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Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman

(Docu) A Visual Acoustics, Shulman Project Partners, Out of the Box production. Produced by Eric Bricker, Babette Zilch. Executive producers, Lisa Hughes, Michelle Oliver. Co-producers, Frederic Liebert, Will Paice. Directed by Eric Bricker. Written by Bricker, Phil Ethington, Jessica Hundley, Lisa Hughes.

With: Julius Shulman, Judy McKee, Carlos Von Frankenberg, Benedikt Taschen, Leo Marmol, Frank Gehry, Craig Krull, Kelly Lynch, E. Stewart Williams, Angelika Taschen, Tom Ford, Buck Stahl, Dante Spinotti, Michael Webb, Barbara Lamprecht, Thomas S. Hines, Ed Ruscha.
Narrator: Dustin Hoffman.

By [**ROBERT KOEHLER**](#)

The modernist ethic receives its due in "Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman." Eric Bricker's handsome, functional if not very cinematic tribute to Shulman emphatically argues for his place as the most important of architecture photographers, and the person who has directly conveyed the titular style to a wider public. Something of a missionary statement for a missionary, this is nirvana for lovers of mid-century modern and fine-art photography, and a solid bet for wide-ranging and specialty fests along with arts-oriented cablers.

Shulman, now 97, is responsible for photographing many of the mod masterpieces in meticulous detail, particularly in the movement's Southern California epicenter. As the film helpfully explains, Shulman's eye for one-point perspective (though not noted here, a considerable influence on Stanley Kubrick's films from "Paths of Glory" on) accommodated the style's emphasis on open, airy space; long, geometrical lines; panoramic use of glass and windows; and the visual blending of exterior earth and sky with interior comfort zones.

After a nice intro with Shulman in his lovely, semi-wild garden (which is anything but modernist), pic takes a roughly chronological form, with a sometimes canned, sometimes witty Dustin Hoffman serving as narrator. Shulman's family moved west to Los Angeles' Boyle Heights in 1920, and daughter Judy McKee observes that by growing up with the city, Shulman was able to deeply appreciate its changes and individuality.

An early interest in photography and architecture eventually led to commissions with architect Richard

Neutra -- who, along with Rudolph Schindler, settled in Los Angeles after training in Vienna with Adolf Loos; together, they launched the school of Southern California modernism. (Pic makes a fascinating companion-piece to Heinz Emigholz's "Schindler's Houses" and "Loos Ornamental.")

In this passage and others, Bricker makes good use of the design-heavy animation talents of firm Trollback & Co. for some lively animated sequences and bridges. Strong-willed men both, Shulman and Neutra clashed enough to keep things interesting (Bricker gathers up some amusing anecdotes), but not enough to stop them from collaborating on dozens of important projects.

Bricker is careful to illustrate Shulman's work with architects beyond Neutra, especially in a generous section devoted to Pierre Koenig's Case Study House No. 22. Shulman's exterior shot of the house, perched on a Hollywood Hills slope and extending out almost impossibly over the night sky, is examined in depth as perhaps the iconic modernist image. Bricker recruits cinematographer Dante Spinotti to lens the house's dramatic, glassy interior, which he does in elaborate tracking shots.

The film's thoroughness ranges from loving tributes to Shulman's many Mexican architect-collaborators, such as the late Abraham Zabludovsky, to a particularly touching sequence documenting the transportation of Shulman's massive archive to the Getty Museum.

When modernism went out of favor, Shulman, almost unbelievably, was ready to call it quits. A brief display of dreadful examples of postmodern architecture, which he holds beneath contempt, suggest what the consciously ironic movement lost (beauty) on its way to being smart-alecky.

"Visual Acoustics" fails to underline a wonderful aspect of Shulman's position today: He lived to watch modernism's decline, postmodernism's rise and fall, and modernism's bold return. He's even lived long enough to photograph Frank Gehry's Disney Hall, a building for which he originally held extreme doubts but now loves.

Production package is first-class, though one wishes for more exciting modern-style music than that of composer Charlie Campagna.

Camera (color/B&W, DV), Aiken Weiss, Dante Spinotti; editor, Charlton McMillan; music, Charlie Campagna; sound (Dolby Digital), Eddie Casares, Oscar Chavez, Steve Corbiere, Paul Graff, Alan Halcon, Bill Jenkins, Paul Marshall, Paul Morris, Lori Weinhouse; re-recording mixers, Ron Bartlett, Eric Flickinger; animation design, Trollback & Co.; associate producer, Rose Nielsen. Reviewed at Los Angeles Film Festival (Special Screenings), June 25, 2008. Running time: 83 MIN.

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