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Traces of the Future: Urban Transformation and the Promissory Multiplicity of Photobooks

ALEXA FÄRBER

City-related photobooks are of particular interest for a city's cultural image strategy, which aims at directing attention to what a city has been and is becoming. As such, these photobooks offer a relatively controlled way of "urban imagineering": they convey a specific visual narrative of the city's past, present, and future with the expectation of creating cultural value and resonance. This potential will be discussed conceptually and with the help of an example from Hamburg's largest urban development area, HafenCity.

Stadtbezogene Fotobücher sind von besonderem Interesse für die Bildung eines Stadtimages. Sie zielen darauf ab, die Aufmerksamkeit auf das zu lenken, was eine Stadt war und was sie werden wird. Als solche bieten diese Fotobücher eine relativ kontrollierte Art des "urban imagineering": Sie vermitteln eine spezifische visuelle Darstellung der Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft einer Stadt mit dem Ziel, kulturellen Wert zu schaffen und ein Echo hervorzurufen. Dieses Potenzial wird konzeptionell und mit Hilfe eines Beispiels von Hamburgs größtem Stadtentwicklungsgebiet diskutiert.

Biography

Alexa Färber has been a professor at the Institute of European Ethnology, University of Vienna, since September 2018. There she holds the Chair of Historical Dimensions of Everyday Cultures and works in the fields of urban anthropology, audio-visual research, and the anthropology of knowledge; she has conducted research and led interdisciplinary projects in these areas. In addition to a monograph on representational work at the Expo 2000 (2006), Färber has published articles on “urban imagineering” and the graspability of the city. Her current research aims at conceiving the promissory qualities of the city.

There are many ways to imagine and draw attention to urban transformation. One of them is printed photographic matter in the form of city-related photo-books. Although urban transformation in the mode of urban development involves a great variety of media,¹ photobooks are of particular interest for a city's cultural image strategy, which aims at directing attention to what a city has been and, especially, is becoming. Despite the specific temporality of photography, which is less future-oriented than directed toward a presentation of the past, photobooks offer a relatively controlled means of "urban imagineering"²: they convey a specific visual narrative of the city's past, present, and future with the expectation of creating cultural value and resonance.

This expectation as it relates to photobooks and photography is not surprising. The history of several nineteenth-century European cities points to a kind of "elective affinity" between photography as an upcoming medium on the one hand and major urban development projects on the other.³ Again, the photobook is not the main product of these entangled practices, yet it may feature as a productive sideshow where the experience of urban transformation is turned into a specific object of knowledge as well as a commodity, and thus into an object of desire. Such potential desire attached to photobooks resonates with two observations in the field of publishing and in the context of urban development. First, the production of photobooks seems to be continually ongoing. Rather than vanishing, they are

flourishing, inter alia, thanks to new opportunities in printing and self-publishing.⁴ Second, the incorporation of photography into large-scale urban development projects continues unabated. Le Grand Paris (2007–), an enormous infrastructural and decentralizing project in the Paris metropolitan area, is one of the more recent ambitious examples of integrating photography into a strategy of urban re-figuration. Essentially it has created a structure called "Les regards du Grand Paris," where every year over a ten-year period six photographers are invited to visually attend the urban transformation that emerges from this process. At the same time, the Collège International de Photographie du Grand Paris (CIPGP) has recently been founded to act as a site for cultural work with and through photography, and is scheduled to open in 2024 at Ivry-Port.⁵ Inevitably, the first book, *Traduire le Grand Paris* (2018), has been published to validate these efforts and to make public the photographic interpretations of and interventions in urban development.

In 2016 I used these two observations as a starting point for studying the "expressive form"⁶ of city-related photobooks and created the website talkingphotobooks.net. Testing the extroverting potential of photobooks, I regularly invite colleagues—or strangers—to talk about their responses to these "paper cities."⁷ Together we explore how such printed

1. Söderstrom 2000.
2. The notion "urban imagineering" points to the diverse practices, objects, and actors that contribute to imagining the city rather than to the image or imaginary as such (Färber 2014).
3. Cuny / Färber / Hägele 2014. Burcu Doğramaci points out the affinity between photography and the experience of urban transformation in the early twentieth century (Doğramaci 2010).

4. See, for instance, the debate on the constraints, risks, and opportunities of publishing photobooks in *Photonews*, 2012, including a survey addressing photographers and publishers: photonews.de/blogphotonews/buecher-machen-um-jeden-preis-photonews-umfrage. Accessed: June 6, 2020.
5. See the first call: cnap.fr/laureats-de-la-commande-photographique-nationale-les-regards-du-grand-paris-; and for the CIPGP: photographie-grand-paris.fr. Accessed: June 6, 2020.
6. McKenzie 2002.
7. Martins / Reverseau 2016.

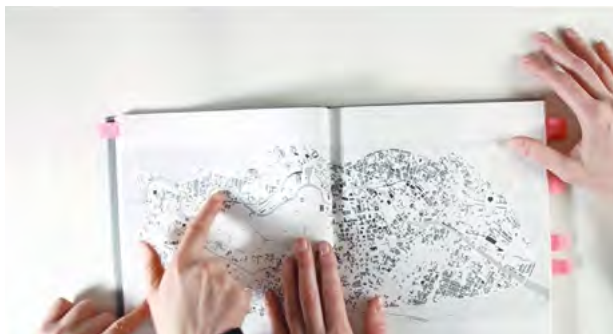


Fig. 1.

Exploring the multiplicity
and potential of photobooks at
talkingphotobooks.net/urban-research.

matter can help us to understand this popular medium's history and presence, its value in urban research, and its visual potential. The multiplicity and potential of books are the starting points for these collective reading sessions, whereby different interpretations of the contents or books as such are articulated. Moreover, the very fact of making these diverse readings public amplifies notions of the urban as a social issue. (Fig. 1)

It is therefore in this context that I propose to study the promissory quality of photobooks as multiple objects from the perspective of the anthropology of knowledge. Firstly, I will delineate some characteristics of the photobook in order to develop, secondly, criteria for an analysis of the promissory potential of the photobook in urban development. Temporality will be highlighted as a particularly significant aspect for the potential of city photobooks. Thirdly, this conceptual interpretation of the promise will be discussed with the help of one example from Hamburg and a photobook related to its largest urban development area, HafenCity.

Exploring the potential of photobooks as documents of visual urbanism leads me to problematize the city as a “promissory assemblage.”⁸ Viewing the promise as a mode of relating and the city as an assemblage of various promises questions the conditions that allow for emancipatory forms of urban life.

The Multiplicity of (City-Related) Photobooks

Thinking about the (photo)book as “an interface through which we encounter ideas”⁹ leads to multidisciplinary and professional fields of research with

competing definitions. Although every book is fundamentally related to others,¹⁰ with regard to the photobook, scholarly theory has nevertheless distinguished its characteristics as a genre, its specificity as a product, and its quality as a collection and valued object.¹¹ Yet we must acknowledge that the book is never single; it is always multiple.

In the two-volume publication *Autopsie: Deutschsprachige Fotobücher 1918 bis 1945* (Autopsy: German-language photobooks from 1918 to 1945), which was published on the prestigious photobook imprint Steidl in Göttingen (2015) and quickly sold out, collector Manfred Heiting and journalist Roland Jaeger suggest that the 1970s was the starting point for an increasing interest in photobooks. From then through to the new millennium, a differentiated field of interest developed—including exhibitions, exhibition catalogues, academic research, and magazines that published special issues on photobooks.¹²

The present dynamic of this rather self-referential field¹³ contributes to the multiple character of the photobook. Today a driving force for the multiplication of the photobook (multiplication in the aforementioned sense of being not an object with one meaning, but rather having a diverse array of meanings) is the valuation process it goes through. And within the last three or four decades

8. Färber 2019.
9. Borsuk 2018: 197.

10. Hagner 2014: 51.
11. Siegel 2016.
12. Heiting / Jaeger 2015: 6–8. Others state that little research has been conducted and published on the role of photobooks about photobooks, or the specific subjects of photobooks about photobooks. Cf. Martins / Reserveau 2016.
13. Heiting has in particular been a major actor, as he has a tremendous collection of photobooks (that was partly destroyed by wildfires in California in 2018).

this field of expertise has become established, private and public collections have grown, and photobook fairs have sprung up (and subsided), while the sheer number of publications has also increased. The photobook and studies on the photobook assemble photographers, printers, graphic artists, collectors, distributors, commissioners, scholars, recipients, readers, and all the materials involved to bring a photobook into existence. These actors merge especially due to the potential desire attached to the photobook as a commodity.

In one such “photobook about photobooks,”¹⁴ *Magnum Photobook: The Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Fred Ritchin and Carole Naggar (Phaidon, 2016), Ritchin argues that for those iconic photojournalists who founded Magnum in 1947 as a “self-run” photographic agency in order to gain autonomy within journalism, the opportunity to publish photobooks instead of (and more often alongside) their photo reportage assignments “enabled them to articulate nuanced, developed, at times dissonant points of view.”¹⁵ Ritchin shows that under these conditions they were able to “report more extensively” or even with “experimental strategies,”¹⁶ which brought with them even more autonomy. The potential of the photobook allowed photographers to become “fully fledged authors rather than simply providing the imagery for others to contextualize and present.”¹⁷ If we think about the specific moment in time that Ritchin describes, we can easily detect

how photography concurrently gained in importance as an art. This is another reason why it had become interesting to invest in this kind of practice as both publication and product. Thus, from this professional perspective, the photobook enables us to relate to the field of art and becomes multiple: photobook *and* art book. (Fig. 2)

The photobook centralizes multiple different expectations and modes of appropriation. Do the urban or the city add any element to this specific centralizing potential of the photobook? Susana Martins and Anne Reverseau argue in their introduction to the edited volume *Paper Cities* that there exists an elective affinity between the photobook or “book device” (rather than photography as such) and the urban: “its narrative and sequential structure turn it also into the perfect medium by which city stories can be told. The parallel between cities and photographic books proves likewise to be an interesting and powerful one: since one can explore the pages of the book as one would similarly discover the streets of a city, stopping wherever one wants to, spend more time there or going back to the most attractive places, while avoiding the ones that look uninteresting or less pleasant.”¹⁸

While urban studies—and everyday observation—has taught us that the vision of the urban as the happy place of multiple choices is socially exclusive and only holds true for specific social milieus, the scholars’ approach is inspiring and useful in the sense that it broadens the given definitions of what would count as a photobook today. They introduce the notions of the “photographic book” and “book device” that they developed

14. The often splendid publications on photobooks about photobooks concentrate and provoke a reflexive and valuating knowledge, turning them into valuable photobooks themselves. They become a register for photobooks, a source for orientation, and a valuation tool for collectors and researchers.

15. Ritchin 2016: 6–7.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Martins / Reverseau 2016: 8.

Fig. 2.

Photobooks about photobooks.



Fig. 3.

Paris in photobooks. "Paris la nuit" (ca. 1935). Source: Hans-Michael Koetzle, ed. 2011. Eyes on Paris: Paris im Fotobuch. 1890 bis heute. Exhibition catalogue. Deichtorhallen Hamburg. München: Hirmer Verlag. 120–21.

toward more contemporary expressions of the photo-text-book configuration, which they understand as "photography on the page (not necessarily a printed page)."¹⁹ Against this background and in common with other scholars,²⁰ Martins and Reverseau prefer a "hybrid and relational approach"²¹—and I would add "performative approach"—whereby "the paper cities genre activates, and implies, a subtle and well-balanced negotiation between the portraitist and the portrayed."²² (Figs. 3 and 4)

This awareness of the performative potential of city photobooks (and of books as such) feeds into the perspective of an anthropology of knowledge that is trying to discover the situational potential of such urban-visual devices. From an ethnographic perspective, we ask how exactly they emerge from being connected to (or disconnected from) each other. Here the promise as a mode of relating comes into play, as well as the city as an assemblage of various promises.

Photobooks and Their Promises in Urban Development: Photographing and Publishing HafenCity

Promises may be spoken words or materialize as promising objects such as photobooks. We can grasp their promissory potential in Fred Ritchin's reflections on the photojournalists who were keen to publish photobooks because "the book, whether published conventionally or self-published, has become an increasingly desirable vehicle for extended photographic exploration and commentary, less encumbered by the media chaos rampant elsewhere. And whereas

- 19. Ibid.
- 20. Cf. Ponstingel 2008; Edwards 2016.
- 21. Martins / Reverseau 2016: 9.
- 22. Ibid.: 8.

in the past working for a prestigious publication brought a photographer an elevated authority, given the eroded status of conventional journalism a photographer's name on the cover of a book may now have more credibility, at least in some circles."²³

The photobook is more than just a book that assembles photography on a page, and sometimes with text. According to Ritchin, it has become a representation of the credibility of a person who can no longer gain authority in her or his professional field. As such the photobook is perceived as a promising object—a desirable vehicle—for this positive identification. It fuels the expectation that credibility and authority will be regained in the future.

Promises, conceived of as illocutionary speech acts in speech act theory²⁴ and literary studies, create a *temporal difference*. They literally make the future present, and they create a past—a past where the promise has not yet existed. More precisely, we can think about the future made present as present traces of the future.

It is worth concentrating on the specific time-space opened by a promise. Studying the “elusive promises” of planning, social anthropologists Simone Abram and Gisa Weszkalnys study ethnographically how the “‘gaps’ between ideal, ideology and practice fill themselves with things unplanned, unexpected and inexplicable, and with things that get overlooked and forgotten. ... [T]he ethnographer's task is to chart how people deal with these gaps and mismatches, and to understand how they are significant to, and are occasionally elided by, the work of planning.”²⁵ These gaps are

time-spaces attuned to the promise and are therefore qualified by a certain elusiveness.

If the photobook is a promise to (re)gain authority as a photographer/author-artist, we might ask how this elusiveness is lived in the everyday. The photographer and future author-artist who expects this promise to be realized will probably not wait until expectations are met and the promise is fulfilled; they will most likely work at the same time on multiple levels to ensure their position—or in the meantime they will have to earn their living with commissioned journalistic work. In everyday life the relation between the photographer and the promise that is materialized in the photobook loosens, though it may selectively be intensified, for instance when they remind the publishing house of the expectations that the photobook should meet.

With these relational and temporal qualities of the promise in mind, I want to turn to the case of the urban development area HafenCity, Hamburg, and to a photographic book project about this area that had been assigned to a group of photographers on behalf of an urban development agency. *HafenCity Hamburg: Neue Begegnungsorte zwischen Metropole und Nachbarschaft* (HafenCity Hamburg: New places of encounter between metropolis and neighborhood, 2010)²⁶ contains the work of seven photographers who were given the task of documenting everyday practices in public spaces. It was a collaborative work by young, variously well-known professionals that was

23. Ritchin 2016: 7.

24. Austin 1962.

25. Abram / Weszkalnys 2013: 23.

26. Along with my colleagues Cécile Cuny and Sonja Preissing, we used the book as a starting point for an exploratory study about collaboration in urban and visual research. In the web document researchingacity.com, we talk about the book's narrative structure and the way that we reconstructed the photographers' collaboration in walk-alongs (*itinéraire*).

Fig. 4.

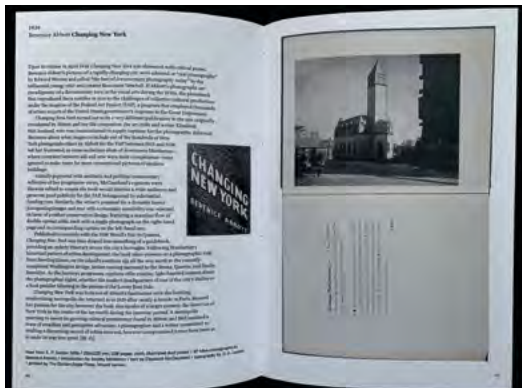
New York in photobooks.

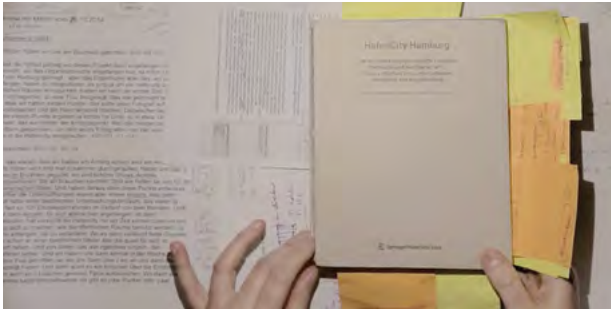
4.1 Changing New York (1939) by Berenice Abbott (photography), Elizabeth McCausland (text), S.A. Jacobs (typography). New York: E.P. Dutton.

4.2 Young Folks' New York (1960/1968) by Susanne Szasz (photography) and Susan E. Lyman (text); Anthony Congello (jacket design). New York: Crown.

4.3 New York Proclaimed (1965) by Evelyn Hofer (photography) and V.S. Pritchett (text), Miriam Woods (jacket design). London: Chatto & Windus and William Heinemann.

4.4 OK OK NO New York (1984) by Lenke Rothman (text and design), Tana Ross (photography), Sune Nordgren (design). Åhus: Kalejdoskop förlag.
Source: Horacio Fernández, ed. 2016. New York in Photobooks. Exhibition catalogue. RM Centro José Guerrero. Granada: Centro José Guerrero.





Figs. 5.

Multiplying the photobook.
Discussion about HafenCity Hamburg:
Neue urbane Begegnungsorte zwischen
Metropole und Nachbarschaft,
with Cécile Cuny, Sonja Preissing,
and the author as part of
researchingacity.com/#Hafen_City.



published in a rather lavish way, and which quickly ran out of print.

HafenCity, the biggest urban construction site in Europe during the first decade of the new millennium, and a future neighborhood of Hamburg, was a “late-comer in the global process of waterfront revitalisation.”²⁷ Initiated in 1997 and conceived in five years, it was imagined as “a service centre for finances, media, image producing tourism and culture,” including housing “not only for the rich.”²⁸ Developers of this inner-city harbor area had promised to create urban life from a former dockland area: work and dwelling would intertwine, and tourist infrastructures would become local attractions, while public and private universities would contribute to the liveliness of the not yet fully realized neighbourhood.²⁹

In this urban development and planning project, the promise connects specific actors with each other: politicians, the HHLA (Hamburg harbor and logistic company), and the management of HafenCity, as well as voters, investors, future dwellers, and visitors. “Urbanity” was one of three mission statements³⁰ that gave shape to the promised future in this place.

A closer look at what inhabits the “gap” or time-space created by the initial promise brings to light more promises in diverse formats: promissory documents and models that help implement an urban development project of this size (neighborhood meetings, festivals, etc.). The very promise of urbanity co-produces new promises, such as the everyday

practices in the public spaces presented in the photobook.

In 2009 the state-owned development agency HafenCity GmbH engaged a landscape architect/photographer to render a qualitative photographic representation of the uses of public space in HafenCity. The study involved money, additional collaborators, meetings between the purchaser and the visual researchers, and a book publication. The assignment was to challenge the negative image of HafenCity by representing photographically its “reality,” or at least to promise it. Accordingly, the agency did not opt for the artistic photography of architecture, personalities, impressive events, etc.³¹ On the contrary, the documentary representation of mundane, everyday practices—walking, sitting, taking pictures, sitting, drinking coffee, sitting, lying down, and taking pictures (perhaps the most strikingly urban practice here)—were considered valuable and promising for the task of representing urbanity.

Two promises met, one supporting the other: the (disputed) promise of documentary photography to render a “true” image of reality supports the promise that this urban development area will soon turn into a lively neighborhood. Nevertheless, the leader of the photo project did not anticipate that the photobook would have an effect on the perception of the area and allow it to be seen as a lively neighborhood, as he explained in a walk-along interview.³² The final publication, a book that includes a large number of photographic series alongside some academic texts, is open to interpretation, different readings, etc. Yet the photobook may well

27. Weinhold 2008: 198.

28. Ibid.: 197.

29. For a study of the social stratification of the neighborhood, see Menzl et al. 2011.

30. Bruns-Berentelg 2014.

31. Cf. for example Doğramacı 2010.

32. For the audio-visual record of the interview with Martin Kohler, see researchingacity.com/#Hafen_City. Accessed: June 6, 2020.

have an impact on the development agency's self-representation, as it being seriously (intellectually) engaged in transforming probable futures into possible or even realized urban futures. Thus the book supported the agency's seriousness as a reliable promisor in a more significant way than the agency's articulated promises to the city. (Fig. 5)

Finally, the elusiveness or looseness of promises also helps us to determine further ways in which the photobook gets multiplied. For the photographers, the collective assignment was a chance to be represented as individual authors of photography. In order for a single-authored photographic expression that transgressed the collaborative assignment to find its way into the photobook, the photographers invested in non-collaborative activities within the collaboration.

In the two walk-alongs that we undertook with the organizing photographer and one of the team photographers, we discovered a great deal about how to cope with an urban site and assignment that were both felt to be rather boring: we were told about ways to circumvent instructions for the collaborative work, such as those involving exact places, perspectives, and times for taking pictures, or those resulting from the forms on which they had to write down observations about the shared subject. Retrospectively, collaborating on picture taking for a photobook became the opposite of artistic autonomy, according to one photographer's recollections of the project.³³ She explained how she started to search for more interesting subjects that suited her self-understanding as an artist. She developed a parallel work routine. In the end, all the photographers

worked on individual series that were then incorporated into the photobook.

It is interesting to note that the temporality of working together on a project created the impetus for other temporalities and allowed other photographs and subjectivities to appear. Time was doubled and stretched: doubled in the sense that while following instructions one did something else at the same time; stretched in that those various activities "would stretch out to something else that would possibly become part of a future project. To agree to the rules of working together does not mean that collaboration is restricted to collaborating."³⁴

Multiple and Promissory: How to Relate to the City?

This glimpse into the multiplication of the photobook and its promissory quality should provide a sense of what happens "in the gap" created by the elusive promise of urban development: its looseness allows for the appropriation of space and time, and for the multiplication of what, for instance, a photobook can promise. In analyzing the expectations attributed to this assignment, it becomes evident that the photobook came into being when the fulfillment of a promise was questioned: the public image of a development area was judged as untrue or false. Photographic representation was then deemed to be promissory enough to populate the "gap" between what on the one hand had been articulated to become true at a certain future time, and what on the other hand could be experienced at the present time. This everyday multiplicity is due to the different temporalities at work: the first promise and its supposed neglect enhance other promises, which not only promise more but open up

33. For the audio-visual record of the interview with Maria NIFI Xerisoti, see researchingacity.com/#Hafen_City. Accessed: June 6, 2020.

34. Cf. Cuny / Färber / Preissing 2019: 70–73.

different time-space dimensions. In studying these volatile temporalities and relationships between the photobook and urban development, I highlight the role of the promise as a relational quality between both so as to stress the potential for the multiplicity of attached interests or desires.

In order to follow the entanglements of photobooks with urban development sites more fully, one would need to ask how the idea for an assignment was “born,” and if, for instance, references to other photobooks in the context of urban planning were used. Could a photobook become part of planning sessions for ongoing work in an area? How is it developed by the publishing house, and along which lines is it distributed: urban studies and/or photography? The promise that is materialized by the photobook is different in the eyes of different actors, who turn it into either a necessary commission, or a wrong analysis, or a future coffee table book. In any of these forms, they assemble contents, actors, and imaginaries, as well as their articulated futures.

These observations of everyday practices as they relate photography to the city and invest in their elective affinity may eventually contribute to the problematization of our urbanized societies. The city can be understood as a disputable terrain of everyday experience and the object of common sense, attracting attention, provoking aspirations, becoming invested with hope, and—from the perspective of urban planning and local politics—becoming an object that is modulated through promises about its future reality. The photobook takes part in the articulation of these futures and their traces. As we have seen, promises attached to the city-related photobook can be appropriated for individual purposes. Can they also be turned into collective aims?

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