



Planning and Building Exhibition

(Schweizerische Architektur Ausstellung). View of the exhibition at the Staatenhaus der Kölner Messe, Cologne, 7–28.11.1948. Published in *Das Werk* 1, no. 36 (1949): 2

from photographers to exhibition: *Switzerland planning and building exhibition (1946-1949)* and the material circulation of photographs

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Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition, an architecture exhibition almost entirely composed of photographs (more than 400), toured through Europe between 1946 and 1949. It was organised by the cultural organisation Pro Helvetia to contribute to strengthening the image of Switzerland in the post-war years abroad. This paper examines this exhibition and focuses on the modality of circulation of photographs from photographers to their display and discusses how the photographic material is appropriated by different actors (photographers, architects, members of the exhibition committee, and the institution in charge of the photographic reproduction). Thereby, this case study considers the architecture exhibition as a place for tracing photographs in a collective and dynamic process that goes beyond the relationship between the architect as a client and the commissioned photographer.

keywords Exhibition, Swiss architects, Circulation of photographs, 20th Century

introduction

For modern architects, architecture photography has been an effective tool to promote and communicate their own work¹. Studies about major figures of modern architecture have revealed that despite the need of architectural images, photographers have long worked in the shadow of the architects without gaining a similar professional recognition². As a place for the dissemination of ideas about architecture, publications, conferences, and exhibitions played a significant role throughout the twentieth century. The use of photography to represent architecture –besides plans, drawings, or models– has been clearly shown in numerous exhibitions. The travelling Swiss architecture exhibition *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition* was almost entirely composed of photographs and provides a relevant illustration of this phenomenon. Organized by the Swiss cultural institution Pro Helvetia³, the exhibition was presented between 1946 and 1949 in eight European cities (f1)⁴. It brought together a collection of more than 400 photographs and plans of buildings from the 1920s to the 1940s. Elizabeth Edwards emphasizes the importance of considering photographs as a material object: “Photographs are both images and physical objects which exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience”⁵. From this material perspective, this analysis will not focus on the subject of photography –the photographic representation of the built object– but argue that the exhibition is a place for analysing the modality of circulation of photographs through various hands from photographers to their display.



f2_Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition
(Schweizer Architektur). View of the exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Basel, 08.01–13.02.1949
Published in *Das Werk* 3, no. 36 (1949): 25

from photographers to exhibition: *Switzerland planning and building exhibition (1946–1949)* and the material circulation of photographs

Indeed, the photographic documentation collected for *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition* resulted from a dynamic and collective process of exchange between various actors. This paper aims to retrace and interpret these interactions. The approach thereby does not only consider the role of photographs, but also draws attention to the involvement of various agents: the architects (whose works are exhibited), the members of the exhibition committee, the architect of the exhibition, and the institution in charge of the photographic reproduction. The analysis will show that this architecture exhibition constitutes a privileged place to investigate architectural photography beyond the collaborative relationship between the architect as a client and the commissioned photographer⁶.

the role of the photographer

Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition was inaugurated at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London on 19 September 1946. The exhibition was organized thematically along building types and gathered mainly photographic views of buildings from inside or outside⁷. The event was anchored in a cultural diplomacy program developed by Pro Helvetia, a foundation established in 1939 under the supervision of the Swiss Federal Council, to promote supposed Swiss cultural and identity values to protect Switzerland from the threat of totalitarian regimes posed by neighbouring countries. After World War II, the exhibition as a mass media was used to strengthen the image of Switzerland abroad⁸. More specifically, the architecture exhibition was considered a means to celebrate the particularity of Swiss architecture as a mirror of a national and cultural identity towards a wide-intended audience⁹. *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition* was followed by two architecture exhibitions, which are considered further below. The meetings of the working committee, also named the exhibition committee, brought together Karl Naef, secretary general of Pro Helvetia, the architect Hans Hofmann, professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and renowned for his exhibition design in the interwar period, along with representatives of the associations of architects and engineers. Conrad Furrer was appointed architect of the exhibition on the proposal of Hans Hofmann and regularly attended the meetings of the committee¹⁰. The ownership of the photographic negatives and their centralised storage were discussed from the very first meetings. As the main material displayed, the availability of photographs was a major concern. Initially, Furrer proposed assigning a photographer to shoot the complete photographic campaign. According to him, his solution would have enabled the committee to retain the negatives and would have facilitated their archival storage¹¹. This first proposal was quickly abandoned yet without trace of explicit reasons. A possible explanation is the short time frame that would not allow a single photographer to complete the work. Ultimately, the architects, whose works were selected to be displayed were asked to provide the photographs¹². The conditions under which these pictures had been delivered to the exhibition committee indicate that the *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition* did not appropriately consider the photographers' rights from the very beginning. The organisers required the architects' photographers to grant permission for using the photographs by signing a copyright disclaimer: "dass es notwendig sei, dass der jeweilige Photograph dem Architekten gegenüber auf urheberrechtliche Einsprache bezüglich der von ihm gemachten Aufnahmen mit schriftlicher Erklärung verzichte"¹³. This condition weakened the professional recognition of the photographer and revealed an asymmetric relationship of status between the two creators involved: the photographer and the architect¹⁴.

Throughout the twentieth century, many architects credited only partially the name of their photographers, or even fully excluded their mention in publications¹⁵. The catalogue published for *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition* reflects this common attitude towards photographic credits. All the displayed photographs were numbered with a caption that included the name of the architect, the building, and the year of construction¹⁶.

However, the identity of the photographers taking part in the exhibition was not disclosed. The only traces of their involvement were given by the incomplete photographic credits of the 52 full-page reproductions published in the catalogue¹⁷. More importantly, the reactions of some photographers demonstrated that a large majority of the architects taking part in the exhibition had not bothered to seek permission beforehand from the photographers, which is contrary to the previously mentioned request by the exhibition committee. As a result, Robert Spreng – a portrait, industrial, and architectural photographer – as well as the *Union suisse des photographes*, the Swiss Union of Photographers (USP) denounced the use of the images for the need of the exhibition without the photographers' permission and criticised the poor quality of the photographic reproductions¹⁸. The situation culminated with Robert Spreng hiring a lawyer and seizing his 60 photographs at the end of the first exhibition in Switzerland at the Kunsthaus in Basel in 1949¹⁹.

the reproduction of photographs

The *Schweizerische Lichtbildanstalt* (SLA) was an institute promoting the diffusion of knowledge through photography founded in 1941 in Zurich under the form of the working group named *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für das Lichtbild*²⁰. According to its first annual report, the purpose of the SLA was to collect, preserve, reproduce and diffuse photographs for knowledge dissemination with a focus on conferences and educational institutions²¹. During its first years, the SLA concentrated on the development of a collection of negatives on the subjects of art, nature, and science. These negatives were taken from objects or images held by museums, schools, library, and archives in order to make them available at low cost for school education. The *Schweizerische Lichtbildanstalt* was not a state structure but nevertheless received its main financial support from public authorities until 1945. From then, the SLA relied primarily on members' dues and, more importantly, on the reproduction of images on demand of a large variety of clients (firms, private or public institutions, etc.) and projects. Pro Helvetia used this commercial reproduction service for *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition*. At the request of the exhibition committee, the SLA was in charge of all the photographic reproductions and enlargements. It is important to note that the *Schweizerische Lichtbildanstalt* had produced the photographs in the absence of the "original" negatives, which remained in the possession of the photographers. Without precise knowledge of the technical reproduction process, we can assume that the SLA probably produced a copy negative by photographing the positive prints submitted by the exhibition committee. Accordingly, the new activity dedicated to commercial orders developed within the SLA caused the exclusion of the original author and thereby established a mass production of photographs without the authors' knowledge. The exhibition committee described the production capacities of the SLA as being much higher as those of individual photographers and justified its approach by arguing that most of the photographers would not have been able to produce photographic enlargements at that scale²²: "Zudem wäre der grösste Teil der Photographen gar nicht in der Lage gewesen, Vergrösserungen diesen Umfangs selber herzustellen. Die meisten Photographen hätten wiederum die Arbeit auswärts vergeben müssen"²³.

The members of the committee repeatedly congratulated the SLA for its efficiency and praised the centralisation of its production. It is worth pointing out that the exhibition assembled more than 400 photographs, which the *Schweizerische Lichtbildanstalt* considered as an unusually large order²⁴. The combination of two sectors of activity (the archiving structure for negatives and the photographic reproduction laboratory), both housed within the SLA, facilitated not only the reproduction of individual images that can be easily duplicated on request, but also the reproduction of architecture exhibitions based on the same photographic collection. In the years following the launch of *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition*, Pro Helvetia organised two circulating architecture exhibitions by

from photographers to exhibition: *Switzerland planning and building exhibition (1946–1949)* and the material circulation of photographs

reusing part of this iconographic collection supplemented by images of recently constructed buildings. These exhibitions circulated internationally under the same name: *Contemporary Swiss Architecture*. Despite their identical titles, both exhibitions differed from each other through the selections and numbers of images and their exhibition design techniques. The first exhibition travelling under the title *Contemporary Swiss Architecture* was considered by the exhibition committee as a replica of *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition*²⁵. This new show brought together about 370 photographs and plans, and it toured for ten years from 1948 to 1958 (f2). It is interesting to see how fast the SLA operated: In June 1948 and three months after the order, the *Schweizerische Lichtbildanstalt* provided the committee with all the requested photographs mounted on cardboard, captioned, and packed. The rationalisation of production thus contributed to the acceleration of the preparation of the exhibition. The second exhibition, also entitled *Contemporary Swiss Architecture*, was organised under the auspices of the *American Federation of Art* and circulated from 1953 to 1958 (f3). Alfred Roth, an important protagonist of the *Neues Bauen*, succeeded Conrad Furrer as exhibition architect. In his reports, Roth emphasised the production efficiency and the uninterrupted operation of the SLA for many days²⁶.



f3_ Contemporary Swiss Architecture

(Ausstellung Schweizer Architektur seit 1930). View of the exhibition at the Deutsches Museum, Munich 22.08–12.09.1948. Archives fédérales suisses, Berne

Thus, the photographic corpus collected for *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition* provided a stock of images from which the committee sourced its two following exhibitions. From one exhibition to another, the photographic material was selected and then completed by new images of recent buildings as provided by architects. Besides, the efficiency and the centralisation of the reproduction service offered by the *Schweizerische*

Lichtbildanstalt significantly facilitated the realisation of subsequent exhibitions. This photographic service supported the aspirations of Pro Helvetia, which intended to strengthen the presence of Swiss architecture abroad. Ultimately, it enabled Pro Helvetia to respond positively to the numerous requests from Swiss legations, schools of architecture, and architects' circles abroad, and therefore led to a continuous "flow" of architecture exhibitions for 12 years.



f4_Contemporary Swiss Architecture

View of the exhibition at the Texas Fine Arts Festival, Austin, Texas, 18.04–10.05.1953

Archives fédérales suisses, Berne

the architect and the exhibition design

As mentioned above, Robert Spreng and the Swiss Union of Photographers denounced the poor quality of the pictures made by the *Schweizerische Lichtbildanstalt*²⁷. Indeed, the exhibition committee gave more importance to the uniformity of photographic rendering than to the idea of photographic quality. Furrer considered that rendering differences between photographic works should have been erased. According to him, photography should not have been used as a medium to emphasise individual expression but as a privileged tool for creating a standardised and uniform "overall vision". In his words, it is an "architecture exhibition and not a photography exhibition"²⁸. For Furrer, the way photographs were presented was as important as their subjects: "Der repräsentative Charakter der Ausstellung soll sich nicht nur aus der Qualität des Ausstellungsmaterials ergeben, sondern gleicherweise auch aus Darstellung und Aufmachung desselben"²⁹. In his view, the SLA was allowed to meet the need for standardised rendering, and thus assured the effectiveness of the exhibition: "Die Herstellung von Reproduktions-Negativen war notwendig, um eine gleichmässige Bildwirkung erreichen zu können. Die Photographien, die aus allen Teilen des Landes eintrafen, waren von sehr verschiedener Qualität, und es war das Bestreben der Ausstellungsleitung, einen möglichst hohen Durchschnitt gleichmässiger Bildqualität zu erreichen, welcher allein die einheitliche Wirkung der gesamten Ausstellung verbürgte"³⁰.

from photographers to exhibition: *Switzerland planning and building exhibition (1946–1949)* and the material circulation of photographs

This quest for visual homogeneity, supported here by an architect, reveals the aspiration for a visual layout that not only facilitated the comparison of the numerous architectural constructions, but also shaped the exhibition as a singular graphic and spatial object. The thoughts of Furrer and his exchange of ideas with the committee members on exhibition technique and the way photographs were displayed drew the outlines of a growing professionalization of architects in the field of exhibition. The “imprint” of the architects’ ideas about exhibition design took a further step forward by Alfred Roth’s innovative display technique for *Contemporary Swiss Architecture* in the 1950s (f4). In the field of architecture exhibition, the architect can thus fill a double role: He or she can both commission photographs and arrange them as an exhibition designer.

endnotes

1. In the 1980s, Beatriz Colomina noted the phenomenon of mediatisation of architecture developed by Le Corbusier by the use of photography in his publications: “Le Corbusier and Photography”, *Assemblage* 4 (October 1987): 6-23, and *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988).
2. Olivier Lugon, “Maisons signées, images anonymes”, in *Photographie et architecture moderne: la collection Alberto Sartoris*, ed. Antoine Baudin (Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2003), 43. See also Julie Noirot, “Regards croisés sur l’architecture: Le Corbusier vu par ses photographes”, *Sociétés & Représentations* 2, no. 30 (2010): 15-26.
3. See the following page for details about Pro Helvetia.
4. The exhibition was presented in Copenhagen (1947), Warsaw (1947), Stockholm (1948), Luxembourg (1948), Cologne (1948), Basel (1949), and Rome (1949).
5. Elizabeth Edwards, “Material Beings: Objecthood and Ethnographic Photographs”, *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 67. See also Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, ed., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004).
6. The author wishes to thank Prof. Olivier Lugon for his useful comments and remarks while preparing this paper.
7. For the themes developed in the exhibition, see the exhibition catalogue: *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition*, Royal Institute of British Architects, London, 19.8-26.10.1946.
8. Architecture exhibitions but also exhibitions devoted to fine arts, design, and books were regularly organised by Pro Helvetia in post-war years. About the place of exhibitions in Pro Helvetia’s foreign policy, see Thomas Kadelbach, “*Swiss Made*”. *Pro Helvetia et l’image de la Suisse à l’étranger (1945-1990)*, (Neuchâtel: Éditions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses, 2013).
9. Ibid.
10. “Procès-verbal du groupe I Pro Helvetia”, 18 December 1945. Archives fédérales suisses (AFS), E 9510.6, 1991/51, vol. 113.
11. Ibid.
12. “Formular 1 vom 15.3.46”, cited by Conrad D. Furrer “Bericht über die Vorbereitungsarbeiten zur Schweizerischen Architektur-Ausstellung London Sept./Okt. 1946”, Zurich, 24 June 1949. AFS, E 9510.6, 1991/51, vol. 266.
13. Ibid.
14. On the question of the anonymity of architectural photographers, see Lugon, “Maisons signées, images anonymes”, 43-51.
15. Antoine Baudin, “De la collection à l’encyclopédie. Enjeux et jalons d’une entreprise exemplaire”, in *Photographie et architecture moderne: la collection Alberto Sartoris*, ed. Antoine Baudin (Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2003), 14.
16. *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition*, 37-61.
17. Among the 52 published images, only 25 are credited.
18. Gaston de Jongh, “Séquestre de l’exposition d’architecture à Bâle”, *Revue suisse de Photographie/Schweizerische Pho-*

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- to-Rundschau, 5 (8 March 1949): 85; K. [König], "Architekt und Photograph", *Revue suisse de Photographie/Schweizerische Photo-Rundschau*, 5 (8 March 1949): 84-85.
19. de Jongh, "Séquestre de l'exposition d'architecture à Bâle", 85.
20. The board of the SLA brings together actors from educational, political and industrial backgrounds.
21. 1. *Bericht der Schweizerischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft für das Lichtbild über das Geschäftsjahr 1941 und 1942*, Zurich, Schweizerische Lichtbildanstalt, 1942.
22. "Formular 1 vom 15.3.46", cited by Conrad D. Furrer, 24 June 1949.
23. Ibid.
24. *Jahresbericht 1946 der Schweizerischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft für das Lichtbild*, Schweizerisches Wirtschaftsarchiv, BV G5.
25. See for example Karl Naef, Zurich, to Eric Kessler, Swiss Legation in Washington, 14 October 1948. AFS, E2200.36-08, 1967/16, vol. 3.
26. Alfred Roth, Zurich, to Pro Helvetia, Zurich, 18 November 1952. AFS, E 9510.6, 1991/51, vol. 269.
27. K. [König], "Architekt und Photograph", 84-85.
28. Translation by the author. Conrad D. Furrer, "Bericht über die Vorbereitungsarbeiten zur Schweizerischen Architektur-Ausstellung", Zurich, 24 June 1949.
29. "Bericht der Expertenkommission auf Grund der Vorarbeiten von Architekt C.D. Furrer", Zurich, 11 December 1945. AFS E 9510.6, 1991/51, vol. 266.
30. Conrad D. Furrer, "Bericht über die Vorbereitungsarbeiten zur Schweizerischen Architektur-Ausstellung", Zurich, 24 June 1949.

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**from photographers to exhibition: *Switzerland planning and building exhibition (1946–1949)*
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CV

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