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Instagramming Architecture: The Social Media Revolution in Architectural Photography

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the profound impact of Instagram on architectural photography in the 21st century. Once a professional and editorial endeavor, architectural photography has been transformed by social media into a participatory and highly aestheticized activity. Instagram's algorithm-driven visuals, hashtag culture, and global reach have changed how architecture is captured, consumed, and even designed. This paper explores the visual aesthetics promoted by Instagram, the algorithmic pressures on photographers and designers, and the ethical and cultural consequences of a platform-dominated gaze. Through extensive case studies—ranging from Ricardo Bofill's Muralla Roja and Thomas Heatherwick's Vessel to India's Rani ki Vav and Studio Mumbai's handcrafted works—the study explores both the creative opportunities and serious challenges introduced by this digital revolution. It argues that while Instagram has broadened the audience for architecture, it has also commodified space and design into fleeting visual content, often at the cost of cultural depth and spatial integrity.

Keywords: Architectural Photography, Instagram, Technology

INTRODUCTION

With over 2 billion users worldwide, Instagram has become a dominant force in shaping how the world views and interacts with built environments. Launched in 2010 as a mobile photo-sharing app, the platform has evolved into a visual marketplace where architecture plays a key role. From travel bloggers to architects, interior designers to tourists, users now photograph buildings not just for memory but for metrics—likes, shares, and followers (Leaver et al., 2020).

The power of Instagram lies not just in its massive user base, but in the way it mediates visual culture. Through features like filters, reels, and hashtags, it frames the way architecture is seen. Buildings become backdrops. Design becomes décor. And the photograph becomes more important than the experience itself.

This paper explores these transformations through multiple lenses—historical, aesthetic, technological, cultural, and ethical. It traces the evolution of architectural photography, analyses Instagram's influence on visual norms and design logic, and presents case studies that illustrate the implications of this shift. Finally, it considers how professionals and scholars can respond to this visual revolution with awareness and responsibility.

EVOLUTION OF ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Traditional Practice

Historically, architectural photography has been a discipline focused on documenting the material, spatial, and formal qualities of buildings. Pioneers like Julius Shulman in the U.S. and Lucien Hervé in France created iconic images that interpreted architecture with sensitivity to light, human presence, and spatial hierarchy. Their work was used in publications, exhibitions, and academic discourse—serving as both documentation and artistic commentary.

Photographs were composed with care, often requiring large-format cameras and post-production darkroom processes. The intent was not just to showcase design but to represent an architectural idea: modernism, minimalism, brutalism, regionalism, etc. (Wigley, 2018). The photographer played an interpretive role, filtering architectural intent for a broader audience.

Entry of Digital Media

The rise of digital cameras in the early 2000s democratized architectural photography, allowing amateurs and students to explore the field. However, Instagram took this democratization further by turning everyone into a content creator. With minimal effort and zero cost, users could now capture, edit, and distribute architectural images globally in seconds.

This shift blurred the boundary between professional and popular representations of architecture, moving the field from curated magazines to user-driven feeds. The implications are massive—both liberating and limiting.

INSTAGRAM'S VISUAL GRAMMAR

Platform Architecture

Instagram's interface encourages particular visual behaviors. The square (later adaptable) frame, scrollable feed, emphasis on color and contrast, and the use of filters like Clarendon or Lark promote stylized, high-contrast imagery that appeals to the eye. Content that performs well visually tends to get more traction, regardless of its architectural relevance (Manovich, 2017).

The platform's algorithm prioritizes engagement over accuracy, leading to what Manovich calls "algorithmic aesthetics": content that is shaped not by design merit but by digital metrics. Photographers thus begin composing images for algorithms, often emphasizing symmetry, saturation, and focal points that are optimized for small screens.

The Instagram Gaze

This gives rise to a new kind of visual subjectivity—the "Instagram gaze." Unlike the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011), which is tied to travel and culture, the Instagram gaze is performative. It is less about seeing and more about being seen seeing. Architecture becomes the background to a personal performance, often detached from its functional, cultural, or historical meaning.

AESTHETIC AND DESIGN CONSEQUENCES

Design for the Feed

A significant outcome of Instagram's influence is the phenomenon of designing architecture with social media in mind. Bright colors, dramatic staircases, symmetry, photogenic facades, and curated lighting have become central to design decisions, especially in commercial, hospitality, and retail architecture.

For example, cafes and boutique hotels often feature neon signage, patterned tiles, or textured walls specifically to encourage user photography. This leads to an emerging design typology: the "Instagram trap"—spaces created solely to go viral.

4.2 Homogenization of Aesthetics

While Instagram promotes creativity, it also contributes to the global homogenization of design. Architects from New York to New Delhi are now chasing similar visual tropes: pastel palettes, open plans, minimal decor, terrazzo floors, and concrete finishes. The distinctiveness of local contexts and vernacular elements is often lost in favor of shareable design (Brady, 2020).

CASE STUDIES

Muralla Roja (Spain)

Ricardo Bofill's Muralla Roja (1973) in Calpe, Spain, is a striking postmodern housing complex inspired by North African casbahs. Its red, blue, and pink walls create a surreal landscape of interconnected staircases and shadow play.

The building became an Instagram icon after influencers began posting images of its labyrinthine paths. However, the influx of tourists—many seeking unauthorized entry—has caused discomfort to residents and raised concerns about the misuse of private residential spaces (Brady, 2020).

Analysis: The project exemplifies how Instagram can resurrect forgotten architecture but also create ethical tensions around access and privacy.

Vessel (New York City)

Designed by Thomas Heatherwick, Vessel is a honeycomb-like structure in Manhattan's Hudson Yards. Its sole purpose is to offer elevated views and photo opportunities. While it drew millions in its first year, the lack of social context, shade, or inclusive programming attracted criticism.

Following several suicides, the structure was closed to the public, prompting debates about the dangers of designing public architecture purely for Instagram appeal (Gadanho, 2019).

Analysis: Instagramability must not override psychological, emotional, or communal needs in architectural design.

Rani ki Vav (Gujarat, India)

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this 11th-century stepwell features intricate sculptures and symbolic cosmology. Its axial layout and symmetry make it highly photogenic, especially from overhead or linear angles.

Instagram has brought visibility to the monument, yet many users reduce it to visual spectacle, omitting its role as a water-harvesting system, temple, and cultural narrative.

Analysis: Instagram can popularize heritage sites but risks decontextualizing their spiritual and functional meaning.

Studio Mumbai (India)

Architect Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai practices materially rich, labor-intensive architecture that resists the visual slickness of social media. Projects like Copper House II or Tara House emphasize craftsmanship, weathering, and sensory experience. Jain has criticized Instagram for reducing architecture to surface aesthetics, calling for a deeper, slower engagement with space (Frampton, 2020).

Analysis: Some architects consciously resist Instagram aesthetics to preserve architectural integrity and authenticity.

Sundar Nursery (New Delhi)

A 90-acre heritage park adjacent to Humayun's Tomb, Sundar Nursery was redeveloped by the Aga Khan Trust. It includes Mughal-era tombs, botanical gardens, and ecological zones.

The site uses Instagram proactively—QR codes, signage, and organized photo tours ensure respectful engagement. The architecture is designed to be beautiful yet embedded in cultural and ecological narratives.

Analysis: With thoughtful curation, Instagram can be a tool for education, awareness, and sustainable tourism.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Ownership and Consent

Instagram blurs the lines between public and private. Photographers often post images of private residences, religious spaces, or vulnerable communities without consent. This raises ethical concerns about privacy, cultural appropriation, and exploitation.

Environmental and Social Impact

The pressure to photograph iconic sites has led to overtourism in many locations. Foot traffic at ancient temples or ecological reserves damages fragile infrastructure. In places like Hampi or Jaisalmer, locals report disruptions due to photography without context or respect.

The Filtered Truth

Instagram fosters idealized depictions. Filters, wide lenses, and editing apps create hyperreal architecture that may not reflect reality. This misrepresentation can lead to disappointment, erode trust, and even influence misguided design trends.

ROLE OF ARCHITECTS AND EDUCATORS

Architects must balance aesthetics with ethics. Designing with photogenic features is not inherently wrong, but it must be rooted in context, culture, and community.

Architecture schools should educate students on digital literacy, media ethics, and critical visual studies. Understanding how platforms shape perception is key to designing responsibly in the digital age.

Photographers should document architecture holistically—showing people, scale, wear, and lived experience. Curators and institutions can create archives that blend Instagram engagement with rigorous storytelling.

CONCLUSION

Instagram has undeniably revolutionized architectural photography, making it more accessible, vibrant, and far-reaching. It has spotlighted forgotten buildings, enabled global collaboration, and inspired new forms of creativity. However, this power comes with responsibility.

As architecture is increasingly seen through screens, there is a risk that depth will give way to surface, and experience to image. The challenge is not to reject Instagram but to engage with it critically—using it to amplify the richness of architecture rather than reduce it to pixels.

By navigating this new terrain with awareness, architects, photographers, scholars, and users can shape a more ethical, inclusive, and meaningful architectural discourse for the digital age.

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