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Brenda Lynn Edgar, *Le Motif Éphémère. Ornement Photographique et Architecture au XXe siècle*, preface by Claude Massu. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020. 395 pp. 170 b/w and 23 color illustrations, Bibliography, Index. €30.00 (pb). ISBN 9782753580800.

Review by Louise Arizzoli, University of Mississippi.

In her well-researched volume *Le Motif Éphémère. Ornement Photographique et Architecture au XXe siècle*, Brenda Lynn Edgar brings together three facets of modernity that have been rarely studied in dialogue: photography, architecture, and ornament. Edgar's ambitious work investigates different artistic languages in a time of historical change, looking at key moments between the mid-nineteenth century and the 2000s in France, England, and in the United States. Edgar's weaving together these different media, following their little-known dialogue in a balanced way, is the most valuable aspect of her research. With expertise, the author has selected a wide range of relevant figures who have made significant contributions in this field (some well-known like Edward Steichen or Le Corbusier, other much lesser-known like Eugene Mollo or Laure Albin Guillot), for example through photo-murals, objects printed with photographic motifs or photo-fresco. Many of these techniques were quite short-lived and had been long-forgotten, however Edgar's inquiry brings them back to life through careful historicization. Moreover, this study has solid foundations; it stems from Edgar's doctoral work (2013) and is based on a mix of excellent primary sources, including archival documents, interviews, and correspondence with architects, designers, curators and photography historians. Edgar has also dug into the decorative arts press, such as *House and Garden*, especially between the two World Wars, to find images of interior décor and design, artist's writings and critiques, and exhibitions reviews to build up her case. The book is well-illustrated and allows the reader to gain a solid understanding of how photography became an integrant decorative part of interiors in private and public spaces, but also how it eventually ended up moving to the façade of buildings in more recent times. The author however faced challenges, particularly when discussing techniques that have left few durable traces: the photo-fresco, for example. In the book this technique is described as one of the most innovative in terms of fruitful dialogue between photography, ornament, and architecture, yet no extant examples remain today. Edgar was however well-equipped to recognize the technique when it was used in 2012 at the Venice Biennale, by architect Miroslav Šik, who is thought to be genuinely innovative with his work. Edgar discusses this periodic loss of artistic knowledge and reinvention as "*recurrence amnésique*" (recurrent amnesia), granting thus to the historian a meaningful role in bringing awareness to the past. Another relevant aspect of this study is the discussion of the place of ornament in history, which has known many ups and downs. *Le Motif Éphémère* reveals that within modernism, ornament has found renewed interest in architecture through the medium of photography. The author understands ornament using Pascal Liévaux's and Laurence de Finance's definition that sees it as a

decorative element inherent to all techniques, which has the aim to embellish and bring value to an object.[1]

Edgar's volume is divided into two parts which follow a chronological division, highlighting moments in which ornament and its link to photography was most meaningful. Despite the fact that photography as architectural ornament started to play a role soon after the invention of the medium, its most prosperous years coincided with the rise of modernism in the 1920s. This span from the 19th-20th centuries marks the first part of *Le Motif Éphémère*. The second part of the volume explores the evolution of photographic ornament in architecture from the Second World War to more recent times, especially investigating its role in architectural façades, mainly through the work of French architect Jean Nouvel and Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron.

Edgar's investigation starts with the second half of the nineteenth century, a little after the invention of photography, when the new medium was only just finding its own identity, and as it started to serve the decorative arts industry. The South Kensington Museum in London (precursor of the Victoria and Albert Museum) was a pioneer in its use of photography. Not only did it form its own collection of photographs, it also documented its decorative collections through photography. Manuals of ornaments were compiled, allowing the documentation and the circulation of ornamental motifs while supporting artists and architects in their craftsmanship. Beginning in 1870, a new technique of photographic ornamentation of daily-life objects developed: for example, tableware with photographic portraits. Some examples can still be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum, but otherwise very few of these photo-impressions remain. The technique was complex and costly, which eventually prevented its commercial success. Later in the 1920s, however, it became incredibly inspirational to artists such as Edward Steichen, who produced photographic impressions on silk, and was able to sell his designs as luxury objects. The alliance of photography with stained glass was also popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as new technical experimentations soared with impressions of large-scale photographs to embellish buildings in the public sphere.

These limited experiments took place during the interwar period. The author carefully examines the production of those years, paying particular attention to what was done in France, England, and the United States. The chapters focusing on that period ("La nouvelle photographie ornementale, 1925-1939," "La photographie ornementale américaine," "Expériences françaises," and "Invention et oubli dans le modernisme anglais") are particularly relevant for the scope of the Edgar's argument, addressing as they do the role of the ornament during its apparent fall from grace in modernist architecture. Edgar's study reveals that it was through the use of photography that ornament found a new function in architecture. New technologies permitted large-scale impressions, and the photo-mural became a key decorative element, embracing modern themes such as machines, industrial objects, and abstractions. Interestingly, there are differences between productions in Europe, and those in the United States, where the bridge between artistic and commercial output was crossed with greater ease. The photo-mural also benefitted from technological improvements provided by the Eastman-Kodak company, with their production of a paper specifically suited to large-scale printing. Photo-murals were especially popular in American interior design, and photographs of home décors from the 1930s that Edgar has traced in contemporary publications reveal the trend for landscapes still indebted to the picturesque. While at this time the United States privileged figurative themes in the visual arts--American abstraction started only after the World War II with Abstract Expressionism--Edgar nevertheless discusses an interesting episode of this moment that centered on the ties established by the

art dealer Julien Lévy to avant-garde movements, namely the Surrealists formed under Paul Sachs at Harvard University. Lévy believed in the potential of large-scale photography as a decorative medium. Writing in the 1932 MoMA catalog for the exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, where photo-murals were first exhibited in an institutional setting, Lévy stated that "the photographer is particularly well equipped to meet the problems of mural decoration as posed by the modern architect and builder" (p. 117). Although the success of this exhibit and others would not survive the Second World War, Lévy and his group of artists nevertheless signal a unique moment of dialogue between photography, ornament, and architecture in the United States, one that was more distinctively artistic.

Edgar next discusses a similar line of experimentation taking place in France, comparing two figures with radically different profiles, each of whom contributed to the renewed interest of photography used as ornament in architecture and the decorative arts: the French photographer Laure Albin Guillot (1879-1962) and the Swiss-French architect, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier (1887- 1965). Albin Guillot is here investigated in relation to her work to revive nineteenth-century attempts to fuse decorative arts and photography in objects of daily life. In particular, Guillot experimented with the technique of microscopic photography of cells. She elaborates this technique as an artistic motif, transferring it onto objects. Le Corbusier, on the other hand, used photography as a large-scale ornamental device in the Swiss pavilion of the Cité Internationale Universitaire in Paris, in two different locations of the building: in the entrance staircase, and in the library. He arranged in a grid a variety of motifs, cells, and enlarged natural elements, alternating these with photographs of architectural elements--an ensemble which Edgar defines as a "modern cabinet of curiosity" (p. 152)--inventing a form of abstract ornament that was truly modern: "Toujours est-il que cet ensemble de photomurals révèle un certain génie en matière d'ornement qui permet à l'architecte non seulement de radicalement remettre l'ornement en question, mais aussi d'inventer des formes d'ornement véritablement moderne" (p. 155). While Le Corbusier has been well-studied in all the facets of his architectural inventions, his experimentations with ornamental photography have thus far been overlooked. Edgar remedies this scholarly lacuna. In this chapter, the author ponders Le Corbusier's conceptual usage of the grid, which connects with the architectural structure of collective housing (itself conceived as a grid). As Edgar notes, Le Corbusier regarded his photo-murals for the Swiss pavilion as works of art: "une magnifique tapisserie opulente et belle en soi, d'un gris profond - un camaïeu: tout simplement le gris des photographies en bromure" (p. 154), claiming later in life that he was the first to have introduced photography in the "arsenal du peintre et de l'architecte" (p. 170).

Another substantial chapter of the first part of the book concerns Eugene Mollo (1904-1985), a Russian émigré in London, interior designer, photographer, and set designer, who started his career working for Sergei Diaghilev. With the firm Mollo & Egan, he patented the invention of the photo-fresco in 1934 and specialized in interior decorations for cinemas. The photo-fresco is one of the most inventive techniques Edgar looks at. Marrying photography with large-scale decoration, photo-fresco was challenging to use, because it required a fast-pace, virtuosic projection of the image directly onto a wall that had been prepared beforehand with a photo-sensitive emulsion. Despite the innovation it brought to photography, architecture, and ornamentation, photo-fresco predominantly served commercial productions, and hardly survived its ephemeral status.

The second part of *Le Motif Éphémère* analyzes how photography progressively merged into architecture following the Second World War and continuing into recent times, due to the availability

of advanced technologies. Through the example of Robert Venturi, the author looks at photo-murals as billboards which embraced and criticized consumerism and the capitalist society emerging in the United States in the 1970s. Finally, Edgar discusses at length the integration of photographs in architectural façades since the 1980s. Here, she specifically looks at the work of Jean Nouvel at the Institut du Monde Arabe and Herzog & de Meuron's Ricola factory in Mulhouse. These two examples of "façades photographiques" (p. 265) opened the way to the technique of the "all over," where the building's solidity dissolves under photographic projections. With the reuse of the motif of the *Achillea Umbellata* (a plant that was photographed by Karl Bossfeldt, 1865-1932, to reveal artistic designs in nature) by Herzog & de Meuron on the façade of the Ricola factory, Edgar's investigation comes full circle. The *Achillea Umbellata* was used by Bossfeldt to teach his students elements of design found in nature, while decades later, the same image of the plant became the iconic motif adorning modern architecture, and eventually came to symbolize the entire œuvre of Herzog De Meuron: "comme si ce fragment suffisait désormais à lui seul a évoquer non seulement le bâtiment qu'il adorne mais toute l'œuvre de Herzog & de Meuron… ce seul fragment soulève des questions sur l'adéquation du bâtiment avec son image photographique, *a fortiori* considérée comme une œuvre d'art autonome" (p. 286). With *Le Motif Éphémère*, Brenda Lynn Edgar connects key historical moments that have contributed to the reinvention of photography as an architectural ornament.

NOTES

[1] Laurence de Finance and Pascal Liévaux, *Ornement: vocabulaire typologique et technique* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, 2014), p. 18.

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