Negotiating the Status of Architectural Photographs

Negociar el estatus de las fotografías arquitectónicas

Abstract
This article investigates the role architecture has assigned to architectural photographs and the protocols regulating their use through close readings of the correspondence between architects, authors, editors, publishers and photographers. The article thereby traces how, in the first half of the twentieth century, architecture came to appreciate photographs as artifacts with individual qualities, but resisted recognizing their independent agency. It suggests that this act of circumvention was legitimized by disciplinary protocols and has led to a discrepancy between the role assigned to photographs by architecture and their actual role in the production of architectural meaning.

Keywords: Architectural photography, Blaue Bücher, Lucia Moholy, Walter Gropius, Walter Müller-Wulckow, Karl Robert Langewiesche, Sigfried Giedion, authorship

Resumen
Este artículo investiga el rol que la arquitectura asignó a las fotografías arquitectónicas y los protocolos que regularon su uso, a través de la evaluación de la correspondencia entre arquitectos, autores, editores, editoriales y fotógrafos. Se rastrea cómo, en la primera mitad del siglo XX, la disciplina de la arquitectura llegó a apreciar las instantáneas como artefactos con cualidades individuales, pero se resistió a reconocer su capacidad e independencia. Este acto de elusión fue legitimado, a su vez, por protocolos disciplinares que condujeron a desacuerdos entre el rol asignado a la fotografía y su participación de hecho en la producción de significado.

Palabras clave: fotografía de arquitectura, Blaue Bücher, Lucia Moholy, Walter Gropius, Walter Müller-Wulckow, Karl Robert Langewiesche, Sigfried Giedion, autoría
Photographs in the Blaue Bücher on Contemporary Architecture

When, around the beginning of the twentieth century, advancements in printing technology allowed for the cheap reproduction of photographs within publications, new formats such as illustrated magazines and photobooks developed. In Germany, Karl Robert Langewiesche was among the first publishers who, from as early as 1909 onwards, embraced the new format in his Blaue Bücher series. The format seemed ideal for introducing a general, not highly educated audience to topics of cultural relevance, ranging from animals and German landscapes to art and architecture. These photobooks usually featured an introductory essay, a comprehensive section of large format photographs (mostly one per page), followed, if necessary, by a short segment providing additional information.

Despite the undeniable centrality of photographs to these publications, the images were rarely commissioned by the publishing house and were instead sourced from professional and amateur photographers. Topics of upcoming publications were described in ads placed in relevant magazines and circular letters which were sent to individual photographers as well as to the many photography clubs and societies that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. The recipients were asked to supply the publishing house with photographic prints, which would be acquired or otherwise returned.

The acquisition process for the photographic materials for the four books on contemporary German architecture by the art historian Walter Müller-Wulckow, published between 1925 and 1932, differed slightly. While the publishing house adhered to the strategy of sending out circular letters, they went to architects rather than photographers, who were asked to send in photographic representations of their designs. Besides presenting the books as an outstanding promotional opportunity, the publishing house also portrayed them as serving the greater good, namely the "promotion of an understanding of good architecture in the widest circles," as a letter from 1928 proclaimed.

Müller-Wulckow's books credited each architect underneath the photographic representation of their work, but commonly omitted the name of the photographer. This procedure, Langewiesche explained in a letter to Müller-Wulckow, "seems entirely correct to me," at least if the "photographs are supplied by the architect and the images were commissioned by them." There is no evidence that the publisher made any inquiries as to whether this was the case, however, and he generally operated under the assumption that receiving photographic material from an architect released him from any liability towards the photographer whose work he reproduced. Clearing the reproduction rights, he insisted, was the architects' responsibility.

The publishing house was not simply indifferent towards the photographers whose work filled the pages of these books on contemporary German architecture, but actively dismissed their relevance. This is substantiated in a letter from Langewiesche to Müller-Wulckow, written in September 1926, which responds to an inquiry by the latter regarding the legality of having lanternslides made from photographs reproduced in his books. Langewiesche admitted that he was "strictly speaking not authorized" to grant permission for any further distribution of the photographs, but thought that only "in respect to any other than an architectural publication one would have to adhere more strictly to the juridical terms." He based this opinion on the assumption that most of the photographs in question had been taken on commission of the architect whose work they depicted as means of propaganda and who would, if anything, welcome their distribution. Langewiesche's response to Müller-Wulckow is interesting not only because it reflects the publisher's awareness of the incongruity of his principles with...
common or legal conventions, but also because it demonstrates his general acknowledgement of photographs as artifacts while disqualifying architectural photographs as a means to an end rather than artworks with any intrinsic value.

Most architects who responded to Müller-Wulckow’s invitation to contribute to his book project readily accepted the publishing house’s intent to keep any photographic prints selected for reproduction for potential future editions and to receive as compensation a copy of the book featuring their designs. Only the publishing house’s frequent failure to clearly communicate these principles in advance led to occasional protests by architects. “Hundreds of publishers and authors, just like you, approach me each year to get free pictures,” Erich Mendelsohn wrote when demanding compensation for the photographic prints he did not receive back from Langewiesche. While Müller-Wulckow repeatedly stressed that the benefits of having one’s work featured in his books would certainly outweigh the architect’s investment, the publishing house usually complied with such requests, if grudgingly so. A look at the arguments related to the demands made by the architect Hugo Häring, who considered it the architect’s right to control the reproduction of photographic representations of their work, prominently demonstrates the growing importance that architectural professionals attached to having control over architectural photographs, but also reveals the growing discrepancy between architecture’s outward disregard of photography while inwardly embracing and becoming increasingly reliant on photography.

In a letter from January 1929, Häring charged Müller-Wulckow a sum of 40 Reichsmark for the rights to two photographs reproduced in the revised edition of Bauten der Arbeit und des Verkehrs that depicted Gut Garkau, a farm the architect had designed. In response to this demand, Langewiesche explained to Häring that Müller-Wulckow’s volumes on contemporary architecture accrued “astonishingly high editorial costs” in comparison to books on other topics and that their realization would hence rely on the architects’ support, namely the provision of images free of charge. The impression that the publisher generally accepted Häring’s right to be paid for the reproduction of photographs of his designs proves wrong, though, when Langewiesche then declared that “it had to appear downright grotesque that the publishing house is supposed to compensate an architect for the propaganda it provided for him.” He conceded that, theoretically, architects were entitled to request compensation for their expenses, such as costs related to the acquisition and mailing of photographic prints [photographisches Reproduktionshonorar]. They quite certainly did not have the right to demand what he referred to as an “artistic reproduction fee” [künstlerisches Reproduktionshonorar], that is, a payment in acknowledgement of the architect’s artistic work by means of charging the publisher for his permission to use photographic depictions of their designs. Müller-Wulckow backed his employer, insisting in a letter to Häring that financial demands based on what a photograph showed were unjustified — at least in the case of exterior architecture.
a single penny for the substance on which its income relied,” Häring continued to defend his point of view. The very material that publishers like Langewiesche expected to receive from the architects for free, he stressed, was what “turns your book into a valuable book.” If Langewiesche’s calculations would prevent him from paying “for the material that you base your business on,” he added, “you must refrain from publishing books.”

Notably, Langewiesche could have simply rejected Häring’s demands on legal grounds. Müller-Wulckow, however, was keen to mediate between his employer and Häring and find an amiable solution to protect his good relationship with the architectural community. Even though he could have commissioned photographs or obtained material from sources other than the architects themselves, both Müller-Wulckow as well as Langewiesche profited from the architects’ collaboration and willingness to supply them with photographs of their work. But quite independently of such economic considerations, the inconsistency in Langewiesche’s arguments – on the one hand trying to reason with Häring, while challenging the general legitimacy of his claims on the other – reflects the ambiguous role of architectural photographs. The publisher identified photographs as stand-ins for the architects’ designs when he stressed the promotional value of the publications for the architect as well as when describing the books in his circulars as “a selection of the best and most characteristic achievements” within the field of contemporary architecture. Yet he also established a notion of architectural photographs as being independent from the buildings they depicted, if only by means of rejecting the idea that they were subject to architectural authorship, as implied by Häring.

Dwelling on Häring’s demands here, it is important to note that he was “a member of the architects’ association Der Ring,” which, as he pointed out to Langewiesche, obliged him to “generally provide publication material only in exchange for a fee.” His opinion thus was that of a representative of a considerable number of the most influential architects of Weimar Germany, rather than the idiosyncratic voice of an individual. A look at the correspondence between Müller-Wulckow and other members of Der Ring provides two important insights: Firstly, while the publishing house adamantly rejected complying with Häring’s expectations to be paid for allowing photographs of his work to be reproduced, it accepted similar demands by other members of Der Ring. Secondly, not all of the group’s members charged Langewiesche for the publication of photographs of their designs, indicating a lack of commonly accepted and followed conventions for the use of photographs within the context of architectural publishing at the time and a disregard of principles if this furthered one’s personal interests. Yet the alternation between different characterizations of architectural photographs – represented by Langewiesche’s and Häring’s arguments – also reveals how architectural photographs are equally and simultaneously representations of artifacts, namely buildings, as well as artifacts in their own right.

Lucia Moholy’s “Missing Negatives”
Despite their disagreements, architects, the editor and the publisher all benefitted from and had an interest in maintaining the classification of photographs as a means to an end, produced to be at their disposal. At a time when photography had only just come into its own as a creative and productive process and as a mass medium, the inconsistencies in this characterization of architectural photographs remained largely unchallenged. More than two decades later, in the 1950s, another and quite different dispute was likewise concerned with the applicable protocols for the use of architectural photographs. By then, photographs had become generally recognized as having intrinsic qualities, which in turn lent a voice to the photographer, who could no longer be simply ignored. Yet the discussion around the contested use of the photographs of the Bauhaus building in Dessau taken by Lucia Moholy nevertheless indicates a continuous disregard for the photographer’s rights, and for photographs as meaningful agents in the production of architecture, legitimized through a disciplinary framework of standards and protocols.

Even though architectural photographs made up only a small fraction of Moholy’s oeuvre, her work contributed significantly to the development of modern architectural photography.[15] In 1923, she arrived at the Bauhaus with her husband László Moholy-Nagy, bringing with her experience in photography as well as in editing, publishing and public relations.[16] While she was never a student or staff member at the Bauhaus, she provided substantial support for her husband’s work as well as for the school, which required a steadily growing number of photographs to compile catalogues, but also for publicity purposes. In 1926, when the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, Moholy took a series of photographs of the school’s new buildings, designed by Gropius. These pictures, taken without any official commission, as Moholy would later stress, were widely published to promote the institution and have gone on to crucially shape the image and reputation not only of the buildings they depict, but also of Gropius and the Bauhaus more generally.[17]

In 1928, Moholy left the Bauhaus along with her husband and Gropius, and in 1933, now divorced and threatened by the Fascist regime, she fled Germany, leaving behind an archive of approximately 600 large-format glass negatives. Initially kept by her former husband and his new wife Sibyl, they handed them over to Gropius when they also left Germany about a year later. Contrary to rumours that the archive had been destroyed in Berlin during the war, it had been shipped to the US in 1937, together with Gropius’s belongings, when he took up a position at Harvard University. Moholy’s attempts to determine the archive’s fate after the war were in vain until 1954, when Gropius, to whom she had turned for advice, disclosed that he had been in possession of the negatives for decades. He freely admitted that he had “carefully kept them, had copies made of all of them and have given a full set of copies to the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard.”[18] He had
furthermore promised the museum "the original negatives with your name attached as soon as I do not need them any more myself." Gropius’s past actions and plans, but also his asking Moholy if it might be "sufficient if I sent you contact prints of the negatives" rather than returning them, demonstrate a clear dismissal of her interests. When he pleaded that Moholy should "not deprive me of them [the photographs]," he implied that the images would have much more meaning for him than for her.

The case of Moholy’s negatives and the non-consensual use of her photographs for decades is of great relevance to the construction of the Bauhaus legacy, the disputed concept of authorship at the Bauhaus, the role of women in the Weimar avant-garde and at the Bauhaus and, not least of all, the effects of exile and migration on the spread of Bauhaus ideas, individual biographies and modern architecture in general. However, here I want to focus on the disputes around Moholy’s demands to have her negatives returned to her and to be compensated for the use of her photographs in order to examine the relationship between architecture and photography following the Second World War. Indeed, the arguments brought forward against Moholy reveal a simultaneous acknowledgement and rejection of the significance of her photographs, and thus point towards an inconsistency in architecture’s relationship with photography.

In his letters, Gropius suggested repeatedly that it was him and not Moholy who was being unfairly treated. Thus, he refused to respond to a long letter from Moholy in response to his revelation that he was in possession of the negatives “because of the insulting insinuations it contains,” as his wife Ise, writing on his behalf, explained. Ise Gropius rejected any wrongdoing on her husband’s part, but also undermined the relevance of Moholy’s photographs. While her husband had indeed used and distributed Moholy’s photographs, she admitted, he had employed the negatives on only two occasions and in all other instances relied on the “original copies made for him by you when he was still in Dessau.” Ise further downplayed the significance of Moholy’s photographs by describing them as “the only record he [Walter Gropius] has of a work that is now considered to be of historical importance,” taken before “the Bauhaus building has been converted into something unrecognizable.” She thus insinuated that the photographs were only valuable in their capacity as documentation of an object of great importance, not as objects in their own right, while also suggesting that the ownership of a photographic print entailed the right to use and disseminate the image unrestrictedly.

One might therefore assume that Ise Gropius simply subscribed to the classification of architectural photographs as the documentation of a building and being without any intrinsic value, truly believing that her husband had acted rightly. Her offer to organize the return of Moholy’s negatives “at your expense,” and only if Moholy would promise in writing to refrain from making any “further demands” on her husband, calls this into question, however. Ise Gropius’s conditions expose a contradiction in her arguments similar to that found in Walter Gropius’s letter. While neither Ise nor Walter Gropius challenged Moholy’s ownership of the negatives and her right to demand their return, both convey a conspicuous general disregard for her and her interests.

Given the historical context, the aspect of gender inequality surely played into the course of events and certainly contributed to the confidence with which Walter Gropius, a privileged white male Harvard professor, expected Moholy, a divorced female photographer, to withdraw her claims and quietly accept the appropriation of her negatives and the use of her photographs by him and others. However, I want to propose that, in Gropius’s actions, an issue resurfaced that was generally concealed: namely architecture’s unresolved relationship with photography. The arguments brought against Moholy by publishers and authors who had used her photographs, which they had received from Gropius, mirror the same contradictory sentiment towards Moholy manifested in Gropius’s letters: a general dismissal of her interests and rights paired with a simultaneously underlying recognition of her authority and, in the case of Swiss art historian Giedion and his publisher Neuenschwander, an acknowledgement of Moholy’s photographs as artifacts in their own right.
In 1954, Giedion’s book *Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork* appeared simultaneously in several countries and languages. It featured several of Moholy’s photographs as well as an appraisal of their quality. In Gropius’s *Bauhausbauten Dessau*, Giedion wrote that the architect’s Bauhaus buildings were “illustrated by a series of excellent photographs, taken with rare perception and clarity by Lucia Moholy.”[31] Nonetheless, he refused to comply with Moholy’s demand to be paid for the use of her pictures and insinuated that her request was inappropriate. Allegedly, all parties involved in the making of his book, author and architect included, had put their individual interests aside for the sake of the project. One photographer had initially asked for payment, but had withdrawn his claims when he and Gropius had explained that “this book could only come into being for a reasonable price because of the sacrifices of all participants.”[32] Hence, Giedion did not dismiss Moholy’s right to be compensated for the use of her work, but rather condemned her decision to act on it. Such moralistic demands can be seen even more clearly in a follow-up letter to Moholy where, increasingly indifferent towards her adherence to her demands, Giedion asserted that “[i]f every photographer had made similarly exorbitant claims based on vested rights, the copyrights would have been much higher than the costs of the book itself.”[33]

The Swiss publisher Max Neuenschwander, who coordinated the publication of *Walter Gropius*, also referred to a specific circumstantial necessity that warranted any rejection of Moholy’s claims. “By means of publishing the book simultaneously in several languages,” he explained, “I attempted to reduce the retail price of the book in the interest of the author.”[34] This, however, had “created considerable expenses for me as well as the author.”[35] His rebuttal of Moholy’s claims, he stressed, was “by no means motivated by economic interests but solely by my concerns that the experiment will be threatened by similar demands.”[36] Informing Moholy that “I find it inconceivable that the author is really you,” Giedion finally established a difference between generally accepted protocols and those applicable within the context of making books such as *Walter Gropius*, characterized by Giedion as the “first real biography of a modern architect.”[37] Hence alluding to the existence of specific protocols for the use of architectural photographs, Giedion and Neuenschwander justified their disregard of the photographers’ rights not with the characterization of photographs as a means to an end, but by privileging the importance of what the photographs showed over the photographer’s authorship.

Moholy finally addressed the various arguments brought against her in a dispute with Herbert Bayer, who refused to pay her for the use of her photographs in the catalogue of the 1938 MoMA exhibition *Bauhaus 1919–1928*, which he had edited in collaboration with Ise and Walter Gropius. Like Giedion and Neuenschwander, Bayer also referred to the specific context in which he employed Moholy’s photographs to justify his rejection of her demands, which, he furthermore implied, she did not have a right to make in the first place. Paying her “would have been out of the question for this catalogue with an educational purpose,” he argued.[38] He had also been surprised “that you would charge for photos which you made on Moholy’s [László Moholy-Nagy] request for the Bauhaus books in 1925 without pay,” thereby undermining her authorship rights altogether.[39] Stressing that these “were and still are my photographs and no-one else’s … and I am, and always have been a person in my own right and not merely a tool or adjunct,”[40] Moholy opposed this insinuation. It was most peculiar that excuses such as “educational purpose,” “catalogue” and similar metaphors are always held against the photographer though no such publication could even be attempted without the photographer’s contribution, which is essential. I have given up believing in those metaphors long ago, particularly when editors and publishers do not even try to make the most elementary enquiries.[41]

On the one hand, Moholy identifies a specific and intrinsic relevance of photographs for the purposes of architectural discourse. On the other, however, she brings into view how architectural professionals circumvented the recognition of such relevance through dubious arguments. Instead of acknowledging the stake photography holds in the communication of architecture, it appears that, as a professional discourse, the field suppressed any contributions photography has made to the architectural context and refused to engage with the influence that photography, as a meaning-producing practice, wields over the understanding of architecture and its image.

**Conclusion**

The situations discussed in this article reveal how architectural professionals recognized the photographer’s work as a creative and meaningful endeavour by acknowledging her crucial role in mediating architecture and its image. Yet the arguments brought against Moholy also suggest that architecture, as a profession, evaded acknowledging the contributions made by photography in the construction of our understanding of architecture by rejecting any claims for a specific creative contribution to the depicted object. The position of photography, the photographer and the photograph that surfaces here is highly contradictory: on the one hand, photographs are recognized as artifacts that shape not just a specific image, but the understanding of architecture itself; on the other, photographers are said to have practically no creative investment in their work, and therefore no entitlement to have their work recognized and compensated as being artistic. While the goal of cutting costs might have played into this, especially in the case of Langewiesche and the making of the Blaue Bücher, it is in the dispute between Moholy and Gropius, who no longer had an economic interest in the images, that such considerations are especially betrayed. The rejection of any claims to have the work recognized as adding to the object depicted are thus revealed as an evasion of the formative influence of the photographs.

These two situations, moreover, reveal a shift in the way architectural professionals responded to any demands by photographers to have their
work taken seriously. In the first, the making of the Blaue Bücher, the justification for the disregard of the photographer’s interests was straightforward, as it was derived from the characterization of architectural photographs as a means to an end without any individual value. This was also generally accepted. The publisher’s attempt to substantiate his rejection of Häring’s demands and, by extension, a notion of architectural authorship that included photographic depictions of a building, reveals the inadequacy of a characterization of photographs as objects lacking any intrinsic qualities, however, and instead unintentionally established their autonomy. The second story suggests at first glance that, about two decades later, the notion of photographs as objects with individual qualities and an understanding of the work of the photographer as being creative had become generally accepted among architectural professionals. But the disputes around the use of Moholy’s negatives show that, although Gropius and others by and large acknowledged the value, significance and individuality of her photographs, they also expected that the photographer would not claim authorship. Yet by doing exactly that and invoking the rights derived from it, Moholy contradicted the expectations towards architectural photographers and thereby challenged those who had become used to treating her photographs as a means to an end and confronted architectural professionals with the centrality and immensity of photographs to their work. The referral to particular protocols applicable to the use of architectural photographs in response to Moholy’s demands stipulates the need for the photographer to subordinate her interests to those using her work. Rather than acknowledging photography as a new agent that intervenes in the way architecture was understood, and entering into dialogue with photography and photographers, architecture went out of its way to evade the realization that photographs had, for better or worse, become a crucial and, indeed, increasingly constitutive part of their work.

Notes
1. For an insightful study on photobooks in Weimar Germany, see Pepper Stetler, Stop Reading! Look!: Modern Vision and the Weimar Photographic Book (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).
5. Circular dated March 1928, HA/BV, Langewiesche Archive, Correspondence 1928:
6. Langewiesche only felt obliged to credit a photographer if the photographic prints featured a disclaimer, such as a photographer’s rubber-stamp, on the back.
7. Letter from Langewiesche to Müller-Wulckow, dated August 8, 1928, emphasis in the original, LMO-MW, folder 55.2 Langewiesche, Karl Robert.
20. For details on Moholy’s life and work, see Rolf Sachsse, Lucia Moholy. Bauhaus-Fotografin (Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv, 1995); Lucia Moholy (Düsseldorf: Marzona, 1985).
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