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## Film Review: Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman

**Bottom Line: Doc about architecture photographer Julius Shulman presents a lively, humanistic portrait of a man and his times.**

By Kirk Honeycutt

Jan 1, 1900

*Los Angeles Film Festival*

There are two audiences for Eric Bricker's "Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman." The first is people with an abiding interest in architecture, photography, art, design and historical Southern California. The other is anyone who wants to see a really terrific, intensely focused documentary on a fascinating personality. The film premiered at the Los Angeles Film Festival with its 97-year-old subject, architectural photographer Julius Shulman, in the audience. Just as he does in the film, Shulman answered audience questions with a keen artistic insight and joyful spirit that belies his age.

His photos introduced the world to Modernist architects working in the West, figures such as Richard Neutra, Rudolf Schindler and Frank Lloyd Wright. In interviews with key figures, many in-depth discussions with Shulman himself and the display of so many photos from an archive of over 8,000 projects dating back to 1927 when he began with a Brownie box camera, Bricker shows just how much Shulman's photography meant to the Modernist movement.

Shulman jokes that the architect does all the heavy lifting of designing and erecting a building while he comes along to snap photos. In reality, his eye for a designed space is unparalleled in the world of architectural photography. As a consequence, his photos brought the movement to a much wider audience.

Consider his most famous photograph: Pierre Koenig's Case Study #22 house (1960) located in the Hollywood Hills. In the black-and-white photo, two women chat inside a glass enclosed wing of the house that seems to hang dangerously over the sparking

nighttime cityscape of the Los Angeles basin. While the house has been featured in countless commercials, TV shows and movies since, that single photo gave the structure its worldwide fame.

The film's focus is rigorously on Shulman's professional life. While his daughter is among the interviewees, there is virtually no mention of his private life. He is seen engaged with his current photography partner, cataloging his archive, meeting renowned architects and making personal appearances to discuss his philosophy and technique of taking photographs. We learn of his relentless activism regarding the environment and his "retirement" in violent reaction to the Post-modern movement. (Post-modernism is to architecture what female impersonation is to femininity, he asserts.)

He makes a bold statement: The camera is the least important thing in photography. Then when you think about it, you realize how absolutely true that is.

Along with a percussive music score and intelligent editing that nicely mixes Shulman's startling photographs with the superbly cinematography by Aiken Weiss and none other than Dante Spinotti, "Visual Acoustics" pays eloquent tribute to one of architecture's most passionate and determined advocates.

*Production companies: Shulman Project Partners. Director: Eric Bricker. Writers: Eric Bricker, Phil Ethington, Jessica Hundley, Lisa Hughes. Narration: Dustin Hoffman. Producers: Eric Bricker, Babette Zilch. Executive producers: Lisa Hughes, Michelle Oliver. Director of photography: Aiken Weiss, Dante Spinotti. Music: Charlie Campagna. Editor: Charlton McMillan.*

*Not rated, 84 minutes.*


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