Re-Visioning City: Discourse on Vision, Image and Memory

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Abstract "As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of [the city] as it is today should contain all [the city's] past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls." – Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities. Therefore, the significance of a place lay not in its function, or even in its form, but in the memories associated with it. The most significant place for the city of today is to be the place associated with the collective memory of the city. Sometimes called cultural memory, the memory of the city is inextricably linked to the foundation of the city, and every general theory to find a meaning of a place must always be measured against this, especially in the present day of globalization where cities tend to have no boundaries. This paper tries to explore how visual perception through images or photographs can contribute to find the meaning of a place in a city. Buildings and institutions, streets and landscape, natural and artificial elements construct a new reading of the city as a system of representation, a complex cultural entity. This discourse brings together concepts from critical theory on vision, image and architecture of a city to find out a memory (or meaning?) depicted through photograph or image. The research expects to provide further analytical material on city dynamics and more authentic knowledge of variety of urban situations, thereby providing some necessary background on the historic urban culture of what a city may still hold.

Keywords City, Image, Visual thinking, Memory

1. Rethinking City: Image, Vision and Memory

Cities commemorate special pleasure for human memories through its historical yet common places being seen in all lights and weathers. A city is definitely a construction in space but unlike architecture the entity is of vast scale, which can only be perceived over long span of time. But for different people and for different instance the perceptions are of different sequence- interrupted, abandoned or cut across anonymously.

'At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up-to it, the memory of past experiences.' [1]. Even a visitor who may not have long associations with the city, can find the image of the city soaked with memories and meanings.

Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns [2]. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all. In case of a city it is obvious that the city is an object which is perceived (and perhaps enjoyed) by millions of people of widely diverse class and character and it is the product of many builders who are constantly modifying the structure for reasons of their own. As a result it may be stable in general outlines for some time but it is ever changing in detail.

This critical research aims to analyze the perceptive reconstruction of cities eliminating its time barrier through visual memories. It will explore city dynamics in respect of visual thinking by image analysis. This analysis, however, limits itself to the effects of physical, perceptible objects on imaging. There are other influences on imageability, such as the social meaning of an area, its function, its history, or even its name. These phenomena will be explored in terms of finding meaning of simple but informative visual images. It will off course exemplify why the importance is given on images i.e. optical senses though other senses like hearing, touching or smelling might play cumulative role.

2. Vision and Thinking

There seems to be a public image of any given city which is the overlap of many individual images. Each individual picture is unique, with some content that is rarely or never communicated, yet it approximates the public image, which, in different environments, is more or less compelling and embracing. [3] The contents of the city images so far studied (by historians and researchers), which are referable to physical forms, can conveniently be classified into people, structure and other representative identifiable elements.

According to Juhani Pallasmaa sight has historically been regarded as the noblest of the senses, and thinking itself thought of in terms of seeing. [4] Already in classical Greek thought, certainty was based on vision and visibility 'The eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears,' wrote Heraclitus in one of his fragments. [5] Plato regarded vision as humanity's greatest gift, [6] and he insisted that ethical universals must be accessible to 'the mind's eye'. [7] Aristotle, likewise, considered sight as the noblest of the sense 'because it approximates the intellect most closely by virtue of the relative immateriality of its knowing'. [8]

Since the Greeks, philosophical writings of all times have abounded with ocular metaphors to the point that knowledge has become analogous with clear vision and light is regarded as the metaphor for truth. Aquinas even applies the notion of sight to other sensory realms as well as to intellectual cognition.

The impact of the sense of vision on philosophy is well summed up by Peter Sloterduk: 'The eyes are the organic prototype of philosophy. Their enigma is that they not only can see but are also able to see themselves seeing. This gives them a prominence among the body's cognitive organs. A good part of philosophical thinking is actually only eye reflex, eye dialectic, seeing-oneself-see.' [9] During the Renaissance, the five senses were understood to form a hierarchical system from the highest sense of vision down to touch at the lowest. The Renaissance system of the senses was related with the image of the cosmic body; vision was correlated to fire and light, hearing to air, smell to vapour, taste to water, and touch to earth. [10] The invention of perspectival representation made 'eye' the centre point of the perceptual world as well as of the concept of the self. Perspectival representation itself turned into a symbolic form, one which not only describes but also conditions perception. Words associated with thinking also have visual roots: intelligent, idea, theory, contemplate, speculate, bright, brilliant and dull. And there is no shortage of commonly-used phrases which emphasize the primacy of the visual. Now a day the technological culture has ordered and separated the senses even more distinctly. Vision and hearing are now the privileged sociable senses. Analyzing images, therefore, considered as useful tool for exploring memory through vision.

The idea of 'vision and thinking' in terms of observation has also been portrayed in the concept of 'flâneur'- a term originally coined by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and refers to somebody who observes the city or their surroundings, and experiences an actual physical stroll but also is a way of philosophical thinking and a way of seeing/feeling things. According to Baudelaire, the flâneur moves through the labyrinthine streets and hidden spaces of the city, partaking of its attractions and fearful pleasures, but remaining somehow detached and apart from it. Baudelaire saw the *flâneur* as having a key role in understanding, participating in and portraying the city. [11]. Depicting the idea that flauneur provokes thinking and knowledge by visual recording Walter Benjamin wrote -That anamnestic intoxication in which the flâneur goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often processes itself of abstract knowledge – indeed, of the dead facts – as something experienced and lived through. This felt knowledge travels from one person to another, especially by word of mouth…" [12].
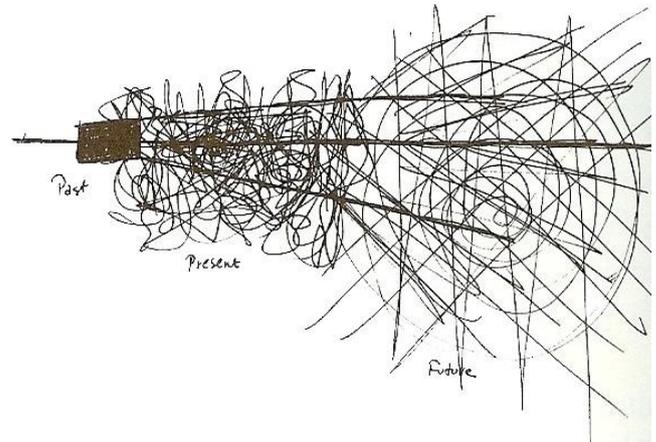

Figure 1. Images of an experiment when some students were asked to depict the notions of past, present and future (Visual Thinking, Victor Burgain) **Commentary on the image**: The past is solid and complete, but still influences the present and the future. —The present is complex and not only the result of the past but leading to future, thus overlapping both, but is an entity in itself (black dot). —The future is least limited but influenced by both, past and present. —One line runs through for all have one common element—time

3. Image and Knowledge

Aided by digital technology, designers and planners are making ever greater use of photographic images to depict and envision urban environment. The methods for employing photographs and their precise construction have not been adequately analyzed. Discussing the new reliance on imaging techniques in architecture, Cambridge Professor Andrew Saint recently noted, "the long-term challenge for the architectural profession is to ride this exciting, undisciplined, licentious, and dangerous beast, to control this irresponsible lust for image that pervades our culture." [13] Several imaging methods have gained widespread currency in explaining public places. This essay specifically tries to explore the predominance of image over bodily experience;

the exclusion of intertwined socioeconomic, historical and political specificity; and the commodification of place. It is to be believed that a photographic image can be used to articulate the impression of the present community image and build consensus for its history.

However the trouble of such ideas lies in the definition of what constitutes a place. Sense of place incorporates a range of engaged bodily experiences in conjunction with passive appreciation of visual imagery. In any case image-based approaches to urban exploration can come up with revealed socioeconomic, historical and political realities.

Can images hold meaning? If so, to what degree of precision can this meaning be predicted? Numerous theorists have examined this question in terms of painting and photography. According to photographer, philosopher Victor Burgin the photograph is an incomplete utterance of a massage that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is the meaning of any photographic massage is necessarily context determined. We might formulate this position as follows: a photograph communicates by means of its association with some hidden or implicit text; it is this text, or system of hidden linguistic propositions, that carries the photograph into the domain of readability. [14]. Though, in any case differences in the cultural background of individual viewers cannot be discounted. According to Bazin, "Even the uncaptioned photograph, framed and isolated on a gallery wall, is invaded by language when it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other; what significant elements the subject recognizes 'in' the photograph are inescapably supplemented from elsewhere." [15] These ideas proposes the unavoidable presence of 'something that is the outcome of visual senses' to be conducted to understand a photographic image rather than to just looking at it.

Figure 2. Idea Centre Library in Whitechappel, London. **Commentary on the image_** Today glazed facades of contemporary buildings reflect older structures in their bright new mirror glass, *can they deny? (Kevin Lynch, 1972)*

According to writer Martia Sturken no object is more equated with memory than the camera image, in particular the photograph. Memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze.

Yet memory does not reside in a photograph or in any camera image, so much as it is produced by it. The camera image is a technology of memory, a mechanism through which one can construct the past and situate it in the present. Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation. They can lend shape to histories and personal stories, often providing the material evidence on which claims of truth are based, yet they also posses the capacity to capture the unattainable. [16]

On a similar note Sinclair (2002) introduces the notion of 'eye-swiping' – scanning the urban landscape for creative material. The term eye-swiping evokes the avidity of Baudelaire's flâneur's eye sweeping up material for literary or artistic reinscription [17] Eye-swiping suggests the act of appropriation, saturating the text with proliferation of information. The precise recall of place is enabled by Sinclair's methodology, which he states is 'walks, photographs then at some later date, a book' (Sinclair, 2002), while referring to the camera to eye-swipe the detail, to log the sights which will later be translated into words [18] Sinclair's eye-swiper reads the photograph as a machine-like reproducer of real images.

The idea that one brings individual experience to the photographs or images assists our understanding of the constitution of the human subject through representation. Images that represent the culture thus have the power to create identity. Representations of architecture, landscape, and urban space within real estate promotion, advertising, and public planning processes have immense power to shape formal and spatial expectations or norms. Photography, film, television, digital media, and advertising teach us not only how to 'see', but how to construct our understanding of the city and our place in it. For this reason, those immersed in contemporary culture—both those who inhabit and those who visit the built environment— would benefit from greater critical awareness of how to receive and analyze photographic images. Urban photographs are not simple depictions of real places, but embedded with broader socioeconomic, historical, racial, cultural or political conditions beneath the images. Urban images are not only about what someone sees the city to '*look*' like but also what it '*feels*' like to be there, or how it works.

Photography and simulated urban images are valuable and can be considered as a tool for understanding existing urban conditions, imagining better places, and implementing positive change in the city. A richer set of methods might support a more meaningful collaboration between viewers and inhabitants, addressing complex urban realities outside the frame. Susan Tag in her 1977 collection of essays 'On Photography' describes -The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker (flaneur) reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur finds the world "picturesque." [19]

Figure 3,4.   Whitechappel Street, London; in early 19 century and now. **Commentary on the image**_Vision in its entirety seems to be reflected with a quality of permanence in urban monuments. Monuments, signs of the collective…….offer themselves as preliminary elements, fixed points in the urban dynamic..........(Aldo Rossi)

Figure 5,6.   Image of Whitechapel street market now and in 18th century.......... **Commentary on the image**_Certainly the architecture of the city, the human thing per excellence is the physical sign of its biography,...... permanent character of forces of urban dynamic. (Aldo Rossi)

Even a photograph which has no actual writing on or around it is traversed by language when it is 'read' by a viewer. The intelligibility of the photograph is no simple thing; photographs are texts inscribed in terms of what we may call `photographic discourse', but this discourse, like any other, engages discourses beyond itself, the 'photographic text', like any other, is if the site of a complex 'intertextuality', an overlapping series of previous texts "taken for granted' at a particular cultural and historical conjuncture. These prior texts, those presupposed by the photograph, are autonomous; they serve a role in the actual text but do not appear in it, they are latent to the manifest text and may only be read across it 'symptomatically'. The question of meaning therefore is constantly to be referred to the social and psychic formations of the author/reader. [20]

4. Analyzing Images

A number of different approaches may be used to analyze photography. It models reflects its own particular concerns and priorities. For instance any single photograph may be viewed primarily as social or historical evidence.

Investigated in relations to the intention of the photographer and the particular context of its making.

Related to politics and ideology.

Assessed through references to process and techniques.

Considered in terms of aesthetics and traditions of representations in art.

Discussed in relation to class race and gender.

Analysed through reference to psychoanalysis

Decoded as a semiotic text [21]

In the case of this discourse the analysis will be performed as per assumption of the following discussion.

According to Rudolf Arnheim an environmental image may be analyzed into three components: identity, structure and meaning. It is useful to abstract these for analysis, if it is remembered that in reality they always appear together. A workable image requires first the identification of an object, which implies its distinction from other objects, its recognition as a separate entity. This is called identity, not in the sense of equality with something else, but with the meaning of individuality or oneness. Second the image must include the spatial or pattern relation of the object to the observer and to the other objects. Finally, this object must have some meaning for the observer, whether practical or emotional. Meaning is also a relation but quite a different one from spatial or pattern relation. [22]

Thus an image useful for making an exit to a meaning requires the recognition a distinct entity of its different elements, and its meaning as a hole. It should be kept in mind that these are not truly separable. The visual recognition of an entity is matted together with its meaning. It is possible, however, to analyze the element in terms of its identity of form and clarity of position, considered as if they were prior to its meaning. To begin with, the question of meaning in the city is a complicated one. Meaning, moreover, is not so easily influenced by physical manipulation of objects. If it is our purpose to explore a city and its widely diverse

background, we may even be wise to concentrate on the physical clarity of the image and to allow meaning to develop with proper searching.
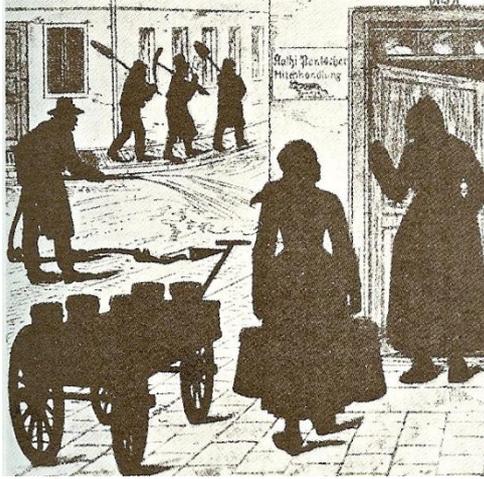
Figure 7. When a ten year old boy was asked to examine the picture reproduced in this figure with human figures darkened he was able to glean details of the other elements of the picture. He even counted the number of the windows on the house in the back and the number of cans on the milk cart. When asked about the sign on top of the door he deciphered it with difficulty: "That's hard to read . . . it says 'Number," then an 8 or 9 . . ." He also could make out the name of the shop owner and the drawing of a cow on the signboard. (Rudolf Arnheim, 1970)

Everything in the world presents itself in context and is modulated by that context. When the image of an object changes, the observer must know whether the changes are due to the object itself or to the context or to both. The object under observation must, then, be abstracted from its context. The observer may wish to peel off the context in order to obtain the object as it is and as it behaves by itself, as if it existed in complete isolation. This may seem to be the only possible way of performing abstraction………………….... Here the obstruction, while singling out the object, does not relinquish the effects of the context but relies on them for the indispensable part of the information. [23]

5. Exploring Time and Places

To explore a city it is important to observe- 'The contrast of old and new, the accumulated concentration of the most significant elements of the various periods gone by, even if they are only fragmentary reminders of them……………. The esthetical aim is to heighten contrast and complexity, to make visible the process of change' [24]. So, the city itself can be a historical teaching device, an aim now served by the occasional guided tour or plaque.

The temporal organization of memory uses external props: spatial clues, cause-and-effect relations, the memories and recitals of others, recurrent environmental events, or specialized devices such as records and calendars which can be derived through exploring city images. However, remembering a city depends on a context, whether internal or external. The environment in which a thing is learned

becomes part of what was learned. Special mnemonic devices associate what is to be learned with vivid perceptual Images. In any case the city can be enormously informative, since the pattern of remains is a vast if jumbled historical.
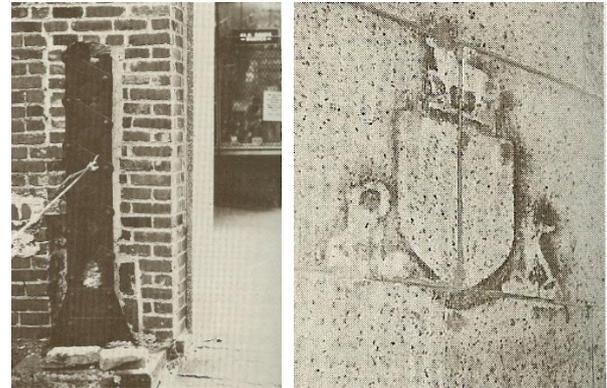

Figure 8. On a parking lot in Washington Street, a broken column commemorates what once occupied this parking lot. Nearby a sign removed has left its image on the stone............there are many indicators of timei the street. (Kevin Lynch, 1972)

According to Aldo Rossi "Images, engravings, and photographs of these cities, record this vision. Destruction and demolition, expropriation and rapid changes in use and as a result of speculation and obsolescence, are the most recognizable signs of urban dynamics. But beyond all else, the images suggest the interrupted destiny of the collective. [25]
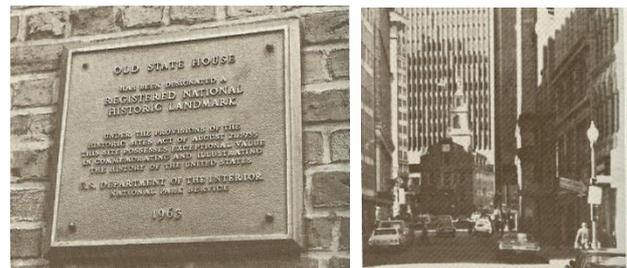

Figure 9. At the northern end the Old State House (in Washington Street) is dwarfed by the office buildings of the early twentieth century, which are themselves dwarfed by the latest generation of skyscrapers. But we are reassured to see that this landmark is duly certified. (Kevin Lynch, 1972) **Commentary on the image**- The city's language of buildings and streets, of glass and light, is a declaration of ideals (...) which the city achieves by transforming things into words, objects into signs, the dark of nature into neon abstraction and codes (...) the mediascape devours the literal materiality around it" (Christensen, 1993, p.9-10)

Therefore, **the aim of this discourse is to explore the idea that through the analysis of visual perception, how the visual register of a city can be articulated in terms of time, place and identity.** A visual perceptual analysis is performed with some very common images and photographs of widely known cities through the discourse. From the images with the very simple abstraction of elements in terms of achieving identity in the meaning of individuality and through discovering the spatial pattern relation of the object with the observer, one can come up with interesting historical truth which has been conveyed by the visual

existence of the object and known to all yet been explored from the images through perceptual analysis. The co-existence of old and new, presence of the urban monuments in perspective and perception and the evidence of time (some times in guise of a bridge or a clock) take the opportunity to make an exit to certain meanings of those places. Yet it is to be noted that the approaches are hypothetical and experimental leading to further research.
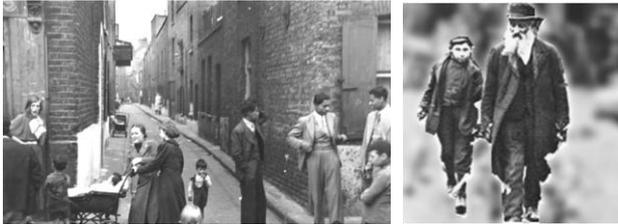
Figure 10.   The basal population of poor English country stock was swelled by immigrants from all over, particularly Irish and Jewish........ Indians.......... the Bangladeshis are the most visible migrant group today ....a major symbol of the resident Islamic community. **Commentary on the image:** Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns......(2)

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