

Ann Shelton:

26 photographs of a house

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Photographer Ann Shelton has found a fitting subject in James Walter Chapman-Taylor's 'Castle', the house he designed and built between 1929 and 1930 in rural North Taranaki for businessman-turned-politician Charles Wilkinson. This is not just because it complies with Shelton's longstanding fascination for sites loaded with often-charged history, but because the architect's project uncannily replicates many of the motives at work in photography's heroic task of holding a mirror up to nature. Chapman-Taylor may not have approved of Shelton's use of a technological apparatus that removes handicraft from the act of creation, but this does not diminish the synchronicity that exists between the building and the medium that records it. Both aspire to the condition of truth and Shelton sets herself the task of testing their success.

For one, Chapman-Taylor's architecture, like photography, sets out to connect directly with nature. The 'Castle' does this by careful positioning on its site; through its spatial distribution around an internal courtyard designed to offer glimpses of what Chapman-Taylor called an 'inner world of beauty'; and in its honest use of natural materials: native timber from local forests, sandstone from nearby coastal outcrops, shingle and boulders from adjacent riverbeds.¹ Photography seeks similar connection

as a medium of transparent reproduction, producing images that contain the magical trace of what was there before the camera. Both, then, are indexes of sorts, registering the imprint of the world via their respective media, framing views through apertures that let in light.

Further, Chapman-Taylor's house – a weighty structure now fully embedded in its setting – may appear on first acquaintance very different from the insubstantial photographic image that captures only an evanescent instant, but a link can be made that takes us back to the very origins of photography. Note here that photographic pioneer Henry Talbot chose to work inside Lacock Abbey, Wiltshire, setting up his primitive camera in 1835 to record the square of light framed by a single mullioned window. As Geoffrey Batchen suggests, Talbot intended to draw metaphorical connections between the actions of the camera and the framing function of the house, where interior space serves as the receptacle for light, the very vehicle of photographic representation.² In other words house and camera are co-extensive; they function, in Talbot's terms, as variants of each other.

Like Talbot, Shelton uses a house to reflect on the nature of her medium, but complicates any simple transcription by presenting two sets of images produced in different eras – one taken by the architect, the other by the artist – to offer further thoughts about the fundamental character of photography. Fascinated by the fact that Chapman-Taylor left his own photographic record, Shelton sets up a complex play between original and copy that reminds us of photography's reproductive potential, but which also signals the confusion that results when reality is compromised by images and their endless proliferation.³

Here too, Chapman-Taylor's house serves as more than mere subject; it survives as testament to the problematic importation of a 'foreign' architectural language that is itself a copy of an absent original. Again, Chapman-Taylor might not have relished the comparison, as he set out to champion the singular and handmade, but let's remember he was an adherent of a style that came second-hand from England. Even then, the Arts and Crafts Movement was a self-conscious quotation of older traditions, a harking back to preindustrial modes of construction: an appropriated medievalism. Further, the 'Castle' may be a fortified structure in name alone, but it occupies the same site as Whakarewa, the pallsided pa of Ngati-Mutunga, and so functions as a veritable palimpsest. Clearly, Chapman-Taylor's project is a projection and a displacement, not quite the authentic statement originally intended.

Most telling of all, Shelton's photographs not only record the house in situ but arrive at this place via photographs Chapman-Taylor made that re-present his architectural vision. His original prints were designed to be presented in an album for the new owner, as a record of work well done, but also to remind the client of how the house should be preserved. These show both how the house looked, but also, by dint of photographic restaging, they reveal how Chapman-Taylor wanted his project seen. Methodically moving from exterior to interior, they inadvertently isolate the structure from its surroundings, allowing only the merest glimpse of the world beyond, to focus, instead, on massive, handcrafted details, a perspective that powerfully conveys the building's density and bulk – its very human achievement. We witness not nature framed but culture under construction.

In an equally remarkable gesture, Shelton returned to the well-preserved house to replicate as closely as possible what

Chapman-Taylor envisaged. Reproduced shot for shot, Shelton shows us how little the place has changed, proving the success of Chapman-Taylor's vision to create something permanent. The most striking difference is the maturing of the garden. There is, too, the shift from black and white to colour, which warms the subject by 'updating' it. Hanging new photographs beside modern prints of Chapman-Taylor's 'originals' invites us to interrogate what has happened 'in-between', to map what remains the same and what has changed. Photography here becomes a tool of history, its immediacy now serving to accentuate the flow of time.⁴

So, finally, this pairing achieves the reflexive ambitions of Shelton's practice, to disclose a great deal about photography's ontology. I think it proves what Chapman-Taylor already understood, that photography may not be an adequate substitute for the real object, but it is a means to establish distance, to put space between reality and thought, to allow interpretation, critical reflection. His photographs were a visual exegesis of his architectural project. Shelton goes further, to show us how the distance photography inserts between object and image is a necessary condition of the medium, a powerful reminder that photography is more than mere mirror, and never quite a transparent window.

1. Chapman-Taylor's quote, and information about The 'Castle' are from Judy Siers' *The Life and Times of James Walter Chapman-Taylor*, Millwood Heritage Press, 2007.
 2. Geoffrey Batchen, 'Desiring Production', in *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, MIT Press, 2001.
 3. Shelton's colour photographs are new works, 'her' originals, and the black and white prints are made from Chapman-Taylor's originals. Yet Chapman-Taylor's images show us the house as the architect saw it, and thus are more 'authentic', while Shelton presents the house as it appears some 70 years later, restricting her views to those that duplicate his photo-documentation.
 4. Perhaps it is more than a happy coincidence that she and Chapman-Taylor both use versions of a similar large format camera, for this connects them across time within an evolving history of photographic technology.
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