

What the picture you're looking at looks like August 27, 2009

Tardy to follow up the "[truthy lies](#)" post with more opinions from photographers of the built environment, but never too late. In the intervening time, Edgar Martins [broke his silence](#), citing Michael Jackson's death, realizing that history is now unlinear, stating all facts are mediated, and referencing Lacanian "lack"—all with only ten footnotes. I was back in Crit Theory class, circa '91. Jörg published Edgar's elaborate disquisition, then got [a bit defensive](#) for having afforded Edgar a one-way avenue for so little net explanation.

I'm guessing that the reason that this is all we've heard from Martins directly on the subject (long as it was) is to get to the other side of some kind of settlement with the *Times*. Regardless, when I read in a recent Sunday edition [a little piece about photographic fakery](#), the irony was a tad too rich. A Dartmouth computer science professor (and fake photo sleuth) says, "The very nature of photography was to record events. . . . You'd think there would have been a grace period of respect for this new technology."

I'm partisan on this issue, but this is an absurd statement for anyone familiar with the history and theory of photography. The science was born with a specific set of technologies so unlike contemporary faculties that we're practically talking about two different practices. The ostensibly inviolable link between truth and photography cannot be traced to its earliest origins; the first [Daguerreotype to depict a human](#) famously records only the stationary man getting a shoeshine—the rest of the throng is invisible due to their motion over a long exposure. Photography's [preoccupation with mystical concerns](#) throughout the nineteenth century, not to mention the photographic revelation of objects and events unobtainable to the unaided human eye, renders this line of thinking ridiculous to me.

As with many topics this can be qualified by intention and context. So here are several more photographers (and one "image creator," see below) of architectural subjects and the built environment responding to the extremely reductionist question: **Should photojournalistic standards of "truth" be applied to architectural photography?** First there is Greg Girard, whose documentation of [Kowloon Walled City](#) is in my mind a major landmark in the history of architectural photography; his more recent book [Phantom Shanghai](#) is also amazing. Stanley Greenberg is arguably the foremost photographer of New York City infrastructure, and whose first [two books](#) will soon be joined by another next year, *Architecture Under Construction*.

Philipp Schaerer has a different creative and professional profile than Greg and Stanley, as he is not a photographer, but an architect, image manager, and ultimately, as he terms it, an "image creator." His field is architectural visualization, and he has done so professionally for such firms as Herzog & de Meuron. His conceptual projects include [Raummodelle](#), which explores "how conceptual images can be developed with classic rendering techniques" and [Bildbauten](#), which collides disparate elements of buildings and terrain to create images of impossible and meaningless architecture. Visually and conceptually his work is fascinating, and explicitly treats these big issues. So without further ado:

Greg Girard:



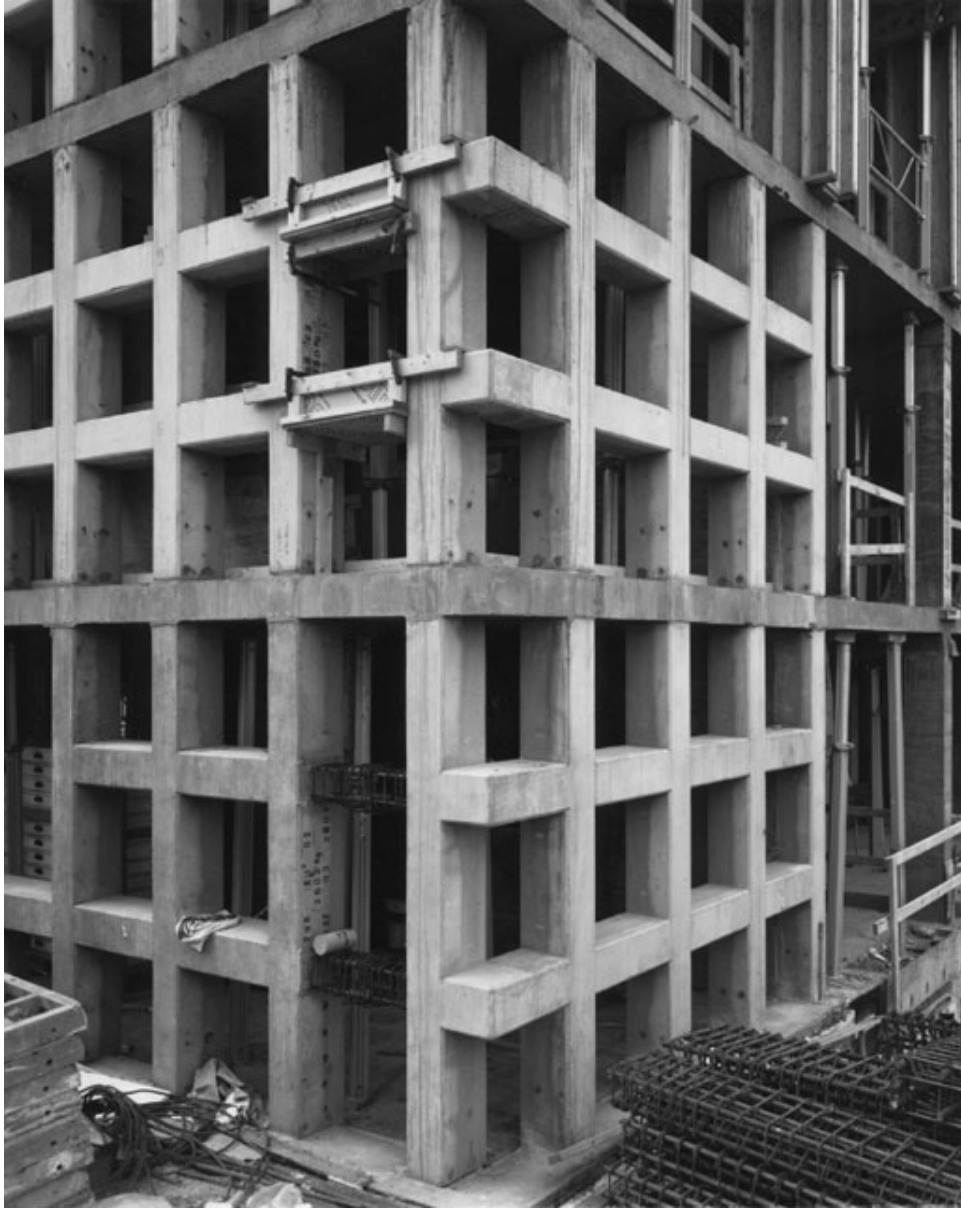
Neighborhood Demolition, Fangbang Lu, 2006, by Greg Girard

I'm not sure that photojournalistic standards of truth have even been applied historically to much of photojournalism, let alone other areas of photography. I am thinking especially of the staged and lighted pictures from *Life* magazine in the 1950s and 60s, among other earlier and later examples. At some point along the way a code of what constitutes acceptable darkroom manipulation and photographer intervention was established by the "quality" magazines and newspapers. This code remains in place today, modified for the new digital reality, though unless one has a background in mainstream journalism one would not really know what lines can and can't be crossed. "Photojournalism" is a pre-television term, and in one sense the practice has never fully come to terms with television, let alone the internet and digital imagery. It seems that an ever-smaller number of these quality/traditional publications and their online versions enforce a code of standards, essentially a pledge to their audience that: "This is what we say it is." **Without that pledge all you can say about a picture, in terms of truth at least, is: "This is what the picture you're looking at looks like."**



Walled City Exterior, 1987 by Greg Girard

Stanley Greenberg:

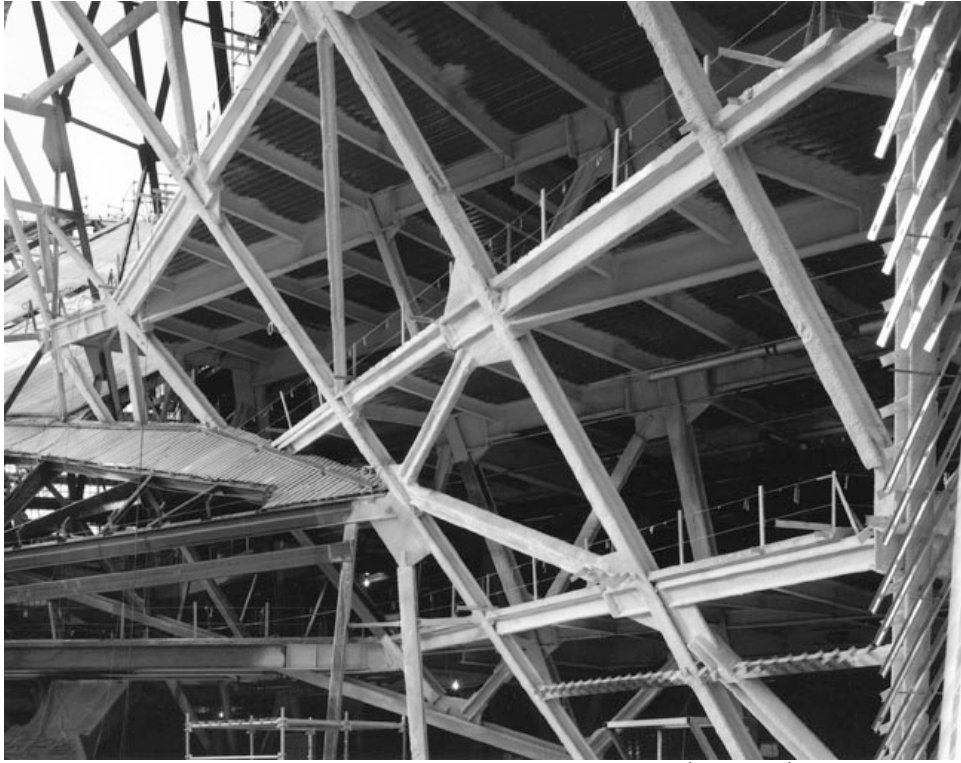


Untitled, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001, © Stanley Greenberg. From the forthcoming *Architecture Under Construction*, University of Chicago Press

While I am scrupulous about issues of accuracy and manipulation, I think it's all about your intentions, either stated or implied. I don't alter anything at the site of my photograph. I may dodge and burn to bring back what I remember (and how accurate is that) because film is not the same as your eye. If I photograph an interior with a window, it's a safe bet that you can see through the window with your eye, but the film may not have the latitude to do that. If you were to shoot digitally and combine two exposures to make a picture more like what your eye sees, that's fine. But I'm not comfortable with adding a tree that's not there. I don't consider my work documentary; even if it is done in that style. There are so many ways you can alter perceptions; what do you include, what lens do you use, how do you light the space, can you tell what the scale is?

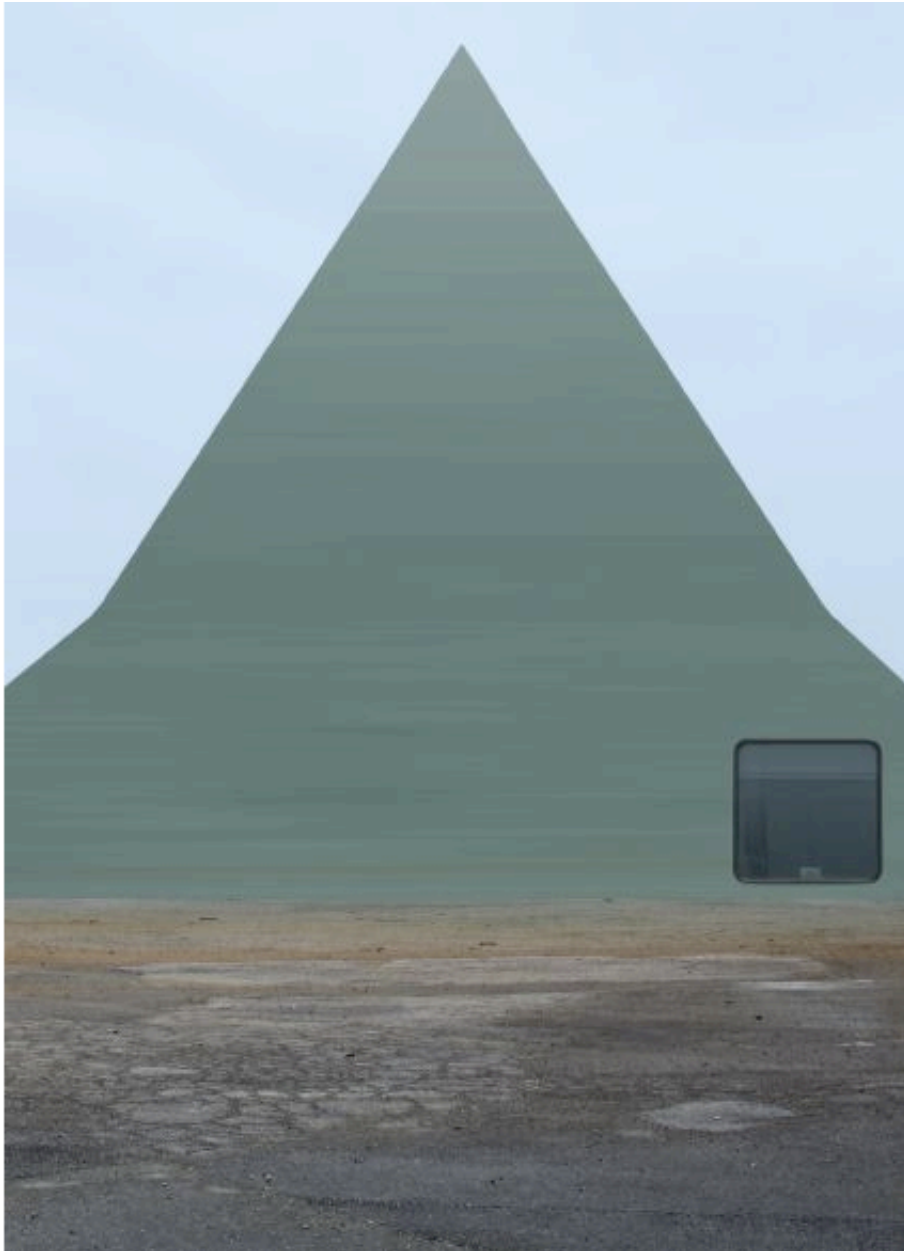
Architectural photography often means using a stylist to set up a scene. Is the photograph an accurate depiction of what's there? Yes. But it may not be an accurate portrayal of how a house is lived in. And if you're calling it photojournalism, you should be faithful to what's there.

There are many ways of telling the truth. A fictional film may be a better way to tell a story than to use the facts. A novel may be better than a memoir. It's all about your intention. If you state it, then you have a responsibility to be true to it. If you don't, then you may leave it up for interpretation. **But context can change everything, and you can mislead just as easily by locating your pictures in a way that is bound to be misinterpreted.**



Untitled, Denver, Colorado, 2005 © Stanley Greenberg. From the forthcoming Architecture Under Construction, University of Chicago Press

Philipp Schaerer:



Bildbauten No 6, 2007 by Philipp Schaerer

It's an interesting and a difficult question, and hard for me to say yes or no in very clear manner. Let me explain:

I think it's already difficult to talk about "veracity" and "truth" in the field of photography. Taking a photograph is to project a tridimensional environment on a two-dimensional layer by means of a lens. Depending on the lens you use, the projection can be significantly distorted (as with a wide angle lens). In the field of architectural photography this fact is already problematic for [the intent of such] photographs is to reproduce truly the dimension of a space. How many times have we had the experience of looking first at a photograph of an interior—for booking a hotel room or looking for a new apartment—feeling a little bit disappointed once we physically were inside the space because it felt much smaller compared to the distorted photograph. So, already at this point it's difficult to speak about veracity and truth in architectural photography.

Looking at the postproduction, the question is much more difficult, because at this moment of your workflow, you are able to erase or add supplementary content to the photograph or the image. **The major question here is, at which level of intervention does a photograph lose its status of being a photograph?** I do not speak of cleaning a photograph of dust and little scratches — that isn't the problem. The problem begins when you are touching the content—when you alienate or change the represented content in the photograph. What does an architectural photographer do in the situation of having taken a shot of a façade and unfortunately there are distracting and accidental elements in the image, like a moving person, a car, or a temporary fencing which hides an important fragment of the façade and has nothing to do with the building. In this situation is the architectural photographer allowed to retouch the distracting elements without violating the “veracity and truth?” I would say yes, because one moment later the person or the car would have vanished and the retouched photograph would be the “same” as the photograph which would have been taken 3 seconds afterwards. . . . I know, already in this case the concept of photography as a “documentary piece of evidence” begins to alternate.

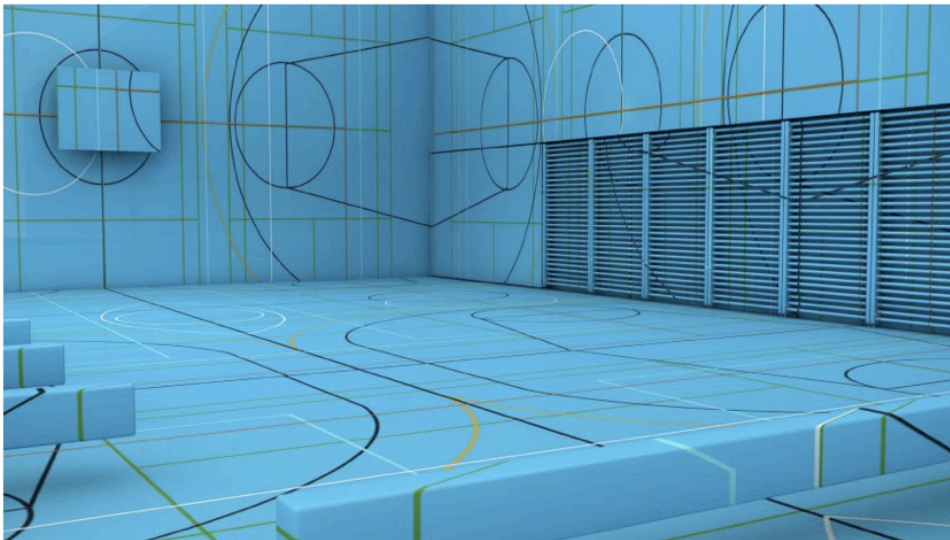
But what about the instances when architectural components are retouched and suppressed—for example a disturbing socket or a distracting division of a railing or a window? This phenomenon can be observed more and more since the onset of digital image editing. I can't really say if this is good or bad, but I would like to understand why and wonder where it comes from. Most architectural photographs come into existence due to a commission from an architect. But architects and photographers deal differently with the reality. **While a photographer is constantly busy to see what is there, capturing the environment like a “seismograph,” an architect is more trained to think of what *could* be there.** For the architect, reality—built or not—always has something alterable, changeable. His building is a result of a long line of decisions, drawings, image montages, which throughout the design process [contains elements that can be changed until] the very last moment, when the building is built. I think this moment, when things become immovable, is a very delicate situation for the architect, because it requires a “change of mind,” another “mentality” about reversibility. For the architect a photograph is not really different than a drawing, an image montage, or rendering—it's just another medium of representation, which also has the capacity of being changed.

I think it also depends on the context in which a photograph is highlighted and is used for. I think each photographer or image creator has to ask himself when doing his job and working on the postproduction, for what is this photograph used, and what is the main purpose—documentary or fiction? What level of integrity does the distribution channel or the final reader expect from the image?

Personally I'm only half confronted with the question of veracity when working on architectural images. I'm working in the field of architectural visualisation, [creating] images which are not to be seen as a copy of a certain reality; rather, they try to render/visualise an imagined, possible reality, because the buildings don't exist yet. The only contact point between my work architectural photography is that I use a similar photographic visual language. Today, digital image processing allows the design of images that can hardly be distinguished visually from a photograph. This creates confusion. Architectural visualisations—as a rule designed during the planning stage—usually had a conceptual, abstract character. With the advent of photorealistic high-end renderings, a new kind of image type was added: an image that seems to be a

photograph. It becomes increasingly difficult to make the distinction between documentary image as an image of reality, and a simulated, possible image. How do we as professional image creators react to this development?

My main interest does not really consist in providing images that are as photorealistic as possible. Visualisations are created in the stage where the freedom or the potential lies in the possibility to really express what is useful for the understanding of the project. So my main interest is: How can I create images which try to reflect not only a neutral, clean copy of a possible, built architecture, but also primarily convey an architectural idea based on the visual language of photorealism? By means of a selective handling of the image elements I try to maintain this balance; perhaps a certain degree of abstraction helps to distinguish between architectural photography (documentary) and architectural visualization (fiction). And this is good so.



Raummodelle No 4, 2008 by Philipp Schaerer

Posted in [architectural photography](#), [crit](#), [photography](#) | Tagged [Edgar Martins](#), [Greg Girard](#), [Philipp Schaerer](#), [Stanley Greenberg](#) |

3 comments

Excellent post. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe the Greenberg photo is of Libeskind's Denver Art Museum, a project on which I worked (I probably designed most of the connections in that photo).

Another element to the truthfulness of photographic or conceptual representation that I find interesting is the lack of human presence in the former, or the hypothetical users added to the latter: bohemians at bistro tables, children playing in plazas, etc. As the essential ingredient in the "production of space," the social interactions that occur within/without architecture — be it existing or forthcoming — help define its reality. By omitting them or speculating on how they might occur, the veracity of any representation is already questionable.

by [keith](#) August 29, 2009 at 12:34 am

I like the notion of “what could be there” rather than necessarily “what there is”.

I really enjoyed this post even though I'm not especially interested in architectural photography.

by [Rebecca Horne](#) September 11, 2009 at 11:50 am

[...] the same time, photographers, like the now infamous Edgar Martins—see here and here—have been going around asserting that facts are by definition mediated, everything is [...]

by [New York/Reality Based Community](#) March 8, 2010 at 8:31 am

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)
[Entries \(RSS\)](#) and [Comments \(RSS\)](#).