

THE ROBERT ELWALL PHOTOGRAPHS COLLECTION AT THE RIBA BRITISH ARCHITECTURAL LIBRARY

*Valeria Carullo*

*Curator, The Robert Elwall Photographs Collection*

*2015*

The Royal Institute of British Architects was founded in 1834, and part of its remit from the start was to collect items of architectural interest and create a library that would facilitate the study and understanding of architecture. After an initial donation by Charles Barry - the architect of the Houses of Parliament - the RIBA encouraged its members to donate items to start a collection, which soon grew to such proportion that new premises for the Institute had to be found. The RIBA moved once again before finding its current home at 66 Portland Place in 1934, exactly a century after its foundation. The building, designed by George Grey Wornum (1888-1957), was the result of a competition and still stands as one of the most striking buildings of the 1930s open to the public in London.



Royal Institute of British Architects, 66 Portland Place, London (1934)

Photographers: Dell & Wainwright

During this time the RIBA Collection had become fairly significant. Photographs were acquired from the very beginning as part of architects' archives, but were generally considered as mere documentation and not attributed the importance given, for example, to drawings. It was only in the 1980s that photographs became a separate collection within the Library holdings, thanks to the vision of the late Robert Elwall (1953-2012), who was to become the first Photographs Curator at the RIBA and subsequently Assistant Director of the Library. Elwall, a librarian who had read history at Oxford, realised the value of the photographic material held at the RIBA and the importance that photography has always had in disseminating ideas and promoting knowledge. He secured for the Collection the archives of several of the foremost British architectural photographers who had by then ceased their activity; other important additions came as part of the archives of prominent architects. By the late 1990s the Collection had grown in size and status, and Elwall convinced the RIBA of the need to build a dedicated, climate controlled store to house it. This store was completed in 2002, and it now houses more than 1.5 million items, ranging from negatives to transparencies to photographic prints. The Collection had in effect almost doubled in size when, thanks again to Elwall's foresight, the Institute acquired the archive of the Architectural Press – historic publishers of the *Architectural Review* and the *Architects' Journal* – consisting of over 600,000 items. Another of Elwall's outstanding achievements was the launch of the Library's digitization programme in 2006, a project he firmly believed in as part of his commitment to bring the Collection – and all visual material from the Library – to the widest possible audience. Other testimonies to this commitment are the many photography exhibitions that Robert curated with his staff, both at the RIBA and elsewhere; his lectures and talks in various UK and international forums; and, perhaps most of all, his writings, which include an impressive number of articles and a handful of the most influential books on architectural photography ever written, such as *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography* (Merrell, 2007). Considering his contribution to the discipline and to the RIBA, it is only fitting that the Collection was renamed in his memory in 2012.

At present the Robert Elwall Photographs Collection is probably the world's largest repository of photographs of architecture and the built environment. Its oldest items date from the very early days of photography and its most recent are digital prints of contemporary architecture. It is international in scope and covers several other fields related to architecture such as landscape, townscape, interior design and social documentary, as well as portraits of architects and other personalities. Our oldest object is a fairly recent acquisition, a salt print of the Tower of the Five Orders at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, taken in 1843 by William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) – our only print by one of the fathers of photography. The Collection's extensive 19<sup>th</sup> century holdings also include a set of rare albumen prints of Central Park as it was being laid out between 1858 and 1863, donated to the RIBA a few years later by a member of the AIA (American Institute of Architects); three salt prints of Egyptian monuments taken by Maxime Du Camp (1822-1894) as he was travelling in the Middle East with Gustave Flaubert between 1849 and 1851; and a number of albumen prints of the New Louvre under construction, part of the very extensive survey of the building carried out by Édouard Baldus (1813-1889) from 1855.



Most of these holdings - and later ones - were acquired thanks to the propensity of architects for collecting photographs of historical as well as contemporary architecture. As for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Collection is particularly strong on the inter-war period, as well as on post-war architecture (especially British). Some of the best represented photographers are John Maltby (1910-1980), Eric de Maré (1910-2002), John Donat (1933-2004), Henk Snoek (1915-1980) and Edwin Smith (1912-1971), who was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the RIBA in the autumn of 2014. His archive, bequeathed to the RIBA in 2002, is very extensive, consisting of around 20,000 prints and some 60,000 negatives.



Battersea 'A' Power Station, London (1934)  
Photographer: John Maltby

*Previous page:*

Central Park, New York (1860s)

Photographer: unknown

New Louvre under construction, Paris (1855)

Photographer: Édouard Baldus





Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool (1967)

Photographer: Henk Snoek

*Previous page:*

'Skyscraper' fishermen's sheds, Hastings (1956)

Photographer: Eric de Maré

Boots head office, Beeston (1968)

Photographer: John Donat



Hafod House, Wales (1950)  
Photographer: Edwin Smith

However, the largest archive by far is the previously mentioned Architectural Press Archive, which includes photographs taken between the late 1920s and the early 1980s. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of this archive, which represents the legacy of two of the most important architectural publications in the world and the role they played in shaping British architecture. Two sets of images within the Archive deserve particular mention in this context: the first is the collection of glass negatives and photographic prints representing the work of Dell & Wainwright, official photographers to the *Architectural Review* between 1929 and 1946. This formidable partnership, whose most powerful images clearly reference the language of the New Photography, was extremely influential both for other photographers and for the role they played in promoting of Modernism in the United Kingdom.



Embassy Court, Brighton (1935)  
Photographers: Dell & Wainwright

The other outstanding collection of images within the Architectural Press Archive is that related to a project called 'Manplan', carried out by the *Architectural Review* in 1969 and 1970. In order to document the current state of architecture and urban planning in Britain, the *Review* commissioned some of the best photojournalists of the time rather than professional architectural photographers. The result was like nothing seen before in the magazine's pages: the images were grainy, punchy, dynamic, and - unlike most standard photographs of architecture - often focussed on people as well as buildings. One of the photographers involved in this project was the greatly influential Tony Ray-Jones (1941-1972). His superb images, taken for the 'Housing' issue, are not as well-known as the rest of his work, and can definitely be considered one of the highlights of our Collection.



Terraced houses on Old Kent Road, London (1970)  
Photographer: Tony Ray-Jones

Building on this outstanding cultural resource is a difficult but very stimulating challenge. So much has changed with the arrival of the digital era, but our priority is still to look after our 'analogue' collection and to make it available to a contemporary audience – hopefully for many generations to come. Access to the Library is free and open to all; photographs can be viewed by appointment in the Library reading room at 66 Portland Place. Users include students, architects, architectural historians, conservationists, media professionals, as well as members of the general public who simply want to learn more about their house or the unusual building down the road from where they live. In addition, people all over the world can view a growing selection of photographs through our online image database, RIBApix ([www.ribapix.com](http://www.ribapix.com)), which at present allows access to more than 80,000 images.

**All photographs in this article are from the Robert Elwall Photographs Collection.**