



**Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary**

Surrey, 1934, Oliver Hill. Dell & Wainwright / RIBA Collections

# architectural photography, the media and the paradigm of objectivity in the work of oliver hill

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*The interwar period in Britain saw a rapid increase in the dissemination of well-photographed buildings and interiors in a variety of journals and magazines. Varied titles such as the Architectural Review, Country Life and The Queen all published seductive images of newly built architecture and its interiors. This period, as Robert Elwall pointed out, 'saw the development of close collaborations between architects and their favoured photographers'. Taking these relationships as a starting point, this paper aims to look more closely at the dissemination of the work of architects such as Oliver Hill (1887-1968) in the media of the time.*

**keywords** Oliver Hill, Magazines, Interwar, Commerce, Objectivity, Visual communication, Mediation

## introduction

Architectural photography as it appeared after the First World War saw a rapid change in how buildings were photographed. The Avant-Grade techniques, as used by the so-called *New Photography* (such as close-ups, worm's and bird's eye views), produced iconic shots that were markedly different from the pictorialism (**f2**), that was adhered to before the war. Publishers and architects alike became acutely aware of the importance that this type of imagery could play in selling modern architecture to the public; an awareness that is still as important today as it was then.



**f2\_Gayfer House**

London, 1923-1926, Oliver Hill. Arthur Gill for © *Country Life*

Architects such as Oliver Hill (1887 -1968) sought to work with the best photographers of the time. Together with photographers such as Dell & Wainwright, Millar & Harris, Hill went out of his way to create the best possible shot, not only of his buildings, but also of their interiors (also designed by Hill). Hill's choice of photographers and the detailed attention he paid to the staging of these images shows that he understood the power of a well-photographed building.

However, to what extent was the reproduction of these images the result of the relationship between architect and photographer? To date, less thought has been given to the role of the editors of the magazines that published these photographs. This paper will therefore question to what extent the editors influenced the final look of the published image and asks how important the role of the target audience was in making decisions? This article will also further explore the roles of the people involved in producing these images as this fosters questions around objectivity in relationship to photographs published in a variety of magazines.

## the unholy alliance<sup>2</sup>

In one of the first retrospective discussions of Hill's work: *Modern Houses in Britain 1919-1939* Jeremy Gould describes his work as his: [...] inspiration not coming from the theories of Le Corbusier or Walter Gropius but more from the pages of the *Architectural*

## architectural photography, the media and the paradigm of objectivity in the work of oliver hill

*Review* and even *The Ideal Home*<sup>3</sup>. Gould, writing in the 1970's, approached Hill's work from a Modernist bias opposing Hill's whimsical approach to domestic architecture, which he sees as far removed from the aims of the dogmatic modernists such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. However, the quote is equally telling for its referral in one sentence to two magazines that were at the peak of their popularity during the interwar period in Britain.

The monthly *Architectural Review* (1896) together with the weekly *Architects Journal* (1919) became the voice of the architectural press under the editorship of James Maude Richards and Hubert Cronin de Hastings<sup>4</sup>. The *Ideal Home* (1920), also published monthly, targeted a female middle-class readership and promoted the suburban lifestyle. Gould's derision for Hill's inspiration (coming from the pages of architectural and interior design magazines) alludes to a fear of the way the architectural photograph was being used in the media, creating a gap between photographic illusion and reality. This fear culminated in the late nineteen seventies when the critic Tom Picton wrote about 'The Craven Image', a two part article published in the *Architects Journal*<sup>5</sup>. Here Picton warned the architectural profession about the 'unreality of most architectural photography' found within the architectural press. Picton warned that once an image taken of a new building is sent to the architectural press the damage is done. All parties (the editor, photographer and architect) according to Picton are part of a conspiracy to publish the most flattering image of a building as to attract readership and clients. Those images for Picton seem no longer to be the instruments for communication between the architect and his audience; a communication made possible by what should be the anonymous vehicle of this journey: the camera<sup>6</sup>.

The 'sycophantic' nature of the alliance between editor, photographer and architect that Picton was referring to was not always seen as problematic. The architect, according to Robert Elwall, who perhaps best exemplified this new found relationship between architect, editor and photographer was Oliver Hill. Hill was well aware of the power of (what he saw as) a well-photographed building and was keen to work with Dell & Wainwright, who he thought 'the best photographers working to-day'<sup>7</sup>. Hill's eye for the aesthetic representation of his work didn't go unnoticed by his friends and colleagues. Clara Fargo Thomas working with Hill in 1930 on the Grosvenor House Hotel suites wrote a letter to Hill that she saw pictures taken by Violet Campbell and David Lynch: '[...] it seems that you had nothing to do with them, as the arrangement of the furniture lacks your fine touch.' Fargo Thomas seems so annoyed with this situation and suggests that it would be better to have other pictures taken at her expense with Hill supervising the job. Comments such as these can once again highlight the importance designers attached to how their work was disseminated in the media.

However, the focus on producing iconic images didn't always result in a truthful communication between the architect and his audience. Gould's and Picton's misgivings about architectural photography and the press have rightfully been illustrated by Elwall's link to Hill's Joldwynds commission (1930-1932, **f1**), which in 1933 was voted House of the year by *Country Life*. A mixture of images taken by *Country Life's* in house photographers and Dell & Wainwright beautifully illustrated the journal article accompanying this announcement (**f7 y f8**). Nevertheless, away from all the publicity, the owners Nancy and Wilfred Greene were anything but happy with their new dwelling. In an avalanche of angry letters to the architect the owners pointed out that: 'Your job does not come to an end as you seem to think when you have got something that looks nice in a photograph' and 'It would all photograph nicely, including the bookcases when filled, as at your suggestion, with books that no one could read, but which had good bindings. Unfortunately Joldwynds was meant for a house to live in, not a lovely film set'<sup>8</sup>. From the clients' perspective, Joldwynds turned out to be Hill's least successful building whilst at the same time (rather surprisingly) it has lived on in the architectural press and historiography as his most popular and most widely recognised commission<sup>9</sup>.

## visual communication

The nineteen twenties and thirties have been considered as a time when people negotiated modernity through the visual<sup>10</sup>. Being a mass medium, the illustrated press played a key role in bringing many and various forms of modernist design into the lives of large sections of the British public. 'The interwar years', according to Fiona Seaton Hackney, 'have been characterised as a time when advertising was reshaping the institutional structures of the media, changing the relationship between the media and its audiences'<sup>11</sup>. Publishers and editors became acutely aware of the importance of establishing a close relation with their readership. As well as architects, magazines wanted to persuade people to buy their work especially in the years after the slump, or as Hugh Casson in his role as writer and broadcaster put it: 'Economic facts' were 'as inexorable and unavoidable as press day'<sup>12</sup>. The volume of articles published on Hill's work exemplifies his skilful understanding of the media and his interest in self-promotion. The variety of journals, magazines and newspapers with wide ranging subjects from architecture, decorative art, women's interests and popular newspapers meant that Hill's work reached a wide variety of audiences as those in charge of the magazine's production were able to adapt and present his work in accordance to how their magazine was consumed<sup>13</sup>. Previous research on the work of Oliver Hill by Jessica Holland has already highlighted such an editorial approach by comparing the drawing room of Hill's Gayfere house as it was published in the *Architectural Review* and *Country Life* (see (f1 y f4). Holland points to the 'different atmosphere' that was 'evoked by the same interiors'. Dell & Wainwright (working for the *Architectural Review*) have emptied the interior to attract focus on the highly reflective surfaces whilst A. E. Henson (working for *Country Life*) focussed more on the interior itself. The comparison of these two editorial approaches is often used to highlight the modernist versus the non-modernist approach of the editors of the respective magazines. However, a closer reading of these images might also highlight how the editors used different strategies to connect to the cultural relevance of their readership through visual communication<sup>14</sup>. The *Architectural Review*, during the interwar period, had a small circulation and its editors continuously set out to targeting the general public instead of solely focusing on professional readership, as was the case for journals such as the *Architects Journal*<sup>15</sup>. *Country Life* on the other hand presented itself to its readership as a: 'Journal for all interested in country life and country pursuits'<sup>16</sup>. Portraying continuity and tradition as encapsulated in the ideal of rural living was key as this in Roy Strong's words: 'reflected the social aspirations of the professional and urban-based classes who made up the major part of the readership of *Country Life*'<sup>17</sup> Although aimed at different readerships both magazines equally understood the influence their images had.



f3\_Gayfere House Drawing Room

London, Oliver Hill, A.E. Henson for © *Country Life* (1931)

## architectural photography, the media and the paradigm of objectivity in the work of oliver hill



**f4\_Gayfere House Drawing Room**

London, Oliver Hill, Dell & Wainwright for © *Architectural Review* (1931)

British magazines during the 1930's were influencing new ideas about visual communication happening in the United States. George Herrick writing in 1939 in an article for *Commercial Art* noted the new dramatic lay-outs, colour, larger formats and attention grabbing effect in British magazines<sup>18</sup>. Magazines such as *Country Life* would soon become known for their particular style of photography. This style can perhaps best be highlighted by a lecture given by John Cornforth in which he was asked by Deborah Howard to talk about '[...] the influence of *Country Life* photographs on our knowledge and perception of British architecture'. In his lecture Cornforth pointed out that the *Country Life* images were recognisable for several reasons. First, according to Cornforth:

*[...] is their carefully balanced composition. Then there is their no-nonsense clarity and natural even lighting. Also there is the wide but not distorted angle of vision, the Protar lens being more or less that of a human eye. Moreover buildings or rooms tend to be photographed off centre and from a fairly low angle to play up their scale, and so make them appear more dramatic and picturesque<sup>19</sup>.*

Cornforth also points out that every effort was made to make the room look as monumental as possible with furniture being rearranged to achieve this look. Juxtaposing images such as those taken of the Gayfere house drawing room (**f1 y f4**) highlights to what extent these photographs were choreographed, or as Rosa pointed out: 'The photograph's perspective is not necessarily true to the actual space but rather to the camera's view of it'<sup>20</sup>. However, this message, as previously mentioned, is then once again filtered and arranged by the magazine's editors, who needed to make sure that their visuals communicated in a positive way with their audience and adhered to magazine's overarching vision. As Hubert de Cronin Hastings speaking on the architectural journalism of the *Architectural Review* mentioned: 'In order to get an architect to buy and say he had read the magazine you have to put a substantial amount of what you think he wants to see and only a limited amount of your own personal stuff or message, as it simply puts him off'<sup>21</sup>.

## commerce

This adaptability of Hill's work meant that his new commissions were taken up within a variety of magazines. Joldwynds, as an example, was included in magazines such as *The Studio*, *Country Life*, the *Architectural Review*, *Vogue* and *The Queen*. However, due to the sheer amount of new buildings being completed during the interwar period it is important to highlight that magazines didn't commission a continuous stream of new images to accompany their articles. On the contrary, the layout of these pages dedicated to Joldwynds seemed to have been dependent on the majority of images taken by Dell & Wainwright, which can point to 'the professionalization of commercial architectural photography as a business'. As was the case in America with photographers such as Schulman and Stoller many architectural photographers 'kept the negatives, and produced reprints when needed for the architects or magazines, and owned the rights to their photographs'<sup>22</sup>. Although this meant that many images of newly commissioned architecture were duplicated it was up to the writers and editors of each magazine to give meaning to these images within the context of the magazines' editorial. So how did editors go about shaping the interpretations of their readership? A first point of call is the captions accompanying the chosen images. As the sociologist Howard S. Becker has pointed out: '[...] a caption tells us what's important, points out what we should attend to, tells us what we can ignore, indicates the connections that link the objects and the people in the picture'<sup>23</sup>. The magazine's readers therefore who viewed the images of Hill's work were guided not only by the accompanying text but also by the captions and these captions would change according to the magazine/context in which they appeared. By providing a caption the editor was able to anchor the image and hence guide the readers interpretation within the framework of the editorial policy. Although both articles rely heavy on images taken by Dell & Wainwright it is clear to see that the captions in *The Studio* (f5) highlight the fine art details and the sculptural qualities of Joldwynds whilst the *Architectural Review* (f6) is giving its reader hardly any text and is relying on the reader to link numbered captions (discussing the edifice's tectonics) to its corresponding image.



f5\_Joldwynds interior as published in *The Studio*

June 1936, p.338. © *The Studio*



## architectural photography, the media and the paradigm of objectivity in the work of oliver hill



f6\_Joldwynds as published in the *Architectural Review*  
1934, p.116. © Architectural Review

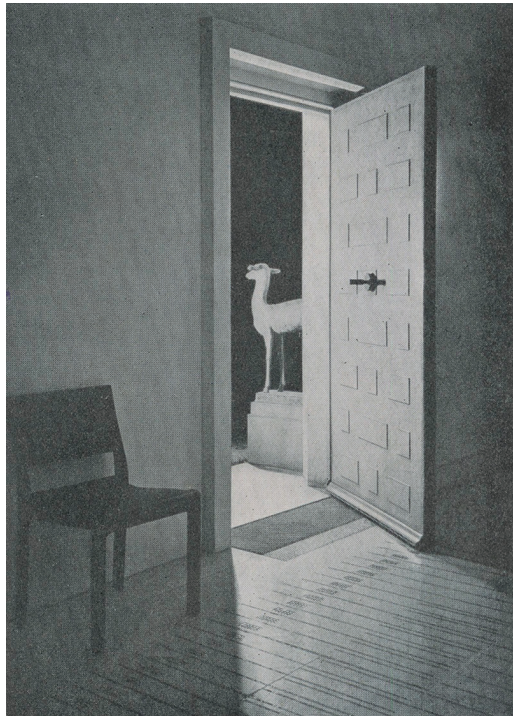
Image and text were not the only factors competing for the readers' attention. Advertising also played a key part in which commercial magazines were experienced. It is important to note, as Steve Parnell has highlighted in his research on *Architectural Design*, that the code of conduct by which architects must abide up until 1980 stated that architects were forbidden to advertise their services. They were, however, allowed to 'publish illustrations and depictions of their work'. Thus as Parnell rightly points out: 'the architectural magazine became one of the principal ways for architecture to promote their work'<sup>24</sup>. The inclusion of Hill's work in a variety of magazines on a constant basis meant that his work was being advertised regularly, making a broad audience accustomed to his oeuvre.

So far we have paid attention to these published images as individual objects. However, apart from an archival context, these images are never seen in their abstract state they always form part of a sequence chosen by the editorial team to enhance the visual dialogue with their readers. The photographic sequence is especially relevant when it came to interior photography. Readers were able to enter the house and experience its interior as if they were walking through the house turning this sequence into a spatial photographic plan<sup>25</sup>. Sarah Anne Carter in her research on interior photography in the USA between 1870 and 1900 has pointed at the importance of photographic house books. A house book being:

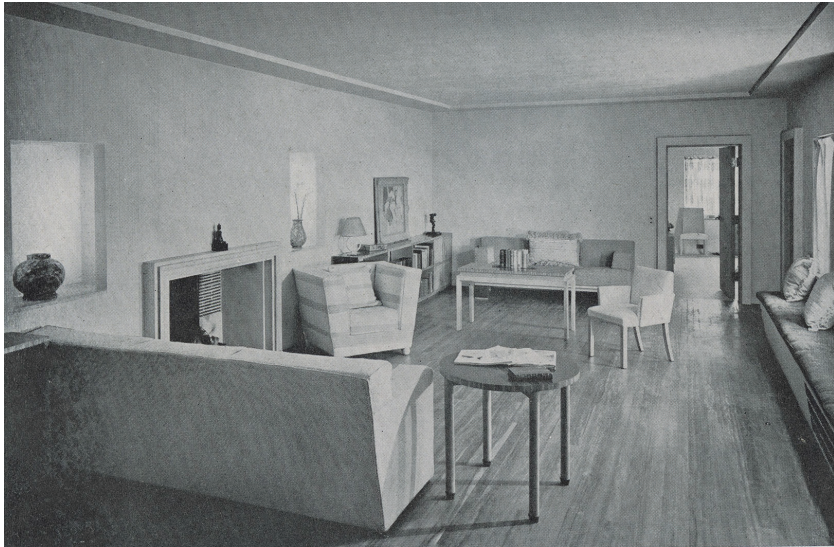
*'[...] a representation of a home's interior, arranged in a narrative order through a bound book of carefully arranged, sometimes captioned, photographs. A well-designed house book held to particular spatial conventions of representing a home, touring a potential visitor through a set of spaces transformed into still life'*<sup>26</sup>.



Carter further points out that 'this conceptual model also informed the order of domestic advice books, which led readers through the text as if they were walking through a house'<sup>27</sup>. I want to argue that a similar approach could also be found in magazines published in Britain during the interwar period. An example of such an approach can be found in how *The Studio* presented Hill's Joldwynds to its readers. The two-page spread of the article introduced the reader to various exterior views of the house whilst introducing two interior views of the entrance hall. The final two pages of the article show a variety of interior views all representing the lower ground floor. As would be the case with the house books it is important to note that in the images of the Joldwynds article the flow of the interior space is also highlighted by leaving the doors open (**f7 y f8**). This movement of space was also highlighted in the images captions: 'The terrace as seen from the East Loggia', 'The further door leads to the West Loggia', 'View through the living room to the hall' etc<sup>28</sup>. With minimal text the images became the dominant note in catching the readers attention. This was also the case for magazines such as *Country Life*, which positioned itself from the outset as a magazine to look at rather than to read. This trend which was taken to its limit in the 1930s by the launch *Architecture Illustrated*, a magazine with a minimum of text but a maximum of images.



**f7 Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary**  
Surrey. 1934, Oliver Hill. © *Country Life*



**f8 Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary**  
Surrey. 1934, Oliver Hill. © Country Life

## **conclusion**

In 1963 Ezra Stoller, writing on photography and the language of architecture, highlighted the role the editor played in how his photographic message was finally received by the audience stating that: '[...] for better or for worse the message as formulated by the photographer is generally filtered, arranged and explained by an editor who must then reproduce his own selection of pictures with varying degrees of fidelity'<sup>29</sup>. Stoller saw the editors' role as a limitation that took away from the message he was trying to communicate with his photographs. Nevertheless, as this paper has shown, the relationship between designer, photographer and editor was not always seen as detrimental to this message. During the interwar period this alliance was of mutual benefit and created possibilities to show and advertise newly built architecture and interiors to a wide variety of audiences. Editors were acutely aware of tailoring their content in line with their target audience through the combination of image and text. This combination was to become a key tool in guiding the public on how to read an image. Focussing on certain aspects of the image whilst ignoring others made it possible to use the same images in a variety of magazines.

Approaching the published images of Hill's work as a designed object has highlighted how these images themselves are designed and therefore open to historical analysis. It therefore remains important not to take the architectural image at face value but rather understanding them as a mediating channel between producer and consumer.

## endnotes

1. Robert Elwall, "New Eyes for Old: Architectural Photography" in *British Modern Architecture and Design since the 1930s*, ed. Susannah Charlton et al. (London: Twentieth Century Society, 2007), 64.
2. As coined by Andrew Higgott in reference to Tom Picton's article "The Craven Image" see
3. Jeremy Gould, *Modern Houses in Britain, 1919-1939* (London: Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, 1977), 15.
4. Steve Parnell, "Architectural Design 1954-1972. The architectural magazine's contribution to the writing of architectural history" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2011), 24.
5. Tom Picton, "The Craven Image or the apotheosis of the architectural photograph". *Architects Journal* 25 July (1979): 175-190; 225-242.
6. Ezra Stoller, "Photography and the Language of Architecture", *Perspecta* 8 (1963) 43.
7. Letter, Oliver Hill to Francis Arnatt, April 25, 1935, box 10, folder 3, Oliver Hill Papers, Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings and Archives collections.
8. Letter, Nancy Greene to Oliver Hill, June 21, 1934, box 16, folder 1-2, Oliver Hill Papers, Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings and Archives collections.
9. Amongst other things The Greene's had to deal with: the rendering of their façade cracking, their flat roof being so leaky it soaked all of their clothes whilst the knocking and creaking noises from their radiators made it impossible to sleep at night (See box 15, folder 2-4; box 16, folder 1-2; box 17, folder 1 Oliver Hill Papers, Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings and Archives collections).
10. See, for example: Yasuko Suga, "Modernism, Commercialism and Display Design in Britain. The Reimann School and Studios of Industrial and Commercial Art" *Journal of Design History* 19 (2006) 137-154 and Michael Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) VIII.
11. Fiona Seaton Hackney "They Opened Up a Whole New World": Feminine Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in Women's Magazines, 1919-1939" (PhD diss., University of London, 2010), 48.
12. As quoted in Jessica Kelly, "To Fan the Ardour of the Layman": J.M. Richards, The Architectural Review and Discourses of Modernism in British Architecture, 1933-1972" (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2013), 26.
13. As Jeremy Aynsley has noted: 'magazines are complex entities that hold cultural and economic concerns in tension their synthesis of image, text and 3D object the product of a division of labour between editors, advertisers, journalists, illustrators, typographers, designers and art directors'. Jeremy Aynsley, 'Introduction' *Journal of Design History*, 18 (2005): 3.
14. For a detailed explanation of cultural relevance in connection to the Architectural Review see Kelly, "To Fan the Ardour layman", 8-10.
15. Kelly, "To Fan the Ardour layman", 123.
16. Jessica Holland, "An English sensibility: the architecture of Oliver Hill" (PhD diss., University of Portsmouth, 2011), 67.
17. Roy Strong, *Country Life, 1897-1997: The English Arcadia* (London: Boxtree Ltd., 1999), 36.
18. Hackney, "They Opened Up a Whole New World", 58.
19. Lecture transcript, J. Cornforth, 'The influence of Country Life photographs on our knowledge and perception of British architecture', n.d., 2005/2/3/3, Archives of Art and Design, Blythe House.1.
20. Joseph Rosa, "Architectural photography and the construction of modern architecture", *History of Photography* 22:2 (1998): 99.
21. As quoted in Kelly, "To Fan the Ardour layman", 3.
22. Rosa, "Architectural photography and the construction of modern architecture", 103.
23. Howard S. Becker, *Telling About Society*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 37.
24. Parnell, "Architectural Design 1954-1972", 16.
25. Sarah A. Carter, "Picturing Rooms: Interior Photography 1870-1900", *History of Photography*, 34:3 (2010): 257.
26. *Ibid*, 255.
27. *Ibidem*
28. N.A., "A House On The South Downs "Joldwynds" Holmbury St. Mary: designed by Oliver Hill, *The Studio*, 3 (1936): 334-338.
29. Ezra Stoller, "Photography and the Language of Architecture", 43.

## architectural photography, the media and the paradigm of objectivity in the work of oliver hill

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