

FRIEDERIKE VON RAUCH: Top ten, The best German architectural photographers
by Falk Jaeger on website of Goethe Institut on November 2015

TOP TEN: THE BEST GERMAN ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHERS

Architecture criticism and architectural photography are inseparable - and yet they are fundamentally different. The one describes a space, a building, a city in words, the other captures the light that emanates from the architecture: through sober documentation, “unbribeable” commentary, or sensitive narration, poetic rapture. In Falk Jaeger’s work as architecture critic, the architectural photographer turns into his alter ego. He has selected the best of the profession and presents them with their various approaches and pictorial languages in brief portraits.

One might think that taking pictures of houses cannot be all that difficult. They don’t run away and wait patiently for the right light together with the photographer. Sometimes, however, the waiting is in vain, and often conditions are not comfortably manageable as they are in the studio. Thus it becomes clear that in photographing architecture, one very much needs a feeling for the motif, the right moment, the congenial view, and imagination. These ten selected photographers demonstrate this, constantly surprising the viewer with new perspectives, atmospheres and effects.

Architectural photography is also a completely independent field of work. Unlike fashion, cars, or food the issue here is not setting the motifs in the right lighting with the purpose of selling them. The houses have already been sold. For the most part the photos are commissioned by architects who want to have their works documented and often have very definite ideas about how the buildings should look and how they should affect the viewer. Sometimes, however, the photographer turns an unremarkable building into a star, and the photo itself becomes an icon. Many an architect has brought his or her building like a child into the world and left it to others – and therefore to the photographer as well – to absorb and interpret their work.

The fact that buildings are generally photographed without users, in other words without people is a phenomenon that is difficult to explain – the more so since architects mostly put pictures of people into their renderings of planned buildings.

Perhaps the reason for this lack of people in typical architectural photographs is that the work of a photographer, depicting a building, is like composing a still life. Living creatures are only a disturbance here. But given a choice, most architects also go for an image without people. Modern architecture has striven since its beginnings in the early 20th century for clarity, simplification and abstraction. People, by contrast, bring disorder and life into the building. Elite architectures of one kind or another cannot tolerate this at all – which calls their reason for existing into question, but that is another story. The documenting architecture, the attempt to acknowledge and appreciate the work of the architect, present it as faithfully as possible and render it accessible, is an important task of architectural photography. Architectural theory speaks of the form level, the topological, physically present architecture. This level is every-day working life for most architectural photographers. The axis of symmetry, where present in the object, is obligatory. But photographers also choose other angles, avoid perspectival distortions, wait for optimal light conditions. It is no accident that some of the architectural photographers have passed through the school of the photographer Dieter Leistner in Mainz or at the Fachhochschule Dortmund. He radiates and has perfected this approach of careful geometric composition, harmony and balance. Thus images of high intensity and precision arise, in some of which an effect can be observed that the idealised image has in a certain way detached itself from reality.

But there is also the level of appearance, in other words the architecture as it is perceivable, influenced by weather, the observer's movements, or other conditions of reception. When Hans Georg Esch stages his panorama photos of Chinese metropolises, he does not wait for a smog-free day, but instead reflects the poetics of the schematic layout of Cityscapes. Others compose photo essays on this level and do not necessarily document the architecture per se, but instead the ambient as it is.

The third level, that of the image, is the subjectively experienced reality of the architectural form and its appearance, and arises in the mid of the observer. This is the level on which Friederike von Rauch works, for whom architecture is a raw material from which feelings and dreams can be made.

Thus, a variety of approaches to the subject exists, and thereby also very different signatures among the Top Ten of architectural photography.

[...]

FRIEDERIKE VON RAUCH

"I'm not an architectural photographer," she stresses, which is true inasmuch as she does not accept any commissions for photographic documentation of buildings. Friederike von Rauch, born in 1967 in Freiburg im Breisgau, makes use of architecture only as a subject for her artistic work. The spaces, the traces left by people (only the traces, never the people themselves), the atmospheres are what draw her attention. Context is of no interest, is greyed out, the pictorial information radically reduced. The issue here is not spectacular new buildings, but space, light and shadow, materiality, atmosphere. Nothing bold or striking, loud, dramatic or in motion is to be found in her pictures. They are composed like the pictorial spaces of Romanticism.

Her colour palette is pale, subdued almost to the point of monochrome, the diffuse light flowing gently, conveying a reserved stillness, deserted museums after closing-time are her places of longing. She gives longing an image and a form: she is the poet of architecture – with a camera.



Photo: Friederike von Rauch