

Ana Skobe: METAMORFOZA ALI MATERIALNOST ARHITEKTURNE FOTOGRAFIJE

METAMORPHOSIS OR MATERIALITY OF ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

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POVZETEK

Izhodišče prispevka je raziskava materialnosti arhitekturne fotografije z osrednjim pojmom metamorfoze, ki ga Akos Moravanszky v svojem delu *Metamorphism: material change in architecture* razvije kot ključen pojem moderne arhitekture. Tega bomo obravnavali s torišča dveh problematik oziroma vprašanj, in sicer arhitekturne materializacije ter odnosa med analognim in digitalnim v fotografiji. Cilj je ponovno opredeliti oziroma razširiti pojem, z namenom, da bi pokazali, kako možnosti, ki jih odpira sodobna arhitekturna fotografija v odnosu do problema materialnosti, omogočajo, da vidimo, kako se manifestira ključni aspekt moderne arhitekture, ki je metamorfizem. To bo neke vrste podkrepitev teze, da je arhitekturna fotografija za arhitekturo generativna sila.

KLJUČNE BESEDE

metamorfoza, arhitektura, fotografija, materialnost, analogno, digitalno

ABSTRACT

The incipience of this contribution is the exploration of the materiality of architectural photography through the central concept of metamorphosis, which Akos Moravanszky develops as a key concept of modern architecture in his work *Metamorphism: material change in architecture*. We will address this through two themes or questions: firstly, the question of architectural materialisation and secondly, the relationship between analogue and digital in photography. The aim is to redefine or expand the concept, to exhibit how the possibilities opened up by contemporary architectural photography in relation to the problem of materiality allow us to see how the key aspect of modern architecture, namely metamorphism, manifests itself. This will be a kind of reinforcement of the thesis that architectural photography is a generative force for architecture.

KEY-WORDS

metamorphosis, architecture, photography, materiality, analogue, digital

1. INTRODUCTION

The starting point of the article is the concept of metamorphosis, which Akos Moravanszky develops as a key concept of modern architecture in his work *Metamorphosis: material change in architecture*. The Swiss-Hungarian architectural theorist and historian defines metamorphoses as “alchemical transformations of materials in architecture” (Moravanszky, 2018: 12). He explains this process as a special transformation of building materials, which the practice of architecture is capable of: the transformation of ordinary, raw, “worthless” materials into something extraordinary, valuable, incorporating a spiritual dimension as well.

Even in photography, we witness various aspects of materiality that characterise the dynamic process of a transformative nature. Photography transforms the reality of the “external” world that we experience through our operation into an image of this reality, the spatial and temporal dimension of everyday experience into a surface, light into pixels or grains, an idea that materialises in a built object of architecture into an idea of an object that is materialised in a photograph or a series of photographs. The metamorphosis in the photographic medium also eventuates throughout history – in the form of a transition from analogue to digital photography, and a return to analogue, which is no longer about the technology itself.

In the following, we will discuss the concept of metamorphosis entrenched on two themes: 1) the question of *architectural* materialisation and 2) the relationship between analogue and digital in photography. The aim is to explicate how the possibilities, which were introduced by contemporary architectural photography, pertaining to the problem of materiality allow us to distinguish *metamorphosis*, a key aspect of modern architecture as defined by Moravanszky. One of the goals of this analysis is the redefinition or expansion of the term itself. The concept of metamorphosis is chosen as a potentially productive starting point to prove the central thesis of the article, namely that architectural photography can enhance the material presence of architecture, or even its architecturality, as it changes the way of viewing, seeing and understanding architecture, and, consequently, also its design and construction.

In order to explain how architecture is materially transformed in the medium of architectural photography, let us first inspect the relationship between the objective and the subjective in the field of photographic practise.

2. THE MATERIALISATION OF ARCHITECTURE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the earliest theoretical questions of photography is the question of the relationship between human and the camera as a mechanical device intended to capture reality. Thus, we have a living being – the photographer – with their subjective perception of the world, and contrarily, the camera, or at least it seems so, with the mechanical nature of objectively recording reality.

We can certainly say that a photograph has an objective dimension: it is a mechanical recording of something from the so-called objective reality. Concurrently, it also has a subjective dimension with the photographer being behind the camera and deciding on its *modus operandi*. The American philosopher Susan Sontag has emphasised an additional quality. According to her, even in the most ‘technical’ and objective photographs, whose sole purpose is to imitate reality, we find a receptivity to

discover beauty. The latter is to be found everywhere, even in the most banal and everyday things (Sontag, 1978). It is about showing beauty where we might not even recognise it at first glance, about discovering, revealing beauty – photography makes beauty visible by showing the object in a new way, by opening up the possibility that we can see it differently. Photography initiates the metamorphosis of an object: it transforms it into an object that is something extraordinary and something else than what it is. As such, it becomes visible precisely through the mediation of the photographic medium.

The photograph therefore expresses the vision of its creator, who makes a series of decisions during the procedure: what to photograph, judgments about the composition, framing, lighting, processing techniques. As the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere aptly articulated: “Photography is an art of the gaze *par excellence*. But the art of the gaze primarily consists in the art of choosing [...]” (Ranciere, 2013: 177). But at the same time, we wonder how it is possible to make art with an apparatus that seems to automatically “overwrite” everything that comes in front of its lens, without any special interpretive ability. In a chapter from the book *Aisthesis*, Ranciere summarises the arguments of 19th century artists and critics who tried to portray the practise of photography as art. The artists and critics of the time attributed true art to seeing and not to the instrument – i.e., to the camera – that transcribes it. The philosopher argues that it is precisely in the separation of these two “ways of seeing” that the moment occurs in which photography attempts to be thought of as art, i.e., that “the photographer is an artist because he sees, and because interprets” [...] “The artist makes art once the machine has done its work; and he does so by suppressing everything in this work that is mechanical, thus un-artistic” (Ranciere, 2013: 172). The final photographic image therefore owes its artistic appeal to the artist who watches over the instrument – the hand or apparatus that performs. The supposedly mechanical nature of photography “frees the potential of seeing from the mechanical servitude of the hand. It enables the suggestiveness of things offered to the gaze and the artist’s inner subjective vision to coincide directly” (Ranciere, 2013: 174).

In any case, photography in itself is not necessarily synonymous with the production of art. Art can only be created with a photographic apparatus with the help of imagination and intuition, with which we free photography from the mechanical subjugation of the hand. We have realised that photographic images are constantly subject to framing, reductions, enlargements, cropping, retouching and various treatments, which means that they play with the scale and meaning of the world (Sontag, 1978). They have the ability to change the given reality, because photography is not only seeing in the sense of observing and recognising, photography is also, and above all, seeing as a matter of individual choice and a way of making sense of the world. As with photography in general, this also applies to the photography of architecture. The photographer’s own intervention materialises in the photograph itself, in the product itself, and is the result of their creative act. It is visible in the product itself, which, if it is good, is also a materialisation, a manifestation of the photographer’s idea. *Ergo*, in the best case, we probably see the architectural idea itself in a new way through photographic interpretation, i.e., the architectural object itself in a new way. This can be described as the *(re)construction of architecture*.

According to Ansel Adams (in: Barber, 2019), one of the most famous photographers of American landscapes, a photographer does not capture a photograph or take a photograph, they create, make, one might even say *construct* a photograph. In this, if it is good, it is similar to architecture, it is the result

of a creative act that is always guided by an idea and which, if successful, is also the articulation of an idea in the material product of said creative act. Perhaps the idea comes closest to what Badiou (2008) defines as a moment of the real, i.e., that which is never directly present, always excluded from reality, so that it can be established as a logical whole enforcing effects. It acts as exactly that which is missing in reality. Colomina (1996) describes photography as something that is outside the logic of “realism”, since it does not *represent* reality, but rather *produces* it anew. In other words, the photographic image does not reflect the world, but rather generates it, constructs it anew, in its own, different and specific way, with a certain message that the author wishes to give it. We could even say that photography is a mechanism that makes a difference. The difference between reality and the new reality.

Despite the mechanical nature of the production process, photography is something subjective and simultaneously something that changes and directs our view of the world. The architectural object depicted on it constantly moves between the original (the building itself) and the recording (its image), between its presence in the physical world and its representation in the virtual world. Although the space of representation is different from the space of architecture, it is nevertheless constantly being supplemented, reconstructed and redefined. The point of view we defend is that photography is not only a means of representing architecture, but that, if successful, it can also *present* architecture in its own medium, in the form of a photographic image. We are discussing the materialisation of architecture through photography or about its material presence in the photograph – let us now see how this manifests itself.

We are addressing another field of subjectivity, that which belongs to the viewer. In the starting point, the photographic camera's objective view of reality is subjectivised by the photographer's capturing process and transformed into a dialogue between the object (the photograph) and the subject (the viewer). If the photograph is good and attracts our gaze, we as subjects become ensnared in the photograph with our desire, i.e., it triggers the viewer's desire and drives them to watch, interpret and see. Ranciere wrote that being a spectator is not a passive position that should be transformed into an activity. The viewer observes, evaluates, compares, interprets, in short, co-forms thoughts (Ranciere, 2009: 13). Watching is already an *activity*. Photography is therefore not only a reflection of the world and the given conditions, but is also co-creating the world because (1) it makes us see things in the world in a new way, in a way we have not seen them before and because (2) it triggers our thought process, forcing us to look and think independently, thus making us into those who think and feel independently. Architectural critic and historian Kenneth Frampton, in his article *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, argues that we must experience the object live, so that all the senses have the experience, not just sight (Frampton, 1993). Despite the reduction from three dimensions to just two, a good photograph offers the viewer something more than just a visual experience. If the photograph is good, it enhances our sensory perception of the architecture, and not only that, its perception can become more real and intense, perhaps even more real and intense than when we see the architecture itself, *in situ*, in the place of its location. The weakness of photography, in the sense that it reduces architecture, which is a spatial and temporal phenomenon, to something non-spatial, immobile and impermanent, is what makes it extremely powerful and intense at the same time. The power of the photographic image is therefore the power of the effects of the real and the two-dimensional.

Roland Barthes described precisely this “depth” in photography with the term *punctum* (Barthes, 2000: 32), which is what stings, moves and impresses us. With this, it intervenes in the field of art, which Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió defined in his book *Differences* as an experience that makes us most alive, full, which acts as an immediate experience itself, in which the viewed object and reality merge into one indivisible whole (Solà-Morales, 1997). Therefore, it is not unusual that architectural objects and/or photographs can sometimes captivate the viewer more vehemently or disclose more than the building itself. The photographer has the possibility to recreate the meaning and message of the image, moreover, they can also amplify and sharpen the architecture, bringing it closer to us and explaining it. This kind of reflection of the world – albeit a very different one – changes our worldly self-image, where consequently we co-create these images and sustain their co-creation of us. The key to this is the idea, the *punctum*, which is able to strengthen the materiality of the two-dimensional image; if the photo is good, it is the result of a kind of transformation or of metamorphosis that “makes something in art and architecture visible that is otherwise difficult to explain: the alchemic transition between materiality and immateriality” (Moravanszky, 2018: 209). An immaterial idea is materialised in photography through material effects that photography achieves through its own techniques – composition, light, texture, relationships between objects, shapes, proportions ... At the same time, photography has the potential to convey more than just a visual experience or physical properties by revealing to us the sensual qualities of space, materials, and architecture. We will explore how below.

3. THE MATERIALITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The twenty-first century is the century of mass consumption, globalisation, the telecommunications boom, and the market economy [including the latest technologies, AI, etc.]. One of the consequences of new technologies is the limitless and mass production of images, which expeditiously developed alongside the printing press, continued with the arrival of the World Wide Web and resulted in today's accelerated hyperproduction. In the world we live in, it is no longer possible to imagine reality independently of photography. In the decades following its invention in 1839, photographic images became ubiquitous and began to dominate visual media – magazines, books, newspapers, television, etc. The rapid expansion was facilitated by the transition from analogue to digital technology, with photographs evolving into integral information and endless data streams that traverse the globalised world. The advent of the World Wide Web and social networks has brought a completely new experience of viewing and consuming them, which is why many discussions have arisen about passivized and inauthentic images that create representations of the world for us and thus reduce the capacity of our own imagination. Every day we are surrounded by photos that are fast, instant, direct and easily accessible. Due to their fleeting and superficial nature, they often convey fragments of information rather than comprehensive knowledge. Susan Sontag agrees, claiming that today we see the world “as a set of potential photographs”, in which “reality has come to seem more and more like what we are shown by cameras” (1978: 11, 149).

What we are wondering is how have these novel technologies altered the ways we perceive and experience the world through reshaped relationships between surface and depth, time and space. How have they changed the materiality of the traditional image and what attitude towards material reality have they really brought? In order to be able to think of photography not

only in a contemporary way, but in the full meaning of the word contemporaneity, we will look at the main differences and connections between analogue and digital. We will be interested in how changes in technology have affected what, according to Moravanszky's theory, can be seen as one of the main characteristics of modern architecture, namely its special materiality, which is the result of a process of metamorphosis. This particular materiality is described by Moravanszky as "the transformation of a worthless stone into a golden one, architecture as alchemy"¹: That would be a potential interpretation of Gottfried Semper's theory of *Stoffwechsel* (Eng. material transformation), which explains the ability of materials to undergo change by considering the products of human *téchne*" (Moravanszky, 2018: 10). We will also discuss the trend towards a return to analogue, mixed or hybrid approaches, developing and substantiating the thesis that there are still images that can interrupt and transcend established ways of thinking and acting through which we interpret and understand the world.

3.1 Analogue and digital

To outline the changes brought about by the digital age, we should first look at analogue photography, whose practise is closely related to the notion of materiality.

Every initial mode of photography – from the heliograph to the daguerreotype and the calotype – was defined by the medium's relationship to the production processes; each of them used certain material and chemical components that in combination enabled the creation of a permanent image recorded with light. This was the result of the chemical recording of light on a photosensitive surface – paper, film or plate. The light striking on the light-sensitive material, usually silver halides, was initially recorded as a latent image, but later in the process it became visible and permanently recorded.

What is very evident here is that the key feature that distinguishes analogue from later digital photography is its physical presence, derived from a haptic material basis. Analogue photographs are valued not only for their graininess, colour specificity and high dynamic range, which characterise their visuality, but also for their unique existence and multisensory processes triggered by the materiality of the medium on which they are recorded or presented. Because analogue photography is subject to human and chemical error in its physicality, it is often imperfect. Grains, dust, light leakage, and discolouration are part of the medium. The imperfection of the surfaces, their graininess, blurring and signs of wear and tear also affect the viewer and stimulate a multi-sensory perception. Analogue photographs therefore have the qualities of tactility, specific texture, irregularity and the presence of the object in the world, which lend them an "aura of materiality". We will discuss the latter below, but first we shall see how this feature has changed with the advent of digital technology.

The invention of digital photography in the second half of the twentieth century brought revolutionary changes to photographic methods that quickly replaced analogue processes. The working process became much faster and simpler and without material intermediaries – film, paper and chemicals. A new type of image was written directly onto the memory card via the surface of the digital sensor, converting physical traces of light that enter the lens into a code or binary record that become the carrier of a potential image. Potential because the information "encoded" by the machine must first be "decoded" in order

to become visible. The data set emanating from the code is regarded as a latent image, similarly to that which stems from an undeveloped negative in analogue photography. We can speak here of a new, immaterial sphere introduced by digital photography, since it seems that it does not itself exist in a material sense. However, as Uršula Berlot Pompe emphasises, immateriality "should not be understood as an alternative word for material reduction, emptiness or idea, but on the contrary, we can speak of immateriality as a new state of matter" (Berlot Pompe, 2022: 124). It is therefore more about the loss of material presence, and not materiality itself, since even a dematerialised image is tied to a specific medium and material aspect – in the case of photography, to software and image pixels.

New technologies not only brought with them a new worldview, but also a growing interest in re-searching or redefining the materiality of photography that we see in today's practises. As Katharina Fackler writes in her article, "we find that, instead of dematerialising photography, the digital has added new variants to the already wide range of photographic materialities [...]" (2019). Contemporary photographers are asking what photography is and how it can be perceived as immaterial, digital record or as a two-dimensional surface in its third dimension. In this way, they look back to pre-digital processes, which is not just a nostalgic longing for the past, but a confrontation with the materiality that has paradoxically been inherent in photography since its earliest manifestations. Their practises therefore promote the potential of the digital photographic image to transcend superficiality and acquire materiality. They use different (alternative) methods for material change, which often means a departure from accepted and established photographic procedures. These practices include taking photographs without a camera, drawing, painting or other types of intervention on the image carrier and altering the surface through external factors – light, water, heat, chemical processes. Some even resort to methods of destruction – folding, burning, cutting, tearing, etc. of the photos, resulting in a deformed surface of the medium and introducing a new (third) dimension, or they are combined on an interdisciplinary level with different art genres. Our agenda shall thus continue with exploring this in relation to the concept of metamorphism, as described in the work of Akos Moravanszky.

3.2 Return to the analogue and metamorphism

At the beginning of the 19th century, the German architect Gottfried Semper described the theory of *Stoffwechsel* (Eng. metabolism or material transformation) as "the transfer of forms that were originally connected with the way in which one material was processed to other materials" (Moravanszky, 2018: 15). In this case, the memory of the original texture remains inscribed in the shape or skin of the object (Moravanszky, 2018: 15). The "theory of material transformation" or "theory of material metamorphosis", as he calls it, thus "combines artistic production not with the rejection of what came before but with reflective, creative continuity" (Moravanszky, 2018: 187). The main thing, then, is "change and continuity, the constant renewal of form which reflects the story of its own creation" [...] "new materials and objects are integrated in a pre-structured system which is adequately elastic, and which promotes rather than restricts reinvention. In this sense, *Stoffwechsel* is an old hypothesis but one which signifies constant renewal" (Moravanszky, 2018: 212-213).

In photography, the described process takes place on two levels: 1) in the transfer of architecture or its materialisation in the

¹ Alchemy as the science of the impermanent and the changing.

photographic medium, which we discussed in the first chapter. Furthermore, Semper perceives the creative process itself as the starting point of *Stoffwechsel*, since “every material dictates a certain form of representation due to the properties that distinguish it from other materials, and each demands its own treatment or technique”. Material transformations are viable as well if altogether construed as phases of development (Moravanszky, 2018: 190). Metamorphism takes place on another level, namely 2) with the development of technique or with the transition from analogue to digital and the renewed interest in analogue, whereby materials, ways of viewing, etc. change, but the essence of the medium remains the same, so that we can speak of a dynamic and constantly evolving relationship between change and continuity.

In recent years, we have seen an increasing return to analogue and so-called hybrid processes of photography, where photographers use old techniques in a new, contemporary and creative way. One of the reasons for their resurgence is the unique look and feel that such images give. As mentioned earlier, analogue aesthetics have a certain permanence and (material) qualities that are difficult to replicate in the digital environment, including high dynamic range, grain, specific colours and defects; in short, it is a look that is different from that of a polished and perfect digital image. Due to the nature of the work and the limited number of shots, analogue techniques also force photographers to take a more considered approach to photography. The process to the final image takes longer, and the result in most cases is that fewer photos are taken, and more diligent forethought is required. French editor and critic Olivier Zahm added to the advantages of analogue over digital the element of emotionality that distinguishes humans from machines, devices and technology: “Digital photography is sharper and cleaner; it contains a lot of information but is cold. Film gives you less information but includes emotional information. And what are we interested in, information or emotions? We care about feelings. The film is very emotional. You can cry when you look at the contact sheet, it's amazing” (Zahm: in Rooney, 2017). Revealing sensual qualities, as we have come to know, is only one of the many potentials of architectural photography.

If we return to Moravansky's thesis and address the concept of alchemy, which the architectural historian associates with the transformation of materials, we can expand his definition and say that architectural photography is about the object depicted in the photograph appearing on a new way, in some new aspect, whilst it is simultaneously shown as a special object, as something interesting, new, as something that carries within itself a *punctum*. The metamorphosis in photography is thus encapsulated in the fact that something that can also be worthless or routinely overlooked, that we no longer see, is shown as an art object or architectural object, i.e., as an object of a special kind. Moreover, photographs also give architecture the opportunity to enter the collective consciousness and memory of so-

ciety extremely quickly through repetitions and reproductions. Architecture is captured in a form that passes on the memory to future generations, even if this architecture no longer exists. Susan Sontag describes this as a transformation “into slim objects that one can keep and look at again” (Sontag, 1978: 21). Sontag implies here that photographs as objects count in what they are, as something present and not as an image or an expression of something absent. Even digital photos, as we have learnt, do not signify the absence of materiality, but only its specific form.

4 CONCLUSION

During the period of modernism, new interpretations and understandings of space emerged, fuelled by new scientific and technological discoveries. Interest shifted from material aspects to immaterial and invisible dimensions of reality. As a result, the relationships between original and copy, subject and object, reality and its representation were re-theorised and redefined. The development of contemporary information technologies has established “new spatial relations, based on the concept of virtual reality and simulation, and arising from the global cancellation of traditional time-space relations in the new immaterial sphere of the global internet” (Berlot Pompe, 2021: 3). Changes have also appeared in the communication and distribution of photographs – with the advent of the World Wide Web and social networks, almost anyone can now become a user, photographer and critic at the same time. However, digital photography, based on algorithms, computers, and networks, has not necessarily brought with it something bad and inauthentic, as it has the ability to expand the creative applications of photography while opening new questions and possibilities. In today's age, in which everything is dematerialised, materiality takes on a significance.

The fact that there are still examples of good photography whose image is not just a backdrop devoid of content or experience, and which functions independently of the marketing demands of all-pervasive capitalism, brings some optimism to the aforementioned criticism of the postmodern image with its fast and instant character. These are photographs that manage to shake and transcend the given mental frameworks and categories through which we interpret and understand the world; that are not necessarily the latest, most spectacular or different; which are not defined only by appearance and surface, nor only by message and content. They are the ones that enhance the experience and our sense of being in the world by accentuating the meanings of things in their openness and possibility of re-definition. So, when architectural photography is developed at the level of its practise as a creative activity, as one of the forms of art, the results are fruitful for both thinking about architecture and thinking about photography. As a generative force, it strengthens the materiality of architecture so that it becomes visible in a different way, enabling us not only to see differently, but also to design and build differently.

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