

REVIEW OF

**Photography and Modern  
Architecture in Spain.  
Conference and discussion  
in FAUP by Iñaki Bergera.  
Scopio Editions, Porto, 2015.**

***New American Topographics,*  
Iñaki Bergera.  
La Fábrica, Madrid, 2018**

## Pedro Leão Neto

University of Porto Faculty of Architecture (FAUP)  
pneto@arq.up.pt

Pedro Leão Neto (Porto, Portugal, 1962) holds a Degree in Architecture at Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP, 1992), a Master's degree in Urban Environment Planning and Design (FAUP, 1997) and a PhD in Planning and Landscape (University of Manchester, 2002). Professor at FAUP since 2007 in the area of Architecture Communication and Photography he is responsible for the courses "Computer Architecture Aided Design" (CAAD) and "Photography of Architecture, City and Territory" (FACT). He has oriented and co-oriented several Master Thesis, PhD and curricular and professional internships. He is also the coordinator of the research group Centre for Communication and Spatial Representation (CCRE) integrated in FAUP's R&D centre, director of the cultural association Cityscopio and the founder and editorial coordinator of scopio Editions and its open platform scopio network, which is a CCRE's research-based editorial project focused on Documentary and Artistic Photography related with Architecture, City and Territory. He has curated several architectural photography exhibitions in Portugal and abroad, workshops and international debates and seminars around the universe of Architecture, Art and Image, being the founder and coordinator of international conferences On the Surface: Photography on Architecture, which last edition was held at the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT), Lisbon. He is the author and editor of more than 30 books and Editorial Coordinator of Sophia peer review Journal specifically designed to address theoretical work on Architecture, Art and Image. He was the coordinator and Principal researcher (PR) of several national and international projects publicfunded, and he is currently the coordinator of "Visual spaces of Change" financed with 189.011,13€. He won the PRAXIS XXI, FCT 1998 fellowship.

### ABSTRACT

**Acknowledging the long history of mutual interference between Architecture and Photography, their complex and ubiquitous relationship, and understanding Photography as a relevant artistic and critical research tool, Inaki Bergera's work offers new light over these matters. *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain* fosters a renewed understanding of Spanish architecture from the modern period, compiling and structuring all the information that was somehow scattered or lost, speaking about the photographers that were creating images of those modern buildings and the architects to which they were associated with. *New American Topographics* is an astonishing photography book reinterpreting the visual discourse of the New Topographic aesthetics and bringing them to contemporary time.**

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### KEYWORDS:

*Photography; Architecture; New American Topographics*

My first contact with Iñaki Bergera was in 2014 when he was invited through *Erasmus plus mobility* program for a seminar in the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP) about Spanish architecture and its photographic reproductions. The result was an open conference in FAUP called "Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain", where Iñaki presented and explained the *FAME* research project and also visited our I&R centre, Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura e Urbanismo (CEAU / FAUP) and the research group CCRE (Centro de Comunicação e Representação Espacial) having talked with diverse researchers and also the students of the photography course lectured at FAUP.



**FIG. 1** Cover of the book *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain* (2016).

Since this first collaboration, we acknowledged our common interests related to the world of Photography on Architecture, making clear that both research and initiatives around these themes could be very much strengthened by further collaborations, especially taking in

account Iñaki's knowledge and significant research around these subjects established by the diverse publications, conferences and other initiatives of his responsibility. Thus, it has been a privilege collaborating with Iñaki since then, being *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain* the first project together published in the collection Debates of scopio Editions, making possible to register for future memory and study the contents of Iñaki's conference and the debate that took place afterwards. This event was open to the entire academic community and also to external groups and institutions.

Released in 2016, scopio Editions' *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain* is unique in several aspects as will be explained next, mostly because it was the opportunity to publish in book format the brilliant synthesis of the FAME project presented by Iñaki at the conference in a refined limited edition of selected images and text. It is important to refer that the FAME project has been object of several other publications, namely its Book / Exhibition catalogue *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain 1925-1965*, published by Fundación ICO, La Fábrica, Madrid, 2014<sup>1</sup> and the Book *Fotografía y arquitectura moderna: Contextos, protagonistas y relatos desde España* published by Fundación Arquia, Barcelona, 2015<sup>2</sup>. While also linked to FAME, *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain* published in scopio's Debates' collection is a different type of publication. It is a limited edition in a portable format, printed on *Munken Print Cream* with a softcover. The book combines a set of 32 selected images with the transcriptions of Iñaki's presentation and of the discussion that took place afterwards with the students and researchers. The challenge was to combine the text with the images in a way that they could communicate not only the concepts being explained but also convey the true learning spirit of the conference, surprising and stirring the curiosity of the reader and prompting him to know more about these writings and research.

Thus, with this book, it is possible to access key points of FAME and follow the interesting discussion that took place at the end of the conference. Through this exclusive shortened version, we are able to acknowledge the important work of compiling and structuring all the information that was somehow scattered or lost about photography and modern architecture in Spain. The book simultaneously makes the reader, on one hand, aware of the importance of the photographers who were creating images of those buildings and the architects to which they were associated with in Spain, as well as what were their international links. On the other hand, it encourages the viewer to further analysis through the reading of other extended publications coming from FAME, making them known and accessible for future research.

Besides other things, with this book we have a critical selection of the most significant publications - state of the art - regarding this

1. *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain 1925-1965* (2014) corresponds to the exhibition catalogue of FAME project, and it looks at the history of architectural photography during Spanish architecture's modern period, ranging from the avant-garde of the 1920s to the conclusion of the International Style. It is a significant publication showing the processes of how and why certain pictures were taken along this time span, pointing out significant relations between architects and photographers, as well as the diverse audiences for these images. As pointed out by Sílvia Blanco Agúeira, it can be seen in this book how Inaki undertook "(...) the scientific study of modernity, focusing on the scant critical recognition of the interpretative and theoretical potentialities of combining both disciplines." The book presents alongside its text hundreds of photographs documenting the architectural environment of Spain during these decades, which entails the photographers Francesc Catala-Roca, Marín Chivite, Paco Gomez, Alejandro de la Sota, José Galle, Luis Lladó, Oriol Maspons, Nicolás Muller, Margaret Michaelis, Francisco Ruiz Tilve, Alberto Schommer, Julio Ubiña, José de Yarza García, Fernando Higuera, José Manuel Aizpúrua, Fernando García Mercadal and Josep Branguli.

2. The create the first critical, theoretical, documental and historiographic map about the importance of image for the construction of Spanish modernity. The book displays a collection of writings coming from diverse researchers of FAME, experts in these fields of study, and constitutes an enhancement to the former catalogue. This is so because there is an amplification of the research structured in three main sections - Fotografía de Arquitectura. Justificación, Medios y Archivos; Momentos y Protagonismos en la Fotografía de Arquitectura Española; Episodios Particulares en Torno a la Fotografía -, which treat in depth the basic, general and specific issues all necessary for the future study of Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain. Book *Fotografía y arquitectura moderna: Contextos, protagonistas y relatos desde España* (2015) is worth mentioning, as explained by Inaki in its Introduction, because it reunites a set of texts which treat in depth the primary, general and specific issues all necessary for the future study of Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain.



FIG. 2 Spreads from the book *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain* (2016).

photographic universe: the importance of photography and its authors and the great photographers responsible for the dissemination of the International Style of Modern Architecture all around the world. Then, at the same time, its reading allows the understanding of the Spanish universe and especially the relationships established between the photographers and the architects - Spanish architecture and other international authors. It is worth referring some crucial issues that are undertaken by Iñaki and later become object of discussion – all of which are transcribed in this book – that constitute very interesting themes of debate such as, for example, within the modern architectural photography universe, the diverse and significant relationships of Spanish photographers and architects (Kindel and José Luis Fernández del Amo, Català Roca and Josep Antoni Coderch, and others more) as well as the similarities and differences between some of these relations and others out of Spain (Julius Shulman and Richard Neutra, Lucien Hervé and Corbusier, and others more).

The idea that Iñaki advances at the end of the conference “(...) that it is possible to discover other languages, other views, other narratives



**FIG. 3** Spreads from the book *Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain* (2016).

in architectural photography outside the “mainstream”, apart from the archetypal description that so far we have been told through historiography. “is of utmost importance, since it impels us to learn important lessons from modernity, bringing them in a meaningful way to contemporary discourse.

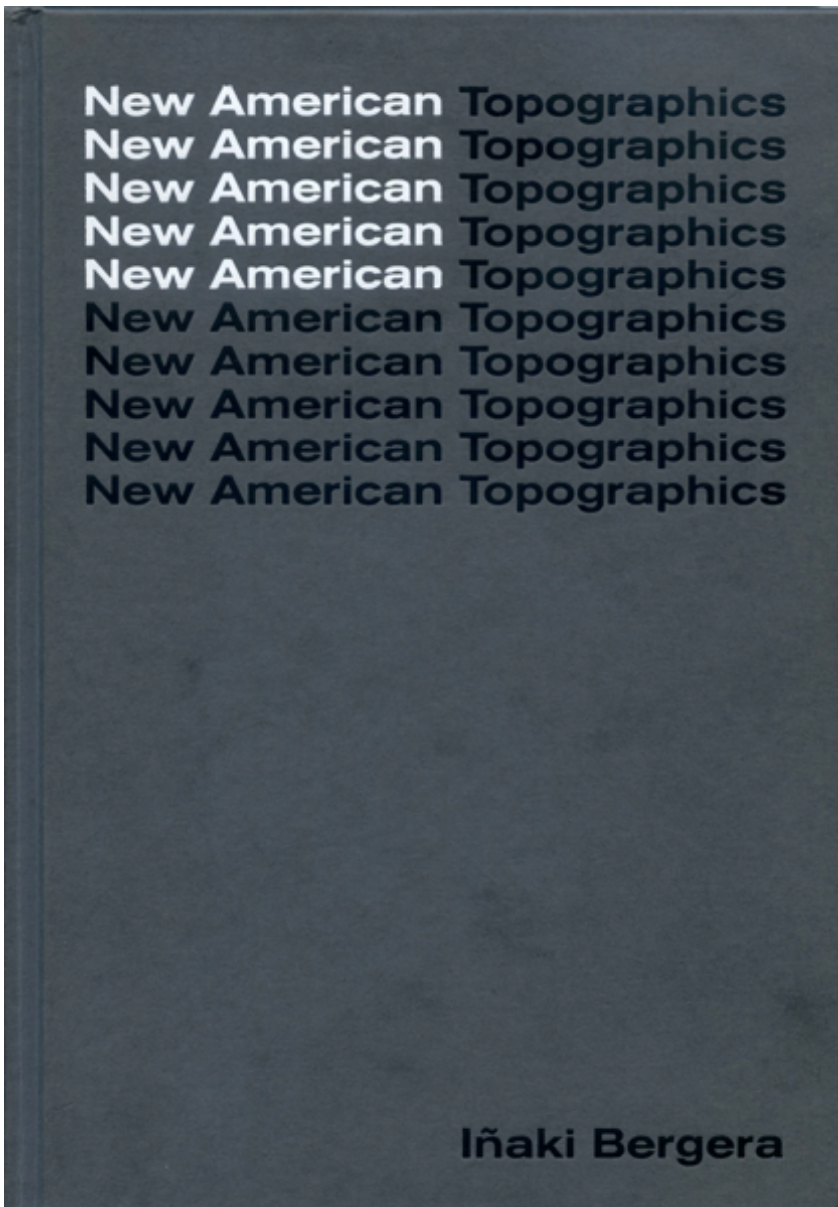
The critical spirit of modernity is one of its main lessons, and it is something that must be present in our time as that can be perceived by what is said by David Company in his essay *Architecture as Photography: Document, Publicity, Commentary, Art*<sup>3</sup>: “(...) it becomes clear that an independent and critical photography of architecture is as vital as it is endangered. My essay thus far has attempted to track something of this critical spirit from its origins in the 1920s. I end with an example that might point us toward future possibilities.”

*New American Topographics* (2018) is an astonishing photography book, a cared edition in authors’ book format, printed in *Creator Vol paper* with a beautiful hardcover in grey tissue. Iñaki’s work focuses on the North American vernacular architecture and derelict, empty spaces, made up of ruined gas stations, empty parking lots and lost streets and highroads, where we see no people and time seems to have stopped. *New American Topographics* is no doubt the result of his likings for these enigmatic non-places and a more elaborate photography project than his previous series *American Gas Stations* (2014), a magnificent tribute to Ed Ruscha influential serial work that featured photographs of several places along Route 66. In this work, Iñaki reinterprets the visual discourse of the many photographers coming from the landscape photography, rooted in the aesthetics called *New Topographics*<sup>4</sup> and brings them to contemporary time through a photography series that reveals the contradictions, dys-functionalities and mysteries of many of these places in North America.

We sense the responsiveness and awareness of Iñaki towards these

3. *Architecture as Photography: document, publicity, commentary, art* by David Company In Pardo, Alona., and Elias Redstone. *Photography and Architecture In the Modern Age*. Munich: Prestel, 2014.

4. Leão Neto, Pedro. “Introdução”, *Topografias a Norte*, Scopio Editorial Line, 2013: 3–9 “Among other things, this aesthetics was characterized by a group of authors and photographic projects that communicated the conflicts between culture and nature and the destruction of the environment by man, which is clear, for example, in Robert Adam’s *Outdoor Theater*, Colorado Springs (1971), one of the forerunners of this movement. These authors looked towards a postmodern engagement, simultaneously emphasizing the abstract and optical qualities of the landscape, and man’s destruction or conflicting interference with it, thus adopting a vision closer to the formal concerns of contemporary art. The group emerged with the exhibition “New Topographics9: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape”<sup>10</sup>, curated by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House (Rochester, NY) in January 1975. The exhibition’s spirit and aesthetics had a very significant impact, not only in America, but also in Europe, and it gathered such diverse authors as Robert Adams (1937-), Lewis Baltz (1945-), Bernd and Hilla Becher, Frank Gohlke, and Stephen Shore. All of them influenced photographic practices using the “New Topographics” model regarding landscape and other genres around the world (see for example, Stephen Shore’s influence on contemporary European photographers such as Joachim Brohm, Andreas Gursky or Thomas Struth, among others, on Bernd and Hilla Becher’s Düsseldorf students, or even on the younger generation of photographers like Jens Liebchen or Ola Unverzart). In fact, three out of the ten photographers in the show were later commissioned by the French government during the 1980s for the Mission de la DATAR, namely Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, and Stephen Shore.”



**FIG. 4** Cover of the book *New American Topographics* (2018).

territories because his series makes us feel both their *genius loci* of desolation and “no man’s land” atmosphere – which are so North American – as well as how photography can be both an artistic expression and a tool for critical, exploratory and innovative research on architecture, understood comprehensively as a practice and discipline able to integrate diverse dimensions such as the social, cultural, economic, political and others more.

Iñaki’s visual grammar renders new visibility or importance to those non-places, heightening the exposure and questioning of the documental side of *New American Topographics*. His vantage point has a key role in determining how the viewer understands the composition and relates to the subject matter. Thus these places become more than just common spaces or abandoned vernacular architectures that nobody would look twice, gaining with his series new importance and meaning.



**FIG. 5** Spread of the book *New American Topographics* (2018).

In other words, and using Roland Barthes<sup>5</sup>’ concepts of denotative meaning and punctum, even though Iñaki’s photographs have as primary frame of reference the subject of the photograph (parking lots, mailing posts, etc.), which is its denotative meaning, the punctum of Iñaki’s photographs allows for the formation of a critical reading.

This means, for example, the detail or artefact within the photograph that opens up that space to analysis, making viewers question the identity and memory of those spaces as happens, for example, with the North American Flag baton in Palms Highway, stuck in the middle of a walking pavement occupying the whole spread.

This photograph makes you realize the importance of that symbol for the North American culture, but then also leads you to confront it with the unfinished walking pavement where it stands and the bleak mailbox in front of it, as well as with the desolation and emptiness of that

5. Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981)



**FIG. 6** Spread of the book *New American Topographics* (2018).

anonymous place showing the one-story house of the real estate agent Morongo Valley on the other side of the road. This image is also a magnificent tribute to Robert Frank's flag photograph present in his seminal work *The Americans*<sup>6</sup>, however, the punctum in both images work through different visual strategies. In former, it might be said that its punctum is the focus on that national emblem, which also stands in the way of seeing since it is obscuring the eyes of one of the women at the window in the photograph<sup>7</sup>.

In Iñaki's case, the punctum works another way, which is being critical by highlighting the symbol within that bleak environment and in this way giving weight to the contrast between the environment and the national emblem, revealing the contradictions of many of these places in North America.

We can see Iñaki's analytical vantage point in many other photographs of his series as, for example, in the image of the Rocket statue in

6. Frank, Robert. *The Americans*, (Steidl/ National Gallery of Art)

7. See the article "When Robert Frank shot the American flag" in Phaidon at (<https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/photography/articles/2015/july/03/when-robert-frank-shot-the-american-flag>). "This flag photograph (top), taken at a parade in Hoboken, New Jersey, during the summer of 1955, was shot on the second of the three trips. "The wind is blowing the flag out taut," Ian Jeffrey writes in *The Photography Book*, "and in the process obscuring the eyes of one of the women at the window. National emblems may provide a focus, but they also stand in the way of seeing."



FIG. 7 Spread of the book *New American Topographics* (2018).



St. Augustine Pass, in the middle of nowhere, or with the contradictions of the road symbols also in isolated far-off places, as in the spreads of North Indian Canyon Drive or the Ragsdale Road where it is difficult to imagine any traffic, and where you can see almost everything in-between you and the infinite horizon. The dialogue between past and present that Iñaki is able to establish by means of his visual strategy empowers the selected architectural artefacts, being them the desolated places or vernacular constructions, with a far-reaching significance. In fact, they become representative of a larger whole about North American culture and its way of life and lead viewers to (re)think numerous mainstream concepts about identity, values and memories of contemporary America and its past history.

In Iñaki's photographic series there is an interplay with codes of North American cultural and identity meanings, making viewers questioning them by instilling a deep connotative and denotative interplay concerning its subject matter (motels, parking places, power poles, gas stations, etc.). Iñaki does all this by blending simultaneously the connotative within the geometry and diverse patterns he creates with the power poles, power lines, mailboxes or road signs, as well as with the roads, gas stations and all the other vernacular architecture and American artefacts that he takes in because he captures them as structural elements within his photographs.

New American Topographics is also a great tribute to Stephen Shore, an author we feel Iñaki has much in common, namely by the way he sees and captures space and the North-American cultural landscape. In fact, Iñaki's photographs, as Stephen Shore's, also have that same Zen awakened unconsciousness, this meditative quality that Eugen Herrigel speaks in his book "Zen in the art of archery" focused on archery, but that can also be extended to many other contexts, such as the practice of photography.

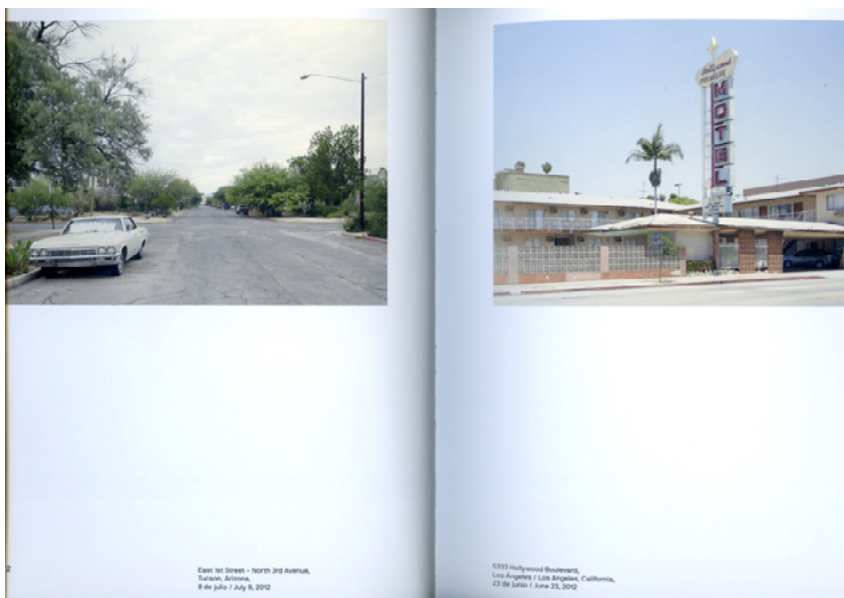


**FIG. 8** Spread of the book *New American Topographics* (2018).

It is also interesting to point out that Iñaki's photographs' captions indicating place, year, month and day, which means the same information matrix of Stephen Shore, which entails a similar traveling artist sensibility for the places he visits and explains the capacity that the photographs of *New American Topographics* possess for communicating the identity and atmosphere of those North American realities. We also think that Iñaki's use of colour and rigorous compositions – even though revealing the author's style of perception and feeling for those territories – can be traced in many of Shore's work. It is this unique capacity of seeing geometries and colour in space that allows the ordinary to become inspiring.

Thus, even though *New American Topographics* subject frame is made up of somewhat banal architectures and places, its photography is all deceptively complex and make viewers' rethink and visualise other images, coming from the connotative universe. The straight lines of power poles, the mailboxes, the road signs and many other artefacts resonate with multiple meanings and have in them a complexity that resists description and creates an autonomous world that speaks critically about the real. Thus we can read Iñaki's photographic series not so much as the reflection of that 'real' world of motels, parking places and other North American artefacts, but as an interpretation of that world.

To finish, we can say that in *New American Topographics* the documentary is not an end in itself, but a genre that, on the one hand, translates through photography aspects of diverse architectural dimensions within American society – cultural, social and political realities and others more – and, on the other hand, uses different strategies to build a critical discourse and ethics about them.



**FIG. 9** Spread of the book *New American Topographics* (2018).