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“To See, to Record, to Photograph”

Discovering Pierre Bourdieu’s Rediscovered Photographs of the Berber House, Uncovering Architecture as an Intellectualist Art

In a historical situation [Algeria, 1958-1960] in which in every moment... the whole reality was at stake, it was absolutely necessary to be at the heart of events and to form one’s own opinion, however dangerous it might have been and dangerous it was. To see, to record, to photograph: I have never accepted the separation between the theoretical construction of the object of research and the set of practical procedures without which there can be no real knowledge.


Architecture, a very intellectual or intellectualist art.


Pierre Bourdieu (1931-2002) was a world-renowned sociologist whose forty books and three-hundred articles were inseparable from the campaigns against the instruments and institutions of social domination that made him France’s leading public intellectual. He is probably best known for his sociology of culture; that of museums, painting, literature, and taste; for his methodological troika of capitals, field and the habitus, (or a system of dispositions); and for his epistemological and philosophical project of objectivation. In architecture, however, his fame was secured by his short essay, “The Berber House or the World Reversed.” That study of the maison kabyle, the traditional house of a Berber-speaking people of Northeastern Algeria, is a mainstay of architectural teaching and is frequently cited in studies of the anthropology of architecture and in the historiography of Islamic domestic architecture, where its relevance as a model for Islamic domestic architecture is both enthusiastically proposed and used, but then sometimes vigorously contested. In 2003, just one year to the day after Bourdieu’s death, the photographs taken during his field work in parts of Kabylia and in Algeria in the period 1958-1960, the residue of several thousands (the majority of which was subsequently lost), were exhibited and published. Among them were several photographs of the different habitats of the Kabyle, including the maison kabyle of the reversed world.

The publication of these particular photographs presents an opportunity and a reason to rediscover the original Kabyle houses, as Bourdieu saw, recorded, and photographed them. More generally, it allows students of architecture to cross the threshold into the epistemological and methodological world where Bourdieu made his conversion from philosophy to ethnoscience, to the world that he would later reverse by engaging in a self-reflexive critique of the methods and minds of scholars (including his own) that he called the objectification of objectivity. (Figure 1) The photographs are both evidence and emblem of this return on himself that had lasting methodical consequences for him and for the many who followed him in employing his “sociology as a martial art,” a tool with which both to comprehend practice and power and to combat domination—social, cultural and political.

Bourdieu’s ideas of the habitus and of a logic of practice were prefigured in the essay on the Kabyle house. The concepts, as believed, would be of special value to students of architecture for architecture was, he said, “a very intellectual or intellectualist art.” Intellectualism, which he also called theoreticism and scientism, impedes an understanding of the “fuzzy logic” that allows people to be masters at what they do without full consciousness knowledge of why they do it. Intellectualism logically afflicts scholars who are analysts of art, for their interest in creation, in design naturally leads them to privilege the work, the opus operatum at the cost of the modus operandi, the mode of production, “the manner of acting, the art in the etymological sense, that the artist...brings into work. This art, this manner of doing... is a practical mastery without theory, without theoretical mastery of practical mastery. The notion...necessitate[s] and effect[s] a radical break with the scholastic fallacy that threatens most of the analysts of art, as...scholars....The scho
The Kahyle House Essay as Self-reflexive Critique of Intellectualism

In the essay, Bourdieu analyzes the Kahyle house space and village space, weaving into it his understanding of movement through them and use of them, enriching the analysis through references to Kabyle proverbs about those objects and practices. Bourdieu identified the structure of the Kahyle mythico-ritual system and the house as a “microcosm” of the Kabyle cosmos, “a miniature world,” but an inverted one. He made sense of the spaces, uses, and qualities organized around oppositions: beam and pillar; high and low parts of the house; the placement of the rifle and of the loom; day use and night use; goings and stayings; dry and wet; public and private and, correspondingly, of persons and their meanings: men/women; male honor/female honor; the fertilizing male/the female able to be fertilized. When the entire interior space is replaced in the total outside space, that space receives a symmetrically opposite signification. Both spaces, interior and exterior, are derived from each other through a 180-degree rotation at the threshold on the front façade of the house, which functions as a magical pivot. Thanks to it, the house possesses two cosmologically favorable Easts, one inner, one outer, allowing women to move around the hearth inside the house toward their East and men to leave the house towards theirs. However, the symmetrical and inverse spaces are not equal, as Bourdieu concludes: “the orientation of the house is fundamentally defined from the outside, from the point of view of men by men and for men,” for the threshold on which the world inverts is reserved for them, as is movement over it toward the outside, the space of the assembly, the mosque and the fields.

The 1970 essay is a virtuoso performance of the very structuralist anthropology that Bourdieu would later renounce and even denounce. But it was never only structural anthropology, for his interest in time and the embodiment of the social and domination are at work in it. Moreover, it came with methodological instruction meant to prevent its generalization into a theoretician’s, theory, separated from its empirical basis in practice. Thus Bourdieu wrote that the “degree to which a mythico-ritual system depends on other systems and the form that dependence takes varies from society to society.” Other systems” meant the “constraints of technique,” including sitting. (Figure 2) Subsequently, he admonished that a concentration on the mythico-ritual space itself, or the opus operatum, comes at the cost of attention to the modus operandi. He included the maison kabyle essay in his methodological masterwork, The Logic of Practice, but only as an appendix, so that it might be read as an object lesson in how to advance beyond the essay through self-reflexivity to the objective of understanding practice. (Figure 4) Its value as an appendix was to “give an idea of the objectivist reconstruction of the system of relationships that was a necessary stage in moving to the final interpretation.” A theoretician reading of the essay is also a dehistoricized reading of the essay, for it fails to recognize that in 1980 Bourdieu repudiated it as “his last work as a blissful structuralist.”

Photography and Ethnography in Time of War

It was in the photographs that Bourdieu himself rediscovered when writing Logic of Practice that he found compelling proof of the costs of practicing blissful structuralism. To understand the photographs, one must also understand the “dangerous conditions” in which they were taken. Bourdieu was at “the heart of events” from 1955 to January 1960, first as a draftee, then, after 1958, as a young “assistant,” or very junior professor of philosophy and sociology, at the University of Algiers. He left Algeria in the autumn of 1959, alerted to the fact that the French army had placed him on the “Red List” of “liberals” suspected of aiding the revolutionaries. He was thus marked for arrest and possible torture. In the period in which Bourdieu was under arms, Algeria was divided into three zones, one of combat, one of police action, and a “forbidden zone” that was
“The situating of the house in geographical and social space, and also its internal organization, forms one of the ‘places’ in which symbolic or social necessity and technical necessity are joined. It is perhaps in cases such as the one here, where the principles of symbolic organization of the world cannot be fully applied and have, as it were, to come to terms with external constraints, such as the constraints of technique, for example, which require the construction of the house perpendicular to contours lines or facing the rising sun (or in other cases, the constraints imposed by social structure which demand that every new house be built in a particular area defined by genealogy) that the symbolic system reveals its capacity to reinterpret, in terms of its own logic, conditions proposed to it by other systems. Without wishing to become further involved in an extremely difficult debate, it might be suggested that the degree to which a mythico-ritual system depends on other systems and the form that dependance takes varies from society to society.”

- “The Berber House or the World Reversed,” 153, n. 5.
Figure 2 (left). Berber houses in Kabylia, Algeria; the Rid, Morocco; and at Ghadames, Libya. The plan of Bourdieu's maison Kabyle was specific to Kabylia in Algeria, although the central room predominates in Berber houses throughout North Africa.

Figure 3 (above). Plan of the maison Kabyle, from Le Sens pratique, 1980. Bourdieu’s original plan, drawn in the field, is reproduced in Images d’Algérie. (Pierre Bourdieu / Fondation LIBER, Genf. Courtesy: Camera Austria, Graz.)

Figure 4 (left). Fontnote to “The Berber House or the World Reversed”
emptied of its inhabitants. It was in the "forbidden zone" that Bourdieu first encountered the maison kabyle that had been described to him by its exiled inhabitants. (Figure 5)

There was nothing unusual in Bourdieu's decision to bring a camera to Algeria; many draftees did so.12 Bourdieu came to Algeria as a practitioner of what he would later call that art of "the man in the street" in his 1965 study of amateur photography.13 He was already a shutter bug, use the American slang of the period, the owner of a Zeiss Ikoflex (bought for the excellence of its lens) and a Leica. It was only when Bourdieu, who had been trained as a philosopher, converted to ethnography, that the photographs he had been taking for his own amusement and because of the great affection, even tenderness, that he felt for the people, became part of his scholarly project.14 Henceforth, his photographs were taken for the immediate purpose of documentation, in order to record the ephemeral and transport the immovable, in rural and urban contexts. They are primary ethnographic documents, one scientific instrument among the many used by Bourdieu to produce his ethnosophy. Their purpose was to record the traces of a foreign universe in a manner consistent with the method of objectification that Bourdieu would later make his own. In the book published posthumously, the photographs were divided into five themes, each drawn from Bourdieu's Algerian writings of the 1960's: "War and Mutation," on the photographs of the military presence and the 1958 elections; "Habitus and Habitat," on those of the building of the Resettlement camps and the way people lived in them, as well as on the habitats left behind, including the destroyed Kabyle houses; "Displaced Peasants," on the agricultural activities that continued in the camps; and "Men and Women," on gender relations. Finally, the "Economy of Misery" recorded the encounter of the displaced peasants with Algiers and its bidonvilles, or slums. There he studied urban practices, again, of men and women in the most ordinary of circumstances. For example, he paid close attention to the study of dress, both European and traditional, and to how people moved in the streets. Finally, in the small city of Blida, he took up the position of street photographer, using his still camera as if it were a movie camera, systematically photographing the passers-by. The Ikoflex, with its viewfinder on top of the camera body, gave him a distinct advantage in a country where photography of women could be an offense, and it may be for that reason that he preferred it to the Leica, which he used little, if the surviving photographs are any indication. The desire to photograph discreetly may also explain why Bourdieu often used a low angle of vision when photographing.

Photography was an instrument of discovery: it made him more acutely aware of others, of himself, and of the defects of scholarship, especially of its self-absorbed "scienticism." The photographs of the Kabyle House capture that scienticism:

The roofs of the house had been removed to force people to leave. ...There were these jars...these large jars that hold grain, decorated jars...And thus I was very happy to be able to photograph despite the disastrous situation, and that is very contradictory. I was able to take photos of these immobile houses and their furnishings because they no longer had any roofs. And this is something very typical of my experience there, that was also something quite extraordinary: I was quite overwhelmed, very aware of the suffering of these people, while at the same time there was the detachment of the observer, manifesting itself by the fact that I was the photographer.

This was all the more true for the Kabyle house whose plan Bourdieu published, for it was situated in a part of the forbid-
den zone where “he was under the control of men who had the power of life or death,” and Bourdieu had risked not only his life but that of his students to go there. Is it any wonder that the initial rediscovery of the photographs of the roofless houses around 1980 caused him once again “to question the deep-rooted determinants of a so obviously ‘misplaced’ libido scienti.”

Photographing the disasters of war allowed a self-distancing from that disaster, a protection from it in the name of scholarship, of science and its impulses and imperatives.

Self-Discovery and the Intellectualist Art

Although taken during the war, these are not war photographs. Although the work of an amateur in a foreign country, they are not travel photographs. Although shot by someone who later termed his Algerian work as “bizarrely falling between Orientalism” (the French discipline of the study of Islam and other non-Western civilizations) and “ethnology” (reserved for the study of “primitive people”), they are not Orientalist, in the aesthetic sense of the term. They also lack the mis-en-scène, the staging, and the preference for the big picture with a cast of hundreds, that are characteristic of the generally otherwise admirable ethnographic photographs of Algeria of Thérèse Rivière of the 1930s.

But they are not merely ethnographic photographs, for they are also photographs of self-discovery. The photographic view is the analogue of his sociological view. Photography was the method that allowed Bourdieu to keep the distance he needed for scientific work, that of objectivation, while requiring from him a consciousness of that distance and of the shortcomings of social scientific claims to objectivity. This double distancing, a moving away from others that oblige a moving away from one’s own situation with regard to what one is studying, also sustained him when he witnessed the enormous sufferings of people for whom he felt a strong affinity.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Gisèle Sapiro of the Centre de Sociologie Européenne and Stanford Anderson, and the Department of Architecture for the opportunity to attend the 2003 conference, Hommage à Bourdieu, and to see the photographs; to Xing Ruan and the Society of Architectural Historians and Nasser Rabat and the Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at MIT for earlier opportunities to work out my thoughts on Bourdieu’s photographs and the Maison Kabylie; and to Clifford Geertz for an illuminating explanation of the maison Kabylie. Franz Schultheis and Christine Frisinghelli are thanked for their patient answers to my questions. See also, Hélène Lipstadt, “Pierre Bourdieu, Images d’Algérie. Une affinité élective. Organized by Fondation Luber and Camer Austria. Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 63, no. 1 (March 2004): in press.


3. This fact that the specificity of the maison kabylie to Kabylia has been overlooked has caused authors to use it as a universal model, then to contest it. See Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress, The Berbers (Oxford: Blackwells, 1996), 241-43, fig. 7.3, for distinctions between different Berber houses and between those and Arab dwellings.


