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The Ephemeral Imagination: The Postcard and Construction of Urban Memory

NICHOLAS BOYARSKY

The postcard plays a pervasive and sometimes socially critical role in the formation of the popular imagination and individual narratives of the modern city. This paper will explore the critical potentials for the postcard through the career of the American photographer Walker Evans and decode a series of postcards in order to examine how the devices of recto and verso, photographic manipulation and enhancement, and the mechanisms for messaging, captions, and postage together form a multi-facetted and open-ended means of communication.

Die Postkarte spielt eine allgegenwärtige, manchmal sozialkritische Rolle bei der Entstehung populärer Vorstellungen und individueller Erzählungen von der modernen Stadt. In diesem Artikel werden die kritischen Potenziale der Postkarte anhand der Karriere des amerikanischen Fotografen Walker Evans und einer Reihe von Postkarten untersucht. Durch das Zusammenspiel von Vorder- und Rückseite, fotografischer Manipulationen und Verbesserungen sowie der Nachrichten, Bildunterschriften und Postwertzeichen entsteht ein facettenreiches und ergebnisoffenes Kommunikationsmittel.

Biography

Nicholas Boyarsky, PhD, AA Dipl, is an architect and teacher. He is a partner in the London-based studio Boyarsky Murphy Architects, and a Professor of Architecture at RMIT University, where he is involved with practice-based research PhD programs in Europe and Asia. A fifth-year Studio Lead at Oxford Brookes University, he is also a founding member of the Asia-based Urban Flashes network. Current research interests include the medium of ephemera in architectural discourse, Bogdan Bogdanović, the Partisans' Necropolis in Mostar, and exhibitions and publications around the Alvin Boyarsky Archive.

Walker Evans and the Re-photography of Postcards

The postcard has evolved from an ephemeral medium for celebrating the early twentieth-century city to a collectable item, and then, in the 1970s, to a critical tool for exposing and resisting the planned twentieth-century urban condition. At each stage of this evolution, the postcard has provided an opportunity for the individual to construct alternative urban memories by expressing and developing his or her personal narratives in relation to the mediated platform of image (recto) and text (verso), and in so doing to formulate a position of resistance to the "sovereign powers of society" that Georg Simmel outlined in his 1903 critique of "modern" society.[1] Paradoxically, the demotic form of the postcard[2] has also lent itself to the creative practices of artists, photographers, and architects in their critical explorations of issues such as monumentality, the everyday, the informal, and the anonymous within the urban condition.[3] The mass-produced nature of the postcard and its subsequent cultural appropriation as a vehicle for fiction and speculation give it the collective status of the "hysterical document," a term coined by artist Walid Raad to describe something that is based not on any one person's actual memories, but rather on fantasies erected "from the material of collective memories."[4] The ability of the postcard, as ephemera, to evoke Theodor Adorno's concept of the uncanny, as estrangement provoked by the everyday, endows it with a disruptive power to confront the traditional canons of aesthetic tradition and to form political critique.[5]

This evolution can be traced through the life of the American photographer Walker Evans (1903–1975), who started collecting postcards as a young child and amassed over 9,000 of them throughout his life, mostly dating from the 1900s to the 1920s. The popularity of the postcard had peaked in 1908, when more than 677 million cards were mailed (by comparison, it took over three years, from 2006 to May 2009, to reach one billion tweets). Evans's fascination with the postcard, the industrial scale of its production, and the methods of image manipulation that he documented through his collection led him to an evolving and critical relationship with photography, the everyday, and the twentieth-century city. The influence of the postcard on Evans's own photographic work can be seen in a series of postcard-like photographs that he took in the early 1930s, with the intention that the Museum of Modern Art would publish them in 1936.[6] These images often mimic popular postcards to the extent that some were even taken from the same viewpoint as the original postcard, with one significant difference: they are all black and white. Yet they also form critiques of the original postcards, as seen in two examples: *Street Scene, Morgan City, Louisiana* (1935) and *Folk Victorian Cottage at Ossining Camp Woods, Ossining, New York* (1930–31). Evans took the Morgan City image in 1935, seven years after the postcard (Figs. 1 and 2). It updates the postcard by featuring the Long-Allen Bridge across the Mississippi, opened in 1933, but it also

1. Simmel 1971 [1903]: 342.
2. Burgin 2018: 172.
3. This can be seen in the work of Susan Hiller and her piece *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1972–76), which assembles three hundred "Rough Sea" postcards; in Zoe Leonard's project about Niagara Falls, *You See I Am Here After All*, comprising four thousand vintage postcards; and in the work of John Stezaker. In architecture, Alvin Boyarsky, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Bernard Tschumi, and Rem Koolhaas adopted the postcard as a means of critique.
4. Raad 2002.
5. Edgar and Sedgwick 1995.
6. Evans and Rosenheim 2009: 19–22.

Fig. 1.

Front Street Looking North, Morgan City, LA, vintage postcard, 1920s.

Fig. 2.

Walker Evans, Street Scene, Morgan City, Louisiana, 1935.
© bpk Berlin / The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Walker Evans.

reinstates the visual noise of the telegraph poles, wires, lights, and signage that had been cropped out of the postcard. There are oil barrels to the left-hand side of the image, a person is crossing the street, and the foreground has not been cropped. Evans is here reclaiming the idealized and heavily edited postcard image as an objective documentary image.

The Ossining postcard (Fig. 3) is more nuanced, and we can see Evans beginning to engage in political dialogue as he visits the sites of chosen postcards and expands on the critical potentials of re-photography from a different point of view to the original. Ossining's Camp Woods Grounds were the permanent summer home for mass Wesleyan evangelical affirmations that attracted thousands and lasted all day and into the night. The original postcard shows the preacher's house with open seating facing what seems

Fig. 3.

Preacher's Rest, Methodist Camp Ground, Ossining, NY, vintage postcard, 1920s.

Fig. 4.

Walker Evans, Folk Victorian Cottage at Ossining Camp Woods, Ossining, New York, 1930–31.

to be a screened stage. Evans's photographic postcard (Fig. 4) restores missing trees and removes all religious significance by depicting a vernacular typology, which he calls "folk Victorian cottage." The cottage is shuttered for winter, the open-air auditorium has been cropped out, and the stage is now revealed to be a verandah or porch. In contrast to the Morgan City postcard, which celebrates the everyday mess of the city, the restrained and understated black-and-white documentary-style Ossining postcard critically erases popular religious expression in order to celebrate everyday vernacular architecture.

In using black-and-white documentary-style images for his proposed postcards, Evans was exposing the artifice of the heavily manipulated "Greetings from…" postcards, many of which were printed in Germany up until the First World War and then by businesses such as Curt Teich & Company in Chicago. His interest in the individual

narratives that each mechanically reproduced postcard carried led him to explore the ephemeral moments of mass urban experience through the anonymous lives of city dwellers in two projects, *New York Subway Portraits* (1938–41)[7] and *Labor Anonymous* (1946), shot in Detroit.[8] Here Evans worked incognito and secretly to capture images of ordinary people, unaware of this process, going about their daily lives. These images (and there were over 600 subway portraits, for example) subvert our contemporary notions of surveillance by championing the individual's struggle to maintain his or her independence and individuality in the face of, as Simmel had described in *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, "being levelled, swallowed-up in the social-technological mechanism."[9]

Evans returned to the postcard in 1964, when, in a lecture at Yale, he reflected on his lifelong passion for the postcard: "The very essence of American daily city and town life got itself recorded quite inadvertently on the penny picture postcards of the early 20th century. The medium was hack photography; but these honest, direct little postcards have a quality today that is more than that of mere social history … Downtown was a beautiful mess, the tangle of telephone poles and wires attest to that. The architecture is simply indescribable."[10] The lecture followed an article for *Fortune* in 1962 entitled "When 'Downtown' Was a Beautiful Mess," which represents Evans's most articulated critique of modern urbanism in which he advocates for the mess of urban experience. The article, which celebrates the chaos found in the evolving city, must be seen as a riposte to Mies van der Rohe's contemporary project for Lafayette Park, Detroit, one of the first examples of "urban renewal" promulgating a highly ordered and sanitized vision of the city.

Collecting junk became a form of cultural resistance for Evans, who, in 1971, wrote in a short piece called "Stuff" that a lifetime's obsessive collecting had led him to the ultimate aesthetic inversion: "Yes I'm an incurable and inveterate collector. Right now I'm collecting trash, literally. I've gotten interested in the forms of trash, and I have bins of it, and also discarded ephemera, particularly in printing. Some day I expect to be infirm and quaking and unable to speak. Rainy days will follow, and I'll sit in my chair, and I'll fool with this stuff."[11]

The recycling of ephemera and the everyday image in order to challenge modernist orthodoxies can be found in the architectural discourse of the 1970s, in a series of influential architectural publications that, responding to the violence and decay of the American city, sought in various ways to challenge the hegemony of the modernist project, and in particular the paradigm of the modern city and its reliance on the City Beautiful movement, alongside its exclusively functional approach. Alvin Boyarsky's *Chicago a la Carte: The City as Energy System* (1970); Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972); Bernard Tschumi's

7. Evans 2004.
8. Zander 2016.
9. Simmel 1971 [1903]: 342.
10. Rosenheim 2009: 110.
11. Ibid.: 35.
12. Boyarsky, A. 1970; Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1972; and Koolhaas 1978.

Fig. 5.

Hauterives (Drôme) - Palais idéal (Façade Est, No. 1), vintage postcard, 1910s.

postcard series *Advertisements for Architecture* (1976–77); and Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto* (1978)[12] together represent an insurgent movement that circumvented conventional modern methodologies of urban design—such as functional segregation and universally applicable solutions—to reconnect to popular myths and narratives of the American city and the individual, anonymous citizen. The weapon of choice within an arsenal of critical references was ephemera, specifically the postcard, both vintage and contemporary, which enabled the protagonists to build upon its inherent nostalgia and its potential for surrealist interpretations, alongside its documentary potential for social criticism, to fashion multiple narratives and bring unexpected references and content into the discourse on the city that would break with tradition.

Greetings from... Urban Myths and Messages

Greetings from... Urban Myths and Messages is a short sequence of postcards that I have compiled in response to Evans that illustrates how the everyday can be a source of the uncanny and a means to construct, or rather deconstruct, urban memory through the lenses of recto and verso. The images can be read either on their own or alongside the short texts below. They are a random sampling.

Postcards are the record of a journey: the recto is usually a popular illustration of the point where the purchaser of the card may be on his or her journey, whilst the verso holds a personal message of direct experience of the actual place. The lined section to the right-hand side of the verso identifies the addressee who is invited to participate in a dialogue between representation and experience. When it reaches its destination and is displayed on the mantelpiece of the home of the addressee, the postcard becomes a momento of the journey. Delivered days or even weeks after being posted, the verso evokes memories of the sender and his or her relationship to the addressee. The message exists in a time lag, describing the feelings and thoughts of a moment that has now been superseded by fresh experiences that the addressee can only guess at. The recto frames a stylized, fixed, and impersonal view of place, while the verso embodies the intimate experiences of the itinerant.

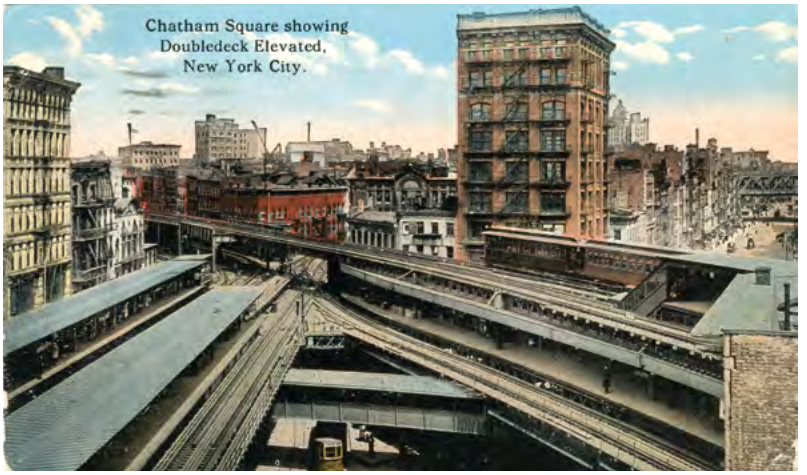

Fig. 6.

Chatham Square showing Doubledeck Elevated, New York City, vintage postcard, 1926.

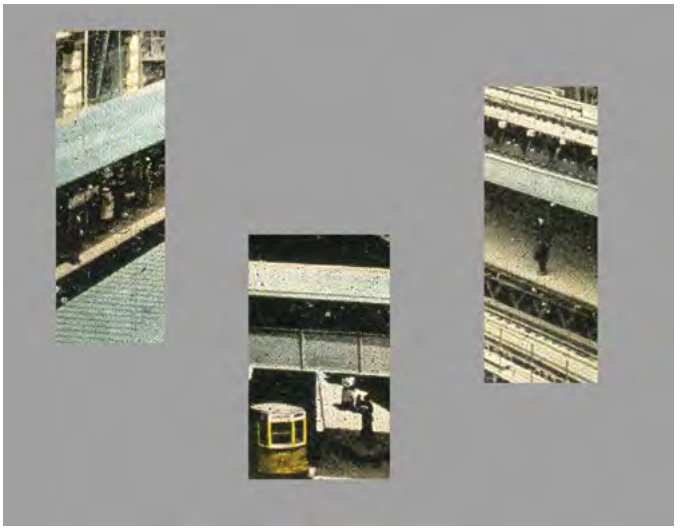

Fig. 7.

Nicholas Boyarsky, Chatham Square Boogie Woogie, photo montage, 2019.

Fig. 8.

Le Havre: Arrivée du “France.” Du Camping Municipal, vue générale sur la Ville, le Port et La Plage, Le Havre, vintage postcard, 1960s.

...the Ideal Palace

On a hot and dusty day in 1879, the postman Ferdinand Cheval, in the middle of his rounds, stumbles across a strangely shaped stone. This stone triggers in him a chain of associations that inspires him to construct his Palais Idéal near Hauterives over the next thirty-three years (Fig. 5).[13] The structures are all based on his readings and misreadings of images from the rectos of the postcards he was delivering, and it is no coincidence that the first known printed picture postcard with an image on one side had been created in France a few years previously. His motivation and the narratives for his extraordinary structure must surely have come from his illicit readings of the versos. This form of automatic design inspired by the subconscious was recognized and incorporated into Surrealist lineages by André Breton, who first visited Hauterives in 1931.

...Chatham Square

"I am Down at Coney Island 12.45 am writing this I wish to you fine day Here over 10000 people here Moma" (Fig. 6).

The message, written by "Moma" to her daughter in Queens and posted on October 10, 1926, in Brooklyn, was written at the crowded Coney Island Beach at 12.45 am. Now, there are hundreds of postcards of Coney Island, its beaches, fun fairs, and amusement parks, all of which celebrate aspects of the popular New York beach, yet this card depicts an opposite condition: the collision of a huge piece of infrastructure with Manhattan's Lower East Side. Moma, in her cryptic message, is very precise about timing and also the exact number of people (10,000) on the beach. She must have been enjoying an Indian summer for the beach to attract so many people in October. I find it strange that Moma was not celebrating her actual experience by buying a postcard that depicted her location. It could be that Moma was suffering from anthropophobia, and that she chose this card because it shows the opposite condition of Coney Island. For Chatham Square is almost romantic in its vision of a sparsely populated metropolis, and I have highlighted the handful of passengers on the different platforms to reveal this (Fig. 7). Chatham Square was a transfer point for passengers heading to Coney Island, so it may be logical to assume that Moma was recording a moment on her journey to her ultimate destination, as one might purchase a postcard of a steamship, a border crossing, or a suspension bridge. If this is a momento of her route to Coney Island via Manhattan, is the point of purchase significant? Did Moma dash out of the station to find the card? Perhaps stores on Coney Island sold postcards of all of the New York transit system's popular transfer points so that visitors could record and memorialize the steps along their journey to Coney Island? One will never know! The card and its message have become uncanny. Perhaps it is even a coded message and the number 10,000 refers to a cash drop-off. Putting speculation aside, Moma and her daughter were using representations of the city to triangulate between each other and the experience that they wished to convey, regardless of the fact that the verso message has very little relevance to the place described in the recto image. Images of the city have become familiar backdrops to the intimacies of daily life, and these seemingly random views depict popular moments that celebrate complex urban instances of infrastructure and congestion. The strangeness of the

13. See Jouve / Prevost / Prevost 2015; and Piron 2017.

message and its mismatch between view (recto) and experience (verso), together with the mix of typos and extremely precise data, are relaxed, just as the progress of daily life coincides with urban advancements.

...Le Havre

The second myth is more nuanced. It is a view of the French port city of Le Havre (Fig. 8), which was devastated by bombing in the Second World War and redesigned by the great French architect of reinforced concrete Auguste Perret, and completed some ten years after his death in 1954. This view from the early 1960s shows an example of the new Europe that was emerging out of the ruins of war. I discovered this card among a small collection of views of Perret's Le Havre that my father, Alvin Boyarsky, purchased when he was visiting the city with Cedric Price on one of Cedric's annual holidays. In those days, Cedric would take a day trip to a port town in France to have lunch and then return to London in the evening in the company of cronies such as Alvin, Ron Herron, David Alford, and the engineer Frank Newby. This was basically a day of drinking copious amounts of beer, wine, and brandy interrupted by a sumptuous meal. On one such outing the drinking had reached such a point that, by the time the ferry had set off from Dover (or whichever port it was), everyone was pouring pints of beer over each other.

Needless to say there is no message on the verso, and if there had been it would no doubt be beer-stained and illegible. However, the encounter between a small group of drunken London architectural visionaries in the mid-1960s with the neatly ordered French new city and its rationalist concrete-framed buildings must have generated countless epithets that were then relegated to oblivion. By coincidence, Jacques Tati was shooting *Playtime*, his epic film on the futurist city, between 1964 and 1967. The above is anecdotal in a way that only a blank verso can be, because, in its immaculate state, there is no interaction between the image, the message, and the addressee, much as an unbuilt architectural project has no relationship with builders, clients, and the public. Like an incomplete work of architecture, a blank postcard is a provocation, but, until words have been inscribed and a stamp licked, it can easily be an empty gesture.

The postcard's view is complex and reveals a number of different layers. In the distance, the sky meets the Channel, and within the port we can see a state-of-the-art passenger liner, the *France*, possibly arriving from America. The middle ground reveals the newly reconstructed city clustered around Perret's over-scaled yet stunning St. Joseph's Church. The foreground depicts the municipal camping ground with tents and caravans, a place for tourists to stay and contemplate the achievements of the city rebuilt from the ashes of destruction. Here two technologies sit side by side: mobile and temporary structures such as tents and pressed and riveted steel caravans alongside reinforced concrete buildings. The relationship is uneasy: the camping ground is for transients and the dispossessed, for viewing the city and the port as entertainment, but this parasitical relationship is not reciprocated by Perret's inward-looking buildings, which sit solidly within the city's gridiron.

Close examination of the postcard reveals the campers' urban vista to be an uncanny form of entertainment because the campers, such as the man in the foreground

wearing very short shorts, are looking at their tents rather than at the view on offer. Is the postcard's view then completely staged in order to present the coded and subliminal message that the tent will replace the building and the campsite the city, in a similar way to Claude Frollo's prophecy in Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* that "the book will kill the building"? Is the man staring at his canvas a portent of this imminent transition? Evidence of this, and a direct influence of this card, might be found in Herron's iconic *Walking City*, a collage produced in the same year as Price's annual holiday to Le Havre, or, a couple of years later, in Price's Potteries Thinkbelt project. Yet the mute blank verso of the card gives nothing away.

A contemporary reading of *Le Havre: Arrivée du "France*"—the title of the postcard—also uncovers political references, such as to the "jungle" at Calais, where, in recent years, thousands of illegal migrants in makeshift campsites tried desperately to break across the United Kingdom border that had been relocated to northern France. This dialectic between transient and ephemeral structures, and fixed architectures can also be found in manipulations of postcards by the Nazis in their use of racial stereotyping to discredit modernist architecture.

A 1927 postcard of the Weissenhof Siedlung in Stuttgart shows a couple, including a young woman in a white dress, overlooking a park with an array of buildings by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Hans Scharoun, Walter Gropius, and Ludwig Hilberseimer, among others. Some thirteen years later, the National Socialist Party issued a heavily montaged version of this card entitled "Araberdorf" (Arab village), which replaced the couple with scaled-up images of Arabic-looking men and women with camels, rugs, trays of dates, and even lions. Scharoun's house in the foreground was badly cropped and Max Taut's beautifully curved elevation was squared off to look more Arabic. The view became a piece of propaganda with a simplistic and crudely racist message that discredited both Islamic culture and modern architecture as degenerate and "medieval." *Le Havre* does not talk of "good" and "bad"; it is celebrating progress, yet its juxtaposition of static and mobile architectures refers to a continuing tension in architecture and urbanism. Tati expressed this differently in an interview about the making of *Playtime*:

"For the entire beginning of the film *Playtime* I direct people so that they are following the guidelines of the architects. Everyone operates at right angles to the decor, people feel trapped by it … In modern architecture an attempt has been made to ensure typists sit perfectly straight and that everyone takes themselves seriously. Everyone walks around with a briefcase which seems to give them the appearance of being well-informed."[14]

…Brasília

Postcards commonly depict monumental buildings which represent the physical manifestation of structures of political power. Here the postcard works at a subliminal

14. A Jacques Tati quote taken from *World's Only Architectural Comedy? A Look at Jacques Tati's Masterpiece: Playtime, Thursday at the Music Box*, https://arcchicago.blogspot.com/2013/02/worlds-only-architectural-comedy.html

Fig. 9.

Congresso Nacional e Esplanada dos Ministérios (National Congress and Ministries Esplanade), Brasília, vintage postcard, 1960s.

level to embed and perpetuate the status quo within the popular imagination. This is far from the lowly life of a camping site on the edge of Le Havre, and from everyday experiences of a multi-layered subway intersection in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The monumental postcard facilitates tourism and the mass consumption of cities and landscapes by reducing them to visual momentos, snapshots that, by being touched-up and enhanced, have become super-real and ultimately substitutes for authentic experience. The postcard reinforces the popular perception of the serious and responsible role of the building and of architecture as being "worthy of its function in ritual," a vision that Johan Huizinga, Adolf Loos, Sol LeWitt, and others would have us believe.[15]

On the face of it, *National Congress and Ministries Esplanade* (Fig. 9) subscribes to the monumental view, yet it is not a straightforward momento. The aerial view of Lúcio Costa's Monumental Axis is misaligned, badly cropped, and strangely foreshortened so that more emphasis is placed upon the grids of traffic infrastructures than on the Plaza of the Three Powers. The relationship between the Supreme Court Palace and the Planalto Palace, and the plaza and the National Congress is underplayed, as is the relationship with the surrounding landscape. It is, in Evans's words, an image of the quotidian life of the city that inadvertently records the "beautiful mess" but does not celebrate Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's ensemble according to their design intentions. The postcard is troubling, almost subversive, because it appears to be undermining Brazil's civic capital and the architects' iconic ensemble.

The card becomes stranger when we look at it purely in terms of color. The native soil is bright red with a high iron content, which makes it extremely fertile. The card exposes a conflict between the red soil and the green-planted areas that define the

15. For an extended description of the deltiological method, see Boyarsky, N. 2016.

Fig. 10.

Plataforma da Estaçao Rodoviária (Platform of the Bus Station), Brasília, vintage postcard, 1960s.

monumental axis. It might therefore be argued that the card is highlighting the artificiality of Brasília and the Brazilian government's attempts to plant and inhabit a landscape that is naturally red with green (ironically, current aerial views of the city on Google show that much of the green axis has reverted to red). The card *Platform of the Bus Station* (Fig. 10) shows a more ordinary view of Brasília at a point where an underpass undercuts the raised podium of the bus station. It reveals a more authentic experience of the city. Here the red dust is omnipresent, staining walls and coating the roads, and there is no attempt to introduce any green. Of its kind, the anonymous image is surprisingly ambitious, for, in order to show the different layers of infrastructure, the card is at once an aerial view looking down at the underpass and a worm's eye view that gazes up at the towers above the podium of the bus station.

Architectural photographs of Brasília, and of the vast majority of twentieth-century architecture, are predominantly black and white. This enabled the photographer to record and enhance architectural form and its abstract features in terms of light and shade, black and white, and the multiple gradations of gray in between. It cannot account for red soil, the color-staining of dust, or the exigencies of planting and sustaining vast areas of grass lawns. Heavily authored, edited, and framed, the architectural photograph was not a tool for the chance discovery of the accidental that the anonymous and everyday postcard can offer.

Greetings from… Urban Myths and Messages has been a vehicle to use the deltiological method[16] in response to the challenges to modernity that Walker Evans posed in his different uses of the postcard. Deltiology, or the collecting and reading of the postcard, offers the means to tease out three underlying themes and questions: the discourses between the individual and the city, between the formal and the informal, between the sedentary and the nomadic, and between urbanism and micro-urbanism; how to define an architecture of play in opposition to the commonly accepted monumentality of architecture; and what we can learn about architecture from the postcard as an anonymous and populist critique, and what roles the uncanny and the everyday might play.

16. Ibid.

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ALL FOR THE BEST

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