

## Photography, Archive, Experience Dialogue and Storytelling

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*Atlante architettura contemporanea* (Atlas of Contemporary Architecture) was created with the aim of promoting awareness of the value of contemporary architecture among the widest possible audience. It is a complex and articulated project in which the image plays an essential role, and the dialogue between the different disciplines – architecture and photography – is consciously perceived as a crucial component of the research process.

The authors were assigned the task of witnessing, documenting, and re-reading a significant part of the contemporary Italian architectural heritage, in the wake of a solid tradition which, starting from the early days of photography, as in the photographic campaigns in the mid-19th century France, reaches up to the beginning of the new millennium, through the commissioning of projects, which, since the 1980s, have explored numerous territorial areas in Europe pursuing various objectives using a number of different methods.

Like commissioning jobs, the project “Atlante” requires a specific working method that aims to strike a balance between professional assignment and artistic freedom, connecting the notions of documentation and interpretation, “in such a way that it is precisely the interplay between these spheres that gives rise to both the cognitive and creative values of photography”, as Stefano Chiodi (2003) wrote on Gabriele Basilico’s work.

The core of the project is not only purely linguistic and formal research, which is needed to identify all the aspects of a consolidated genre such as architectural photography, but also a comprehensive view of the photographer, a figure who assumes a multi-faceted role as a professional, researcher, author, mediator, as well as unique and privileged testimony – with his/her own gaze, sensitivity, and body – of architecture.

The entire work process is characterised by an extensive dialogue, in which the specific experience of the photographers in the field impacts the structure of the project. Conversely, the process also requires confirmation and consultation between the specific technical indications of the execution, requested by the editorial committee, the visual results of the campaigns, and the updating of the list of the buildings that are to be photographed, depending on accessibility of the sites, the state of conservation and the level of transformation of the works.

The ongoing debates about the feasibility of photo shoots, but also about visual culture, attitudes, and preferences shown by the authors, have made it possible to create a synergy with the photographers, turning the challenges faced along the way – note that a significant part of the documentation work took place during the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic amid total organizational and regulatory uncertainty – into an opportunity to develop joint research, which could at once maintain the representative and narrative aspects from which the selection derived, and promote each author’s personal means of expression.

The explication of an architectural work through photography represents a value *per se*, since it establishes a relationship between the design process and the authorial activity that translates places into images, even revealing unseen aspects of well-known places. Buildings show the inevitable signs of aging, and photographs show the state of repair for every single part of architectural units, revealing an unbiased perspective that incorporates both success and failure and is free from the integrity that is required, instead, by pictures published in magazines.

Gaddo Morpurgo (1984) points out that “Having abandoned any dependence on the image of the project, photography offers us other images of that same architecture that we used to consider complete when it was built. Photographers return to the ideal architectural ‘construction site’, following their own itinerary and, while selecting and juxtaposing admittedly partial images, they build another context within which we are prompted to re-read and review the features of a space, as well as the ‘outcome’ of a project”.

The analytical ‘gaze’ of photographers draws attention to some fundamental issues without which many of these works would lose their value as much as if, in addition to their inherent role, they ceased to be the expression of a culture or an instrument to perceive and modify a context with contemporary languages. An example of such contexts would be the relationship with the surrounding environmental elements, whether natural or anthropogenic, and the value of the details, whether they are surfaces, finishes, colour treatments, or furnishing units.

Knowing through direct experience is an integral part of understanding architecture, like any other work of art. However, sometimes restrictions on access and use, as in the case of private properties and non-public buildings, make it impossible and photography becomes a privileged tool of mediation between the work and the end user. By suggesting new interpretations, the image of an architectural object, that the photographer provides with new semantic meanings, becomes a useful tool for its understanding, especially when compared with representations made in other phases of the history of the building, thus offering a unique learning opportunity for students, scholars, or just enthusiasts.

The complete archive, that is the primary objective of the client’s request, is the place where the project unfolds and becomes fully readable and accessible, thanks to the digital platform *atlantearchitettura.beniculturali.it*. The images produced during this photo campaign enrich the *Atlante architettura contemporanea* database with 256 more new buildings located all over Italy, associated with more than 2,800 photographs. The selection of structures, starting from the 120 buildings photographed during the 2018 campaign, seeks to cover all national areas, with the objective of including even lesser-known ‘voices’, thereby promoting curiosity about a plurality of architectural languages. The wide selection of images that tell about each building, displayed in accordance with the authors, makes it possible to describe those artifacts in their entirety, and in their relationship with the context, while highlighting a variety of partial views, atmospheres, details, and materials, that allow for a dialogue to be established between the photographer’s sensitivity and the design quality of the architect.

Starting from the archive, the project is organised into two separate target areas, each different but complementary: the exhibition and this publication you are reading.

The exhibition *10 viaggi nell'architettura italiana* (10 Journeys through Italian Architecture), housed in the Palazzo dell'Arte at Triennale Milano, displays about 110 medium and large-size prints, which is a limited and symbolic sample of the archive derived from the personal selection of each photographer. In the spectacular installation designed by Studio Folder, the images directly emerge from a map of Italy, scale: 1:56,000, 3D and walkable, which underlines the close link between architecture and territory, and shows both the travel itineraries of the 10 photographers and the physical distribution of the 256 architectural structures added to the archive. The geographical and analytical view offered by the map is paired with a large format projection, a sort of backdrop on which all images are displayed, arranged in short sequences according to purely formal and compositional criteria aimed at foregrounding their aesthetic and polysemantic values.

This publication, which is also structured according to the itineraries of the photographers, is intended to look like a travel guide and, through the very limited selection of buildings and images, pursues the objective of showing the consistency and coherence of the work. The visual narration is completed by some of the notes that the authors jotted down during or after their photo campaigns: it is a travel diary full of observations, anecdotes, suggestions, tips and highly personalized ideas that interact with images, amplifying and exploring their meaning without laying claims to objectivity or scientific accuracy. Taken individually, these short writings reveal the sensitivity and personality of each author, while, if read as a whole, they serve as a reflection on photography, on the relationship with places and space in general, on the perception of time and light, on the sense of travel, and the pleasure of discovery. What is often excluded from representation and is now being reintroduced through images and words – whether it is in the physical, bodily aspect of the photographers' presence in the architectural space, or in the inevitable encounters that the experience has produced – is actually the main presence in architecture, the human dimension: perception, experiences, and relationships, without which no structure would make sense.