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Exploring the Urban Space: Methods for Visual Urban Research

BETTINA LOCKEMANN

In contrast to other genres of urban photography, visual urban research addresses questions of visibility and employs various methods for the study and presentation of urban topography. Reflecting on her own photography practice, the author thoroughly investigates the relationship between photography, cities, places, and topographies both as a subject and a topic of photographic research.

Im Gegensatz zu anderen Genres der Stadtfotografie befasst sich die visuelle Stadtforschung mit Fragen der Visibilität und setzt verschiedene Methoden zur Untersuchung und Präsentation der urbanen Topographie ein. Die Autorin reflektiert ihre eigene fotografische Praxis und untersucht die Beziehung zwischen Fotografie, Städten, Orten und Topografien sowohl als Gegenstand als auch als Thema fotografischer Forschungen.

Biography

Bettina Lockemann is an artist and researcher in the field of photography. After doing vocational training in the discipline, she studied art photography and media art at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig and did a doctorate in art history at the Stuttgart State Academy of Fine Arts. She has taught at multiple universities, including as a professor of the practice and theory of photography at Braunschweig University of Art, among other places. Currently she works as a freelance artist and theoretician.

More information: www.archivalien.de

Photography as a medium is employed in multiple ways in order to document cities or architectural structures, to explore the urban sphere and to present it to the public. Several photographic genres vary in their approaches and intentions in dealing with the urban throughout the history of photography. This leads to a multiplicity of methods and outcomes in printed and digital forms, such as magazine articles, exhibition displays, photobooks, and the like. No matter if the photographic works are perceived as art or applied photography, many can be used to understand something about the state of the urban in the time of their production. However, visually researching the urban sphere is an intentional process that has to fulfill other requirements than just looking at interesting sites and fixing them within a photographic frame. The differences between various photographic approaches to the urban will be discussed within this paper.

As an artist/photographer who is working in the urban sphere, I consider my work a form of visual urban research. On the one hand, I explore cities with my camera, looking for architectural and other structures in the city space and at how this space is used. In a conceptual way, I look for specific elements of urbanity and exemplify those in my work. On the other hand, I use profound research to inform my knowledge about the specific situation on location, creating a backdrop to visually investigate the urban sphere.

In the first part of this article, I will introduce various genres of urban photography and discuss their approaches to the cities depicted. In the second part, I will outline my approaches to visual urban research and exemplify them with reference to two photographic projects.

URBAN PHOTOGRAPHIC GENRES

Architectural Photography

In the history of photography, the first photographs taken in the city focused on architectural structures. One of the inventors of photography, the French artist Louis Daguerre, took photographs of the Boulevard du Temple from an upper floor of his house. As exposure times were too long to document the urban bustle, only a man who is getting his shoes shined is left within the picture.¹ When exposure times became shorter, architecture was photographed in the context of urban activities.²

Architectural photography today mostly deals with an individual architectural structure within a city. Usually commissioned either by the architect, a journal, or by an administration, the photographer creates photographs that show the particular construction with a strong focus on aesthetics. In beautiful pictures and perfect lighting, the achievement of the architect is honored. Whether the single architectural structure fits well into its environment or assists in generating a degree of social cohesion is of secondary importance for the architectural photograph.

1. Daguerre took the picture *Boulevard du Temple* in 1838: de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Boulevard_du_Temple_by_Daguerre.jpg. Accessed: June 8, 2020.
2. The invention of the shutter as well as improvements of photographic materials and technical equipment enabled shorter exposure times in the decades after the invention of photography. See britannica.com/technology/photography/Photography-early-evolution-c-1840-c-1900. Accessed: June 8, 2020. For an example, see the photograph *Paris, l'Opéra, Académie nationale de musique*, 1880–1900 (unknown photographer): commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris,_l%27Op%C3%A9ra,_Acad%C3%A9mie_nationale_de_musique.jpg. Accessed: June 8, 2020.

Travel Photography and City Marketing

The intentions of travel photography and city marketing often do not deviate too much from those of architectural photography, as their aim is to show the beautiful places and special sights of a city. The aesthetic value is highly ranked. Architectural, travel, and city marketing photography usually come as individual photographs. It is the single spectacular picture that is used to represent either a specific location/architecture, or the city in its entirety.

Street Photography

Street photography is a genre in urban photography that is pursued by photographers who act as flâneurs observing activity in the street. Street photography captures poignant moments. This genre of urban photography has developed along with small and easy-to-use cameras from the 1930s on. The photographer-observer reacts to what there is to see in the streets and tries to condense it in a single picture. Garry Winogrand is probably the best-known street photographer. He published his own photographs in numerous books. Despite being published under a thematic title, each picture is individually framed and presented. It can be taken out of the book and presented as an individual photograph without losing the message.³

3 For Garry Winogrand's photographs, see moma.org/artists/6399#works. Accessed: June 8, 2020.

Social Documentary

The genre of social documentary takes a different direction. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth-century, it was initiated to show and criticize the living conditions in densely populated urban quarters. For instance, in 1868 the Glasgow City Improvement Trust asked photographer Thomas Annan to photograph the slums of Glasgow prior to demolition. Photographed between 1868 and 1871, his series was used as a document of the unsanitary conditions of Glasgow's back alleys.⁴ One hundred years later, Bruce Davidson photographed the dilapidated tenement buildings and their inhabitants in Harlem, New York City.⁵

In social documentary, the city's built structures and inhabitants merge to tell a story of poverty and deprivation. The photographs are taken to reveal poor living conditions. Social documentary photography is usually published in a series of images, as it is used to call attention to societal deficiencies. A single picture is not enough to create a broader understanding of a complex situation. The aesthetics of the individual photograph may be treated as secondary to the photograph's content.

Pictures of the mentioned photographic genres may be studied to gain knowledge about the depicted cities, architectural structures, or situations in their specific time. However, as most of them picture particular situations, it is difficult to use them to understand correlations within the urban fabric. How do buildings, streets, footpaths,

4. For Thomas Annan's photographs, see digital.nls.uk/learning/thomas-annan-glasgow/index.html. Accessed: June 8, 2020.

5. For Bruce Davidson's photographs, see blog.ricecracker.net/2017/04/10/bruce-davidson-east-100th-street. Accessed: June 8, 2020.

urban green spaces, parked cars, pedestrians, cyclists, automobile traffic, signposts, traffic lights, benches, bicycle stands, and other street furniture work together? How are the areas in between buildings and streets designed? How are they used by passersby? These are only a few of the questions to which many urban photographs do not provide answers.

VISUAL URBAN RESEARCH

Visual urban research—as another genre—provides a possibility to investigate a specific city in regard to particular issues and uses of public space. My approach to photographing cities is a conceptual one; that is, I do a lot of research before I start to work on location with the camera.

Research can be carried out in very different ways. Reading, exploring image material in city archives, conducting interviews—with inhabitants, architects, social workers, administrations and their staffs, neighborhood organizations, and the like—as well as walking through the area; these are all methods to gain knowledge on the object of research. Many of these methods will be continually used throughout the work period while also using the camera. To carry out research in advance helps to find a mode of visualization, to concentrate on a specific issue, and to focus the perception while working on location. It enables the photographer to withstand being distracted by visually attractive situations or spectacular events. By setting priorities, the photographer can delve into the topic, thereby supporting the creation of a coherent photographic sequence.⁶

6. Visual urban research is a claim that is only rarely used. When urbanists implement photography as data in their research, often they do not have the knowledge of visuality that would make their images worth looking at independent of the written research. I would consider some works of artists such as Katja Eydel (cf.: Katja Eydel, *Model ve Sembol, The Invention of Turkey*, New York / Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2006) or Elisabeth Neudörfl (cf. Elisabeth Neudörfl, *E.D.S.A.*, Berlin: Wiens Verlag, 2010) to be visual urban research. Apart from myself, Austrian artist/photographer Martin Grabner uses this claim for his work (cf. martingrabner.com).











From the Periphery⁷

In 2012, I photographed the project *From the Periphery* in Braunschweig, a city in northern Germany with a population of about 250,000, and published it as a photobook in 2013. It deals with Braunschweig as a car-centered city, with the relationship between housing developments since the 1930s, and with the city's car-friendliness as implemented in the city's reconstruction after the Second World War.

I started to work on the project a year after I began teaching at the local art school. From my first encounter with the city, I had been confused not only by the massive streets that seemed to be built for a much larger city, but also by the multiple housing developments that date back to the 1930s, the time of National Socialism in Germany.

Research helped me to understand the history of the development of housing projects in Braunschweig, which is linked to the separation of the city's functional uses and their connection via automobile traffic, as suggested by Le Corbusier in the *Athens Charter* in 1933.⁸ Taking into account the probability of air and gas attacks during a potential war, building legislation in the period of National Socialism already implemented measures that shaped new housing developments and their road networks accordingly.

The historic center of Braunschweig consisted of timber-frame constructions and narrow streets from medieval times. People worked close to their

living quarters and ran errands nearby. The new housing developments spread in circles around the city center. After the center was completely burned down due to the Second World War's air raids, it became possible to build wider streets and much larger lots in the postwar period of reconstruction.

Considering the vicinity to the city of Wolfsburg, home of the Volkswagen Group, and the fact that the first VW training factory was constructed in Braunschweig, it seems inevitable that the city was rebuilt to center around the car as the prioritized means of transport. Of course, Braunschweig is not the only city that was reconstructed as car-centered after the war. In my work, Braunschweig serves as an example for other unspecified German cities.

I decided to photographically explore the city along the main roads from the arterial highways into the city, to look at the two ring-road systems, and to check out various housing projects in several areas. My intention was to critically observe the city's car-friendliness and its implications on the quality of life and movement through the city.

The way I photograph embraces all kinds of items visible in the streets. I do not intend to only photograph a specific house or street; rather, I try to integrate the disorder offered by many sites. The presence of urban elements that may block views or inhibit movement, such as moving or parked cars, traffic signs, garbage cans, manhole covers, a variety of pavements, and the like, are just as important as the architecture depicted.

I am aware of the problem of the limited detail featured within the photographic frame. In *From the Periphery* I use the

7. Lockemann, Bettina. 2013. *Vom Rand aus / From the Periphery*. Salzburg: Fotohof edition; archivalien.de/en/stadt/rand/rand.html. Accessed: June 8, 2020.
8. See Le Corbusier. 1973. *The Athens Charter*. New York: HarperCollins.

framing in a drastic way that forces the viewer to experience the picture as a cutout of a much larger whole—the audience will understand that a decisive cut has been made. This is also one of the reasons why I used the vertical format: it resolutely fragments the city, thus interrupting the flow of traffic. By showing the pictures with full-bleed on three sides, the book underlines this aspect. Only six photographs in the middle of the book have a horizontal format: they are taken from the perspective of the front seat in a car, presenting a continuous horizontal view. Here the architecture of the city becomes a stage setting sliding into the peripheral vision from the sides. The street and other cars occupy the stage's center.

Thinking of a way to transfer my research into pictures, I have to decide how to approach the subject and the encountered situations, and how to visually frame them. My perception and experience of the situations in the street need to be translated into a visuality that allows viewers to have their own experience when viewing the photographs.

The photographs are not only made to present a specific topic; they are also intended to emanate a specific atmosphere that allows viewers to think about what they see and to get their own idea of the subject. To some extent, the photographs themselves become a site that can be explored and experienced, even though I selected the perspectives, and I decided to show certain places and omit other situations.

As an artist, I have the freedom to use photography in a way that does not explain a specific situation or the reason why a picture was taken in the first

place. Rather, the photographs—in this case a sequence totaling 105 pictures—can operate as a visual trigger for the viewer to think about the quality of space in contemporary German cities. The photobook features only a short artist statement in the back to give a hint of my perception of the city. Therefore, the pictures can be viewed independent of any textual explanation of what they show or what they could possibly mean.







In Transition: Urban Renewal in New Orleans⁹

In the winter of 2014 and 2015, I photographed *In Transition* in New Orleans and finished a book draft in 2017 that is not yet published. *In Transition* deals with urban renewal as it is currently carried out in many US cities. I chose New Orleans because of the political situation in the aftermath of the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In New Orleans, the process of urban renewal seems to have been accelerated when compared to other cities.

After doing in-depth research on the specific situation in New Orleans, I moved there for four months to study the city's particular setting and to examine different topics in-depth. As I encountered the city and looked for a way to visualize my ideas on the topic, various forms of research merged in the photographic process.

For the book, I defined eight themes connected to urban renewal and spread them out through seventeen chapters. This time I also decided to include some explanatory text. Outside of New Orleans, there is not much knowledge about the city's specific situation. I felt the urge to contextualize my photographs by unfolding some of my research, thus providing more depth.

The way pictures and text work together is quite crucial. In journalistic photography—as well as in many types of documentary—photographs come along with captions that mostly provide textual information about what you see in the picture. I find this rather problematic, as the viewer can use the picture as a mere

illustration of the caption. In my perception, captions often prevent viewers from really looking at photographs, which usually show more than the information the caption provides. Thus I do not use captions. For the project *In Transition* I had to find a way to use text without requiring viewers to read an entire page at the beginning of each chapter. I came up with a text format that runs along below the pictures and gives some contextual information without describing what can be seen in each photograph. Thus, it may be a little difficult to decide whether to first read the texts or look at the pictures. For those who like to flip back and forth, this may not be problematic, as reading and looking can be accomplished together.

The chapters specify general topics connected to urban renewal as well as specific ones connected to New Orleans. General topics are the gentrification of certain neighborhoods, the revitalization of commercial corridors, the installment of public parks and other urban green spaces, and the redevelopment of public housing projects. Specific topics include the rehabilitation of historic houses by new and mostly young residents, the widespread service by volunteers, Charity Hospital—a particular issue of healthcare in the city—and the cultural capital of Second Line parades and Mardi Gras celebrations. Since the topics cannot be separated meaningfully, I decided not to use blank pages between chapters. One can notice the beginning of a new chapter only by the text below the pictures, or by the slight change of perspective often implemented in the first and last picture of a chapter.

The visual quality of this work differs from the one in *From the Periphery*. To begin with, I decided to use a

9. For the photo project *In Transition*, see archivalien.de/en/stadt/renew/renew.html. Accessed: June 8, 2020.

horizontal format in order to take account of the city's horizontality. I also decided to be less strict on the framing, which means that the frame is not set as precisely as in the Braunschweig project. However, this project also realizes the idea of including a multitude of objects present in the streets. Whereas—with few exceptions—there are no people in the Braunschweig project, the New Orleans one is divided. In most pictures of public space that take architecture and infrastructure into account, there are no or only a few people. The chapters dealing with the cultural sphere, however, offer pictures with many people who are often photographed from close proximity.

The distance between me (the photographer) and the photographed objects is an issue that always needs consideration. I often keep a distance, meaning that in the foreground there may be space that other photographers would consider empty and leave out. This area is occupied by the streetscape: sidewalks, curbs, lawns, or the neutral ground—as median strips are called in New Orleans. This approach is part of my perception of public space. Often, I find it necessary to distance myself from the scene to gain an overview. This method also leaves more room for the viewers. Compared to the Braunschweig project, there are more pictures that move closer to the photographed objects, providing some aspects of materiality in, for example, the pictures of the houses in a phase of rehabilitation. Most photographs of *In Transition* offer a lot of minutiae, giving an impression of an entire space rather than a cut-out detail.

In understanding the act of photography as a performative act that creates a

specific reality—an image-actuality—my approach can be called performative. I focus on specific topics and relationships between the architectural, infrastructural, cultural, and social spheres. By bringing these issues together in the photographic sequence, a new—a *photographic* reality is created. The concentration on other topics would probably bring forward a completely different photographic series, thus a deviant photographic reality.

The Importance of the Photobook in Visual Urban Research

The overall outcome of my visual urban research is not only the photographic sequence; it is also the book that encloses it and provides a form of context. The resulting photographs halt the fleeting perception and allow for an in-depth study of the multitudinous objects and people depicted. But the photographs are never used as individual pictures; they are placed in the context of a sequence, assembled in a book, and contextualized by a title, text, and graphic design. The process of image selection becomes very important when thinking of the sequence and the book's form.

In the process of selection, I balance all aspects of research and photographs, thus sharpening the intention and forming the viewing experience. It is my intention to find a way to transmit not only a factual situation through photographs as information, but to create a photographic sequence that conveys multiple facets of the topic and the explored city, including a specific atmosphere. The photobook addresses viewers in such a way that, through turning the pages, through reading and perceiving the images, they participate in creating the experience. The photobook does not explicitly state

how things are; the photographs rather serve as a trigger for viewers to find their own stance toward what is presented. The viewers are actively involved in the creation of meaning.

CONCLUSION

I understand visual urban research as an approach that provides a visual amplification of text-based research. It does not simply illustrate research results. By implementing a conceptual method, multiple resources containing information on the object of research can be used; they are integrated into the photographic procedures that they inform, thus affecting and guiding perception, and photography on location.

To deal with the object of research, specific photographic methods of visualization are selected that embrace the complexity of the encountered urban situations, interpreting them and condensing them atmospherically. The atmosphere emanated from the photographs is as important as the way they work together and trigger the viewing experience. The photographs do not only serve as information; they become sites that allow for exploration and the experience of the viewers. The performativity of their creation brings forward a specific photographic reality that can be explored and experienced throughout the entirety of the photobook, which contextualizes the individual photograph through the sequence, title, text, and graphic design. The photobook provides the possibility to gain an understanding beyond the textual explanation of the researched topic. The photographic sequence enables the audience to gain an individual experience by means of visual perception and to match this with their insight of the situation, thus obtaining new knowledge.

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