized as such.

This period also marks a methodological turn in the use of photography as a tool for architectural and urban analysis, rather than mere documentation. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's 1968 Yale studio, later published as *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), exemplifies this shift: students photographed the Strip systematically from a moving vehicle, using the camera not to produce a single authored image but to generate a comparative visual record — an approach that treated photography as a research instrument for reading the urban and architectural landscape. This dual development — the professionalization of the commissioned image and the emergence of photography as an analytical tool — set the conditions under which the market continued to expand in the following decades, growing proportionally with the increased use of images and media.

It is in this context that the position of the architectural photographer, when portraying a project, generates different methodologies of approach conditioned by the observer's eye, the intention of framing, and the objectives of the designer. It was with the advent of commissioned photography for the dissemination of projects that the two modes of set and documentary — rooted in other fields of general photography — were transferred and applied to architecture.

Photography, as a still image of a stable element like architecture, resists the acceleration of a media landscape increasingly dominated by video and what De Seta calls 'visual disaster' (De Seta 2012, 40). With the arrival of the digital era, significant changes appeared in the technical aspects of photography, simultaneously transforming how the image is perceived. The conception of aesthetics also underwent a change: whereas previously a project was documented through a reduced number of photographs, it can now be presented through many, building a spatial narrative by accumulating multiple frames of the same project as a whole. It is understandable that in Modernity — given the chemical and physical process of producing a print, along with the cost of mass reproduction — projects were represented by one or at most three key frames, rather than the extensive collections found in today's digital and print media. In contemporary photography, there is an attempt to contextualize within a broader set of images to illustrate a narrative or idea, reinforcing the need for multiple frames to recreate a linear discourse (Berger [1972] 1980, 65).

⁵ It is also important to consider the number of photographs presented for each project. The transition from analog to digital photography significantly increased not only the quantity of images produced but also the number of photographs made publicly available as part of the representation of a single architectural work.

A comparative exercise that illustrates this technical shift — outside the commissioned system that structures the four core cases analyzed below — is the analysis of the photographic production of two non-contemporaneous photographers of the same work. As an example, we compare Marvin Rand (1924–2009) — represented by one of his three prints — with one of the twenty images⁵ made by Iwan Baan (1975) of Louis Kahn's Salk Institute (Image 6).



Fig. 6. Left: Salk Institute by Marvin Rand (1963). Right: Salk Institute by Iwan Baan (2010).
Source: California Captured, Phaidon; and Iwan Baan Official Website - 2026

As seen in the case of the Salk Institute from these two perspectives, beyond the significant difference in the number of published photographs, there is no notable aesthetic variation apart from the handling of color and format. The way both photographers approach the project — capturing it within its inhabited reality rather than staging it — and the aesthetics they pursue do not differ significantly. This continuity across generations confirms that the aesthetic distinction in architectural photography responds not to technological change, but to a deliberate photographic position — the question that the following section addresses directly.

04. Methodology: visual analysis and case selection

This study adopts a qualitative comparative methodology based on the visual analysis of commissioned architectural photographs. It investigates whether recurring visual strategies can be identified in contemporary architectural photography and whether these strategies can be systematically grouped into two aesthetic modes, referred to here as *Impromptu* and *Arrange*. Rather than emerging from isolated examples, these categories are derived from the comparative observation of recurrent visual patterns across a corpus of commissioned architectural images. The historical discussion presented in the previous sections provides the theoretical framework within which these categories are identified, defined, and subsequently tested through comparative case analysis.

The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. First, a review of representative bodies of work from contemporary architectural photographers operating under commissioned systems, with the aim of identifying recurring visual patterns that could be grouped into distinct aesthetic tendencies. Second, the identification and definition of two recurring aesthetic modes — *Impromptu* and *Arrange* — defined according to six variables observable in the visual outcome of the photograph: (1) degree of control over the scene prior to shooting; (2) treatment of human presence; (3) role of contextual elements; (4) handling of light; (5) compositional logic; and (6) relationship between the architectural object and its surroundings. Third, the application of these categories to a selected set of cases for comparative verification.

Cases were selected according to three criteria: all photographers work under a commissioned system directly linked to the architect-designer; all selected works belong to post-2000 architectural production; and the MAMM expansion case was specifically included because it allows for the direct comparison of two photographers working on the same project under equivalent conditions, functioning as the methodological anchor of the study. The remaining cases — VIA 57 West and the Tournai School of Architecture — were selected because they represent photographers with consolidated and recognizable bodies of work whose aesthetic positions are clearly differentiated. These four photographers are not intended to represent the diversity of contemporary architectural photography but were intentionally selected as paradigmatic examples for testing the analytical framework.

The following table (table 1) summarizes the six variables and their expression in each mode:

Variable	Impromptu	Arrange
Degree of control	Low – scene accepted as found	High – scene organized prior to shooting
Human scale presence	Spontaneous	Staged or absent
Contextual elements	Active, integrated	Subordinated or eliminated
Light	Found, natural conditions	Selected or managed
Compositional logic	Emergent from existing disorder	Preconceived and controlled
Architectural object	Embedded in surroundings	Isolated and autonomous

Table 1: Analytical matrix of Impromptu and Arrange modes. Source: own elaboration

The six variables summarized in Table 1 constitute the analytical framework used throughout the comparative reading of the selected case studies. Rather than operating as binary classifications, they describe tendencies along a spectrum — a single photograph may exhibit characteristics of both modes simultaneously, as illustrated in the MAMM case studies, where both photographers engage with context and human presence but with fundamentally different degrees of control and compositional intent.

It should be noted that the classification proposed here refers exclusively to the perceived visual outcome of the photograph, not to the technical production process. Images produced through staged arrangements may intentionally simulate a spontaneous appearance, and would therefore be classified according to their visual result. The study is limited to a qualitative reading of a small, intentionally selected sample and does not claim statistical representativeness.

05. Two aesthetics in contemporary architectural photography

At the beginning of the diffusion of modern architecture photographs in magazines during the 1930s — as in the early days of photo-reportage (Freund [1974] 2001, 99) — images were produced individually to illustrate a written story and create a narrative about the project, exposing a manifesto rather than constructing a discourse through multiple images as is the case today. In contemporary practice, the photographic report of a project is largely visual, and only in specific cases is its publication accompanied by text, focusing the user's experience on the image itself. This shift in the appreciation of the image is largely due to digitalization and the ease of reproduction, which — aided by social media — has promoted the mass use of images both digitally and in print. This leads to what Barthes describes as "the civilization of the image" (Barthes quoted in Pallasmaa 2014, 19).

Within this "civilization of the image," the act of hiring a photographer to document a building for later dissemination tends to shift away from the artistic dimension of architectural photography toward its purely commercial dimension. It resembles the treatment that marketing applies to product photography and evolves alongside the same systems of diffusion used in that discipline. As Bauret explains:

"Today's photography has its feet between two universes whose boundaries, although not totally insurmountable, are governed by at least different laws: the world of art and commissioned practice." (Bauret 1992, 15. Translated from Spanish)

⁶ The term *Impromptu* derives from the definition provided by the Real Academia Española (RAE), which describes it as a composition improvised by the performer and, by extension, one created without a preconceived plan (Real Academia Española, s.v. "impromptu"). In the context of architectural photography, the term is used metaphorically to describe images that appear to emerge from spontaneous circumstances, incorporating the contingencies of everyday life and the unplanned presence of contextual elements.

⁷ The term *Arrange* is adopted from the definition provided in the Cambridge Dictionary, where the verb to arrange refers to the act of preparing or organizing elements into a particular order (Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "arrange"). Within the context of this study, the term is used to describe photographic compositions in which architectural elements and surrounding components are deliberately organized to construct a controlled visual representation.

⁸ As noted in the methodology, this classification is based on the photograph's visual outcome rather than its production process — a distinction particularly relevant here, since a staged image may deliberately simulate spontaneity and thus register visually as *Impromptu*.

Despite this relationship between architectural and product photography, the analyzed cases suggest that many architectural photographers seek to align their proposals with the fine arts, pursuing their own style and moving away from the merely commercial image. This pursuit — together with the need to distinguish an image within an agglomeration of them — is a direct cause of the emergence of the aesthetics of contemporary architectural photography.

For the purposes of this study, the two aesthetic modes proposed are defined as follows. The **Impromptu**⁶ mode is understood as a photographic approach in which the architectural project is captured within its inhabited reality, without prior manipulation of the elements present in the scene. The photographer operates as an observer who allows life, context, and contingency to compose the image, privileging authenticity over formal control.

The **Arrange**⁷ mode, by contrast, is defined as a photographic approach in which the elements of the scene are deliberately organized and controlled prior to or during the shooting session, presenting the architectural project as a composed object isolated from the disorder of everyday life. In both cases, the aesthetic result⁸ is not accidental but responds to an intentional position of the photographer, aligned with the design discourse of the commissioning architect.

Through the review and analysis of representative images from contemporary architectural photography, two distinct aesthetic modes were identified, referred to in this study as **Arrange** and **Impromptu**. To define and explain these proposed categories, a comparative analysis of photographers and their approaches to different architectural projects is undertaken. For each case, the manner in which the project is represented is examined, as well as the relationship between this approach and the resulting photographic aesthetic. This relationship also responds to the architect's intention when commissioning a photographer, seeking continuity between the conceptual discourse of the project and the visual narrative constructed through photography.

Within this methodological framework, two case studies are selected for analysis: VIA 57 West in New York, designed by BIG and photographed by Iwan Baan, and the Tournai School of Architecture, designed by Aires Mateus and photographed by Tim Van de Velde (Image 7)

Following the analytical Table 1 outlined above, Iwan Baan's photograph exhibits: low degree of control, spontaneous human presence, active and integrated context, natural found light, and an emergent compositional logic, with the architectural object embedded in its surroundings. In the first case, associated with the Impromptu mode, the photographer builds the composition from what the context of the installed work offers, without attempting to isolate it. He finds elements that enrich the photograph and convey a sense of architecture embedded in an urban center such as Manhattan, while the light conditions emphasize the building's presence and express the contrast of architectures within the context. The human scale, the vehicles, and the nature of the inhabited city evoke the urban photographs of René Burri or Henri Cartier-Bresson, in which architecture appears as a backdrop rather than an autonomous object (Bergera and Lampreave 2012, 21). The term Impromptu — taken from musical improvisation, which also composes through rhythms — is apt here, since the aesthetics and framing are constructed with elements already present in the place without prior organization, allowing the life of the building to be captured in the most realistic way possible. This photographic aesthetic also recalls the work of Ezra Stoller in the 1960s, where the documented building, though the primary element, was grounded in context and compositional disorder, anchoring it in architectural reality rather than presenting it as an isolated object.

Applying Table 1, Tim Van de Velde's photograph exhibits: high degree of control, absent human presence, subordinated context, selected and managed light, and a preconceived compositional logic, with the architectural object placed in deliberate juxtaposition with its preexisting surroundings rather than isolated from them. Through this Arrange approach, the photographer constructs a deliberate dialogue between the new intervention and the preexisting industrial building, allowing the older brick structure to occupy the greater part of the frame while the new volume appears at its edge — a composed contrast rather than an isolated presentation of the architecture. The composition foregrounds this relationship

between old and new, setting aside cars, people, and other urban elements that might distract from it. This order grants the architecture immediate presence and legibility (Pérez Escolano 2012, 43), even as it excludes the everyday reality beyond the frame. As for human scale, the photograph favors a clean, uninhabited reading — with as few human figures as possible, generally positioned in advance, or a strategically placed element that aids composition rather than evoking life within the architecture.

This presents an equally valid reading of the project, in which the architectural relationship — rather than architecture in isolation — is understood as something arranged in space to be composed and photographed with deliberate intent — hence the name *Arrange*. This position evokes images such as those of Marvin Rand in his photographs of Californian houses, presented as compositions in which all objects are arranged and accommodated as part of a larger whole, with the house itself as the central figure. The light, the prominence of the architectural element, the cleanliness of the composition, and the relationship to a present but non-dominant context recall the posture of fashion photography — particularly that of Helmut Newton. In his photographs, certain elements evoke a context rather than a studio, yet what stands out is the model: the figure that truly transmits the message within the composition.



Fig. 7. Left: VIA 57 West (BIG) by Iwan Baan (2017). Right: Tournai School of Architecture (Aires Mateus) by Tim Van de Velde (2017). Source: Iwan Baan Official Website and Aires Mateus Official Website - 2026

While the urban contexts and architectural scales of both cases differ, the aesthetic and compositional values of the images created for each are clearly differentiated by the posture and methodology of each photographer. The difference lies not only in the presence or absence of human scale and contextual elements but in the very nature of the photograph — implying that regardless of the type of work, there is a common denominator within each photographer's practice for creating the image and selecting the elements with which they choose to present the work.

To further clarify the aesthetics proposed, a comparative analysis is carried out using two images of the same project, taken from the same orientation and both commissioned by the architect-designers. This exercise more explicitly evidences the photographers' positions and the subjectivity that the camera offers. The photographs analyzed are of the expansion of the Museum of Modern Art of Medellín (MAMM), designed by CTRL G and 51-1, as seen through the lens of Cristóbal Palma (Image 8) and Federico Cairoli (Image 9). The project seeks the permeability of its spaces, generating covered public spaces and introducing the street-square logic at different levels. The volumetric approach and the play of materials are among its most outstanding characteristics.

Under the vision of Cristóbal Palma, one sees a project revolving around public space, where a wide range of activities are accompanied and appropriated by the architectural proposal. In the manner of the Impromptu mode, the captured elements appear just as they exist in the reality of a common day in the building — which functions as the primary element but in the manner of a backdrop for everyday life, rather than as an isolated object in the composition. According to Table 1, this image reflects: low degree of control, spontaneous human presence, active integrated context, natural light, and emergent composition, with the building embedded in the everyday life of the space. Reading the complete photographic session, the Impromptu mode is evident: the photographer allows reality to unfold, and its elements appear in the photograph without having been arranged to compose the image. The technical execution freezes human figures in the midst of their activities through fast shutter speed, yet reveals the interior of the project without sacrificing light detail. In this aesthetic — and particularly in this photograph — composition emerges through existing disorder. The aesthetic is created thanks to the photographer's agility and ability to harness the disorder of occupied space, contrasting it with the order of what is built, and thereby creating a pictorial language of spatial atmosphere.

Applying Table 1, Federico Cairoli's photograph reveals: high degree of control, staged human presence, a directly presented but geometrically subordinated context, selectively framed natural light, and a preconceived composition structured around a vanishing point, with the architectural object positioned as the terminus of the frame's converging lines. This presents an entirely different aesthetic from Palma's, organized through a clear compositional geometry: the converging lines of the plaza establish a vanishing point that draws the eye toward the building, framed by a wide-angle lens that encompasses the surrounding towers and greenery. The cleanliness of the composition and the premeditated placement of the single human

figure allow this photograph to be categorized within the Arrange aesthetic. It is worth noting that most of Cairoli's images from this project are developed in the Impromptu mode; however, certain exterior views — such as the one presented here — are developed in the Arrange mode, organizing available elements to produce a composed image. In this case, the context is presented directly rather than diffusely, yet the geometry, the vanishing point, and the centrality of the composition make the constructed object prevail over the surrounding disorder. The handling of light additionally gives a material sensitivity to the work that grounds it within the urban landscape rather than isolating it from it. The value of this photograph revolves around austerity of elements, focusing attention on the architectural project and the human figure presented within it.



Fig. 8. MAMM (CTRL G and 51-1) by Cristóbal Palma (2016).
Source: www.51-1.com/MAMM - Official project website 2026



Fig. 9. MAMM (CTRL G and 51-1) by Federico Cairoli (2016).
Source: www.51-1.com/MAMM - Official project website 2026

The relevance of comparing the same project through two distinct photographic positions should be underscored. In doing so, the proposed aesthetics become explicitly evident, while simultaneously demonstrating the subjective language that each image acquires from the person who frames it. The same project can yield an endless number of image possibilities, remaining open to being understood from any point of view — and even to complementing other perspectives in the construction of the discourse the architect wishes to propose.

It is worth noting that the aesthetic categories of Arrange and Impromptu proposed in this study constitute an original theoretical contribution to the field of architectural photography. While the distinction between documentary and staged approaches has been addressed tangentially in the broader literature on photography — particularly in the work of Freund ([1974] 2001) and Bauret ([1992] 2010) — no prior study has formalized these two modes as specific analytical categories applied to commissioned architectural photography and its relationship to the design discourse of the architect. The value of this proposal lies precisely in its operative nature: Arrange and Impromptu are not merely descriptive labels but analytical instruments that allow for the systematic reading of photographic bodies of work, the identification of aesthetic tendencies within architectural offices, and the understanding of the ideological dimension embedded in the act of commissioning an architectural photograph.

It is also important to emphasize that the compared photographs carry a clear intention of transmitting a design position and a language aligned with the architecture outlined in each project. For this reason, within the commissioned system analyzed here, the architect plays a central role in the construction of the project's image, as it is typically the architect who decides which photographer to hire according to their own style and aesthetics. It is equally telling to observe, when tracing the body of work of a specific architect, how the same aesthetic is consistently maintained across presentations of their projects — generating a common visual denominator through the photographic image. The selected cases indicate that architects tend to maintain ongoing relationships with their primary photographers, seeking alignment in aesthetic sensibility: a behavior inherited from modernity.

06. Conclusions

This study has sought to theorize contemporary commissioned architectural photography through a genealogical reading — tracing the photograph as a conscious and intentional act from the early debates on framing and objectivity, through the consolidation of the architect-photographer relationship in Modernity, to the digital and media transformations that define the current landscape. The parallel drawn between the broader history of photography and its specific application to architectural representation has allowed for the identification of two aesthetic modes — Impromptu and Arrange — whose roots lie in the documentary and staged tendencies that photography has carried since its origins.

The comparative analysis carried out has allowed for the preliminary validation of these two modes as analytical instruments capable of systematically describing the visual logic that governs the construction of the architectural image in photography. The Impromptu mode is characterized by the deliberate incorporation of inhabited reality into the composition: light conditions, human presence, contextual elements, and contingency are treated as constitutive components rather than disturbances to be eliminated. The Arrange mode operates through the opposite logic — organizing and controlling the elements of the scene prior to or during the session, isolating the architectural object from the disorder of everyday life and presenting it as a composed, autonomous object closer in logic to product photography than to documentary practice.

The six variables introduced in the methodology — control, human presence, context, light, composition, and the object's relationship to its surroundings — allow for systematic differentiation between both modes, expressed as binary tendencies: spontaneous versus staged, integrated versus subordinated, found versus controlled, emergent versus preconceived, embedded versus isolated. These variables operate not as binary switches but as a spectrum, which explains why a single photographer may produce images consistent with both modes within the same project, as observed in Federico Cairolí's work on the MAMM expansion.

The cases analyzed confirm that the choice of aesthetic mode responds to a deliberate alignment between the photographer's visual language and the architect's design discourse — and that this alignment may itself be understood as a discursive act. The selection of a photographer whose aesthetic tendency reinforces the architect's design philosophy constitutes an implicit statement about how the built work is intended to be read and remembered. A noteworthy observation, consistent across the cases examined, is that regardless of technological change — from analog to digital, from three key frames to extensive online galleries — the cases examined suggest that the intentionality of the image as a vehicle for a design position remains consistent with its role in Modernity, even if the resources and systems of diffusion are different.

It is important to acknowledge that a given photographer may move between both aesthetics according to the need and intention of each image. However, a reading of broader bodies of work consistently reveals a dominant tendency, particularly among photographers who serve as the primary visual voice of a specific architectural office. This search for a defined aesthetic has become even more pronounced in the contemporary context, the analyzed context suggests that photographers increasingly develop a recognizable visual language in order to stand out within the accelerating volume of images that characterizes current media culture — and where the expansion of the architectural photography market runs parallel to the architect's increasing reliance on digital visual systems to promote and give lasting presence to their projects. Even as access to cameras has become universal, the specialization of the architectural portrait remains indispensable for establishing a genuine dialogue between the image, the project, and the broader body of built work.

It is also worth noting that the contemporary commissioned photography market has evolved beyond the direct architect-photographer relationship that characterized Modernity. Increasingly, photographers produce and offer images speculatively — shooting a completed project independently and subsequently proposing the work to the architectural office. In this context, architectural practices may accumulate images of the same project from multiple photographers, selecting among them according to the communicative intent of each platform or publication — privileging one aesthetic mode or another depending on the reading experience sought for each specific audience and context. This multicanal logic not only explains the coexistence of both aesthetic modes within a single project's visual archive — as observed in the MAMM case — but also suggests that the distinction between Impromptu and Arrange has acquired a functional dimension beyond the purely aesthetic: each mode serves a specific communicative purpose within the contemporary image ecosystem.

This study is limited to a small selection of post-2000 cases, and the categories proposed do not support broad generalizations beyond the cases examined. Variables not controlled here — including geographic and cultural context, typological diversity, the specific brief provided to the photographer, and prior professional relationships between architect and photographer — represent productive directions for future research. Several questions remain open: how do these modes operate across different architectural typologies? To what extent do they map onto regional traditions of architectural photography? And how are they received by different audiences — architects, critics, and the general public? The analytical framework proposed here is designed to support that inquiry.

Figures

Fig. 1. Chambre à ciel ouvert, Apartment of Charles de Beistegui, Paris. Architecture by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, 1929–31; Louis XV-style fireplace surround added by Charles de Beistegui¹. Photograph by Marius Gravot, FLC L2 (5) 23. Source: Fondation Le Corbusier, accessed 2026.

Fig. 2. Zeche “Graf Moltke” by Albert Renger-Patzsch (1956) Source: Atlas of Places Archive Website - 2026

Fig. 3. Case Study House No. 22 by Julius Shulman (1960). Source: Case Study Houses, Taschen 2009

Fig. 4. Unité d’Habitation by Le Corbusier, photographed by Lucien Hervé (1954) Source: artsy.net – 2026

Fig. 5. Behind the scenes, Julius Shulman (1960). Source: Julius Shulman Photography Archive, The Getty Research Institute

Fig. 6. Left: Salk Institute by Marvin Rand (1963). Right: Salk Institute by Iwan Baan (2010). Source: California Captured, Phaidon; and Iwan Baan Official Website - 2026

Fig. 7. Left: VIA 57 West (BIG) by Iwan Baan (2017). Right: Tournai School of Architecture (Aires Mateus) by Tim Van de Velde (2017). Source: Iwan Baan Official Website and Aires Mateus Official Website - 2026

Fig. 8. MAMM (CTRL G and 51-1) by Cristóbal Palma (2016). Source: www.51-1.com/MAMM - Official project website 2026

Fig. 9. MAMM (CTRL G and 51-1) by Federico Cairoli (2016). Source: www.51-1.com/MAMM - Official project website 2026

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