

On the Architectural Structure of Photographic Space

Mike Christenson, AIA

Published in *Architectural Science Review*, 54: 2, 93 - 100.*

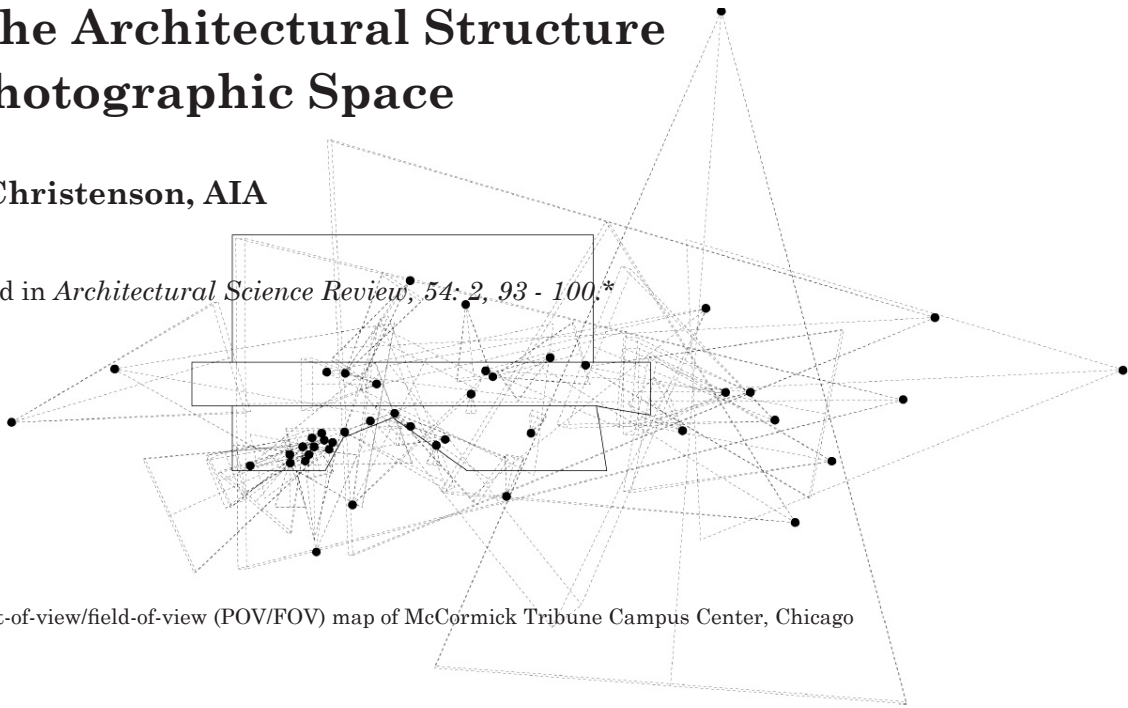


Fig. 1. point-of-view/field-of-view (POV/FOV) map of McCormick Tribune Campus Center, Chicago

Introduction

Photography as a practice is uniquely responsible for constructing architecture's identity: knowledge about built works of architecture is largely embodied in and communicated through photographs. Classic examples of the centrality of photography's complicity in constructing architecture's identity include Le Corbusier's appropriation of trade photographs of American and Canadian grain elevators to support his argument about a "New Architecture" (Banham, 1989); Bernard Rudofsky's use of apparently anonymous photographs to construct the idea of a "nonpedigreed" architecture (Rudofsky, 1964), and more recently, the proliferation of photographs of buildings like Frank Gehry's Bilbao, where the images of the building assume a value which can be understood, in certain contexts, as on par with the building itself (Urry, 2002). Yet, architecture simultaneously operates to construct photography's identity as a practice: every building can be understood as a device for selectively revealing and obscuring views. As Beatriz Colomina has succinctly acknowledged, every building is "not simply represented in images but is a mechanism for producing images." (Colomina, 1996:97.)

Now, with the advent of technologies like Google Street View and websites like Flickr, new challenges to the mutually constructive relationship between photography and architecture are emerging. Google Street View, or GSV, promises to obliterate the historical idea that architectural photographs in order to be useful must be of something: GSV images are of everything, and therefore are of nothing in particular. And yet, their ubiquity makes them uniquely useful and valuable in any effort to "to organize the world's information" concerning architecture (Google, 2011). Flickr promises to obliterate the idea that images must be edited and published by a third party – not the photographer and not the recipient – in order to be widely disseminated. By eliminating the middleman, Flickr and GSV make many more architectural photographs available to everyone anywhere: among these photographs are ones of obvious value and many others whose value is not so obvious. Technologies such as Flickr and GSV, which promise to challenge old ideas about the relationship between photography and architecture, demand new critical tools for assessment. This paper proposes just such a tool in the point-of-view/field-of-view map.