

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



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The aesthetics of architecture during the construction process

by Cristina Gastón and Judit Taberna

The image of a building under construction is a powerful stimulus for the imagination of any observer, and even more so for that of an architect. These kinds of photographs capture transitory states in the building's life, only perceptible for a short time, yet essential to achieving its final form. In intermediate phases, in an unfinished building, when it has not yet reached its functional phase, or the final phase of its permanent presence has not been completed, situations of high aesthetic value can be observed, unforeseen by the architects who designed or directed the project. The other way around, these situations can also occur during the dismantling or demolition process, or in states of ruin.

We have selected three articles on photographic projects that focus on the intermediate stages of urban transformation processes: *Icarian Archive (1987–1992): A Reinterpretation of a Photographic Collection* by Martí Llorens; *Scaffolding Styles: Aesthetics of Iron Construction* by Sol Diéguez García; and *Nobody's Ever Seen the High Line: Joel Sternfeld and the Image of the High Line that Led to its Rehabilitation* by Oscar Barnay. In these three cases, photography has been the only possible means to document and seductively reveal the construction work: whether it be the demolition of an industrial neighborhood and its subsequent replacement with residential buildings in Barcelona; the discordant image of scaffolding in the city; or the discovery of a new urban landscape on obsolete railway tracks in New York.

Martí Llorens presents the archive of a documentary project, undertaken nearly forty years ago, entitled the Icarian Archive. What began as a creative project to monitor the demolition of the industrial neighbourhood whose axis was Icaria Avenue, using a pinhole camera, continued as a project to document the construction of the Olympic Village neighbourhood that replaced it, using a conventional camera. The collection comprises 58,000 images—18 x 24 cm paper negatives and 26 mm colour images, 17,000 black and white images, and 15,000 slides, all taken by Llorens himself. In the accompanying text, Llorens reflects on urban changes, his understanding of the city as it existed, and the construction work necessary to transform it—"A city in transit." On the other hand, he also reflects on the changes that have occurred in photographic technique, from the daguerreotype to the advent of the digital camera, including the disappearance of the darkroom, 35mm film, and photographic paper—"Photography in Transit." With this, he invites us to reconsider both our position in relation to a changing world and the way we represent it. Martí's work reveals the enviable ubiquity of the photographer, with permission to enter and leave everywhere; he has been inside water mains, even atop cranes

and skyscrapers. Martí ends by quoting Stephen Berkman, North American photographer and artist who develops his projects using photographic processes from the 19th century: *"The writer Thomas Pynchon said, 'You know what a miracle is? It is another world's intrusion into this one.' I aspire to create work that transports one into a realm of the imagination, a real and direct experience. Each photograph acts like a portal into another world. I am fascinated with the idea that as soon as an image is taken that world almost immediately vanishes. The real value of a photograph is often not known until 40 or 50 years down the road. The more the world being depicted vanishes, the more interesting the photographs become because the resonance of time is added."*

When **Sol Diéguez** travelled to New York in the fall of 2024, she encountered what has been dubbed the scaffolding epidemic. A recent article in the newspaper *La Vanguardia* was titled "New York Seeks Remedies for the Scaffolding Epidemic" (November 23, 2025). Correspondent Francesc Peirón stated that the Big Apple has some 8,400 structures on its sidewalks, a number that, if laid end to end, would stretch all the way to Montreal, Canada. Buildings are hidden beneath the scaffolding that proliferates throughout the city. "Lately, frustration has been observed among those mythomaniac tourists chasing movie or TV series-worthy images." This is due to a regulation requiring buildings taller than six stories to be inspected every five years. However, Sol Diéguez, far from finding it odious, found in it the impetus to turn her camera toward a city that seemed to have regressed a century. Today, scaffolding once again completely surrounds the iconic Flatiron Building, presenting an image very similar to that of its construction a century ago. Sol presents a triptych that brings together three moments in the Flatiron's history in a visually powerful document that highlights its captivating urban presence. The article revisits the 19th-century debates surrounding the "scaffolding style." The term originated with a derogatory connotation, much like "Gothic" or "Impressionism." Art theorists of the time used it to describe the poor impression made by new infrastructures built with steel technology compared to the stereotomy of stone as the foundation of monumental architecture.

Finally, **Oscar Barney** explores Joel Sternfeld's photojournalism, which played a key role in the revitalization of the High Line, an abandoned railway line on Manhattan's West Side, as an urban park. Sternfeld's photographs had a direct impact on the transformation and creation of a new public space. The imagery created by the photographer served to raise awareness of the potential value of the abandoned infrastructure, influencing the positive public perception of the project and also shaping the design created by the architects and landscape designers in 2010. From 1929, the High Line was an elevated railway serving freight transport between the West Side docks and directly connecting to warehouses to avoid disrupting street traffic. Rail use gradually declined until it ceased in 1980. Over time, a new landscape flourished, with grasses

and wildflowers nourished by insect and bird seeds. In 1999, in response to a city proposal to demolish the infrastructure, a neighbourhood association, Friends of the High Line, was formed to advocate for its preservation. Between 2000 and 2002, Joel Sternfeld photographed the High Line's new urban landscape throughout all seasons, capturing a bucolic railway scene that intersected with Manhattan's iconic skyline. This lent support to the preservation campaign until a new mayor decided to preserve it, believing that a new park could be an economic driver for the city—while simultaneously reserving space for a future transportation corridor.

This type of photographic reportage allows us to discover the hidden structures that underpin the visible form and that sometimes defy the logic of appearances.