

*Landscapes of Care. Public housing across multiple
geographies: crossing theories and practices*



SOPHIA
scopio EDITIONS

volume 9, issue 1 | publication year: 2024
issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]
isbn: 978-989-53640-8-4

...

homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

Cycles

Jorge Tárrago Mingo, Igea Troani

"One evening I had a near-hallucinatory vision. The question-and-answer session that led up to this vision went something like this: Suppose you shoot a whole movie in a single frame? And the answer: You get a shining screen. Immediately I sprang into action, experimenting toward realizing this vision. Dressed up as a tourist, I walked into a cheap cinema in the East Village with a large-format camera. As soon as the movie started, I fixed the shutter at a wide-open aperture, and two hours later when the movie finished, I clicked the shutter closed. That evening, I developed the film, and the vision exploded behind my eyes. This idea struck me as being very interesting, mysterious, and even religious."¹

The almost century old, now well-known account by Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto describes the creative process of his series 'Theaters' (1976) as a kind of epiphany about image making whereby time is compressed into a single frame. Sugimoto's quest for the single, total image had already been pursued by Western philosopher, Walter Benjamin in 1936. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility', Benjamin announced a future marked by reproduction and the technical transformation of the nature of art with political implications. A couple of years earlier, the French poet Paul Valéry had already anticipated that very profound changes could be expected in relation to the arts, since all visual arts had until then featured a physical component that could no longer be considered or treated as before. Neither matter, nor space, nor time were the same anymore. In *The Conquest of Ubiquity* ("La conquete de l'ubiquité") Valéry explains:

"Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."²

Benjamin, Valéry, and others have outlined the framework for the theoretical principles that shape our contemporary visual culture. Today, we no longer expect our works of art to be published globally as one offs in physical or digital form. Instead, we are conditioned to reproduce any and every image at any moment, now, in real time and in any place. Analogue reproduction has mostly been replaced by digital reproduction and therefore is no longer linked to a defined size or format. And, perhaps more importantly, and as Jacques Rancière argues, the

¹ Hiroshi Sugimoto. *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Theaters*. (Bologna: Damiani/Matsumoto Editions, 2016).

² Paul Valéry. *Piezas sobre arte*. (Madrid: Visor, 1999), 131. Transl. by the author.

digital reproduction of images has led to the abandonment of the association between image and a specific place where it can be observed, displayed or preserved, now or in the future.³ Sugimoto's Theater series contains not only each frame of the film, but also each experience of its viewers in a single white rectangle, dully white and yet subtly different, capturing the different shades of light that surround each of the different captured films, making them essentially abstract and similar, as well as unique.

In a society where we are constantly surrounded by a myriad of multiple and simultaneous images, the idea of one single image commanding our attention might seem curious. As the Spanish-American art theorist, Beatriz Colomina suggests:

We are surrounded today, everywhere, all the time, by arrays of multiple, simultaneous images. The idea of a single image commanding our attention has faded away. It seems as if we need to be distracted in order to concentrate. As if we – all of us living in this new kind of space, the space of information– could be diagnosed en masse with Attention Deficit Disorder (...) Rather than wandering cinematically through the city, we now look in one direction and see many juxtaposed moving images, more than we can possibly synthesize or reduce to a single impression.⁴

We are no longer immersed in the era of Benjaminian reproduction, but in the era of streaming, where these other multiple realities, massively distributed as an illusion, seem more vivid than the moment experienced by each of its viewers. We live in a context never imagined by Benjamin or the first photographers. Global webcams, high-resolution satellite vision and above all AI image generation open the door to new scenarios with unsuspected levels of realism. All of this, taken together, exponentially multiplies our world, photographed or imagined, in what has been defined as contemporary multiperception.⁵

In this context, the production of image making of architecture is subject to similar phenomenon. In this time of visual saturation and extreme, or almost absolute, virtuality, architecture participates in this process, often remaining alien to the physical reality of its construction. Sometimes, its realization is only possible in the mirror, in that platonically more real place where categories are pure, absolutely abstract, and not limited by circumstantial, budgetary, political, social, logistical, normative or even purely physical restrictions. Perhaps this is why architectural practice is increasingly aided by the eloquence with which photography is able to enunciate its intentions. While there are diffuse boundaries between architecture and photography, nowadays contemporary architecture is inseparable from its photographic images.

3 Jacques Rancière. *The Future of the Image*. (London/New York: Verso Books, 2007), 8–10.

4 Beatriz Colomina. Enclosed by images: The Eameses' Multimedia Architecture. In Tanya Leighton (ed.). *Art and the Moving Image* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 75.

5 Rubén Alcolea. "Multiperceptions / Multiportraits", *New Architecture Magazine, Critical Fabrications*, 129 (2010): 10–15.

The three theoretical papers and two visual essays in this section entitled 'Cycles' address the complexities of urban regeneration, the right to the city, and the social dynamics inherent in social housing, influenced by collective memories. In all the essays, the photographic image serves as a form of dialogue, linking and containing past and present actors. The contributions highlight how collective memories and urban rights are interwoven by different social groups of varying ages, backgrounds and professional expertise, shaping the urban environment and underscoring the importance of preserving and reimagining urban narratives through the powerful medium of the image.

"Fenix Spaces: Youth and Livability in Inner Areas" by Frederica Serra explores how population ageing, can be a powerful tool to transform and revitalize marginal areas in our European countries and the current exodus to the big cities rather than be perceived as a challenge. Serrar analyses two specific Italian policies; the Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne (SNAI or National Strategy for "Inner Areas") and the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR or National Recovery and Resilience Plan). Both policies, the former held by the Agenzia per la coesione territoriale, the latter included under the European Union's strategic priorities for all members, address demographic decline from different layers to enhance cultural, social and economic resources. The article illustrates through the case of Castel del Giudice, a very small village located in the inner region of Molise, how innovative welfare services, assisted living facilities and community initiatives can reverse depopulation and offer positive impact, opportunities, relationships, tions and improved habitability.

"Right to the City (photo)voices: Participatory photography with children in Greater Lisbon" by Rosa Arma and Camila Andrade dos Santos uniquely examines two participatory photographic workshops conducted in 2018 and 2021 by the Socio-Territorial, Urban and Local Action Studies Group (GESTUAL). The workshops included children of African origin and Roma ethnicity from the self-produced neighbourhood Bairro da Torre in Greater Lisbon, who experienced a rehousing process that began in 2007 and concluded in 2023. The photographs by the children are testimony to the cycles of collective memory making by all age groups living in the housing and the social dynamics that construct their lived spaces.

Focusing instead on a now iconic social housing project in Porto, "Differentiated Inhabitation of 'Auteur Architecture': Photographing Álvaro Siza's Bouça Housing Estate" by Eduardo Ascensão, Marta Machado, Paulo Catrica and Ana Catarina Costa uses photography alongside interviewing of the original and newcomer residents to examine how the socio-economic background, history and knowledge of the significance of Siza and his social housing values can be treated reverently or irreverently in interior changes made to select flats. The juxtaposition of photographs alongside testimonies by the residents make clear how the flats, designed originally around a utopian strategy for a classless Portuguese society have instead

succumbed to problems associated with urban gentrification. A story now common in many cities worldwide, the architectural value and iconic significance of the Bouça Housing Estate uses image-making to showcase how preservation of iconic architecture relates to the class, background and professional knowledge of the users. The dilemma of an 'interclassist city' is laid bare through a critique of the consumption of images selling short-term stays at the flats advertised on Airbnb create pressure on elderly residents whose family have moved them elsewhere to capitalise on profitmaking from selling the flat.

The visual essay entitled "The Right Distance: Photographing the neighbourhoods built under the Carnation Revolution" by Ana Catarina Costa, Francisco Ascensão, João Paupério, Maria

Rebelo and Ricardo Santos critically reflects through eight photographs taken by the authors on the dynamic relationship between the collective memories of neighbourhoods built under SAAL (Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local or Local Ambulatory Support Service), a housing program implemented during the Portuguese revolutionary period which included the Carnation Revolution of the 25th April 1974. What is striking about the carefully chosen images is their ability to adopt 'the right distance' between occupants –human and non-human– of the SAAL neighbourhoods detached from nostalgia. The colour photographs are an affirmation of everyday life of the social housing flats with all their imperfection, material degradation, messiness and raw beauty. They make a distinct challenge to the world of flooded imagery in which we operate through their critical selectiveness focusing the viewer's eye purposely.

The second visual essay in the section, 'Cycles' entitled "Housing the Basque Country: Photography of the Collective Space" by Asier Santas Torres, Luis Suárez Mansilla, and photographer Luis Asin Lapique, depicts some research findings showcased a 2018 exhibition by the authors of the public housing policies by the Basque Regional Government (a northern Spanish Region) in the last three decades. After visiting and selecting thirty projects, the photographs explain the present public housing from a human dimension, highlighting traces of humanisation and contemporary domestic and social realities. Beyond the superficial evidence of formal change and obsolescence of the housing, the six photographs avoid an entirely aesthetic view of architecture and its concepts by featuring and focusing the inhabitants' links to everyday life in the collective spaces they occupy.

The specific focus on this issue of Sophia devoted to 'Landscapes of Care' centring on 'Public housing across multiple geographies: crossing theories and practices' in the section on 'Cycles' draws together not only invaluable textual and visual discourse on changes to social housing developments in various countries but it also uniquely draws in the role of the photographer, whether researcher or resident or visitor, in the active process of understanding the process of cycles of urban change being undergone in relation to socio-political motives and pressures and who creates a dialogic exchange with the viewer-reader. The projects and practices

discussed here attest not only to the deep critique of the ongoing significance and importance of photographic image making to capture meaning, as Sugimoto sought, in a world flooded with images but to the potentialities that the photograph, whether archival, fictional or real, can facilitate to create new modes of practice, collective action, memory and user engagement and interaction. Understanding 'cycles' in public housing through critical photographic practice resembles Rut Blees Luxemburg, 'Future Archive' project in which in her artistic research laboratory collaborates with users, artists and residents to record the past, present and future of the re-development of a large brownfield site in Battersea, South London which was the former Sculpture Building of the Royal College of Art (RCA) transformed by Herzog & de Meuron into their new Battersea campus to identify what was, is and could be.⁶ Like Blees Luxemburg's collaborative practice, the theoretical and visual essays here, through their focus on public housing, open up active and operational textual and visual opportunities for archiving, creating and envisioning modern public housing through understanding in-between dialogues from users, residents and designers who reaffirm architecture not as icon or object but for the purpose of living for others.

⁶ *Future Archive* was designed by RCA alumna Emily Schofield (MA Visual Communication, 202) and is published on 1 June 2022 by FOLIUM, an independent arts publisher founded by two RCA alumni, Stewart Hardie and Harry Gammer -Flitcroft (MA Photography, 2018).