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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Introduction

Visual Practices, Architectural Memory and the Transformation of Public Space

Pedro Leão Neto

Sophia Journal has, since its start, established itself as an editorial and research platform dedicated to exploring architecture and the city through the lenses of photography, film, and visual culture. The journal published by the R&D Nuno Portas Centre Studies (CENP), at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto (FAUP), in collaboration with the Cityscopio Cultural Association (CCA) and their publishing imprint scopio Editions, has consistently fostered an interdisciplinary and international dialogue, bridging architectural research with artistic, documentary, and curatorial practices. Through peer-reviewed publications, thematic volumes and international conferences, Sophia Journal has sought to expand architectural discourse by recognising visual practices not merely as modes of representation, but as critical instruments of inquiry and knowledge production.

This tenth volume, *Landscapes of Repair: The Role of Photography and Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*, marks the opening of the journal's fourth thematic cycle. It builds upon and extends previous investigations into *Landscapes of Care*, while shifting the focus towards repair as a cultural, political and ecological imperative. Repair is understood here not as a purely technical operation, but as a layered and critical process that engages memory, heritage, social practices and future imaginaries. In this sense, photography and film emerge as privileged tools for observing, questioning, and reconfiguring how modern and contemporary architectures, infrastructures, and public spaces persist, deteriorate, adapt, or are transformed over time.

The notion of *landscape* adopted throughout this volume aligns with contemporary discourses that conceive it as a dynamic construct: at once a material condition, a cultural medium and an imaginative framework. Architecture, city and territory are approached as living and inclusive organisms, shaped by historical trajectories and present-day uses, and deeply embedded in broader socioeconomic, political, technical and ecological systems. Within this framework, modern architecture occupies a particularly critical position. As a heritage of the recent past, it often remains insufficiently recognised by institutions, scholars and the general public, despite its profound impact on contemporary urban life. Addressing this gap requires not only new historiographical perspectives, but also renewed documentary and visual strategies capable of revealing latent values, contested meanings and transformative potential.

Photography and film have long played a central role in mediating architectural experience. However, this volume foregrounds their capacity to operate as research methodologies rather than illustrative supplements. Drawing on expanded documentary practices, the contributions assembled here engage with what Marion Gautreau and Jean Kempf Jean Kempf[1] have described as the multiple dimensions of documentary photography: its scientific or ideological positioning, its artistic engagement with the complexity of the real, and its capacity to affirm identity and retrieve memory. These dimensions are not treated as separate categories, but as overlapping modes that enable critical readings of architecture and public space across different temporalities and geographies.

Several contributions address photography's role in documenting processes of repair, transformation and renewal. These processes are often visible in intermediate states, such as buildings under construction, infrastructures awaiting recognition, or public spaces whose meanings are still in flux[2]. Such conditions challenge dominant narratives that privilege finished forms and iconic images. Instead, they draw attention to temporality, material processes and the everyday negotiations through which architecture is continuously reshaped. In this regard, photography and film do not simply record change; they actively participate in constructing imaginaries that can influence public perception, policy decisions and design strategies.

Theoretical papers in this volume engage with modern and contemporary architecture through diverse yet interconnected lenses. Studies on aerial photography and regional planning reveal how visual technologies have historically shaped both architectural concepts and ecological awareness, reframing landscapes as complex systems rather than purely visual compositions. Analyses of modularity, prefabrication, and collective housing demonstrate how photographic documentation can illuminate the construction processes, technical experimentation, and cultural negotiations embedded within modern architectural projects. Other contributions critically examine photographic archives, typological series and artistic practices that document loss, obsolescence and marginal forms of dwelling, thereby questioning established hierarchies of architectural value.

A recurrent theme across the volume is the capacity of visual practices to activate architectural memory. Archives are revisited not as static repositories, but as dynamic materials open to

1 Marion Gautreau e Jean Kempf, «La photographie documentaire contemporaine dans les Amériques», IdeAs [Online], 13 | 2019, posto online no dia 01 março 2019, consultado o 17 dezembro 2023. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/5099; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ideas.5099

2 See Pedro Neto. (2024). "An Editorial Project As a Catalyst for Discussion and Construction of Architectural Ideas: Scopio Editions and Sophia Journal". *Sophia Journal* 9 (1): 3–7. https://doi.org/10.24840/2183-8976_2024-0009_0001_1

reinterpretation and recontextualisation. Diachronic studies of urban environments reveal how photographs acquire new meanings over time, particularly when viewed through contemporary lenses shaped by digital technologies, environmental concerns and social change. In this sense, the act of repair extends beyond the physical realm, encompassing the symbolic and cultural dimensions of architecture and landscape[3].

The volume is structured around three editorial sections — *Modernity 50s–60s*, *Intermediate States* and *Other Realities* — each offering a distinct yet complementary perspective on the overarching theme. Together, they articulate a critical trajectory that moves from the documentation of modern architectural legacies, through transitional and provisional conditions, to alternative and often marginal realities that challenge dominant architectural narratives. Interviews and visual essays further enrich this framework by foregrounding practices situated at the intersection of research, design and visual experimentation.

The editorial readings by Cristina Gastón, Judit Taberna, and Jaime J. Ferrer Forés analyse this issue through a layered exploration of photography as a methodological instrument and a critical lens for understanding landscape and urban transformation. From the visual essays curated by Gastón and Taberna, which approach territory through performative engagement, memory, and atmospheres of repair, to their reflections on the aesthetics of construction processes and photography, photography is presented as a means of revealing transient conditions that often escape architectural intention. In parallel, Ferrer Forés situates photographic practice within the broader discourse of modernity, demonstrating how images—whether documenting construction, capturing aerial perspectives, or recording the afterlife of modern projects—operate as tools for analysis, comparison, and historical consciousness. The contributions gathered in this volume—from Josefsson, Alvarado, and Barranco to Ferrer Frau, Wettstein, Jaua, Incicco, and others—collectively underscore the capacity of visual media to mediate between design intention and lived reality, between technological progress and social complexity, and between memory and transformation.

The *Perusal* section of this volume further deepens this critical enquiry through the contribution of its Guest editor Félix Solaguren-Beascoa, *Who Do Cities Belong To?*, a reflective and incisive text that interrogates the city as a contested space of representation, memory, and social struggle. Moving across temporal and geographical contexts—from the upheavals of May 1968

3 See the discussion of key conceptions of landscape circulating as part of the recent discourse i.e. landscape as a fundamental building block, a communicative medium, and a realm of imaginative constructs." Vera Vicenzotti. "The Landscape of Landscape Urbanism." Landscape Journal 36, no. 1 (2018): 75–86. https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.36.1.75.https://lj.uwpress.org/content/wplj/36/1/75.full.pdf

to contemporary urban protests—Solaguren-Beascoa situates visual practices, particularly photography, as both witness and agent in the construction of civic consciousness. Through the works of Carrie Mae Weems and Ryūji Miyamoto, the text reveals how ephemeral materials—plywood panels or cardboard shelters—become charged surfaces upon which claims, exclusions, and forms of resistance are inscribed. In doing so, the city emerges not as a fixed entity, but as a layered and unstable condition shaped by conflict, erasure, and re-appropriation, compelling us to reconsider, once again, the enduring question of who the city is truly for.

The visual essays included in this volume exemplify the journal's commitment to recognising visual research as a legitimate and rigorous mode of scholarly inquiry. Through carefully constructed photographic sequences and reflective texts, these contributions explore public spaces as sites of action, memory and poetic engagement. They demonstrate how visual narratives can articulate forms of knowledge that resist purely textual articulation, engaging affect, perception and embodied experience.

Ultimately, *Landscapes of Repair* proposes a humanist approach to architectural and urban transformation. It calls for renewed attention to the cultural, social and ecological dimensions of the built environment at a moment when cities and territories worldwide are facing profound crises. By foregrounding photography and film as critical research tools, this volume aims to draw attention to practices that do not merely document what exists but actively contribute to envisioning more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable futures.

Through the diversity of its contributions, Sophia Journal Vol. 10 No. 1 reaffirms the journal's role as a platform for interdisciplinary and visually driven research. It invites readers to reconsider modern and contemporary architecture not as fixed objects of the past or present, but as evolving landscapes whose repair depends as much on how they are seen, narrated and remembered as on how they are materially transformed.

Photography as an Instrument of Modern Construction

Jaime J. Ferrer Forés

Henri Cartier-Bresson states that photography stops time. By suspending time, the image becomes a memory of the project's construction process. The use of photographs of the work during construction implies a concern with placing space and technique at the center of the debate on modernity in architecture. Construction establishes the order of space and becomes form. Images of construction aim to reveal constructive innovations and the industrial character of the building process that defines the primacy of the spatial and technological modernity of the new architecture.

In the article *Modularity and Prefabrication: Analysis of the Collective Housing at Ordrupvej No. 70 by Mogens Lassen and Engineer Ishøy*, Josep Oriol Ferrer Frau analyzes the relevance of this residential building within Danish Functionalism. The core of this research is the Systemhuset, a sliding steel formwork system patented by engineer Ernst Ishøy. The photographs document the construction process and reveal the boldness of a technique that made it possible to erect one floor every four days. The camera records the slenderness of the reinforced concrete walls—only 15 centimeters thick—which freed the façade from its load-bearing role. Through the analysis of period photographs, Ferrer Frau's research recovers the importance of collaboration between architect and engineer, in which modern aesthetics were not merely an aspiration but the direct consequence of technical innovation.

During his stay in Paris, Mogens Lassen absorbed Le Corbusier's modern ideas, focusing his attention on experimentation with the industrialization of construction. This fascination with technical logic and machine efficiency was not limited to construction details but aspired to a comprehensive understanding of the environment. Under this same premise of technological vanguardism, Le Corbusier published his book *Aircraft* in 1935, where he claimed the aerial view as a new instrument necessary to reveal the structure of the territory and diagnose the problems of the contemporary city.

The work of Domonkos Wettstein, entitled *Aerial Photography as a New Perspective in Planning and Rehabilitation*, immerses us in mid-twentieth-century Hungary to analyze how the bird's-eye view transformed urban planning practice. The protagonist of this account is the architect Tibor Farkas, who from 1957 onward took on the challenge of modernizing the Lake Balaton region.

The genesis of this instrumental use of aerial photography arose from a technical necessity and a political obstacle. After the Danube floods of 1956, the lack of accurate maps—many of them distorted or classified for military security reasons during the Cold War—forced Farkas to take to the air in a small plane. What began as a reconnaissance mission to identify safe land became a design methodology.

Wettstein identifies an evolution in Farkas's gaze. In an initial stage, influenced by Le Corbusier's formal language, aerial photography served to compose the landscape as if it were a "monumental sculpture." The photographs allowed the architect to balance the mass of new modern buildings with the natural topography. However, in the 1970s, the gaze became systemic. Faced with environmental degradation caused by the success of mass tourism, aerial photography no longer sought aesthetic beauty but evidence of impact: erosion and biodiversity loss. This paradigm shift was fundamental to the emergence of contemporary landscape architecture in Hungary, demonstrating that photography can be the first step toward ecological awareness.

In her article entitled *Two Modern Public Housing Projects in Caracas*, María Fernanda Jaua analyzes the transformation of Caracas during the oil boom of the 1950s through the Taller de Arquitectura del Banco Obrero (TABO). Under the direction of Carlos Raúl Villanueva, the language of Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation was adopted, integrating essential elements such as pilotis to free public space and brise-soleil as a tropical climatic solution.

The study focuses on two residential complexes: the Cerro Grande Housing Unit and the 2 de Diciembre Community (today known as 23 de Enero). Here, photography is analyzed as an instrument of comparison and analysis. On the one hand, the official images from the 1950s, commissioned by the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez under the "Nuevo Ideal Nacional," capture the modernity of the superblocks, their free plans, and their geometric purity, projecting an image of progress that sought to erase the reality of informal housing.

However, María Fernanda Jaua contrasts these images with the contemporary photographic record by Julio Mesa for the Interactive Atlas of the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya. The comparison is revealing. Confronted with the modern concrete utopia, current photographs of these complexes register the "informalization" of the modern project: spontaneous enclosures, lack of maintenance, and a human density that exceeds the original planning. Nevertheless, despite the degradation, the structural logic devised by Villanueva and his team remains the vital support that enables the coexistence of thousands of residents of Caracas. Photography thus serves to measure the distance between political ideal and social resilience.

In Giulia Incicco's research, entitled *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Records of Loss*, photography records industrial decline by systematically documenting obsolete industrial structures. The Bechers' systematic documentation recognizes the aesthetic and historical value of the industrial past through their famous "typologies": series of black-and-white photographs organized in grids that present silos, cooling towers, and blast furnaces. Technically, both Tibor Farkas and the Bechers employ decontextualization: Farkas elevates the gaze to ignore detail and understand the flow of the landscape; the Bechers eliminate background and human figures to understand the logic of the object. In both cases, photography functions as a sensor that enables a systemic understanding beyond what the eye at ground level can perceive.

Incicco highlights the Bechers' participation in the influential exhibition New Topographics (1975), which marked a turning point in landscape photography. By portraying silos, water towers, and blast furnaces under diffuse light and without human presence, the Bechers stripped industry of its romantic or heroic charge and presented it as a pure architectural fact.

Beyond aesthetics, their work was crucial in safeguarding industrial heritage, especially in the Ruhr region of Germany. Their photographic records functioned as tools of historical awareness and were decisive in saving sites such as Zeche Zollern in Dortmund. This industrial complex, once threatened with demolition, is now a museum and a symbol of industrial reconversion, demonstrating how photography can act as a catalyst for the preservation of cultural heritage.

Finally, an interview is presented on the *International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens*, organized since 1990 by the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, which celebrated its 33rd edition in 2024. This recognition focuses on the study and care of places with profound natural, historical, and creative values. Unlike other awards, the Scarpa Prize is granted to specific sites—landscapes shaped by communities or by the interaction between forms of life and territory—rather than focusing on authors or architectural objects.

The methodology of the prize follows a circular cycle of "documenting, researching, and transmitting." A multidisciplinary scientific committee carries out fieldwork and establishes links with local communities to understand landscape transformations, moving beyond a purely conservationist perspective.

A fundamental aspect since 2014 has been the incorporation of documentary film and professional photography not only as means of dissemination but as research tools. These visual narratives make it possible to construct a contemporary language for understanding complex and conflictive landscapes. Ultimately, the Prize functions as a critical platform that links scientific rigor with social sensitivity, promoting responsible and creative management of memory and territory toward the future.

Overall, these contributions demonstrate that visual recording is not an epilogue to the architectural process but a constitutive dimension of its analysis, critique, and heritage preservation. Photography is revealed here as a polyvalent tool: at Ordrupvej 70, it documents technical memory and constructive innovation; at Lake Balaton, it deploys a systemic gaze through aerial photography that evolves toward ecological awareness; in Caracas, it acts as a mediator between design utopia and complex social reality. Meanwhile, the work of the Bechers transmutes industrial obsolescence into cultural heritage, and in the Carlo Scarpa Prize, the image is consolidated as a fundamental research instrument for the interpretation and care of the landscape.

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.

Landscape visual essays

by Cristina Gastón and Judit Taberna

The three selected projects present distinctly different approaches to the territory, each articulated through a highly personal and contemporary perspective. Through images, landscapes can be documented, interpreted, and defined. These works unfold as visual sequences of landscapes that invite interaction and reflection—mysterious and magical spaces, as well as landscapes in need of repair. The three visual essays are: *Making Temporal Landscapes: A Visual Essay on Snow, Site, and Seeing* by Mattias F. Josefsson; *Where Fireflies Unfold* by Oskar Alvarado; and *The American Dream* by Alicia F. Barranco.

Making Temporal Landscapes: A Visual Essay on Snow, Site, and Seeing by Mattias F. Josefsson establishes visual relationships between landscape, perception, and our own presence within a place. Josefsson examines the transformation of the Norwegian territory with the arrival of snow, showing how the site is altered and how this change can be employed within the pedagogy of landscape design. Through site-based actions and the use of photography, he presents a series in which the collective body relates to and interacts with the environment, providing a sense of human scale through performative actions. The images, produced in 2025 with first-year students from the architecture and landscape degree programs, during a four-day workshop, document the students' proposals in the snow, generating new spaces and new ways of seeing and understanding the territory. Photography is used as a tool to observe the site from a two-dimensional perspective and to better comprehend the relationship between the environment and its inhabitants. The sequence is documented in black and white, with low contrast due to the absence of sunlight and the presence of fog; in most of the images, the boundary between ground and sky disappears. The interventions carried out in the snow enable an exploration of different forms, subtle gestures, and edges, creating new architectures within the landscape that will ultimately vanish with the arrival of the thaw. However, as Josefsson notes, the knowledge gained through this experiential workshop remains embedded in how we see and how we design.

The series **Where Fireflies Unfold by Oskar Alvarado** constitutes a visual narrative of the village of Deleitosa, Spain, approached from a renewed perspective that is isolated from and distinct to that of W. Eugene Smith. Smith's work, published in *Life* magazine on 9 April 1951, presented Deleitosa as a photographic icon of the social and economic backwardness of rural Spanish society. In this visual essay, we perceive the result of six years of work in which Oskar documents the village where many of his ancestors lived and where he himself spent a large part of his summers. His personal and experiential relationship with the place enables

him to develop a photographic series closely connected to his childhood memories. The images evoke a sense of mystery, suggesting more than they explain. They are nocturnal photographs, characterized by very low, carefully directed light that guides the viewer toward the discovery of paths, buildings, corridors, and windows. Through the magical atmosphere generated within the space, the work allows imagination to flow and encourages a careful observation of the different elements that compose the environment. The visual sequence invites reflection and interpretation, prompting viewers to construct their own meanings from the depicted landscapes. In this way, as spectators, we ultimately become part of the photographic work itself.

The American Dream by Alicia F. Barranco presents a highly personal vision of the Holy Hope Cemetery in Tucson, Arizona. Established in the early twentieth century and covering an area of 48 hectares, the cemetery is administered by the Diocese of the State of Arizona. It is divided into two clearly differentiated sectors: the northwestern sector, corresponding to the historical core of the complex, where the remains of Mexican citizens are buried; and the southeastern sector, where the graves for well-off families are located. This social division is clearly legible in the photographs. One part of the cemetery appears carefully maintained and formally structured, where the modular arrangement of concrete gravestones defines the landscape. In contrast, the other sector, referred to as "the place of the forgotten," reveals the passage of time through a neglected landscape, lacking a clear organizational structure in the placement of the graves. Alicia captures this cemetery through her personal perspective, developed from a visit she made in 2022. The images are in color, with a strong contrast shaped by the shadows cast by trees and gravestones. The green of the grass and the orderly arrangement of the headstones stand in stark contrast to the surrounding desert scrub, where crosses of varying sizes, shapes, and materials appear without a defined modular structure, accompanied by brightly colored flowers and painted tombs. The visual sequence reveals a wounded cemetery, a landscape in need of repair, which Alicia presents, in her own words, as a chronicle of its hopelessness.

The narratives that follow invite us to reflect on the ways in which we may influence the landscape, whether through direct, performative interaction with it, by documenting the deterioration caused by the passage of time, or by observing attentively and capturing the essence of the place.

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Aerial Photography as a New Perspective in Planning and Rehabilitation : Regional Conceptualizations along the Danube and around Lake Balaton in Socialist Hungary

Domonkos Wettstein

Abstract

Aerial photography has also influenced the modern interpretation of the landscape and the development of modern architectural concepts. An example of this is the aerial photo series documenting the developments of the Lake Balaton Region by Hungarian architects. The modernization of the largest lake in Central and Eastern Europe, has also achieved significant recognition in the international professional history. However, aerial photos soon played an important role in ecological restoration beyond planning.

The Balaton resort project started in 1957 with a new scale and methodology of regional planning process. The project leader was Tibor Farkas, who continuously documented the transformation of the landscape by taking aerial photos from an airplane. These aerial photos provide the primary material for the research. The photos also show the interpretation of the landscape and the formation of architectural concepts. A year earlier, he had successfully prepared the regional plan for the Mohács Island recovery after floods on the Danube. In this process, he already experimented with the use of aerial photography as a design tool and used the experiences in the planning of the Balaton region. The innovative methodology of the Balaton regional plan, which he developed together with Charles Polónyi, later a member of TEAM 10, integrated the scales of architecture, urban planning and regional planning. The Balaton plan was successfully presented at international forums, including the regional planning congress in Liege in 1958 and the last CIAM forum in Otterlo in 1959. In 1965, the Patrick Abercrombie Prize of the UIA was dedicated to "Tibor Farkas and his team" for the integrated methodical treatment of landscape and architectural values.

The Balaton regional plan brought a new scale of planning not only to architects and urban planners, but also to the garden designers who worked closely with them. Over time, the modernization of the landscape also brought ecological problems to the fore. In contrast to the visual landscape interpretation of architecture, a more complex landscape interpretation of ecology was needed, which also revalued the role of architecture. The development of Hungarian landscape architecture can also be linked to the Balaton project, when earlier garden designers began to develop landscape-scale concepts, which soon resulted in the institutionalization of landscape architecture and the launch of university education.

The study points out the transformation of landscape interpretation through aerial photographs. The initial modern architectural concepts show the interpretation of the visual, monumental plasticity of the landscape, later, with the emergence of natural problems, the ecological system of the landscape came to the forefront of interpretation. This transformation in the history of ideas resulted in the reorganization of the position of architecture and landscape planning. Aerial photographs help in documenting modern heritage and understanding the processes of planning history.

Key-words: modern architecture; landscape planning; regional planning; Balaton; regional modernism.

Domonkos Wettstein is an architect, associate professor at Department of Urban Planning and Design, Faculty of Architecture, Budapest University of Technology and Economics. His research deals with scale relationships between architecture and regional development in the planning history. In 2013–14 he was a visiting scholar at the ETH Zürich with the project leadership of Ákos Moravánszky. In 2022, his book "Balaton Architecture – Searching for Strategy in the Twentieth Century" was published. In 2023, he won the Bolyai scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

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Introduction

Aerial photography has given a new perspective to the perception of the landscape, while also creating new tools for landscape planning and architectural design. The architectural application of aerial photography is exemplified by the experimental work of Tibor Farkas, an architect and urban planner and a pioneer of Hungarian regional planning. In 1956, he led the restoration work after the Danube flood in the Mohács Island region in southern Hungary, and then, as Chief Architect, from 1957 onward, he coordinated the regional planning of Lake Balaton, the largest lake in Central and Eastern Europe. The landscape perspective played a prominent role in both flood restoration and the arrangement of the resort area. The Balaton development sought a fragile balance between the natural landscape and modernization, and the landscape perspective also influenced architectural design. The innovative regional planning methodology, integrating the landscape, settlement and architectural scales, achieved significant results in international planning history, which is why chief architect Tibor Farkas and his team received the UIA Abercrombie Prize in 1965.[1] However, the modernization processes were later distorted by the pressure of socialist ideology and ecological problems emerged. Tibor Farkas was now focused on the rehabilitation of the landscape and worked on the search for ecological solutions. For Tibor Farkas, aerial photography represented a new perspective on planning and rehabilitation, in which the problems of nature and architecture appear simultaneously. With his aerial photographs, he sought new perspectives on the landscape, which also shaped his personal interpretation of the landscape.

By processing the personal legacy of the chief architect, it is also possible to review his former aerial photographs. In addition to the archival design documentation and personal notes, the research also processed his contemporary aerial photographs, which were taken during the 1956 Mohács Island restoration and then during the developments on the shores of Lake Balaton in the sixties and seventies. During the research, a personal interview was conducted with the chief architect, and later the heirs provided information for processing the archive. In addition to the chief architect's archive, the study also processed the design documents found in the state archives and the publications of the professional journals of the time. Based on the sources, it was possible to carry out a complex reconstruction of the historical planning processes and to explore the circumstances under which the aerial photographs were taken.

The study examines aerial photographs in the context of design history and seeks answers to the question of how new technology and perspectives influenced landscape, settlement

1 Domonkos Wettstein, "A Desire for innocence? Collectivity and recreational architecture around the lake Balaton (1957–1968)," in *East–West–Central 01: Re-humanizing Architecture: New Forms of Community 1950–1970*, ed. Á. Moravánszky, J. Hopfengärtner and T. Lange (Birkhäuser Verlag, 2016).

and architectural design? What perspectives did the chief architect seek when documenting the landscape and how did he interpret the concept of the modern landscape? The study examines the analysis of perspectives through three different case studies in the light of the chief architect's contemporary publications and personal interviews, based on which it is also possible to depict the transforming concept of landscape in late modernity.

An experimental architectural career – Tibor Farkas, chief architect

Tibor Farkas is a member of the young generation of architects who emerged after the Second World War, whose approach was already shaped by modern architecture during his university years. He was able to try out his experimental approach in various, novel tasks of the era. He was born in 1922 in Dombóvár, Tolna County, and his father worked in the construction industry.[2] He completed his architectural training at the Budapest University of Technology in 1944. After that, he worked as a private designer in Dombóvár for a short time, primarily dealing with village planning plans and settlement surveys. He developed model plans for the development of villages, which he also published in professional journals of the time. His code of conduct for urban planning plans, which was still considered novel at the time, later became widely spread. From 1948, he worked for the National House Building Cooperative in Budapest, and then in 1950 he became a member of the Construction Science Association. At that time, he worked closely with Béla Sámsondi Kiss and, experimenting with the material of fiber-reinforced concrete, they worked on the design of material-saving residential buildings.

However, in 1951 he returned to town planning and headed the town planning department in the state planning company Mezőterv. The group was later transferred to the Town Planning Company (VÁTERV, then VÁTI). The main profile of this socialist state planning company was to solve town planning tasks outside the capital. They primarily prepared town planning plans for rural settlements, but in addition to town planning they also had an office dealing with regional planning and architectural and historical issues. Tibor Farkas headed the regional planning office. His first works included smaller town planning plans (Harangod, Karcag, Keszthely, Monoricsárda, Tiszalök), but in 1956, after the Danube ice flood that caused unexpectedly great damage, he was given the task of regional planning for Mohács Island. It was then that he began to deal with regional planning that went beyond the scale of the settlement. In 1956, he participated in the Budapest revolution against the Soviet occupation as a workers' council chairman. From 1957, he was involved in the newly launched Balaton development. He led the preparation of the first comprehensive Balaton Regional Plan and was also appointed the region's first Chief Architect. In 1965, he received the UIA The position of chief architect was abolished in 1968 as a result of economic policy reforms, and he continued to fight for

2 "Urbanisták", Sources for the biography of Tibor Farkas, accessed March 10, 2025, https://urbanistak.hu/farkas-tibor/

the validation of the professional aspects of Balaton development. He was the initiator of the Balaton Central Development Program, which he had already begun to develop within the framework of the National Technical Development Committee. He held the position of secretary in the transforming Balaton development organization, the Balaton Inter-Ministerial Committee.

However, in 1972, in protest against the increasingly distorted development processes, he resigned from all positions related to Lake Balaton. After that, he mainly dealt with international regional planning tasks and participated in the Thermal project financed by UNESCO. However, in 1979, he received a new assignment to remedy the ecological crisis that was developing at Lake Balaton, and until his retirement in 1983, he supervised experiments related to the rehabilitation of the landscape as a ministerial commissioner. He died in Budapest in 2015. Throughout his career, he created at different scales and in different areas of responsibility, and an experimental approach is a constant feature in his work. After his early experiments with woven concrete materials, he changed scales and dealt with landscape-scale tasks of regional planning, which had no precedent in Hungary before. He developed pragmatic, yet innovative solutions, including the use of aerial photography in landscape planning.

Landscape dynamics of flooding: Flood restoration along the Danube

Tibor Farkas first used aerial photography during the restoration after the 1956 Danube flood. The use of the technique for planning was necessitated by an emergency situation, but the discovery of the possibilities inherent in the new technique clearly demonstrates Tibor Farkas's experimental approach. An ice flood occurred at the beginning of 1956. As the contemporary publication compiled by the planners draws attention to, although ice floods were a common phenomenon on the Danube at that time, due to the unfavorable weather conditions, the 1956 flood caused great destruction in the southern section of the Danube's Hungarian course. The Danube froze over a 940 km section from Vienna to Orsová, but the melting did not start from the south, but from the west, from the upper course, which increased the damage. Due to the extremely cold weather in March, the previously exploded ice floes froze again, forming blockages. The water rose due to the ice jams and overflowed the riverbed, causing dams to break in several places. The flood reached 20 settlements, completely inundating 4 settlements, and 748 km^2 of agricultural land was submerged. The situation was particularly critical on Mohács Island, as the low-lying area was completely submerged. 4,000 people had to be evacuated from the area through the icy water.

[Fig.1]
Regional Plan, Mohács Island. Source : Farkas, Tibor and Károly, Polónyi. „Beszámoló a dél-magyarországi árvízsújtotta területek újjáépítéséről." *Magyar Építőművészet* 5, no. 9 (1956): 266.

Mohács sziget általános terve. Készült a Városterven Farkas Tibor irányításával. A tervezésben résztvettek: Zaitva Tibor, Csillag József építészmérnökök, dr. Jókuti Ferenc agrométnök, Szerdahelyi László mérnök, forgalmi szakértő, valamint a Mesteriskolások részéről Bércs István, az Építőipari Műszaki Egyetem részéről Faragó Kálmán és Major Jenő

The flood defences were still in progress when on 6 April 1956 the Council of Ministers ordered the start of the restoration planning. The planning was entrusted to two young architects from VÁTERV, chief designer Tibor Farkas and Charles Polónyi. The pair had worked together during the first period of the Balaton development, but Charles Polónyi later took up work in Africa, became a member of the TEAM 10 group and had an international career.[3] The young designers had no experience in restoration planning, and in addition, they were given an extremely tight deadline for planning the new settlements, so that they could start the layout immediately after the flood had receded, so they had to be ready by 23 April. In their retrospective, the designers summarised the circumstances of the planning work as follows:

> Among the planning tasks, Mohács Island was the most significant. Due to its size, soil composition and special location, it represents an independent unit. Its problems had to be solved in relation to the environment and within itself, taking into account the current situation, the characteristics and the development opportunities. We did not have enough time to prepare the necessary studies to solve the task, which also had the character of regional planning. We had to be content with the data of the Central Statistical Office, the map material that was difficult to find and proved to be unusable in many places, especially in terms of altitude. We were unable to obtain aerial photographs, which would have been of great help in such a case.[4]

It was not mentioned in the publication at the time, but an interview with Tibor Farkas earlier in the research revealed that the published maps were not usable for military and national security reasons. Because of the nearby Yugoslav–Hungarian border, the official maps were encrypted for military reasons. At that time, Yugoslavia led by Tito was considered an enemy country and in order to prevent espionage, the altitude data of the maps published for civilian purposes were distorted. Tibor Farkas and Charles Polónyi then decided to take their own aerial photographs in an emergency. The receding flood precisely outlined the high places where new settlements could be established. Charles Polónyi wrote about this in his old age memoirs:

3 Ákos Moravánszky, "Peripheral Modernism: Charles Polónyi and the Lessons of the Village," *The Journal of Architecture* 22, no. 4 (2017): 662–88, https://doi:10.1080/13602365.2016.1204076.

4 Tibor Farkas and Károly Polónyi, "Beszámoló a dél-magyarországi árvízsújtotta területek újjáépítéséről," *Magyar Építőművészet* 5, no. 9 (1956): 262–276.

[Fig. 2]
Aerial Photos, 1956. Mohács Island. Source : Archive of Tibor Farkas

...we didn't have the necessary data, no contour maps, not even aerial photographs. We had to watch the flood recede from a small training plane to find out which were the highest points in what appeared to be a completely flat area.[5]

The methodology of the plan integrated several scales, from the regional scale, through the settlement scale, to the architectural plans. This multi-scale methodology prepared the later plan for the much larger Balaton region, also prepared under the leadership of Tibor Farkas and Charles Polónyi. Finally, based on various maps, on-site surveys made during the flood and self-made aerial photographs, they were able to prepare the necessary base maps only with difficult work:

> When the water receded, the boundaries of the deeper areas could be accurately marked. The work was done from a boat, in the water, in rubber boots, at a time when even the population could not return to the island. This part of the work required sacrifice and hard work, but it paid off handsomely during the planning and marking out. The planner thus had a basic map available on which everything that had to be taken into account in the planning was recorded, including remaining house foundations, fruits, water features, etc.[6]

The two planners shared a pragmatic approach, but their different professional horizons emerged when developing the settlement plans. Charles Polónyi already had extensive international knowledge and wanted to apply the theories of modern urban planning to settlement planning issues. In his memoirs, he mentions the idea of the Garden Hungary as the planning concept, where the medieval settlement structure was recalled, where the settlements were settled in such a way that the lands could be reached on foot.[7] Tibor Farkas, on the other hand, based his plans for the new settlements more on the site conditions and the experiences of aerial photographs.

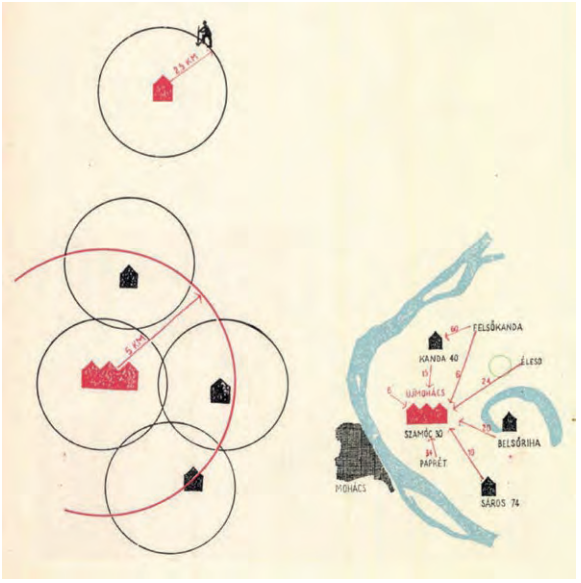
5 Károly Polónyi, Építész-településtervező a perifériákon. Polónyi Károly retrospektív naplója (Budapest: Terc, 2000), 22.
6 Farkas and Polónyi, "Beszámoló a dél-magyarországi árvízsújtotta területek újjáépítéséről", 262–276.
7 Polónyi, Építész-településtervező a perifériákon. Polónyi Károly retrospektív naplója, 22.

In the report of the time, they also summarized their planning experiences.[8] Although the works were still ongoing when the report was written, they were already able to articulate the experiences of the special planning process of post-flood restoration. In this, pragmatic decision-making on site played a prominent role, which was also vividly illustrated by the use of aerial photography.

> In this case, we had to put speed ahead of detailed solutions and the finesse of the design. Therefore, we must accept any criticism that may arise in this regard, because we felt that our most important duty was to immediately provide the plans for the new life. (...) Despite great difficulties, our architects who are leading the construction work are doing a selfless and exemplary job. Few people know about this work, and consequently few appreciate it. In this case, it is not a matter of ordinary design and construction management, but much more. Our architects have to create something good and beautiful on site from the available materials. They still have to overcome many obstacles before the project is fully completed this year.[9]

In the archive of Tibor Farkas, the research found and processed the reduced images of the flood aerial photographs. Although the quality of the images is not very good, the process of the flood receding can be clearly seen in the photo series. The idea of taking aerial photographs was brought to life by an emergency situation, and the new perspective had a great impact on Tibor Farkas and Charles Polónyi, as their recollections also show. At that time, photographs still served as a functional tool for providing data, and there was no aesthetic compositional intention in setting the perspectives. As a result, the images only provided information for mapping the topography at that time, and did not yet influence the creation of architectural concepts. Although the structures of the settlement plans and the formal designs of the architectural plans do not show any connection with the perspective of the aerial photographs, they gave the planners a meaningful impression of the landscape as a whole and of experiencing the new perspective of regional planning, which could also determine their later tasks.

8 László Mányoky, "Tervek és valóság Újmohácson," *Magyar Építőművészet* 7, no. 6 (1958): 169–179.
9 Farkas and Polónyi, "Beszámoló a dél-magyarországi árvízsújtotta területek újjáépítéséről", 262–276.



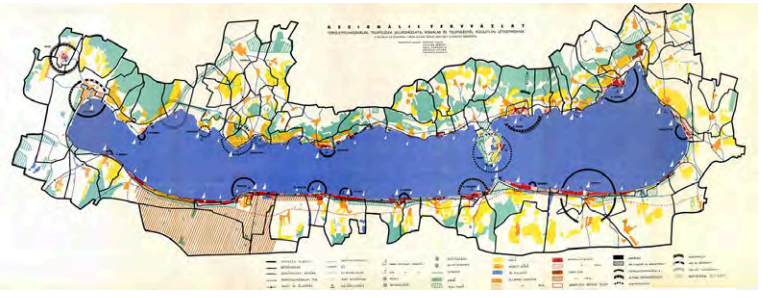
Landscape transformation processes: regional planning in the Balaton region

In the regional planning of the Balaton resort area, not only technical-infrastructural planning, but also the aesthetic evaluation of the landscape became a determining element of the concept creation. In this task, the landscape perspective was valued, which made its impact felt in both landscape planning and architectural design. Aerial photography played a prominent role in the implementation process of the plan, which now served not only to supplement the technical data provision, but also to visually evaluate the architectural solutions. The regional planning of the Balaton coast started barely a year after the Mohács Island restoration. In the meantime, the 1956 revolution and war of independence against the Soviet occupation broke out in Budapest, and after the uprising was crushed, the new socialist government announced a comprehensive social consolidation program. The development of the Balaton coast, which serves as a recreation area for society, became a prominent element of this consolidation program. In 1957, a new regional organization, the Balaton Management Committee, was established to develop the lakeshore, which had a backward infrastructure and was unsuitable

[Fig. 3]
Aerial Photos, Mohács Island. Source : Archive of Tibor Farkas

[Fig. 4]
Regional Plan, Mohács Island. Source : Farkas, Tibor and Károly, Polónyi. „Beszámoló a dél-magyarországi árvízsújtotta területek újjáépítéséről." *Magyar Építőművészet* 5, no. 9 (1956): 264 and 273.

for serving the needs of mass tourism.[10] Tibor Farkas was appointed the first chief architect of the Balaton shore and the head of regional planning. He had to develop both tasks in a pioneering manner, without precedents.[11] He was assisted in his work by Charles Polónyi, the chief engineer of the southern shore of the Balaton Management Committee.



Similar to the restoration after the Danube flood, the work on the Balaton shore had to be carried out under tight deadlines and with limited financial and technological resources. This time, the work also began with a survey of the landscape, and in just one year, by 1958, the first regional plan for the Balaton shore was prepared. The planning methodology, integrating concepts on a landscape, settlement and architectural scale, was similar to the Mohács Island plan, but this time a comprehensive plan had to be developed for a much larger landscape unit. When planning the resort landscape serving recreation, the preservation of the natural values of the landscape and the landscape role of modern infrastructure were considered important.[12] The visual appearance and aesthetic evaluation of the landscape played a prominent role in the concept. On the lake shore, which was already significantly overbuilt at that time, strict protection of the undeveloped areas of the landscape was determined so that the continuous green areas could remain untouched. Within the settlements, new areas suitable

10 István Kisléghi-Nagy, "A Balaton-táj fejlesztése építészeti szempontból; tárgyalási alapul szolgáló javaslat a MÉSZ részére," *Magyar Építőművészet* 6, no. 1–2 (1957): 51–52.
11 György Kőszegfalvi, "A regionális tervezés fejlesztésének néhány kérdése," *Településtudományi Közlemények* 26 (1977): 57–68.
12 Imre Oromos, "Planung für das Erholungsgebiet am Balaton-see, Ungarn," *Garten und Landschaft*, no. 9 (1966): 285–287.

[Fig. 5]
Regional Plan, Balaton, 1958. Source : Bérczes, István, Tibor Farkas, István Kisléghy Nagy and Károly Polónyi. „Beszámoló a Balatonfejlesztés egyéves munkájáról." Magyar Építőművészet 7, no. 4–5 (1958): 145.

for development were designated in such a way that the new development would fit into the composition of the landscape. Tibor Farkas expressed his landscape concept vividly in the development documents:

> The entire Balaton landscape could be compared to a great work of fine art, a monumental sculpture of lasting value. During the development, we strive not to detract from these with new buildings, but to highlight their existing values.[13]

Tibor Farkas's perception of landscape shows the vision of modern landscape design in the twentieth century. He views the landscape primarily as a visual value, and not yet as an ecological unit. As a plastic work of art that the architect, as the shaper of the landscape, can further develop with sculptural tools. All this is strongly connected to Le Corbusier's perception of landscape, which was also reflected in the design and composition of the buildings on the shores of Lake Balaton.

13 Tibor Farkas, *A Balatonkörnyék fejlesztéséről*, Manuscript, 1968.07.29. Source: Farkas Tibor archive.

[Fig. 6]
Aerial Photo, Tihany, Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

When designing the buildings, modern architectural design was adapted to the traditions of the region.[14] As chief regional engineer, Charles Polónyi also designed several new buildings on the southern shore, emphasizing the sensitive touch of nature in his concept. He also took landscape aspects into account when designing the freestanding buildings in the embrace of nature. He developed an innovative structural system for serving beaches, campsites and restaurants, which became adaptable to different locations and functions through the variable use of a prefabricated element set. The solution not only enabled an economical and fast construction method, but also adapted to the landscape environment.[15] By combining light V-shaped roofs, it became a characteristic solution for the architecture of the Lake Balaton coast of the era.[16] Charles Polónyi also presented the project at the CIAM congress in Otterlo in 1959.[17] At the waterfront viewpoints and harbors, buildings with expressive mass-shaped reinforced concrete shell structures were designed, which further interpreted the dynamics of the landscape in an abstract way. Landscape composition was also prioritized when designing larger holiday buildings and hotels. The horizontal strip-like holiday units were counterpointed with vertical tower hotels. This dynamic mass formation, which further shaped the character of the landscape, came from the concept of modern architecture.[18] At the same time, in the historical parts of the settlement that were important for tourism, they adapted to the local architectural traditions. Around the Benedictine abbey on the Tihany Peninsula, or on the volcanic Badacsony vineyard hill, the buildings were adapted to the tradition of vernacular architecture. The traditional mass form was used to shape the new buildings, with great emphasis on the use of local materials, especially volcanic stone. The topographical formation of the buildings also appeared, when the new building units were shaped by taking over the forms of the landscape and adapting them to the terrain. The chief architect also refers to the sensitive consideration of the landscape character in his note from 1966:

14 Tibor Farkas, "Visszaemlékezések: Ahogy én látom a Balatonügy 30 évét I. rész," *Magyar Építőművészet* 37, no 2 (1988): 44–47.

15 Charles K. Polónyi, *An Architect-Planner on the Peripheries: Case Studies from the Less Developed World* (Budapest: P&C), 1992.

16 Simon Mariann, "Hungarian See Promises a Rich Summer: Collective Good and Economic Interest in Socialist Leisure Architecture." in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of the European Architectural History Network*, ed. H. Heynen and J. Gosseye, J. (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van Belgie voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 2012), 480–484.

17 Oscar Newman. *CIAM 59 in Otterlo.* Stuttgart: Karl-Krämer-Verlag, 1961. (in the series of Dokumente der modernen Architektur edited by Jürgen Joedicke)

18 Polónyi Károly, "Visszaemlékezések." *Magyar Építőművészet* 37, no. 3 (1988): 5–9.

[Fig. 7]
Aerial Photo, Badacsony, Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

In terms of scale and architectural approach, we strive for modesty, in the spirit of maximum modernity within our capabilities. In the future, we do not wish to compete with the character of the coastline, which stems from its dimensions, but rather we want to preserve it and at the same time develop it in a modern form, and express one of the main attractions of the Balaton landscape, its generally soothing, more intimate character.[19]

The principles of landscape, settlement and architectural composition enhanced the landscape perspective, which was also reflected in the official representation of the development. Film announcers and press reports of the time liked to take aerial photographs of small aircraft flying parallel to the waterfront. The aerial photographs could simultaneously show the characteristic features of the landscape, the undulating water surface and the new modern buildings lining the shore. The modern aesthetic perspective developed by the designers also determined the representation of the development. The perspective of the aerial photographs also suited the modern architectural character: the new perspective of the landscape emphasized modernity and prioritized the scale of the landscape form instead of traditional historical architectural forms.

19 Tibor Farkas, *Rövid áttekintés a Balatonkörnyéki regionális munkáról.* Manuscript, 1966. Archive of Tibor Farkas.

The results also attracted recognition at international forums, including at the XXIV. Congress for Housing and Townplanning in Liege in 1958, and in the first half of the sixties, numerous architectural delegations came to see the results.[20] As a result, the development won the UIA Abercrombie Prize in 1965. The landscape perspective was also emphasized when the prize was awarded. The value of the plan was believed to be discovered in the unity and harmony of the natural landscape and the architectural solutions. In addition to photo series showing the buildings, publications published in foreign trade press also included aerial photos that convey the landscape perspective.

Aerial photo series taken during this period can also be found in Tibor Farkas' archive. The special feature of the series is that they were not made to order, but were taken by him himself, similar to the Mohács Island photography with a small plane. However, the quality and composition of the image series differ significantly from the shots taken during the Danube flood. While the aim of the photographs taken while flying over the flood was not to evaluate the aesthetic of the landscape, but to obtain topographic data, the aim of the photographs of the Balaton landscape was to evaluate the aesthetic of the new building complexes and development opportunities. Although the composition of the images shows that the chief architect was not a professional aerial photographer and the movement and swaying of the aircraft influenced the adjustment

20 Peters Paulhans, "Kritische Anmerkungen von Paulhans Peters über Architekten von Ungarn," *Baumeister* no. 2 (1964): 99–140.

[Fig. 8]
Aerial Photo, Tihany, Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

[Fig. 9]
Aerial Photo, Siófok, Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

of the image sections, the composition of the images clearly shows an attempt to evaluate the visual aesthetics of the landscape. He never depicted the individual new developments up close, simply looking for an aerial view of the mass composition, but always presented them in a wider section with the mountain ranges in the background. In the photos, he also looked for the landscape unity that he had already formulated at the beginning of the planning, when creating the concept. At the same time, he used the photos not only for documentation, but also for planning. The archive contains a number of aerial photos to which he had attached a transparent tracing paper. He edited the contours of the new installations onto the tracing paper, often examining the installation options that fit the landscape in several different versions.

Based on archival design documentation, reports and aerial photographs, it became possible to reconstruct the landscape perception of Tibor Farkas and his team. As we can see from the previously quoted description, he interpreted the landscape primarily not as an ecological, but as a visual phenomenon, and landscape design as an artistic creative process that creates a new plastic composition. This perception primarily reflected the modern architectural perception of the era, while rules were already formulated for the protection of natural areas. However, the protection of natural areas did not yet appear as a solution to ecological problems, but as a means of providing a landscape experience that ensures recreation. Aerial photography as a planning and evaluation tool expresses this kind of visual architectural perception.

New Perspectives for Landscape Rehabilitation: Documenting Ecological Problems

The last series of aerial photographs from 1972 in Tibor Farkas' archive shows the transformation of perspectives. In addition to new development areas, he increasingly placed emphasis on the shrinking of natural areas. The series of photographs included images in which he no longer sought new modern architectural works, but documented the distortions caused by overbuilding. This kind of change in perspective is related to the changed attitude of the era, the emphasis on ecological problems.

The modernization of the landscape gained new momentum after the reorganization of Hungarian economic policy in 1968. The organization supervising the development was transformed, and the position of chief architect was abolished. Despite the narrowing of his powers, Tibor Farkas tried to create a new institutional framework to control the development processes.[21] On his initiative, the Balaton Central Development Program was established, which continued the priority construction projects on the lakeshore, and he was given a secretary

21 Domonkos Wettstein, "Deformations of the vacationscape: The mechanism of changing effects on the Balaton landscape after 1968," *Architektúra & Urbanizmus* 50, no. 1–2 (2016): 38–55.

position in the Balaton Inter-Ministerial Committee, which ensured coordination. Despite the institutional framework, he could no longer control the processes of landscape development. Increasingly larger areas were filled along the waterfront to create new construction areas, which, however, resulted in the artificial shaping of the landscape and the disappearance of natural waterfront ecosystems. Meanwhile, the former historical vineyard and orchard areas also began to be sold and developed for weekend houses. In protest against the increasingly distorted landscape, Tibor Farkas resigned from all his positions in 1972.[22]

The increasing development of the landscape also caused ecological problems in the early 1970s. Soil-binding plants disappeared from enclosed gardens that were removed from agricultural cultivation, which resulted in erosion of the hillsides. Not only were the historical agricultural sectors of the landscape, such as viticulture and fruit growing, pushed back, but the quality of the soil was also significantly damaged. The appropriate infrastructure was not built for the holiday homes built in the former orchards, and there was no adequate sewage drainage. While the crisis of the hillsides outlined an increasingly complex set of problems, the deterioration of water quality posed an increasingly greater challenge on the lakeshore.

22 Tibor Farkas, "Visszaemlékezések: Ahogy én látom a Balatonügy 30 évet II. rész," *Magyar Építőművészet* 37, no 3 (1988): 10–13.

[Fig. 10]
Aerial Photo, Zánka, 1972. Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

[Fig. 11]
Aerial Photo, 1972. Szigliget, Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

The problem was therefore not primarily aesthetic. Although Tibor Farkas' aerial photographs clearly show the visual problem of excessive development, which is an important aspect in the case of the holiday landscape, the problems directed attention towards a new scientific field, the complex approach of ecology, instead of searching for an architectural solution.

New disciplines emerged, which also transformed the perception of the landscape. The arrangement of the Balaton landscape was no longer dealt with by development-oriented architecture, but by landscape architecture that prioritized rehabilitation. For the new perspective of the landscape, it is worth comparing the previously presented concept of architectural landscape and the concept of landscape of the newly formed landscape architecture. The domestic pioneer of the new landscape-scale discipline was Mihály Mőcsényi, who also participated in the arrangement of the Balaton coast in the sixties.[23] As a university professor, he published his concept of landscape in 1968:

> Landscape is nothing more than the contradictory, and therefore dialectical, unity of the interactions between nature and society. Landscape is, on the one hand, the material condition of society's life, and on the other hand, the bearer of high-level visual-aesthetic qualities. Therefore, it is also the objectified history of the interactions between man and nature – manifested in the material world shaped by man.[24]

Based on the definition, we can see that landscape architecture no longer primarily interpreted the landscape as a visual value, but as a complex ecological system, in which the role of man in shaping the landscape is also present.[25] This new approach later also influenced the approach to architecture. Mihály Mőcsényi created his own summer house by recultivating an abandoned quarry in Balatongyörök, located on the northern shore of the lake. The place focused attention on the treatment of landscape wounds and became a meeting place for the Hungarian and international landscape architecture profession.

23 Annamária Gerzánics, "A tájrendező. A szakma kiterjesztése a táji léptékre," in *MM_C Mőcsényi Mihály egy polihisztor tájépítész. Tanulmányok és esszék Mőcsényi Mihály életéről*, ed. S. Bardóczi, A. Gerzánics, and K. M. Szilágyi (Budapest: Terc, 2021), 267.

24 Mihály Mőcsényi, "A táj és a zöldterület fogalmi problémái a tájrendezés nézőpontjából." *Településtudományi Közlemények* 21 (1968): 66-76.

25 Mihály Mőcsényi, "Egyedi tájérték - Mőcsényi esszék 14." Építészfórum, 19.03. 2013, accessed March 10, 2025, https://epiteszforum.hu/egyedi-tajertek-mocsenyi-esszek-14

The new perception of the landscape also influenced Tibor Farkas's approach. In 1979, he received a new assignment, as a ministerial commissioner, he had to understand the causes of the deterioration of water quality.[26] Their joint experiments with landscape architect Sándor Plósz confirmed that the deterioration of water quality was caused by the excessive modernization of the landscape. The stream beds around Lake Balaton were concreted in the spirit of modernization, while the artificially filled banks protected by concrete dams caused the natural wildlife to disappear from the lakeshore. The reed beds on the lakeshore played an important role in cleaning the river waters arriving at the lakeshore, but in their absence, streams poured their water into the lakebed without purification, which quickly caused eutrophication, i.e. an increase in the organic matter content of the water. When Tibor Farkas took his last series of aerial photographs in 1972, he was only aware of the problems, but his sensitivity to the natural environment gradually transformed his previous architectural interpretation of the landscape towards a more complex ecological perception of the landscape.

26 Tibor Farkas, "Visszaemlékezések: Ahogy én látom a Balatonügy 30 évet III. rész." *Magyar Építőművészet* 37, no. 4–5 (1988): 90.

[Fig. 12]
Aerial Photo, 1972. Révfülöp, Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

[Fig. 13]
Aerial Photo, 1972. Zánka, Balaton Region. Source: Archive of Tibor Farkas

Conclusions

The modern photography technique of aerial photography opened up a new perspective for architectural design, which also influenced the modern architectural design of the twentieth century. All this can be clearly traced in Tibor Farkas' multi-scale design work. After the initial functional, topographical data provision, his aerial photo series already appear as an aesthetic point of view. The points of view taken from the aircraft were well suited to the vision of the modern development of the resort area, where the new building units were conceived as a unity with the natural landscape. In addition to documentation, aerial photos also served as a planning tool, and the further editing of photo perspectives also had an impact on the creation of new compositions. From the seventies, distortions of the landscape also appeared in aerial photos, and photography no longer appeared primarily as an aesthetic point of view, but as a critical tool. In the contours of the natural landscape, instead of the expected natural experience, the harmful consequences of overbuilding appeared. The perception of landscape of the era also transformed, moving from a modern architectural vision of "monumental plasticity" towards the recognition of the systemic connections of ecology. The consequences of excessive modernization opened a new perspective on the landscape and directed attention towards an ecological perception.

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Modularity and Prefabrication: Analysis of the Collective Housing at Ordrupvej No. 70 by Mogens Lassen and Engineer Ishøy

Josep Oriol Ferrer Frau

Abstract

This study examines the evolution of functionalism in Denmark through the lens of the collective housing project at Ordrupvej No. 70 (1937), a landmark work by architect Mogens Lassen (1901–1987) and engineer Ernst Ishøy (1890–1959). The analysis situates the project within the broader context of Danish functionalism, contrasting the international influences of figures such as Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and Walter Gropius (1883–1969) with the local "functional tradition" articulated by architects like Kay Fisker (1893–1965), C.F. Møller (1898–1988), and Arne Jacobsen (1902–1971).

A key focus of the inquiry is on the innovative construction techniques employed at Ordrupvej No. 70, particularly the use of a patented sliding formwork system known as *Systemhuset*. This system facilitated a rapid and cost-effective construction process and is critically analyzed in terms of its contribution to modularity and prefabrication in residential architecture. The central hypothesis is that Ordrupvej 70 represents not only a technical achievement but also a cultural negotiation between Danish tradition and international modernism, anticipating later debates on industrialized housing.

The study is further enriched by historical photographs documenting the construction process. These images capture the intermediate stages of the building's evolution, providing visual evidence of the methods and challenges associated with the implementation of the new construction system. This photographic documentation is integral to understanding the dynamic process of construction and the practical application of modular techniques in mid-20th-century Danish architecture.

Overall, the analysis highlights the contribution of Lassen and Ishøy's collaboration as one of the earliest and most coherent experiments in integrating modular construction and prefabrication into collective housing, offering new perspectives for the historiography of modern architecture in Scandinavia.

Keywords: Collective Housing; Denmark; Mogens Lassen; Modular; Concrete

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Introduction

The objective of this article is to analyze the apartment building at Ordrupvej 70 (1937), designed by architect Mogens Lassen (1901–1987) in collaboration with engineer Ernst Ishøy (1890–1959), as a paradigmatic case of modularity and prefabrication in early 20th-century Denmark. The research focuses on the collaboration between architect and engineer as a decisive factor in construction innovation, examines the building as an experiment in systematized housing production, and situates the project within the broader tensions between international functionalism and the Danish functional tradition.

The central hypothesis is that Ordrupvej 70 not only represents a technical milestone in the optimization of reinforced concrete construction, but also constitutes a cultural negotiation between Danish architectural tradition and the disruptive ideals of modernism. Its significance lies in the way it materializes one of the earliest and most coherent attempts to industrialize collective housing in Scandinavia.

The study is justified by the scarce academic attention that Ordrupvej 70 has received, despite its originality and relevance. By situating the project within the broader debates on functionalism in Denmark and highlighting the technical innovations introduced by Ishøy, this article contributes to the historiography of architecture by recovering a little-explored case. In particular, the photographs of the construction process play a central role: they not only document the experimental character of the building but also become an analytical tool that allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of modularity and prefabrication within the European debates on housing.

The Transition to Functionalism in Denmark

The Danish architect Mogens Lassen began his professional career in an architectural context dominated by neoclassicism and the emergence of functionalism. In the Nordic country, functionalism took two strands: the *internationale funktionalisme* (international functionalism) a movement whose leading European exponents were Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and Walter Gropius (1883–1969); and the *funktionelle tradition* (functional tradition) a term coined by architect Kay Fisker (1893–1965) and associated with the work of C.F. Møller (1898–1988), Ivar Bentsen (1876–1947), and Arne Jacobsen (1902–1971) among others. This duality has been widely studied in the historiography of Nordic modernism (Weston 1996, Østergård 2012), which situates Denmark as a country where modern architecture advanced more cautiously than in neighboring Sweden or Norway.

Attempting to explain this two-headed phenomenon, professor Nils-Ole Lund (1930–2021), in an article for the magazine *Arkitekten* titled *Funktionalismen i Danmark*, described the functional tradition as "a moderate, healthy, and sensible vision of the art of architecture" (Lund 1980, 184)

or as "a mix of local tradition with a rather superficial translation of European functionalism" (Lund 1980, 184). In contrast, international functionalism was perceived as a very disruptive and "industrial" style. In fact, in the same article, the author noted a certain reluctance and criticism from both the profession and Danish academia toward those developments emerging in other Central European territories —particularly in France and Germany—.

The architects of the Mogens Lassen generation received an eminently classical training and, although neoclassicism persisted in many major projects well into the 1930s, there was a noticeable shift in architecture in the late 1930s. Danish scepticism contrasted with the attitudes in other Nordic countries such as Sweden and Norway, where international functionalism was embraced with greater enthusiasm. In Norway, Lars Thalian Backer (1892–1930) published a manifesto in support of modern architecture in the Norwegian magazine *Byggekunst*, stating that:

> "We want to create an architecture that is in tune with the era in which we live and that is natural in relation to the material with which we build. We want to put an end to masking and accessory decoration. Function will determine form; plan and facade will be one." (Backer 1927)

Thus, he characterized neoclassical architecture as a relic of the past, unable to reflect societal transformations. This Nordic debate helps to understand the singularity of Lassen's later collaboration with Ishøy: Ordrupvej 70 embodies precisely the tension between local tradition and the radical proposals of European modernism.

In fact, if we compare the "modern" pavilion for the 1925 International Exposition of Decorative Arts in Paris with the Danish pavilion —for the same exhibition— we observe two completely different architectural styles. The Danish pavilion, designed by architect Kay Fisker, conveyed monumentality and employed symmetry as a compositional element —a neoclassical trait— whereas Le Corbusier's Esprit Nouveau pavilion was conceived as a white, dematerialized box. This represents an architectural style that stood in stark contrast to the Danish architecture.

Other signs of this reluctance toward modernity can be found in the account written by Professor Kaj Gottlob (1887–1976) after an academic trip to Germany. His comments reflected the Danish scepticism toward the new Central European architectural style. Among the most noteworthy visits were those to Heinrich Tessenow's schools in Hellerau (1911) and Klotzsche (1925) in Dresden, where they appreciated an architecture that respected tradition and aligned with their country's trends. In contrast, while touring the houses at the *Werkbund's Die Wohnung* exhibition in Stuttgart (1927), they were impressed by the use of new materials such as metal, glass, and concrete. However, this modernity ultimately failed to convince them, to the point where they questioned its formalism.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the spread of international functionalism in the Nordic countries was gradual. Its beginning is dated to the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, organized by Erik Gunnar Asplund (1885–1940), where the new architectural language was presented under optimal conditions: a large public attendance, positive media coverage, and a privileged location in Djurgården, by the water, on an exceptionally sunny summer day. However, a year earlier in Denmark, the Bygge og Bolig exhibition –organized in Copenhagen by the Danish Association of Architects– brought functionalism closer to the public, since society was not yet aware of what was happening in Germany and France.

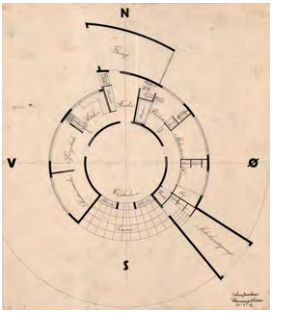
At this event, Arne Jacobsen (1902–1971) and Flemming Lassen (1902–1984), brother of Mogens Lassen, presented the House of the Future (1929), a proposal that particularly captured the visitors' attention for its radical nature. The architects designed the house as an "open machine" in the shape of a spiral, where one could live in accordance with new aspirations.

"It was a dream of free forms and technical aids that reduced labor," they said. In fact, the family model was changing and, consequently, the housing model was being questioned. Families were organized differently: both adults worked during the day, and children spent time at school. Free time became important, and as a result, the home was no longer a place of "domestic labor" but rather a venue for gathering, ritual, and communal enjoyment. For Mogens Lassen, the kitchen and the "cave" as a cozy room would be two of his main elements, thus addressing the shift in the social model posed by international functionalism.

The significance of Mogens Lassen's work in both single-family housing and multi-family residential buildings lies in his ability to employ the international style within a traditional Danish context. In fact, he is considered one of Le Corbusier's Danish disciples.

[Fig. 1]
Danish pavilion Kay Fisker

[Fig. 2]
Le Corbusier pavilion



Mogens Lassen's Training and Early Influences

To understand Lassen's architectural evolution and his relationship with engineer Ernst Ishøy, it is necessary to contextualize his education and the personal connections he established throughout his career.

From an early age, Mogens Lassen and his brother were classmates with Hans Bretton-Meyer (1902–1984) and Arne Jacobsen (1902–1971) at the Nærum Kostskole, a school that educated in "knowledge, will, and the ability to work", "the only thing that allows one to do something in the world" according to the school's 1908-09 annual guide. However, as historian Lisbet Balslev Jørgensen (1928–2002) noted in Mogens Lassen's 1989 biography, the young man never quite adapted to such a classical pedagogy. In fact, this discomfort with his studies would mark his academic journey with successive dropouts.

The Lassen brothers began their training at the Ahlefeldtsgade Technical School in 1918, where they worked as bricklayer apprentices and honed their drawing skills. During this period, Mogens became friends with Birthe, the daughter of architect Carl Petersen (1874–1923),

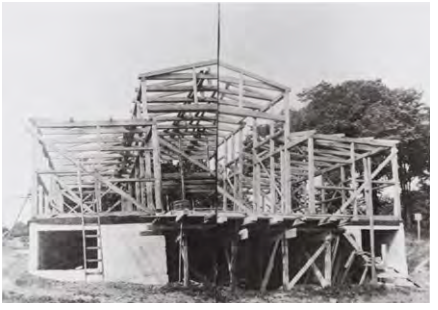
[Fig. 3-4]
House of the future

an important exponent of Danish classicism, whom they visited on multiple occasions at his residence, thereby establishing his first connections with classical architecture.

In the following years, the Lassen brothers made their first foray into architectural practice by designing a house in Randers (1920), employing traditional construction methods with masonry walls clad in wood, evoking the traditional country houses of Øresund.

In 1923, they were admitted to the School of Architecture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, but they never completed their studies due to their inability to adapt to the academic system. However, Mogens maintained contact with the academy through his friends Arne Jacobsen and Hans Bretton-Meyer. After leaving formal education, he worked for an engineering firm, where he acquired technical knowledge.

In 1924, he joined the firm of Edvard Heiberg (1897–1958), an architect influenced by the Bauhaus school of Dessau, whose 1927 house became the origin and reference for successive functionalist-style houses. It was in this architect's library that Lassen discovered the work of Le Corbusier, sparking his interest in international functionalism. The exposure to Heiberg's practice placed Lassen in direct contact with the transnational networks of modernism, reinforcing the idea –present also in Banham (1980) and Curtis (1996)– that modern architecture was as much about technique as about aesthetics.



[Fig. 5-6]
House Edvard Heiberg. Source: Royal Danish Library

Paris. First Contact with Ernst Ishøy

After working with Heiberg, in 1925, Mogens Lassen went on to work for Tyge Hvass (1885–1963), who himself built a "modern" house at Tuborgvej 99 in Hellerup. Hvass, aware of the importance of visiting Le Corbusier's modern works as a reference for European functionalism, facilitated and helped organize Lassen's stay in Paris between 1927 and 1928. There, the young architect worked as a draftsman for the Danish construction firm Christiani & Nielsen, designing railway terminals alongside a team of engineers, a task he found frustrating. In letters from that period to his friends Hans Bretton-Meyer and Ole Wanscher at the time, he expressed his surprise at the idea that engineers could be involved in architecture. However, he was also positively impressed by the precision of their structural calculations and their control over construction processes –especially the technical aspects–.

In Paris, Lassen explored the entirety of Le Corbusier's works, even though at that time the architect had few constructions in the city. In France, Lassen deepened his architectural knowledge derived from the Dom-ino system (1914) and the Maison Citrohan (1920), as well as delving into the image of the modern, functional house that Le Corbusier presented in the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* (1925).

This period is also significant because it is there that he met Danish engineers Chresten Ostenfeld (1900–1976) and Ernst Ishøy (1890–1959), with the latter becoming an intense future collaborator. The relationship between the two was especially fruitful, as both shared an enthusiasm for the new modern architecture. Lassen was drawn to its aesthetics and freedom, while Ishøy was interested in optimizing new materials and exploring their potential to improve structures.

Upon his return to Denmark, skepticism toward functionalism began to dissipate. Neither the magazine *Arkitekten* nor the anti-formalist *Kritisk Revy* voiced criticisms of Le Corbusier. Even at the 1927 Stuttgart Exhibition, Danish architect Kaj Gottlob presented a pavilion titled Esprit Nouveau, symbolizing the transition to modernity. This context allowed Lassen to develop his professional career, consolidating his approach within the principles of international functionalism alongside Ernst Ishøy.

Projects Prior to the Systemhuset

The idea behind functionalism was to harness new techniques and materials to develop an aesthetic that aligned with a new way of life. Mogens Lassen, influenced by the publication *L'Architectural Vivant*, incorporated architectural solutions inspired by the work of Le Corbusier, but with a more intimate approach tailored to the Danish context.

The collaboration between Mogens Lassen and Ernst Ishøy began in 1934 with the design of a single-family house for Dr. Eggert Møller (1893–1996) and his wife Irmeli, daughter of composer Carl Nielsen. They were clients with a high cultural level who were committed to constructing a truly modern home that was different from the conventional designs of the time. The house, built in 1934 on Bakkedal 7 in Hellerup, was conceived as a white cube. It was constructed with reinforced concrete, using a formwork made of wooden boards arranged horizontally, which gave the facade a distinctive patina. However, the complexity and slowness of this process led them to seek a more efficient system.

Ernst Ishøy had been working on the development of a sliding formwork system that would allow construction to be accelerated. This system was not implemented until the construction of the house at Anchersvej 6 (1935) in Klampenborg. Ishøy explained his innovation in an article published in Arkitekten in 1937, entitled Systemhuset:

"Several years ago, I began working on the idea of developing methods to construct reinforced concrete buildings, especially multi-storey residential ones, in a more economical and faster way. I was clear that the great irregularity in design and, therefore, in construction, was the main reason why concrete houses always ended up being more expensive than brick ones." (Ishøy 1937, 173)

During the construction of the house at Anchersvej 6, a sliding formwork made of steel plates was tested for the first time, designed to reduce construction times, improve quality control, and lower costs. For this to be possible, close cooperation between architect and engineer was essential. According to Ishøy: "The task of constructing more economical reinforced concrete houses can be divided into two parts: first, the design of the house and then its execution." (Ishøy 1937, 173).

In the following years, the Systemhuset continued to be refined in other projects, such as the residences at Solystvej 5 and 7 (1936) in Copenhagen. Finally, in 1937, Mogens Lassen built the apartment building at Ordrupvej 70, also known as "the hive", consolidating the application of these innovations in architecture.






[Fig. 7–12]
Images documenting the construction process of the house Anchersvej 6. Source: Royal Danish Library.

The Ordrupvej 70 Apartment Building

The importance of the apartment building of Ordrupvej 70 lies in its definition of a simple and efficient structure. Its design is based on a succession of reinforced concrete panels arranged along the longitudinal axis of the site, which subtly reveal themselves on the facade, and establish the "system" that defines all other elements of the building —facade and internal divisions—. Acting as the generating element.

The structure, and therefore the project, is the result of a close collaboration between architect Mogens Lassen and engineer Ernst Ishøy, who conceived the building through a meticulous construction approach, planning each stage of its execution. The objective was for all structural elements —load-bearing walls and slabs— to have the same thickness. Thanks to this uniformity, they could be formworked simultaneously, generating a monolithic structure that freed the facade from any load-bearing functions.

The dimensional control of the spans between the load-bearing walls was crucial —approximately 4.15 meters—. The precision in the structural calculations was such that the building, designed by Lassen and Ishøy, was constructed with concrete panels of 15 and 12 centimeters thick, as were the slabs. This gave the ensemble a sense of slenderness, particularly evident in period photographs where the contrast between this modern architecture and the surrounding traditional buildings is striking, thereby emphasizing the change in style.

[Fig. 13]
Front view of the Ordrupvej 70 building. Source: Royal Danish Library.

For the construction of the load-bearing walls, the steel sliding formwork system known as Systemhuset, patented by Ernst Ishøy, was used. According to the engineer, "The quality of work with steel formworks is superior to that obtained with wooden formworks." (Ishøy 1937, 174)

This system surpassed the one previously employed in the project for a house at Bakkedal 7 in Hellerup. The new system represented a significant advancement by allowing the construction of one floor every four days. As a result, the process was 10% more economical than traditional construction and, in theory, the taller the building, the more cost-effective the method would be.

In addition to reducing costs and time, the system also optimized the use of built space. Unlike traditional brick structures, which required thicker walls at the lower levels, reinforced concrete allowed for a consistent section throughout the vertical span.

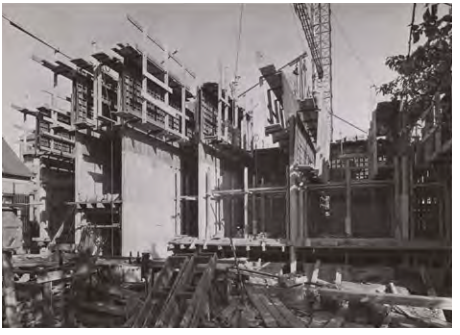
This innovation situates Ordrupvej 70 within the broader European discourse of industrialized housing. Comparable experiments were taking place in Germany and the Netherlands (Curtis 1996), but the Danish example is distinctive for the intensity of the architect-engineer collaboration and the adaptation to local tradition.

The industrialization of this process involved the introduction of machinery in construction, which represented a true revolution in the sector. Although the press of the time welcomed this innovation with enthusiasm, it also expressed concern over a possible reduction in the workforce. However, Ishøy commented in his article that "it was possible to increase the speed of execution, as the system allowed for twice as many workers to be employed," (Ishøy 1937, 174) thereby dispelling this concern.

Once the structure was built, one of the most significant technical challenges of the project was the longitudinal facades. To solve these, an industrialized solution in line with dry construction was used: prefabricated wooden frames incorporating windows and opaque panels. These elements not only reinforced the modern aesthetic of the ensemble but also met the thermal and acoustic requirements.

[Fig. 14-15]
Photo of the house worker. Source: Royal Danish Library.

[Fig. 16-19]
Images documenting the construction process of the building Ordrupvej 70.

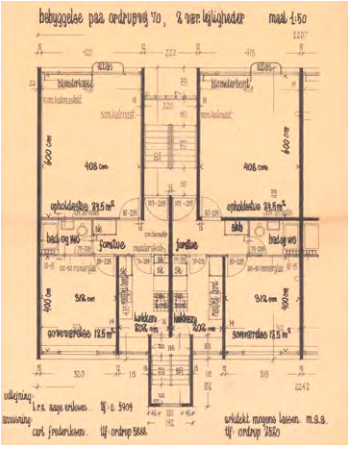


As for the balconies, they were not conceived merely as functional elements, like the kitchen staircase recommended by firefighters, but as an extension of the living room, allowing them to be enjoyed when weather conditions were favourable. Moreover, the inclusion of a sliding door along the width of the balcony optimized the use of interior space.

From a design perspective, this articulation of structure, façade, and balcony reveals an understanding of modern housing that goes beyond technical efficiency. Lassen and Ishøy's project anticipates debates on flexibility, rationalization, and the "dwelling machine", situating Ordrupvej 70 in dialogue with Le Corbusier's theories while grounding them in a Danish context (Frampton 2020).

Mogens Lassen was able to organize the project around the architectural conception that Auguste Perret presented in Contribution à une Théorie de l'Architecture (1952). Perret formulated a series of aphorisms in which he equated truth with beauty, truth with structural clarity, and truth with proportion. One of his fundamental principles was: "L'architecture est l'art d'organiser l'espace. C'est par la construction qu'il s'exprime." (Perret 1952, 29). And thus, he approached the project alongside engineer Ernst Ishøy. For both men, artistic expression was just as important as the technical and social aspects of the building, and Ordrupvej 70 addressed both.

This interpretation reinforces the contribution of the project: Ordrupvej 70 embodies the balance between technical innovation and architectural meaning, showing how prefabrication could serve not only as an economic tool but also as a generator of new spatial and social models of housing.



[Fig. 20-21]
Front Elevation and Floor Plan ofof the building Ordrupvej 70.

Final considerations

The residential building at Ordrupvej, designed by architect Mogens Lassen and built in 1937, represents a milestone in the application of the construction system developed by engineer Ishøy. Its innovative use of reinforced concrete and its structure with transverse load-bearing walls allowed not only greater flexibility in facade design but also an optimization of construction processes, reducing both time and costs compared to traditional brick buildings.

The integration of large windows and sliding doors reflects a modern approach to residential architecture, improving interior lighting and ventilation. Additionally, the use of materials such as cork and stainless steel shows an interest in thermal efficiency and durability.

The aim of Systemhuset was to offer a rapid and economical construction method. Although the building at Ordrupvej 70 generated great expectations, it did not lead to further developments and remained an isolated case. Unfortunately, the other projects never materialized and remained only on paper.

Nevertheless, the scientific contribution of this project lies in three main aspects: it demonstrates the potential of reinforced concrete to systematize housing construction through modular repetition; it highlights the importance of the architect–engineer collaboration as a generator of technical and aesthetic innovation; and it shows how Danish architecture negotiated between tradition and international modernism, making Ordrupvej 70 a cultural as well as a technical milestone.

In this sense, the article contributes to the historiography of modern architecture by reframing Ordrupvej 70 as a case that anticipated later industrialized housing systems in Europe, while also evidencing the limits of innovation in the Danish context of the 1930s. The hypothesis proposed at the beginning –that Ordrupvej 70 embodies both a technical milestone and a cultural negotiation– is confirmed through the detailed analysis of its design, construction process, and reception.

Thus, beyond being an isolated experiment, the building constitutes a reference point for current debates on prefabrication and sustainability, since it reveals how early 20th-century architects and engineers already grappled with issues of speed, cost, efficiency, and liveability that remain central today (Frampton 2020).

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Photographic Narratives of Modern Public Housing in Venezuela Across Two Moments

María Fernanda Jaua

Abstract

Unidad de Habitación Cerro Grande and *Comunidad 2 de Diciembre*, renamed *Comunidad 23 de Enero* after the overthrow of Marcos Pérez Jiménez's military regime, are two public housing projects developed in Caracas, Venezuela, by the *Taller de Arquitectura del Banco Obrero (TABO)* during the 1950s. Both are part of the selection of Caracas buildings for the Interactive Atlas | Visual Register of Urban Architecture | Latin America 1940–1970, developed within the framework of two research projects on the relationship between photography and architecture in Latin America, directed by Professor Cristina Gastón Guirao at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia: "Recovery and Dissemination of Photographic Archives of Modern Architecture for the Development of an Operational Visual Heritage" and "Architecture, Photography and the City: Geolocation and Comparative Study of Photographic Records of Modern Architecture." This paper focuses on a selection of photographs of both complexes corresponding to two different moments in their history: the first during and shortly after their construction, the second in the present day. Through images from both periods, the article examines the modern image of progress that the dictatorship attempted to project, alongside the architectural principles, design strategies, and values pursued by the architects. By comparing early images of both projects, *Cerro Grande* from the first years and *2 de Diciembre* from the final stages of the workshop's brief existence, it is possible to identify the concessions and reductions imposed on the architects due to budgetary constraints and, more significantly, the tight deadlines required to align with the regime's propaganda program. Finally, the recent photographs offer insight into the deterioration and ongoing challenges these housing complexes face today, while also highlighting the enduring formal and spatial qualities of the original architecture and the everyday life it continues to sustain.

Keywords: architectural photography, modern housing, Latin American architecture, Caracas, Banco Obrero

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The *Taller de Arquitectura del Banco Obrero TABO* (Architecture Workshop of the Workers' Bank) was established in May 1951 to develop housing plans and design urban and residential projects to address the housing shortage among Venezuela's middle and working classes, as revealed by the 1950 National Population Census.[1] One of its main objectives was to eliminate the proliferation of informal housing in the country's principal cities, especially Caracas, where the largest share of the population was, and still is, concentrated. The *Banco Obrero*, a public institution founded in 1928, was responsible for managing the development of public housing programs. TABO, which underwent several organizational changes during its existence, operated from 1951 until 1958, the year dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown. Architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva directed the studio throughout this period, working alongside several young architects and architecture students. As Beatriz Meza notes, TABO's activity unfolded within "historical circumstances marked by the predominance of a military regime [...] the economic boom generated by oil revenues, the modernizing drive in different areas of national action, rural-to-urban migration, the urban development boom, and population growth."[2] For a comprehensive account of the origins and activities of TABO, we recommend consulting Beatriz Meza's doctoral thesis and her other related works, as well as Roberto Castillo's doctoral thesis. Castillo's thesis also provides an important account of both ensembles, with new drawings and photographs as part of his analysis.[3]

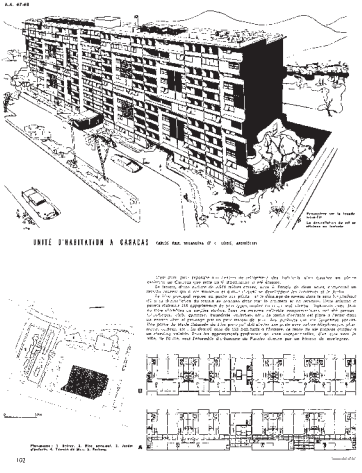
Although the focus of this article is on the role of photography, it is necessary to begin by examining the drawings of an initial, unbuilt project, which help explain the evolution of the workshop's architectural approach, the original intentions behind its proposals, and the reasons behind decisions made during its development. Carlos Raúl Villanueva and Carlos Celis Cepero designed the *Unidad de Habitantes Quinta Crespo* (Quinta Crespo Residents Unit), a project that was never built. Together with *Unidad de Habitación Cerro Grande* and *Unidad Residencial El Paraíso*, both developed during the early years of TABO's operations, this project helped establish the foundational guidelines for the buildings included in the *Plan Nacional de la Vivienda 1951–1955* (National Housing Plan 1951–1955).

The design of the *Quinta Crespo* features a 12-story block clearly influenced by the high-rise housing models developed in Europe since the 1930s, particularly those that elevated the building on *pilotis* to liberate the ground floor for communal use. Above all, its forms, spaces and

1 Meza. Beatriz. 2007. *El Taller de Arquitectura del Banco Obrero (TABO)* (PhD diss., Universidad Central de Venezuela), 10.
2 Meza, "El Taller de Arquitectura...," 10: "en circunstancias históricas signadas por el predominio de un régimen militar [...] la bonanza económica generada por los ingresos petroleros, el impulso modernizador en diferentes áreas de la acción nacional, las migraciones del campo a las ciudades, el auge urbanístico y el incremento demográfico."
3 Castillo, Roberto. 2015. *Appropriating Modern Architecture: Designers' Strategies and Dwellers' Tactics in the Evolution of the 1950s Venezuelan Superbloques.* (PhD diss., University of Kansas).

elements draw from the *Unité d'habitation* prototype developed by Le Corbusier since the 1940s. In Venezuela, such tall residential blocks are known as *superbloques*, and their relationship to European precedents is unmistakable. The National Housing Plan included numerous textual and graphic references to Le Corbusier's work. As Beatriz Meza observes:

> "...at TABO, the influence of Le Corbusier is fundamental, both in terms of his theories, projects, and work organization. The workshop operated under the guidance of a Master, with architects and draftsmen working collaboratively. From the spatial and furniture layout of the space occupied by the Workshop in 1951 to the Corbusierian maxims printed on the walls, the Swiss architect's presence is palpable in the work of those developing state housing proposals for the Banco Obrero."[4]



4 Meza. "El Taller de Arquitectura...," 100: "en el TABO es fundamental la influencia de Le Corbusier en cuanto a sus teorías, proyectos y organización para el trabajo, en un taller donde arquitectos y dibujantes se desempeñan bajo la guía de un Maestro. Desde la distribución espacial y del mobiliario en el espacio que ocupa el Taller en 1951, hasta las máximas corbusieranas impresas en las paredes, la presencia del arquitecto suizo se deja sentir en la labor de quienes desarrollan propuestas de vivienda estatal para el BO."

[Fig. 1]
Carlos Raúl Villanueva and Carlos Celis Cepero, Unidad de Habitantes Quinta Crespo, Taller de Arquitectura TABO. Published as "Unité d'habitation à Caracas," in L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, nos. 67–68 (1956): 91.

The project for *Quinta Crespo* was presented at the National Housing Plan exhibition held in November 1951 and, in the following years, was published in several national and international architectural journals, including *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, nos. 67–68 (1956) (Fig. 1), as part of an extensive feature on Venezuelan architecture. The drawings clearly reflect the Corbusian themes mentioned earlier and also emphasize the three-dimensionality of the façades, with balconies and setbacks designed to protect the dwellings' interiors from heat and direct sunlight. The design of solar protection elements was a recurring concern in mid-20th-century modern Venezuelan architecture. The search for climate solutions in tropical conditions, with the specific influence of the *brise-soleil*, designed by Le Corbusier after his travels to North Africa, is likewise evident in the project.

Following this early proposal, the two projects that constitute the focus of this study mark the beginning and the end of TABO's built work. Guido Bermúdez Briceño designed the *Unidad de Habitación Cerro Grande* as his graduation thesis at the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Central University of Venezuela. Bermúdez was Villanueva's first collaborator at TABO. While still a student, he developed the project within the workshop, and after graduating, he continued working on it with Pedro Lluberes and Carlos Brando as collaborators in the design of the shopping center. Construction began in 1952. Bermúdez remained at TABO until 1955, and during those four years, he was responsible for the design of some of the most significant prototypes developed within the workshop.

Cerro Grande corresponds to the *National Housing Plan*, officially proposed until 1955, but which began to be replaced as early as 1953 by the *Plan Cerro Piloto*, a new phase characterized by substantial changes in urban planning and architectural criteria, driven largely by budgetary restrictions and reflected in staff reductions. *Comunidad 2 de Diciembre*, designed and built in three stages during the last three years of TABO (1955, 1956, and 1957), is thus determined by a very different period in its short trajectory. Villanueva worked with architect José Hoffmann and José Manuel Mijares, who was still a student. The enormous complex is composed of *superbloques*, low-rise housing blocks, and communal service buildings. The model for the new *superbloques* was the *Unidad Vecinal Diego de Losada*, designed by Carlos Brando in 1953, without many of the elements and spatial qualities of the earlier proposals, in an attempt to meet the required cuts and deadlines. The state's demands, primarily related to costs and, above all, to the design and construction timelines required to meet a schedule of inaugurations that favored its publicity interests, had progressively diminished the aspirations of TABO's architects. The changes and concessions they had to make to move forward were reflected in

the reduction of spatial and material qualities of the dwellings and common spaces, as well as in the elimination of the proposed elements for climate protection. As Roberto Castillo states:

> "The first three *superbloques* planned between 1951 and 1953, *Cerro Grande*, *El Paraíso*, and the unrealized *Quinta Crespo* marked a promising beginning for the *superbloque* as they included communal services and a more elaborated architectural design. When mass production became the driving force in the second stage of the National Housing Plan *Cerro Piloto* in 1954, the free-standing *superbloque* was set aside in favor of neighborhoods of multiple buildings such as the emblematic *2 de Diciembre* (later renamed *23 de Enero*)."[5]

Most of the photographs we know of these housing projects, so significant in Venezuelan architectural and urban history, were taken at the time of their construction or in the years immediately following. They were published and continue to appear in recent studies and, as such, have shaped the image we architects have of these complexes that have defined and transformed vast areas of the city. They were originally commissioned to promote the dictatorship's new image of modernity and progress, encapsulated in what the regime called the *Nuevo Ideal Nacional* (New National Ideal). Public works were one of the key pillars supporting this doctrine, with housing projects playing a leading role. Architects, for their part, relied on these images to disseminate the conceptual foundations of their work, as well as the specific features they considered most valuable. The housing projects developed by TABO for the Banco Obrero, together with other large-scale urban initiatives such as the *Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas*, as well as private buildings that reflected national ideals of modernization and progress, were not only featured in Venezuelan publications but also reviewed in many of the most prominent international architectural journals.

As part of the research project "Recovery and Dissemination of Photographic Archives of Modern Architecture for the Development of an Operational Visual Heritage,"[6] which supports this study, a significant number of photographic archives documenting modern Venezuelan architecture were catalogued. Several of these archives include images of the two projects selected for this article, especially *Comunidad 2 de Diciembre*, which was extensively photographed and more widely disseminated than *Cerro Grande*. Among the recovered materials, one envelope stood out: it contains photographs stamped with the seal of the Photography and Cinematography Service of the Ministry of Education.

5 Castillo. "Appropriating Modern Architecture...," 65.

6 Click.org, "Recovery and Dissemination of Photographic Archives of Modern Architecture for the Development of an Operational Visual Heritage," accessed July 29, 2025, https://click.org.es/equipo-submenu_3/?lang=en.

One of these images is a photograph of *Cerro Grande* (Fig. 2), taken when it was recently built, which captures several of the architectural themes originally proposed by TABO for these housing complexes. The composition is structured around the relationship between the tall residential *superbloque* and the low-rise commercial building. The *superbloque*'s volume, viewed in a foreshortened perspective, forms the backdrop for the composition. Its rigorous formal order is designed to allow for spatial and functional variations: the fourth floor is a free, open plan for common use that visually divides the structure into two segments and reveals its straightforward system of concrete porticos (this open level corresponds to the access bridges from the hill on the opposite side of the image, which were never built); on the roof terrace, also a shared space, the area is protected by a lightweight structure of four vaults that extend toward asymmetrically flat roofs; the variations of the façade reflect how the formal and structural order of the volume allow for alternating duplex and single-story apartments. The photograph is carefully composed to produce an abstract image based on the architectural elements that define the complex at multiple scales, while simultaneously illustrating the building's architectural attributes and its relationship to the site.

The *superbloque* and the low-rise commercial building are set perpendicularly, a configuration explained by the architects as a response to the needs of the complex and its urban integration: "the architectural composition opens onto Calle Real de El Valle."[7] This relationship with the site is better understood with two other images. One is by Colombian photographer Leo Matiz (Fig. 3). It is a view of the shopping center's volume taken from an opposite perspective. Matiz focuses on the small building's values by highlighting the inclined wall that defines the shopping center's southern boundary, the taller volume crowned by vaulted forms that acts as an articulation with the *superbloque* at the opposite end, and the connecting corridors and balconies, opening onto the open garden formed by both volumes. The relationship with the surroundings, therefore means that this garden is designed to integrate with those who live beyond its boundaries through this service building.

7 "Centro comercial Cerro Grande," *Integral* 1 (1954): n.p.

The other image is a view from the east, taken by an unknown photographer (Fig. 4). We only see a fragment of the *superbloque*, another of the shopping center and another of the garden they shape. The point of view underscores the scale of the complex in a way we couldn't glimpse in the previous images: the impressive dimensions of the residential block in relation to the small perpendicular volume. These differing perspectives remind us that photography not only documents architecture, but also actively shapes our perception of it revealing how a single built reality can sustain multiple visual narratives.

[Fig.2]
Guido Bermúdez, Unidad de Habitación Cerro Grande, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Photographer unknown. Servicio de Fotografía y Cinematografía del Ministerio de Educación. Museo de Arquitectura Archive, Caracas.

[Fig.3]
Guido Bermúdez, Centro Comercial Cerro Grande, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Photograph by Leo Matiz. Archivo Fotografía Urbana, Caracas.

[Fig.4]
Guido Bermúdez, Unidad de Habitación Cerro Grande, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Photographer unknown. Museo de Arquitectura Archive, Caracas.

The envelope of photographs from the Photography and Cinematography Service of the Ministry of Education also included images of the first phase of *2 de Diciembre* (Fig. 5). These focus primarily on the relationships between the *superbloques* and the lower buildings of the ensemble, through which the various open and communal spaces at ground level were articulated. These plazas and gardens, defined by the relationships between the residential blocks and the service volumes of varied shapes and functions, constitute one of the most distinctive aspects of these projects. Both the low-rise residential structures and the service buildings were fundamental to TABO's vision; without their functional, formal and spatial contributions, the workshop's model of communal living cannot be fully understood. Yet, the colossal dimensions of the *superbloques* have often overshadowed their importance.

[Fig. 5]
Carlos Raúl Villanueva, Comunidad 2 de Diciembre, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Photographer unknown. Servicio de Fotografía y Cinematografía del Ministerio de Educación. Museo de Arquitectura Archive, Caracas.

The previous photographs focus on the architectural ensemble, isolating it from its urban surroundings. In the backgrounds, we can glimpse distant neighborhoods and mountains, but the images do not reveal how the new construction relates to its context, particularly given that these projects were conceived to replace vast areas of informal housing. A clearer understanding of their relationship to the site can be seen in aerial views taken by the Hamilton Wright firm (Fig. 6), which documented Caracas during the 1950s, and by photographer Paolo Gasparini (Fig. 7). In Hamilton Wright's impressive aerial photograph, we can see in the foreground how the first two stages of the complex were built on land cleared by demolishing a densely packed urban grid. Gasparini's closer view of the first stage is deliberately framed toward the direction of the original colonial layout, thus exposing the radical transformation imposed by the new intervention.

[Fig.6]
Carlos Raúl Villanueva, Comunidad 2 de Diciembre, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Aerial photograph by Hamilton Wright. Archivo Fotografía Urbana, Caracas.

[Fig.7]
Carlos Raúl Villanueva, Comunidad 2 de Diciembre, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Photograph by Paolo Gasparini. Archivo Fotografía Urbana, Caracas.


UNITÉ RÉSIDENTIELLE DU 2 DÉCEMBRE AU CENTRE DE CARACAS

En haut de page : Vue d'ensemble du chantier, deux unités de voisinage sur quatre sont déjà réalisées, les autres sont en cours de construction. Ci-contre : Vue du terrain avant la construction des bâtiments destinés à remplacer la zone insalubre qui l'entoure.

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Architectural magazines such as *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (Fig. 8) published these and other photographs of *2 de Diciembre*, along with drawings and brief explanatory texts. Through this selection of images and publications, it becomes evident that photography was one of the essential tools for presenting and disseminating TABO's projects. The workshop was influenced not only by European architectural ideas in general, and by Le Corbusier in particular, but also by their way of explaining, exhibiting, and disseminating them through photography. Carefully composed images, following the conventions of architectural photography, focused precisely on the specific themes, values, and design solutions that the architects sought to highlight.

Despite the clarity and ambition conveyed through these photographs, the material and social outcomes of these housing projects revealed a far more complex and often problematic reality. TABO's housing plans and complexes did not eradicate informal housing. On the contrary, precarious and unserviced neighborhoods continued to grow and expand exponentially in the following decades. The failure to achieve this central goal of the workshop and the progressive physical deterioration of the buildings are among the most frequently cited arguments against

[Fig. 8]
Carlos Raúl Villanueva, Comunidad 2 de Diciembre, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Published in L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, nos. 67–68 (1956): 91.

this type of housing solution. The enormous *superbloques*, pristine in the photographs taken at the time of their completion, soon began to show visible signs of decay. Common service buildings and open spaces such as plazas, sports fields, and gardens at ground level were also transformed, not only due to lack of maintenance but also through new construction, changes in use, and the erection of walls or fences in response to insecurity.

Considered the most consummate manifestation of a failed utopian ideal, explanations for their decline have attributed responsibility equally to the country's political and social conditions and to the architecture itself, an assessment echoed in the critique of similar developments elsewhere in the world. The most widely cited case is *Pruitt-Igoe*, the public housing complex designed by Minoru Yamasaki and built in St. Louis, Missouri, between 1954 and 1955. It was through an image, a still from the video of its demolition in 1972, that Charles Jencks turned it into a symbol of the end of modern architecture.[8] However, the numerous well-documented studies showing that the failure of *Pruitt-Igoe* was not primarily due to its architectural design remain largely unknown, even among architects.[9]

Photographs also served as a vehicle for both celebrating and criticizing modern Venezuelan architecture. A particularly illustrative example is the controversy that arose in *The New York Times* following the exhibition *Architecture in Venezuela*, presented by the Venezuelan Society of Architects and the Creole Petroleum Corporation at the World Affairs Center in New York in 1957. On September 1, the newspaper's art critic, Stuart Preston, published a review commenting on two concurrent exhibitions in the city, one of which was the Venezuelan show:

> "Lavishly installed, the exhibition consists of large photographic panels, enlarged color transparencies, stereo slides, maps and mosaic samples—all to the end of disclosing the daring and imagination that Caracas' new buildings embody. Anyone interested in contemporary architecture, and particularly in the use of color; in the city and regional planning and in the exploitation of new building materials would do well not to miss it."[10]

A week later, the newspaper published a response to Preston's review, sent to the Art Editor by Ada Louise Huxtable who would later become the paper's architecture critic in 1963. For Huxtable, "Nothing misrepresents quite as convincingly and glamorously as architectural

8 Charles Jencks. 1977. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli.

9 See, for example, Katharine G. Bristol. 1991. "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," *Journal of Architectural Education* 44, no. 3 : 163–71; and Chad Freidrichs, dir. 2011.*The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, documentary film. Accessed July 29, 2025, https://www.pruitt-igoe.com/.

10 Preston. Stuart. 2025. "Buildings of Today. Modern Architecture Featured in Shows," *The New York Times*, September 1, 1957, accessed July 29. https://www.nytimes.com/1957/09/01/archives/buildings-of-today-modern-architecture-featured-in-shows.html

photography."[11] Her critique was directed at Caracas' new architecture in general, whose image of progress, she argued, was being built on the planned and deliberate destruction of the existing urban fabric. She used public housing as a case in point, making remarks that are notable for their lack of contextual knowledge and above all, for the condescending tone used to describe the inhabitants of the pre-existing neighborhoods:

> "Caracas' famous public housing, one of the boldest and handsomest of the photographers' subjects. True, there were no nineteenth century industrial slums. But there were rural slums. These were demolished so that a primitive people, whose life consisted of a hut, a garden and a chicken or pig, could be transferred to sophisticated high-rise apartments."[12]

In the context of this study, the relevance of this controversy lies in the fact that both critics based their assessments entirely on a photographic exhibition, an episode that exemplifies, perhaps better than any other, the immense persuasive power of this medium.

This enduring power of photography continues to shape our understanding of modern architecture today, as seen in the recent work developed for the Interactive Atlas. *Cerro Grande* and *Comunidad 23 de Enero* are part of the selection of Caracas buildings included in the Interactive Atlas | Visual Register of Urban Architecture | Latin America 1940–1970, developed within the research project "Architecture, Photography, and the City: Geolocation and Comparative Study of Photographic Records of Modern Architecture."[13] The general criterion, as explained by Cristina Gastón Guirao, was to geolocate selected buildings in each city, chosen for their urban value, and compare photographs from the time of their construction with current digital images obtained from online applications such as Google Street View:

> "This taking of images adapted to our online life, carried out by the members of the research team, impose some limitations that paradoxically interest us. Without being photographs in the strict sense, their value comes from acting as elements of contrast."[14]

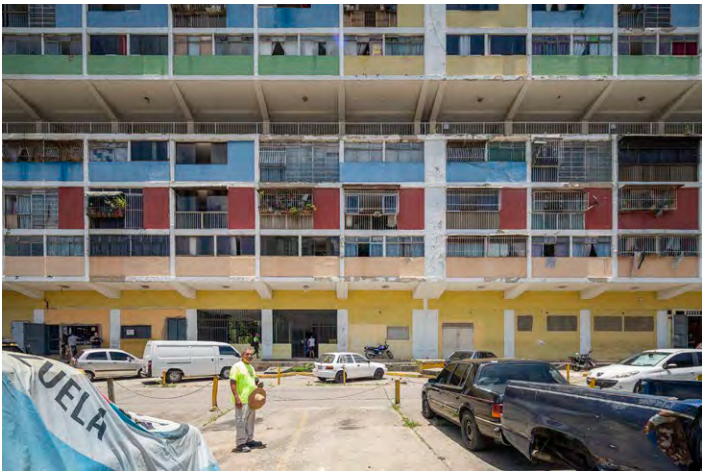
However, in the case of Caracas, such digital images were not available online. As a result, we turned to photographer Julio Mesa, then an architecture student and now a professional architect and photographer, who captured the selected buildings specifically for the Atlas' digital platform.

11 Huxtable, Ada Louise. 1957. "Dissenting View. Correspondent Questions Venezuelan Architectural Achievements," *The New York Times*, September 8. Accessed July 29, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/1957/09/08/archives/dissenting-view-correspondent-questions-venezuelan-architectural.html

12 Huxtable. "Dissenting View."

13 Click.org, "Architecture, Photography and the City: Geolocation and Comparative Study of Photographic Records of Modern Architecture" . Accessed July 29, 2025, https://click.org.es/equipo-submenu_3/?lang=en.

14 Gastón Guirao, Cristina. 2019. "Atlas Interactive. Visual Register of Urban Architecture in Latin America: A Work in Progress," *Sophia* 4 (1). Accessed July 29, 2025. https://www.up.pt/revistas/index.php/sophia/article/view/228.



Interested in modern Venezuelan architecture since his student years, Julio Mesa had already begun a photographic register of relevant buildings. This effort was expanded through his participation in the Atlas project and has continued to grow in the years since. Although currently based in Barcelona, Spain, Mesa travels frequently to Venezuela and uses these visits to photograph buildings he has not yet documented, or to produce updated images of those already in his archive. On one of these trips, in late 2023, he revisited the two complexes discussed in this essay, *Cerro Grande* (Figs. 9–11) and *23 de Enero* (Figs. 12–14), focusing specifically on buildings from the third stage of the latter. This third and final stage, the most problematic of the three, was built on narrow terraces that led the architects to link up to three *superbloques* in a row. The resulting structures, with their disproportionate dimensions, have posed even greater challenges for their functioning and maintenance.

[Fig.9–11]
Guido Bermúdez, Unidad de Habitación Cerro Grande, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Photograph by Julio Mesa, 2023.

Mesa's recent photographs offer a valuable disciplinary perspective on these housing complexes. They are architectural photographs composed following the rules of traditional architectural photography, as the early photographs we have examined, but now documenting the current state of the buildings and the lives they support. They reveal the severe deterioration in many of the dwellings, whose inhabitants often lack the resources needed for maintenance despite evident efforts. They also show the decayed structures, unmaintained green areas, and informal interventions. However, precisely because of Mesa's emphasis on formal order and architectural composition, we can also clearly perceive the structural logic of the original design, as well as the vitality that architecture continues to foster. In the few photographs selected for this essay, we see, for example, the value of Cerro Grande's open and ventilated common spaces, protected by carefully designed roofs and visually integrated into the surroundings. We can also see the effort to maintain these open spaces in the open circulations of the 23 de Enero superbloques and, above all, the relevance of the low-rise buildings, as they continue to create

[Fig.12-14]
Carlos Raúl Villanueva, Comunidad 2 de Diciembre, Taller de Arquitectura TABO, Caracas. Photograph by Julio Mesa, 2023.

communal spaces and bring them to life. Mesa's contemporary perspective, widely shared on his social media platforms,[15] is therefore a valuable contribution to the understanding of these significant complexes, which, despite foundational studies such as those by Meza and Castillo, remain largely unknown and are often assessed through uninformed or generalized views.

The Interactive Atlas | Visual Register of Urban Architecture | Latin America 1940–1970 is an invitation to engage with architecture through photography and to explore, through visual analysis, the spatial and urban significance of selected buildings. This article, as well as Julio Mesa's photographic record, responds to that call by revisiting *Cerro Grande* and *23 de Enero* through images taken with analogous visual strategies at two key moments: during their original construction and in the present day. Together, these photographs document the persistence of a design logic that allowed for spatial and functional richness, even in contexts of limitation. Through them, we recognize not only the material and functional challenges these complexes face, but also the value of the original proposals: the flexibility of the superbloque's structure, its integration to low-rise communal buildings, and the conception of open spaces that support daily life. Rather than reinforcing simplified or dismissive narratives, this visual comparison invites a more attentive reading of their built reality and architectural legacy, one that acknowledges both the challenges and the achievements that continue to shape these living spaces.

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15 Julio Mesa, personal photographic archive, Instagram @juliotavolo; Flickr: www.flickr.com/photos/juliocesarmesa/.

Bernd and Hilla Becher: Records of loss

Giulia Incicco

Abstract

The art duo Bernd and Hilla Becher, renowned for their focus on documenting obsolete industrial structures destined to disappear, gave birth to a work at the intersection of different genres, which contributed to revolutionizing the course of late 20th-century photography. In the present work, the inherent documentary value of their photographs will be highlighted, while also shedding light on a shifting perception of landscape appreciation, particularly related to the iconic exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, in which they participated as the only two Europeans among ten artists. Consideration will be given to how their work contributed to the development of industrial archaeology in the Ruhr, where their systematic documentation of vanishing industrial sites played a crucial role in redefining heritage preservation. The case of Zeche Zollern, an Art Nouveau industrial complex in Dortmund, will be examined as a concrete example of how their photographs influenced the recognition and conservation of industrial heritage. Finally, their work will be contextualized within contemporary environmental discourse, particularly in relation to the Anthropocene, emphasizing how their images raise critical questions about sustainability, the transformation of post-industrial landscapes, and the evolving relationship between industry and the environment.

Keywords: Bernd and Hilla Becher, Industrial archaeology, Post-industrial landscape, Heritage preservation, Anthropocene

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Introduction

The life-long collaboration between Bernd and Hilla Becher gave birth to a work at the intersections between different genres, which contributed to revolutionizing the course of late 20th century photography.

Bernhard Becher (1931–2007), called Bernd, was born in Siegen, in an area of Northwest Germany rich in mines and steel plants. He studied drawing and painting in Stuttgart and then graphic and printing techniques in Düsseldorf, where he met Hilla Wobeser (1934–2015)[1]. Born in Potsdam, she had instead trained as a photographer and was already working as such when she started to attend the Art Academy, where she was asked to help to set up a little department of photography[2]. Their cooperation started in 1959, inaugurated by a first project on the loom houses built in the second half of the 19th century by immigrants employed in local factories in Siegerland[3]. After that, their interest expanded to other categories of industrial installations, such as water towers, coal bunkers, winding towers, breakers (ore, coal, and stone), lime kilns, grain elevators, blast furnaces, steel mills, oil refineries and factory facades. They began to take photographs in Germany, particularly in the Ruhr region, but then they started traveling also abroad on board their Volkswagen van, visiting England, France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and even the United States[4].

The aim of this article is to highlight the intrinsic documentary value of their work. Beyond capturing the technological transformations of an era, their photographs reflect evolving perceptions of the industrial landscape. Their approach aligns with the themes of the seminal 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, in which they participated, drawing attention to the complex relationship between industry and the environment. By systematically documenting industrial sites, their work not only preserves a visual record of vanishing structures but also engages with broader questions of memory, identity, and cultural heritage.

A striking example of this impact is Zeche Zollern, an Art Nouveau industrial complex in Dortmund. Once threatened with demolition, its historical and architectural significance was reassessed in part due to the Bechers' photographic documentation. Today, it stands as a museum and a symbol of industrial reconversion, illustrating how their work extends beyond mere documentation. Their systematic archive has actively shaped the discourse on preservation, demonstrating how photography can function as both a tool for historical awareness and a catalyst for reimagining industrial heritage within contemporary urban and environmental narratives.

1 Susanne Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen* (Schirmer/Mosel, 2005), 12.
2 Hilla Becher, "Hilla Becher in Conversation with Thomas Weaver," *AA Files*, no. 66 (2013): 24.
3 Ibid., 35.
4 Ibid., 36–43.

Finally, their work demands reconsideration in the context of the Anthropocene. Their photographs, which trace the transformation of landscapes at both local and global scales, invite a recontextualization of industrial heritage within today's environmental discourse. By capturing the remnants of a disappearing industrial era, the Bechers' images raise critical questions about sustainability, the long-term impact of industry, and the future of post-industrial landscapes.

Records of loss

In 2013, on the occasion of an interview with Thomas Weaver, Hilla was asked about the seemingly different approaches characterizing her and her husband. The artist confirmed the impression of the British architectural historian, according to whom she seemed "to have a more chemical, physical fascination"[5] with materials such as metal, whose "very nicely"[6] combination with black-and-white photography she had already become obsessed with while assisting the photographer Walter Eichgrün[7]. Conversely, Bernd "appeared to be fundamentally interested in something that was disappearing"[8]. This was notably due to his deep familiarity with the industrial landscape, which had shaped his entire childhood[9]. His roots traced indeed back to the industrial region of Siegerland, where multiple generations of his family had been miners. Bernd's first artistic attempts to represent industrial structures date back to when he was young and involved drawing and lithography, sometimes painting (Fig. 1)[10].

However, as he realized he could not keep pace with the rapid industrial changes, he shifted to photography. His initial ventures into this medium date precisely to 1957, when returning to his home to draw the ironworks, found it to be under demolition. He began thus to take snapshots with a 35mm camera to use them as the basis for his sketches or to assemble them together into collages[11].

Later on, when Bernd and Hilla started to work together, particularly in their early years, they further had to face the challenges posed by rapid industrial transformation. Of particular impact was for example the coal crisis of 1959, which – initially perceived by numerous analysts as a cyclical problem – signified the onset of coal's gradual decline. During the 1970s, the steel sector

5 Becher, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", 23.
6 Ibid., 23.
7 Ibid., 20.
8 Ibid., 23.
9 Heinz-Norbert Jocks, "Interviews mit Bernd und Hilla Becher," in *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, Susanne Lange, (Schirmer/Mosel, 2005), 209.
10 Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 12.
11 When in 1958, while visiting a large Dada exhibition at the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf, Bernd discovered the collages that Paul Citroen had made in the 1920s, he decided to abandon this practice, convinced that he could not do them better. Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 33.

similarly encountered a period of turmoil[12]. As a response to such changes, to which were added financial constraints, and organizational obstacles, they felt compelled to systematize their approach and focus on those buildings directly impacted by rationalization measures. In 1967, describing these circumstances, the duo indeed stated:

> Unsere Arbeit ist, wenn man sie einigermaßen gründlich tun will, ein *Wettlauf mit der Zeit*. Bei der Auswahl mußten wir uns, eingeengt von finanziellen und organisatorischen Schwierigkeiten, sehr beschränken. Von den Gebäuden, die sich überhaupt fotografieren ließen, bevorzugten wir im allgemeinen die vom Abbruch bedrohten, die für Zeit, Gegend und Bauart charakteristischen und die technisch und optisch besonderen Exemplare[13].

12 Stefan Bergerand Jana Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany," in *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation*, ed. Stefan Berger, 1st ed. Vol. 38, (Berghahn Books, 2020), 199. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1850gh6.

13 "Our work, if you want to do it reasonably thoroughly, is *a race against time*. In the selection we had to limit ourselves very much, constrained by financial and organizational difficulties. Of the buildings we were allowed to photograph, we generally preferred those threatened with demolition, those characteristic of the time, area and type of construction, and those that were technically and visually special." (My translation; my italics). Wend Fischer "Anonyme Industriebauten. Fotografische Dokumentation von Hilla und Bernd Becher," *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, no. 1 (1967): 868, as cited in Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 90.

[Fig.1]
Bernd Becher, *Eisernhardter Tiefbau Mine*, Eisern, Germany, 1955/56, Graphite and watercolor on paper.

In addition to the individual's affective attachment to a particular landscape, through their photographs, the Bechers offer a reimagined portrayal of the pioneering aspirations of the 1920s and 1930s. According to Blake Stimson, the grand industrial edifices that once stood as symbols of the grandiose endeavors of collective existence, testaments to advancements in technology, society, and politics, "have aged and are now empty of all but memory of the ambition they once housed"[14]. Moreover, as asserted by Elissa Rosenberg, "photographs do not only interpret; they also implicitly define what we value in the landscape, and thus shape what we see."[15] This aspect can be observed here in connection with the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, to which they took part in 1975 as the only Europeans out of ten. The exhibit took place at George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, in the State of New York and was curated by William Jenkins. The curator's aim was to present "a new documentary objectivity toward the contemporary landscape"[16], which challenged the representation of the American landscape as that of Nature, whose romantic grandeur was pursued by photographers such as Ansel Adams. The exhibited images, whose central theme was the built environment, showcased landscape as a circumscribed, occupied and unspectacular territory. In the particular case of the Bechers, their focus was directed towards capturing industrial architecture that had lost its function over time, leading to its destruction or menaced to eventual disappearance. The presentation of their sequential photographs, organized in a consistent grid and captured directly in black and white, allowed to emphasize the intrinsic quality of these structures as "anonymous sculptures"[17]. In the interview with Weaver, Hilla mentioned that in addition to the anonymity of these constructions, she was intrigued by their state of "stasis":

> As much as their silence and anonymity, the images that I like are always working against something – usually technology. Ever since I was a child, there has always been some new technological development: high-speed film, or smaller faster cameras that people could use while they move. I was always interested in something older, something more static.[18]

14 Blake Stimson, "The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher," *Tate Papers*, no. 1 (Spring 2004), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/01/photographic-comportment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher.

15 Elissa Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic," *Heidelberger E-Books*, no. 24 (2018): 222.

16 Ibid., 225.

17 *Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie technischer Bauten (Anonymus sculptures: a typology of technical construction)* was the title of their first publication in 1970. It was structured in seven chapters, whose subjects were lime kiln, cooling towers, blast furnaces, winding towers, water towers, gas tanks, silos. Later on some of them reached the stature of autonomous collections. It is also worthy to mention that "for the particular plasticity of their photographic work", Bernd and Hilla Becher were awarded the Golden Lion in Sculpture at the XLIV International Art Biennale in Venice in 1990.

18 Becher and Weaver, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", 25.

The technology these pictures were "working against" was continuously renewing itself, "as in Nature where the older is devoured by the newer"[19]. Their pictures contributed to capture the gradual transition from a society rooted in industrial production and storage to one driven by a service-based global economy, tied to distribution and consumerism[20]. In an interview of 1996, Bernd asserted:

> Jede Fabrik produziert soviel wie nur möglich. Wenn sie überleben soll, muss sie wachsen. Fabriken werden immer größer, und die Leute glauben, die Möglichkeiten zum Wachstum seien unbegrenzt. *Aber nichts kann unbegrenzt wachsen.* Gerade als die Nachfrage nach Stahl nachließ, wurden die größten Stahlwerke gebaut. In Baltimore beschloss man, den größten Hochofen der westlichen Welt zu bauen. Dann kam die Stahlkrise. Sie waren Dinosaurier. Sie haben sich gegenseitig aufgefressen.[21] (Fig. 2)

19 Blake Stimson, "The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher," *Tate Papers*, no. 1 (Spring 2004), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/01/photographic-comportment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher.

20 Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic," 225; Francesco Zanot, "Bernhard e Hilla Becher," in *La Fotografia dalla Stampa al Museo* 1941-1980 vol.3, ed. Walter Guadagnini (Skira, 2013), 226.

21 "Every factory produces as much as possible. If it is to survive, it must grow. Factories are getting bigger and bigger, and people believe that the possibilities for growth are unlimited. *But nothing can grow unlimitedly*. Just when the demand for steel was slowing down, the biggest steel mills were built. In Baltimore they decided to build the biggest blast furnace in the western world. Then came the steel crisis. They were dinosaurs. They ate each other up." (My translation from German. My italics). Bernd Becher, "Die Musik der Hochöfen. Bernd and Hilla Becher im Gespräch mit James Lingwood" by James Lingwood, artpress, No. 209 (January 1996), in Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 1992.

[Fig.2]
Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Hochöfen*, 1970-1989, 12 silver prints, 40 x 30 cm each, overall dimensions 172 x 189 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher. [Years and locations have been added on the base of: Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, *Typologien*, (Schirmer/Mosel, 1990), 92-93.]

In the context of this research the adversative clause "Aber nichts kann unbegrenzt wachsen", which sounds in English as "But nothing can grow unlimitedly" can not go unnoticed. It echoes in fact the publication of the Club of Rome's 1972 *The Limits to Growth*, shedding light on the limits in terms of resource availability, environmental degradation, and the planet's carrying capacity, which exponential economic and population growth can encounter. Although, following the art historian Gisela Parak, *New Topographics* exhibition – and thus also the Bechers by extension – can by no means be considered "green"[22], it aligns with a growing societal concern for the environment. The focal point on how human actions influence the landscape can be in fact interpreted as a form of "cultural expression on landscape, nature, and environment"[23]. It may be envisioned as a reaction to the ecological challenges arising from a century of industrialization, urbanization, rapid population growth, and globalization, which – as Parak reminds – from the 1970s led to the emergence of ecocriticism within the humanities[24].

Besides, another point that is important to keep in mind is that the types of industries depicted in the structures of the Bechers' photographs were not disappearing altogether. Abandonment and demolitions involved just some old fashioned buildings, due to structural changes in the industry, material crises or modernisation of certain structures. Yet, this seems rather obvious considering the current climate crisis. According to the IPCC AR4 (2007), it is very likely that most of the observed increase in global average temperatures since the mid-20th century are due to the observed rapid increase in anthropogenic GHGs concentration. Emissions of CO^2 due to fossil fuel burning are then virtually certain to be the dominant influence on this increasing trend[25]. For what concerns Germany, after the Second World War it was called for the deindustrialization of the country. However, during the Cold war, its industrial base became too important for the West and as a result industrial production reached new heights, renewing emissions and pollution. A Statista survey dealing with a time span between 1970 and 2022 reports that Germany emitted 1043,4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 1970. The statistic reflects only those carbon emissions through consumption of oil, gas and coal **(GRAPH 1)**. One of the main reasons for Germany's high emission levels is that coal is the most polluting fossil fuel[26].

22 Gisela Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the New Topographics Transnational Impact* (Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, 2015), 90.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 IPCC 2007, Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, eds. Core Writing Team, Rajendra K. Pachauri and Andy Reisinger (Geneva: IPCC, 2008), 39. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar4/syr/.

26 Ian Tiseo, "Carbon dioxide emissions in the European Union 1970-2022, by selected country", Statista, 11 July 2023. https://www.statista.com/statistics/806887/carbon-dioxide-emissions-co2-emissions-european-union/.

These remarks for Germany particularly apply to the Ruhr industrial area. Bernd and Hilla Becher expanded their work to the region in 1963, photographing in the Gutehoffnungshütte in Oberhausen and the Hüttenwerk Duisburg-Ruhrort as well as in numerous mines[27]. The following picture represents for example the cooling tower of the "Victoria Mathias" colliery in Essen (Fig. 3). A cooling tower is a heat dissipation system which, by exploiting the natural principle of evaporation, rejects waste heat to the atmosphere, allowing a mass of water to be cooled, making it usable again[28]. The structure stands against a neutral background, whose even diffused lighting was due to the fact that the Bechers took their pictures during the winter or spring months. The image is dominated by a feeling of stasis, however this impression should not be generalized. The same Hilla once pointed out that:

> Many people mistakenly think that we photographed the Ruhr industry when it was already decaying, but this is not true. It was at full power. Of course, there was a kind of disappearance of certain old-fashioned structures, or an updating and modernising of parts that were damaged during the war, but the industry itself was still incredibly active.[29]

27 Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 37.
28 Ibid., 61.
29 Becher and Weaver, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", 23.

[Fig.3]
Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Kühlturm, ca. 1950, Zeche "Victoria Mathias", Essen, Ruhrgebiet* (Cooling tower, ca. 1950, "Victoria Mathias", Essen, Ruhr District), 1963, gelatin silver print, 19,53 x 19,4 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher.

This is clear by looking at this photograph taken in Essen in 1964, where only two chimneys can be distinguished in a cloud of smoke shrouding the entire frame (Fig. 4). This picture serves to depict the subject matter of Christian Möller's article "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung" ("Citizens for a blue sky over the Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck and the Interest Group against Air Pollution") published within the pages of the journal *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* in 2022[30]. The rapid reconstruction after the Second World War and economic growth in the 1950s led to a swift upsurge in air pollution levels. The release of soot, dust, and sulfur dioxide – a toxic byproduct of fossil fuels burning – became a detrimental issue for inhabitants of the industrialized region of the Ruhr. The deleterious effects of these airborne pollutants manifested in fact in the form of an alarming escalation in cancer cases, respiratory afflictions, and cardiovascular ailments. Moreover great damages extended also to agriculture, forestry and buildings. Those affected protested against this in submissions and petitions and thus drew the attention of politicians to the abuses, but without the situation improving. As historian Franz-Josef Brüggemeier has observed, although the vast majority of working-class residents had previously prioritized work above all else, they had by this stage become unwilling to tolerate the prevailing levels of pollution and were no longer prepared to acquiesce in them.[31]. Growing public awareness of the pollution problem produced political pressure for change, and it is worth recalling Willy Brandt's resounding promise of 'a blue sky over the Ruhr' during the 1961 national election campaign, where he ran as leader of the Social Democrats[32]. Of central significance in this period of upheaval were the voices of scientists and doctors, who publicly drew attention

30 Christian Möller, "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung," *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* 13 no.1 (2022): 34–36.
31 Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, "A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840–1990," *Environmental History Review* 18, no. 1 (1994): 45–51, https://doi.org/10.2307/3984744.
32 Ibid., 44; Möller, "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel," 35.

[Fig.4]
Walter Moog, *Dunstglocke über Essen mit Zinkhütte*, Essen, Germany, 1964. © Walter Moog | Fotoarchiv Ruhr Museum [In: Möller, Christian. "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung." *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* 13 (2022), 35.]

to the dangers posed by pollution, as well as the efforts of various citizens' associations. As Möller underscores, Dr. Clemens Schmeck played a pivotal role in this struggle. In 1962 he established the "IG schmützt", an initiative that garnered substantial public attention right from its inception, boasting a membership of over 300 individuals by the mid-1970s[33]. Fliers distributed in Dortmund in 1971 displayed an index finger tarnished with grime, accompanied by the inscription "Your lung... is as dirty as your windowsill!"[34]. Schmeck passed away in 1984, but it wasn't until 1992, after environmental protection had become commonplace in Germany, that the interest group disbanded. This same year *Beyond the Limits*[35], the sequel of *Limits to Growth*[36], was published. In this follow-up the third out of three conclusions drew in the previous report, while still considered valid, was rephrased and strengthened as follows:

> A sustainable society is still technically and economically possible. It could be much more desirable than a society that tries to solve its problems by constant expansion. *The transition to a sustainable society* requires a careful balance between long-term and short-term goals and an emphasis on sufficiency, equity and quality of life rather than on quantity of output. It requires more than productivity and more than technology; it *also requires maturity, compassion, and wisdom.* (Meadows et al., 1992, p. xvi)[37]

In this regard, the case of Ruhr is pointed out by several observers as a successful example of transition towards a more sustainable society. Once the biggest industrial agglomeration in Europe, the process of phasing out coal culminated in 2018 with the closure of the last coal mine. The region's eco-restructuring showcases a remarkable case of a well-managed transition, emphasizing the importance of regional actors and factors, alongside external triggers[38]. Such transformation encompasses the development of sustainable economic endeavors centered around renewable technologies, research, innovation and ecotourism. The revival of a deteriorated landscape has been a crucial factor in the area's economic and physical revitalization, where the establishment of the Emscher Park especially stands out[39]. Then, another crucial point is that current aspirations harmonize with the region's industrial heritage,

33 Ibid., 36.

34 Ibid.

35 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, and Jørgen Randers, *Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse, Envisioning a Sustainable Future* (Chelsea Green, 1992).

36 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth* (Universe Books, 1972).

37 Mick Common and Sigrid Stagl, *Ecological Economics: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 246.

38 Philipp Schepelmann, René Kemp and Uwe Schneidewind, "The Eco-restructuring of the Ruhr District as an Example of a Managed Transition", in *Handbook on Sustainability Transition and Sustainable Peace*, Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace, ed. Brauch, H., Oswald Spring, Ú., Grin, J., Scheffran, J. vol 10. (Springer Verlag, 2016), 593-612. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43884-9_28.

39 Regionalverband Ruhr (RVR), *Emscher Landschaftspark*, accessed August 30, 2025, https://www.rvr.ruhr/themen/oekologie-umwelt/startseite-emscher-landschaftspark/.

which over time began to meet with its identity[40]. A notable example is the Zollverein Coal Mine in Essen, which has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage list as part of this transition process. Since 2001, it has been a venue for cultural and outdoor events, attracting over a million visitors annually[41]. In conclusion, it is then important to underscore that the initial efforts to preserve industrial heritage, driven by social movements inspired by the events of 1968, actually also involved the participation of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photographic documentation played in fact a pivotal role in advancing the cause for the safeguard of the art deco machine hall of Zeche Zollern in Dortmund[42], a landmark of early industrial modernism designed by Bruno Möhring in 1902/03. Combining Jugendstil elegance with innovative steel-frame construction, the hall is especially celebrated for its striking stained-glass portal—an architectural feature without parallel in Europe's industrial landscape[43]. The Bechers' photograph of the machine hall captures its architectural elegance and industrial significance, reflecting their distinctive style - central, sober, and meticulously composed (Fig. 5). This endeavor led to the successful preservation of the coal-mining facility, which now stands as one of the eight former workplaces encompassed by the Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage. Through a diverse range of events and exhibitions, Zeche Zollern interweaves historical themes with contemporary issues, breathing new life into these structures[44]. The museum frequently hosts exhibitions and events related to landscape and environmental concerns. For instance, the exhibition *Hidden Costs. Ewigkeitslasten* (2021/2022) featured the photography of J Henry Fair, shedding light on the environmental consequences of the mining industry.[45] Another significant exhibition, *Die Zukunft im Blick. Ruhrgebietsfotografien aus dem Bildarchiv des Regionalverbandes Ruhr* (2021/2022), explored the transformation of the Ruhr region's landscape through historical photography[46]. These efforts demonstrate the region's commitment to sustainability, culture, and heritage, ensuring that its industrial past remains an integral part of its future in a more conscientious and sustainable way.

40 Berger and Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany," 202; Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", 225.

41 See: Zollverein, https://www.zollverein.de/besuch-planen/was-ist-zollverein/

42 Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichte erzählen*, 38; Berger and Golombek,"Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany", 202; Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", 225.

43 LWL Industrial Museum, *Machine Hall at Zeche Zollern*, accessed August 30, 2025, https://zeche-zollern.lwl.org/de/ausstellungen/maschinenhalle/.

44 LWL Museums of Industrial Heritage, accessed August 30, 2025, https://www.lwl-industriekultur.de/en/.

45 LWL-Museum, Zeche Zollern, "Hidden Costs. Ewigkeitslasten. Fotografien von J Henry Fair, 23.10.2021 – 6.3.2022," accessed March 30, 2025, https://zeche-zollern.lwl.org/de/ausstellungen/hidden-costs/.

46 LWL-Museum, Zeche Zollern, "Die Zukunft im Blick Ruhrgebietsfotografien aus dem Bildarchiv des Regionalverbandes Ruhr 19.6. – 24.10.2021", accessed March 30, 2025, https://zeche-zollern.lwl.org/de/ausstellungen/die-zukunft-im-blick/.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the photographic legacy of Bernd and Hilla Becher offers a profound reflection on the evolving relationship between industrial heritage and contemporary landscapes. Their systematic documentation of industrial structures does more than capture technological transformations; it reveals the socio-environmental consequences of industrial decline and invites viewers to reconsider the long-term impact of industry on both local and global environments. By aligning their work with the principles of documentary objectivity, as exemplified in the New Topographics movement, the Bechers transcend mere architectural documentation. Their images function as powerful instruments of historical preservation, prompting a broader public awareness of the importance of safeguarding industrial heritage.

The Bechers' work not only preserves memory but also engages critically with contemporary discussions about adaptive reuse, sustainability, and the cultural significance of industrial sites. A compelling example of this can be found in the preservation of Zeche Zollern in Dortmund, a coal mine captured by the Bechers. Thanks to their photographic documentation, the site was preserved and ultimately integrated into the Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage. This act of preservation has allowed the site to become an emblem of the region's industrial identity, affirming the importance of remembering and honoring the past. Here, documentary photography serves as more than a tool of recollection—it becomes a means of revitalizing and safeguarding collective memory, ensuring that industrial landscapes are not forgotten, but instead reimagined as valuable components of cultural heritage.

The Bechers' approach resonates with broader environmental and cultural concerns of our time. Their scientific and taxonomic rigor, mirrored in the fields of ecological and architectural studies, underscores the need for sustainable preservation efforts in an age marked by the challenges of the Anthropocene. In this way, their work aligns with ongoing discourses about landscapes of care, where photography acts as a bridge between the built environment and the public, fostering a shared understanding of our environmental responsibilities.

Ultimately, the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher continues to shape contemporary dialogues on industrial heritage, demonstrating how photography can function as both a tool for documenting and preserving the past, and an act of care for the future.

[Fig.5]
Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Colliery Zollern II*, 1971, gelatin silver print, 34,9 x 40,5 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher.

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Icarian Archive (1987–1992)
A Reinterpretation of a Photographic Collection

Martí Llorens and Rebecca Mutell

Summary

Barcelona's nomination as the host city for the 1992 Olympic Games led to significant urban redevelopment in the city. One of these projects involved the transformation of the waterfront of the Poblenou neighborhood; Avinguda d'Icària (Icaria Avenue) structured this area, which was characterized by factories, workshops, and railway tracks. This is where a new residential neighborhood, the Olympic Village, was built. The scale and impact —both physical and social— of this project made it comparable to other major transformations such as the 1888 Universal Exposition, the opening of Via Laietana that began in 1908, or the 1929 Universal Exposition.

In July 1987 the demolition of the Icaria neighborhood began. In this construction zone, Martí Llorens began a creative photographic project using a pinhole camera, a camera in which the lens is replaced by a tiny hole. Soon after, this project led him to document, with conventional photographic equipment, the construction of the new neighborhood until 1992.

Almost forty years have passed since the beginning of the demolitions in Poblenou. The relationship we have with photography today is very different from the one we had at the end of the 20th century, as are the links created with everything seen and imagined through it. Now, by digitizing and viewing on screen the photographs of what we now call the Icarian Archive, an interesting and fruitful transversal re-reading is generated that endows these images with new meanings. Having lost their physical nature, it seems that these photographs demand to be approached and interpreted from other parameters. Our relationship with all of them seems to have changed and, of course, also with the city they show. The need to recontextualize and reinterpret their contents in different layers, creating new links, is an essential part of this article.

Keywords: City, urban landscape, archive, photography, memory.

Martí Llorens (Barcelona, 1962) holds a BA in Fine Arts (Image) from the University of Barcelona and an MA in Theory and History of Architecture from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia. He is a photographer specializing in the documentation of architectural, engineering, and urban projects. In 2017, he co-founded Factoría Heliográfica with Rebecca Mutell, a cultural association devoted to research on the origins and early history of photography. His artistic and research practice examines the relationships between time, territory, memory, and image, and has been exhibited and published internationally since 1988. His personal work explores time, memory, and territory, with projects such as Poblenou, which received second prize at the European Photography Award (Berlin, 1991). Interested in the origins of photography, in 2015 he co-directed the restoration and research of the Daguerre-Giroux photographic equipment, with which the first photograph in Spain was taken in 1839. He is co-editor of the essay Buscando lo imposible. Una antología de textos sobre el origen de la fotografía (University of Navarra Museum, 2024). His work is part of public and private collections.

Rebecca Mutell (Aranda de Duero, 1980) holds a PhD in Fine Arts from the University of Barcelona and received the Extraordinary Doctoral Award for her dissertation *Catching the Light: Origin and Materiality of Photography*. She is a lecturer and researcher at BAU, Centre Universitari d'Arts i Disseny (UVic-UCC), where she is a member of the GREDITS research group and serves as Head of Department. She currently co-directs Factoría Heliográfica with Martí Llorens. Her research focuses on the phenomenology of the photographic image and its technical and iconological precedents, and her work has been exhibited and published internationally.

A city in transit

At the end of June 1986, the Barcelona City Council approved the Special Urban Development Plan for Barcelona's seafront, in the area of Paseo de Carlos I and Avinguda de Icària, proposed by MBM, the architectural firm formed by Josep María Martorell, Oriol Bohigas, David Mackay and Albert Puigdomènech. In October of that year, Barcelona was chosen to host the 1992 Olympic Games. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Barcelona had already presented its candidacy on four occasions and now it had won the bid competing with Paris, Brisbane, Belgrade, Birmingham and Amsterdam (Jiménez 2016).

Since 1979, with the first democratic municipal elections, Barcelona's new municipal policy had oriented the transformation of the city through specific interventions at the neighborhood level and in certain urban spaces. During this legislature there were two mayors; the first was Narcís Serra and from 1982, Pasqual Maragall, when Serra became a minister in the Spanish government. Soon it was decided to carry out projects on a larger scale. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that from 1980, Bohigas was delegate of the Urban Planning area of the Barcelona City Council and from 1984, he held the position of Councilor for Urban Planning. These new projects, of metropolitan scope, were boosted with the Olympic nomination in 1986 and were located in four areas; the Valle Hebron, the Olympic Ring of Montjuic, the Diagonal and the Olympic Village. The Special Plan proposed by MBM was developed on the seafront of Poblenou and planned the construction of a new residential neighborhood that during the Olympic Games would serve to house the athletes. MBM architects described the territory to be transformed:

> The area where it was decided to build the Olympic Village was an industrial zone with obsolete facilities and uses. It was separated from the city and the sea by two railroad tracks that were impassable barriers and at the same time generated physical degradation of the environment. The beaches had become an accumulation of debris and industrial detritus. The streets followed the layout of the Cerdá Plan, but had lost their continuity and, therefore, their urban significance. There was an accumulation of unbalanced uses: the Mercat del Peix (Fish Market) converted into a car depot, the barracks in the process of being vacated, a sewage treatment plant, the municipal warehouses, the women's prison, new school facilities that anticipated the transformation of the neighborhood and, above all, an anarchically superimposed traffic of trucks, using Icaria Avenue almost as a segregated road. It was a kind of urban void and, therefore, an ideal place to make a thorough renovation, implementing the first modern neighborhood by the sea, which, from the beginning, we began to call Nova Icària (Martorell et al. 1991, 11).

The new urban planning project did not contemplate the conservation of any of the existing buildings so that, at the end of the demolition work, about two hundred buildings and fourteen streets had disappeared. The tracks of the Marina railway branch, the initial section of the first railroad built in Spain in 1848, had also been erected. By the end of 1989, the area was a huge site, with only the large brick chimney of the Folch factory still standing.

It was not the first time that large-scale demolition operations had been undertaken in Barcelona; in the first half of the 18th century a large part of the old Ribera district was razed to the ground to build the Citadel fortress, and at the beginning of the 20th century, the opening of the Via Layetana through the historic center of the city destroyed around six hundred properties.

[Fig. 1–2]
© Martí Llorens. View from Barceloneta of the Icaria neighborhood and the Folch factory chimney. In March 1986 and June 1988 after the demolitions. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection

Before the demolitions began, the Archaeological Activities Service of the Barcelona City Council proposed to the Monumental Heritage Protection Service to carry out a documentation and cataloguing work of the sector in order to keep a record of the buildings affected by the demolitions. The program was negotiated with the company Vila Olímpica SA (VOSA) created by the State administration and the Barcelona City Council at the end of 1986, which assumed the expenses for the formation of a technical team of historians and architects and the contracting of different technical image services for filming and photography. This work, which includes an extensive documentation of photographs and plans, is entitled Estudi històric-arquitectònic del sector Avinguda Icaria-Paseo Carles I. Poblenou.Barcelona (Historical architectural study of the sector Avinguda Icaria-Paseo Carles I) and that today is deposited in the Arxiu Municipal del Districte de Sant Martí (Municipal Archive of the Sant Martí District) Between 1986 and 1992 and commissioned by the municipal company Holding Olímpico SA (HOLSA), the Barcelona production company Clara Films made a film record of all the infrastructure works carried out during this period, creating a visual archive of nearly three thousand hours of footage that, at the end of 2022, was ceded in its entirety to the Arxiu Municipal de Barcelona. In 1990, in the middle of the construction phase and just after the demolitions, the Arxiu Històric de Poblenou (Poblenou Historical Archive) published a small publication entitled Nou viatge a Icària (A new travel to Icaria) (Arranz et al. 1990) that included texts and photographs by various authors on the history of the Icaria neighborhood and its most important manufacturing facilities. Curiously, Barcelona City Council did not appear in the list of collaborating entities, which included the Department of Territorial Policy and Public Works of the Generalitat de Catalunya, the paint company Industrias Titan, which had its factory in a street parallel to Avinguda Icaria, and the bank La Caixa.

Icaria, from a non-place to a new neighborhood

The Icaria neighborhood was characterized by the railroad tracks, the level crossing, the industrial buildings and their chimneys, the warehouses and the final bed of the Bogatell flowing into the sea after passing under the railroad tracks in a rather inhospitable area that, for decades, was systematically used as an affordable rubble dump. There were few residential buildings. Its relative proximity to the port facilities and the construction of a freight railway station in the early twentieth century, had facilitated the establishment of factories, warehouses and workshops of all kinds from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Among the best known were: Foret, dedicated to pharmaceuticals, Ford Motor Ibérica, to the automotive industry, Escofet and Fortuny, to mosaics and pavements, Folch and Albiñana, which throughout its history housed from an alcohol distillery and an ice factory to a blown glass workshop, the Crédito & Docks warehouses, the El Progreso flour mill, the Pau Soler wine warehouse, the Basseda company dedicated to the refining and bottling of oil. On the sea side, the neighborhood of Icaria had been flanked since the late nineteenth century by the Somorrostro. In this popular and precarious neighborhood of shacks that the sea flooded when a storm arose, in 1918 the famous flamenco singer and dancer Carmen Amaya was born.

The Somorrostro stretched from the grounds of the old Gas Lebón factory to the Bogatell. On the occasion of military maneuvers which, presided over by Franco, included the landing of troops, the Somorrostro was completely demolished in mid-1966 and its inhabitants rehoused in Sant Roc, a neighborhood under construction in the nearby city of Badalona (Carnicer y Grimal 2016). That same year, driven by a group of large companies, some of them owners of facilities in this sector such as Motor Ibérica, Foret and Crédito & Docks, the so-called Plan de la Ribera came into being. In 1968, Mayor José María de Porcioles —the Francoist mayor who held this position for the longest period of time— approved the plan, which had already been joined by other large companies, as well as some banks and savings banks that saw the possibility of a fabulous real estate business. In 1971, this project was publicly presented under the name of Sector Marítimo Oriental. However, opposition to this plan of clear speculative intent was massive; the work of those affected by the expropriations and that of several civic and professional associations, including the College of Architects, finally managed to stop its realization.

During the 1970s, the Subway reached Avinguda Icària with the Ribera station, the current Ciutadella-Vila Olímpica of Line 4. On the land that had occupied the old Docks Barracks, a Wastewater Treatment Plant was built, which discharged into the nearby Bogatell riverbed, and right next to it, the Parc de Maquinaria de l'Ajuntament (City Hall Machinery Park) which, among other technical facilities, housed the Oficina Tècnica d'Imatge (Technical Image Office). This office, equipped with a film projection room and a complete photographic laboratory, generated an important photographic archive related to the monitoring of public works in Barcelona. By then, some large companies had already left Avinguda de Icària, such as the chemical company Foret, whose star product was hydrogen peroxide. At the end of this decade, the Icària neighborhood

[Fig. 3]
© Martí Llorens. Train running on the Ramal Marina, Bogatell section. February 1986. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection

was still characterized by workshops and industrial buildings that, in very different states of use and conservation, had been coexisting for more than a century with the railroad tracks and the level crossing of the coastal train that, since the previous decade, could be circumvented thanks to a two-lane metal bridge for traffic and a squalid metal footbridge for pedestrians.

The Passeig de Carlos I —currently Carrer de la Marina— did not reach the intersection with Avinguda d'Icària because its last stretch, a wasteland turned into an improvised parking lot, was interrupted by the tracks of the Glòries railway branch, on the other side of the Carretera del Bisbe, a curved street that followed the line of an old rural road from the 18th century. Precisely at this intersection was one of the auxiliary facilities of the historical Estació de França that were essential for the steam locomotives; the turntable, the water tanks and the docks for loading coal. Just across the tracks on the Glòries branch was the Mercat Central del Peix (Central Fish Market) a building constructed in 1931 which, after 1983, became a municipal depot for repossessed or abandoned vehicles. By then, no more than three hundred people lived in the Icària neighborhood, since in 1978 all the tenement houses between Sant Pol and Vallgorguina streets had been demolished. Also, as it had been for a long time, the Avinguda d'Icària was completely flooded if it rained more than it should have...

It was in this territory where, between 1987 and 1992, the Olympic Village and other important urban infrastructures were built.

[Fig. 4]
© Martí Llorens. Entrance to the Motor Ibérica factory on Avinguda d'Icaria. September 1988. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection

Icaria and utopia

Icaria was the imaginary island where the French philosopher and utopian socialist Étienne Cabet set the action of his philosophical account, Voyage en Icarie published in 1840. Cabet borrowed this idea from the English thinker, theologian, politician and humanist Thomas More. In his well-known work Utopia published in 1516, he recounts the organization of an ideal society based on a nation in the form of an island of the same name. More used the word utopia which derives from the Greek οὐ (not) and τόπος (place) and literally means non-place. Although as historian and urbanist Lewis Mumford points out in his History of Utopias, he could also have taken it from the Greek word eutopia meaning, the good place.

> For a long time, Utopia has been another name for the unreal and the impossible. We tend to confront utopia with the world, when in fact it is utopias that make the world tolerable for us [...] (Mumford 2015, 23)

It is in this ideal of the non-place or the good place, where Cabet lays the foundations of his society with communist principles. Together with other Icarians, he decided to found different utopian settlements in order to create a new society. The Icarian movement believed that the society was free, which meant that it would not be imposed on anyone. In 1848, in an article entitled, Let's Go to America, Cabet called upon his followers to create an Icarian Communist Republic in the United States. After countless vicissitudes, the project failed completely and Cabet, exhausted and embittered by frustrations and hardships, died at the age of 68 of a stroke. In 1881, in the Californian town of Cloverdale, some followers of Cabet's ideology founded Icaria Speranza, although it was dissolved five years later. Curiously, it was in July 1989, the year in which most of the demolitions on Icaria Avenue were completed, when a commemorative plaque was placed on the site of the school of what was the last Icarian community (Wikipedia, la enciclopedia libre 2024, «Icarianos»).

[Fig. 5]
Marble plaque recovered from the facade of the Motor Ibérica factory before its demolition. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

The Icarian project was also echoed in the workers' and libertarian movement in Barcelona. The inventor and activist Narcís Monturiol, in 1847 founded the weekly La Fraternidad with the intention of spreading Cabet's ideology. It seems that a group of Catalonian Cabetans created an Icarian community in the territory that today corresponds to the Poblenou neighborhood, the name by which a concentration of houses built to the south of the neighboring municipality of Sant Martí de Provençals began to be known from the decade of 1840–50. In 1855, when the demolition of the walls of Barcelona had already begun, the engineer Ildefons Cerdà drew up a topographical plan of the outskirts of the city. It seems that it is in this plan where the name of Icaria appears for the first time, with those of La Llacuna, Clot and Camp de l'Arpa. Icaria, the closest to the sea, indicates in this plan a group of small buildings grouped around the sector currently occupied by the streets of Taulat, Marià Aguiló and Pere IV. Cerdá, a man of progressive ideas, may have named this small neighborhood of Sant Martí de Provençals in a clear allusion to this community. It was possibly for this reason that the Paseo del Cementerio – which from the first quarter of the 19th century began in the upper part of the Barceloneta neighborhood and ended at the Poblenou Cemetery – became known as Avinguda de Icària from 1916 onwards.

[Fig. 6]
© Martí Llorens. Railway buildings on Avinguda d'Icària. During the civil war, it was here where the rebel troops were detained by the forces loyal to the Republic. February 1989. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

The name of Icaria was kept until 1937 when, in the middle of the civil war, it was changed to Avinguda de la Revolució Social. At the end of the war, it recovered the name of Icaria, although ten years later it changed its name again, this time to Avinguda Capitán López Varela, one of the officers who rose up against the Republic on the morning of July 19, 1936 in Barcelona. From the Docks Barracks at Avinguda Icària 170, Lopez Varela went out to the street with three artillery batteries. Advancing along the avenue, he met with the hard opposition of the Guardia de Asalto, the police force of the government of the Republica, and the anarchist militias, engaging in a fierce combat in which he was seriously wounded. At the end of the day, the military rebellion in Barcelona had failed. Tried in a summary court-martial, López Varela was shot the following month in the castle of Montjuic along with three other rebel officers. Precisely in Poblenou, a working-class neighborhood with a large number of members of the anarchist union CNT, most of its leaders belonging to the Nosotros group, among whom were Francisco Ascaso, Joan García Oliver and Buenaventura Durruti, had their homes. During the war, the neighborhood of Icaria was also a target of fascist bombing and there were no less than five air-raid shelters in the same avenue[1].

With the death of General Franco in 1975 and the arrival of democratic city councils, in 1978 the avenue recovered the name of Icaria. The urban reform of the Olympic Village started in 1987 meant the disappearance of a large part of this avenue and the section that remained at the height of the Barceloneta, changed its name to Carrer del Doctor Aiguadé. Currently, Avinguda Icària maintains its original layout only in the section that goes from the Poblenou Cemetery to Carrer de la Marina through the Vila Olímpica neighborhood.

The Photography in Transit

August 2025 marks 186 years since the technical process of the daguerreotype, the first technically and commercially operational photographic process, was made public at a packed session of the Academy of Sciences in Paris. That same year the first photograph was taken in Spain; a daguerreotype obtained by the engraver Ramon Alabern i Moles in the Pla de Palau in Barcelona. Remembering this first photograph in which two buildings appeared and of which nowadays, only its description remains, it seems appropriate to point out that Barcelona is the third of the five most photographed cities in the world, being surpassed only by Rome and New York (Nuñez 2024).

In 1975, the engineer Steven J. Sasson developed the first prototype of a digital camera at the request of the Eastman Kodak Company, where he had started working two years earlier. He patented it three years later, but it wasn't until the 2000s that the digital camera began its true rollout at both the professional and amateur levels. In 2012, Kodak filed for bankruptcy.

1 For a detailed study on the civil war in Barcelona with a great profusion of plans and images, see: (Cardona y Esteban i Cano 2009)

AgfaPhoto, a German manufacturer of photographic paper, film and lab supplies since 1867 had filed for receivership in 2005, just three years before Polaroid announced the end of film manufacturing for its cameras.

The Internet was created in the mid-1960s from a project proposed by the U.S. Department of Defense with the idea of implementing a new communication network. Later, researchers and scientists began to require their respective institutions to connect to this network in order to exchange information. It was only in 1993, in parallel with the growing advance of the personal computer, that the World Wide Web appeared, the network accessible to all as we know it today. Today, more than two-thirds of the world's population is connected to this communication network.

Marketed by Apple, the iPhone, a cell phone with a 2-megapixel camera and various Internet services, was launched in 2007. Today, neither professional photographers nor the general public can conceive or imagine photography without the Internet. And it is logical, because if we think about it, digital photography without the existence of the Internet makes no sense, since in both cases we are talking about the same technological essence.

The digital technique has transmuted the photographic medium at a speed and to a degree never before seen, to such an extent that some theorists, such as the professor of architecture, art and multimedia sciences William J. Mitchell, already spoke of post-photography in 1994 (Mitchell 1994). In the same way that has happened with the city, we will see how the relationship we have with photography today is very different from the one we had with it only a decade ago. In the same way, we might think that the links we create with everything seen and imagined through it are also being transformed. Possibly, our understanding of photography as a means of documentation or as a means of creation is also oscillating.

Photography in the 19th and 20th centuries had a physical support resulting from a chemical process whose result was an artifact that refers us to something fabricated or constructed, of a material and limited nature. The photography of the 21st century can do without any physical support for its visualization, since it is the result of a digital process. The immateriality of these images, among other things, translates into their capacity —apparently infinite— to be reproduced —cloned— and disseminated automatically and immediately.

The new position in which digital technology has placed us should make us reflect on our new relationship with photography and, by extension, with everything we represent and know through it. In this regard, it seems to me fruitful and increasingly necessary to make every effort to suggest and trace a new collection of looks and transversal considerations about the origin and the first stage of the photographic medium that can help us define our position with respect to photographic representation (Llorens y Mutell 2024). This will, should lead us to explore and

reflect from our 21st century digital environment, about the materiality of photography and its vocation of perdurability, understanding a photograph as a technological artifact and instrument of knowledge. We believe that from this approach, the re-reading of the Icarian Archive that now occupies us, serves us perfectly as a subject of study.

Traces of a territory in transit

When the demolitions began in August 1987, Llorens started a photographic project of creation in this former industrial sector. It was this photographic self-commission that, soon after, also led him to document for five years all the Architecture and Engineering projects coordinated by Vila Olímpica SA, VOSA, a municipal company established in December 1986. Obviously, both the personal project and the professional assignment were carried out with chemical photography equipment. For the former, he resorted to a pinhole camera, essentially a camera obscura in which the optics are replaced by a tiny hole the size of a pin. As a negative, this self-built camera used 18x24 cm black and white photographic paper. The low photosensitivity of this material and the low light passing through the pinhole allowed exposure times of several minutes in full summer sun. For the documentary assignment he worked with a complete 35 mm equipment that, in order to cover the different purposes for which the graphic material was intended, he used simultaneously color negative, black and white negative and slide. This archive is made up of some 26,000 color images, 17,000 black and white images and around 15,000 slides documenting the development of the different construction projects from the summer of 1987 to September 1992; the demolitions, the Ronda Litoral, the marina, the burying of the railway, the network of sewage collectors, the urbanization and construction of the whole sector, etc.

[Fig. 7]
© Martí Llorens. Black and white paper prints and slides from the Icarian archive. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

The creation project was developed from the summer of 1987 to the summer of 1989, precisely during the time when the demolitions took place, and very few photographs were taken after this period. Thus, of the nearly 450 negatives on paper taken during this period, only half a dozen shows images of the construction process. Unlike the photographs obtained with 35 mm photographic equipment, the pinhole camera offered the possibility of fragmenting the total exposure time –always a few minutes– into two or three parts over a much longer period of time. On some occasions, this long exposure, fragmented at intervals, made it possible to reconstruct the image of the structures that were being demolished at that moment as transparent and permanent surfaces. The soft-focus characteristic of the pinhole image, the contact printing from a paper negative and the toning and dyeing of the final copy, also help to underline in all these images the idea of definitive transit.

In 1991 and under the generic title of Poblenou Series, a selection of these photographs made at the request of the photographer, theorist and artist, Joan Fontcuberta, was presented to the European Photography Award held in Berlin. The work received the second prize, which marked the beginning of a long series of exhibitions. In his book El beso de Judas. Fotografía y verdad, Fontcuberta included it in a chapter entitled La ciudad fantasma. Regarding the photographs showing the buildings and factories being demolished, the author points out;

[Fig. 8]
© Martí Llorens. Pinhole camera on Avinguda d'Icària in front of a residential building being demolished. March 1988. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

It is true that the photographs of Martí Llorens do not speak to us of the class struggle, obviously, nor of the yearnings and injustices that those walls sheltered. Perhaps the naked photograph is not suitable for describing certain abstract issues, which only an evocative use of language would bring us closer to. But, in any case, this was not the purpose behind the images of "[reference removed to maintain the integrity of the review process]": they only wanted to tell us about the attachment to a territory felt as their own that was imminently going to cease to be so; they told us about the proximity with which an environmental and human cataclysm was experienced; they told us, finally, about the feeling of shock and grief of an entire community (Fontcuberta 1997, 97).

It is true that the essence of this photographic project lies in the reflection —and the reaction— about time and the memory of a very close territory that, it is known, is about to disappear completely. However, almost forty years after I started it, the review of the photographs taken during that period gives me a glimpse of something else. And the fact is that, today, it seems clear that this place has not only disappeared materially, since both the city revealed in those photographs and the very idea of photography of that period appear to us now, quite distant and exotic.

[Fig. 9]
© Martí Llorens. Residential building, Hotel Arts and Mapfre Tower under construction. November 1990. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

The major works carried out in the five years prior to 1992 not only transformed the city materially. In the field of urban planning, the much studied and much debated Barcelona model was forged during that period (Navas Perrone 2016). It is clear that neither the inhabitants of Barcelona, nor the millions of people who visit it every year, now conceive or imagine it in the same way as they did in the early 1990s. For example, both locals and foreigners of thirty years ago would have been surprised by the current tension caused today in a part of Barcelona's citizens by the predatory symbiosis established by tourist overcrowding and urban speculation, one of the results of which is a growing process of gentrification that, fueled by real estate speculation, makes housing no longer affordable for many Barcelonans. It should not be forgotten that pre-Olympic Barcelona was not a world-class tourist destination and, consequently, was not an advantageous target for investment funds. Surely, some of the factory buildings that were demolished without further contemplation in the Icaria neighborhood would now be included in the heritage list and rehabilitated by the administration to convert them into public facilities.

This time lag leads us to rethink and revisit, from the 21st century, both the essence and the formal development of all the photographic material generated during that period. The truth is that by now displaying the photographic copies or the original contact sheets on a large table, this archive can also be seen as a working material in movement and open, as a delicate game of juxtaposition and combination of pieces. We believe that this new approach to the archive

[Fig. 10]
© Martí Llorens. The Ronda Litoral under construction. In the background, an old chimney next to the mouth of the Bogatell sewer. August 1988. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

would allow us to turn it –as Didi-Huberman points out when talking about his huge personal file of texts and images– into a dialectic machine or a machine of dialogues that would help us to generate a more exploratory, more personal and more heuristic reading of all its contents. We find very pertinent what Huberman points out in the catalog of an exhibition entitled Tables de montage. Regarder, Recuillir, Raconter. which deals precisely with his archive and his work methodology:

> The archives tell the story —in bits and pieces— of how time begins again, differentiates itself and invents us. All in a perpetual state of displacement. If roots emerge from archives, it is not because history must be understood from a single place of origin or "source": it is precisely because roots insist on moving everywhere, on escaping, on disappearing into the earth, only to re-emerge where they are no longer expected (Didi-Huberman y Herré 2023, 127).

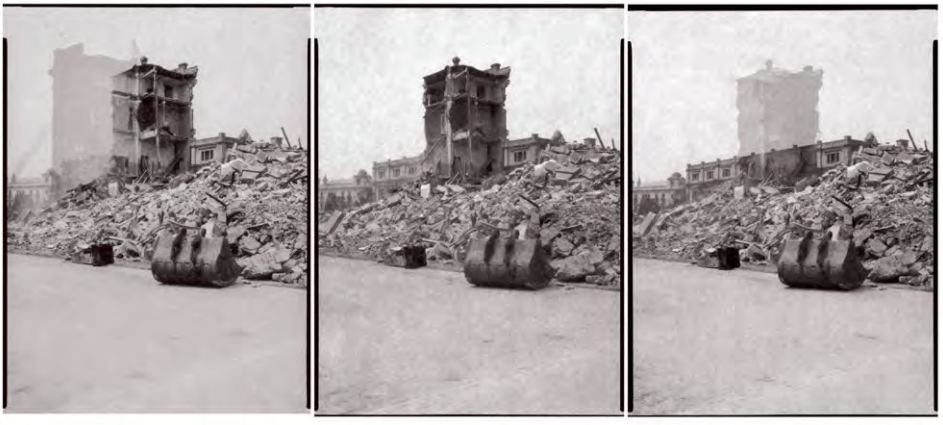
[Fig. 11]
© Martí Llorens. Industrial building and chimney of the Folch factory, photographed from the southwest. Diptych made with the pinhole camera. 1987. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

The reinterpretation and visibilization of the Icarian Archive imply a broader and transversal re-reading that contextualizes and interrelates the material generated during that period. And not only photographic. During the demolition phase, while taking photographs with the pinhole camera, Llorens had the opportunity to access the factories, warehouses and buildings immediately before their disappearance. These spaces had been abandoned, some for only a few weeks and others for years. Without having any specific objective at the time, he found and saved materials of a very different nature. Thus, he found a large number of photographs and letters that, scattered around a trunk, tell us a part of the history of a Menorcan family from the late nineteenth century to the forties of the twentieth century. In another place, in his original folder, he found almost complete collection of sheets of the sewage project of Barcelona drafted by the engineer Pedro García Faria in the late nineteenth century. In other buildings, there were also plans for the renovation of some of the factories, industrial plans for the construction of various parts and machinery and a large amount of municipal documentation from the civil war period, recording the various municipal interventions relating both to the religious buildings set on fire during the early days of the revolution and to the construction of new air-raid shelters. As for the objects, among others, he recovered a hoist with the engraved initials of Credito & Docks of Barcelona, a bottle of milk with the initials of the anarchist union CNT and even three solid cannon shells of the eighteenth century...

Now, all this collection of old photographs, plans, documents and disparate objects are presented as fragments of a place that has disappeared. But all the photographs taken at that time have also been transfigured into light and fragmentary traces of a place that no longer exists. Having lost the original location of all of them, only their materiality and their persistence in time make their encounter with the present possible. We believe that now, their re-reading, cataloguing and visibilization, correspond in a certain way to an archaeological experience understood as a memory practice that compiles and connects past and present from isolated physical fragments. That is why we are now working on the creation of a new website that, as a visual container of the Icarian Archive, can function as a receiver/emitter, modulating certain images related both to the different materials recovered in that place -photographs, plans, objects...- and to the documentary and creative photographs generated in that period with the aim of revealing, of making new meanings visible. This disoccultation will be carried out fundamentally by imagining and establishing new links between all these images. In this way, we believe that we will be able to extract other visual memories of the disappeared neighborhood of Icaria and the current neighborhood of the Olympic Village that until now, have remained hidden.

By way of epilogue, and referring to the photographic collection that represents the vertebral column of the Icarian Archive, we cannot fail to subscribe to a reflection on his own work by 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 (Hirsch 2012).



[Fig. 12]
© Martí Llorens. Demolition of the old railway building 'Servicio Eléctrico' in Avinguda d'Icària 6-8. Triptych made with the pinhole camera. 1989. Icarian Archive / Factoria Heliográfica collection.

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Scaffolding Styles: Aesthetics of Iron Construction

Sol Diéguez Garcia

Abstract

The landscape that offers the city is unfinished and uncertain. It is full of temporary structures serving restorations, repairs, or new permanent and static works. The purpose of these construction elements is not their own aesthetic, theoretical, or functional value, but to evoke the value of something else — that which is to come. However, even though these elements are intended to be nothing more than a transient presence, they inevitably transform the city and its aesthetics. It is common to treat these elements with contempt and to devalue them because of their temporariness. This article aims to explore the aesthetic condition of temporary metal structures by examining the philosophical debate that took place during the nineteenth century on the use of steel in architecture. These discussions, together with photographs taken between the 1920s and 1930s of permanent industrial metal structures, were fundamental in establishing a new vision and aesthetic of industrial landscapes.

Keywords: Scaffolding, Temporary Structures, Iron Construction, Auxilary Elements, Sigfried Giedion

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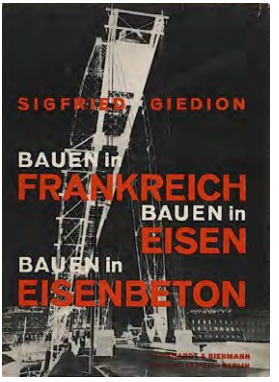
Introduction

The Città Ideale imagined in the Renaissance is far from being a reality. The idea of a perfect, intact and static urban environment is not only utopic but inhuman. The real city has many layers beyond pavements and facades. It holds street furniture, vehicles, traffic lights, signals, signs, electric posters, sewage, noise, ruins, decay and works, among countless others. The actual city is full of layers of structures which facilitate different tecnical things, from safety to protection, from light to advertising, from construction to faking or hiding something (KOSMOS Architects 2025). Public space and buildings under construction or repair means a city inundated by scaffolding, cranes, pulleys, elevated platforms, or frames: temporary iron structures that are part of our landscape.

When I visited the Flatiron Building in 2024, I found its famous façade covered by scaffolding, one might have been disappointed, but the metal latticework actually had its charm. Depending on the vantage point from which you looked at the building, if you stood at a considerable distance and looked at it from the front, the light metal structure would let you see through it. Its body was discontinuous, it had a lot of presence, but when it disappeared it revealed the massive, stony façade of the building clad in limestone and glazed terracotta. The Flatiron had a new façade, but its aesthetic acceptance required a new eye.

In order to pursue the aesthetic condition of iron structures, the article takes as its starting point the theories on metal structures of industrial-era architecture presented in *Bauen in Frankreich: Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton* (Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete) by Sigfried Giedion. The current expanded English edition incorporates an introduction by Sokratis Georgiadis that takes up crucial positions in the debate on the use of iron in architecture and opens the way for reflection on the acceptance of the aesthetics of scaffolding. (Giedion 1995)



[Fig. 1]
Original first edition cover of *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton*, featuring an image of the *Pont Transbordeur* in Marseille. Font: Sigfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928)

Scaffold styles or mass styles

Flatiron scaffolding was a lightweight outer layer that rests subtly on the ground and transmits the structural load discontinuously. It was part of the tectonic world, while the inner layer, heavy and seemingly continuous in its structure, represented the stereotomic world. Both were very different from each other, but there was complicity: one depended on the other. These terms, which classify architecture from the earliest cave and hut constructions, were coined by the German architect and critic Gotfried Semper in the mid-19th century. (Campo Baeza 2020, 2–4)

Many reflections have been made on these two very different ways of approaching the question of architectural form. The editor of the magazine "Deutsche Bauzeitung", K.E.O. Fritsch, refers to them as 'mass styles' and "scaffold styles", the first derives from masonry, representing the architecture of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, in Rome and in the Middle Ages, and also during the Renaissance and the Baroque. The second, which tries to despise iron by calling it scaffolding, derives from the craftmanship of carpentry and came from Ancient Greece and Gothic architecture. It is striking how the nature of Gothic arches is closely related to iron: a stereotomic material such as stone adopts tectonic characters in a limit situation. (Giedion 1995, 17–19)

Whereas in mass styles the solid body is manipulated freely, as if sculpting a block of clay, scaffold styles are based on the assembly of pieces that have been previously designed or selected. Fritsch considered that scaffold styles, manifested by iron, could not represent a new architectural style because of its "poor soil of art". The debate on iron as an architectural style was officially launched. (Giedion 1995, 8)

The theories of Carl Gottlieb Wilhelm Bötticher, archaeologist and architect and author of "The tectonics of the Hellenes", served as a point of reference in this first phase of debate (Bötticher 1844). He argued that the system of monolithic stone had completely exhausted the constructional and architectural possibilities of stone; both classicism and neo-Gothic were merely evolutionary stages in a history that would certainly not end there. Iron represented a new, third way of building and, consequently, a new architecture.

Construction Becomes Form

The Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton for the World's Fair in 1851, was a clear representation of this period. The great iron and glass greenhouse provoked shock and fascination. The matter that defined its boundaries was so condensed that, to the eye of the beholder, it seemed to float. It was an architecture that freed itself from its own material, from its own body. Semper referred to it as "glass-covered vacuum". (Semper 1852)

Eight decades separate the construction of the Crystal Palace and the publication of *Bauen in Frankreich*. This is the period in which the debate on the use of iron in architecture took place.

A debate about a new architectural style. Exhibition buildings, market halls, railroad stations, factories and warehouses were the new demands of society. The aim was clear: to leave as much free space as possible while building with as little material as possible. The iron skeleton allows thin pillars within: freedom of circulation, clear layout, and it permits the best utilization of light.

Iron construction could not be a simple transfer of the way of building in stone, like Gothic architecture. Iron had its own characteristics, a new tensile elasticity, and its expression required a new way of building. "An iron skeleton is subject to changes; it cannot be rigidly bound together like a stone place. It lives with the temperature fluctuations" (Giedion 1995, 134). There is a new tensile elasticity. It is beginning to be recognised that the expression of the iron skeleton also represents something new that demands a balance of forces. It can be stretched and pulled together, it resists extension and pressure and thus, bending. It has the ability to condense large potential stress into most minimal dimensions. It creates transparency, therefore, airspace. To design a load-bearing wall becomes "an intolerable farce" which leads to new laws of design. (Giedion 1995, 101)

The exhibition of 1889 in Paris, with the construction of the Galerie des Machines, represented the conclusion of this development. The pillars disappear, a porticoed structure is presented where it is impossible to identify the point at which the support and the load are mutually integrated. Moreover, it is not rigidly connected to the ground, but accepts the free movement that the material requires. A new oscillating harmony is created. Giedion states it clearly: "The iron skeleton has found its true form. A play of enormous forces is held in equilibrium. But not rigidly, like support and load, rather, almost floating. It is the equilibrium of a balance beam daringly poised against continually varying forces" (Giedion 1995, 142). Here is when iron construction becomes expression and design, therefore form.

The Beauty of the Line

The four aspects of the aesthetics of iron construction are defined by Alfred Gotthold Meyer, an art historian and professor at the Königliche Technische Hochschule (Royal Technical Institute) in Berlin-Charlottenburg. The first is the "new spatial value" represented by the Crystal Palace, which he defines as a "piece with a sculptural atmosphere". Although he recognises its artistic value, he argues that its elements are insufficient for "space formation" and that its latticework was only capable of mere "spatial enclosure" and "spatial cover". The second aspect is the

"new width" represented by the Galerie des Machines, where the problem of the relationship between "support and load" is resolved. The third is the decisive power of the line, which means the "new height". Meyer investigates this aspect in the Eiffel Tower, which he characterises as "a milestone in the history of mankind". Its main characteristic, transparency, was the result of the reduction from mass to surface and from surface to line. (Meyer 1907)

The fourth and final aspect of the aesthetic tetraptychon iron construction was brought together under the title "new lines". Here the focus is on engineering works, such as bridge constructions, and the question is whether they should be classified as architecture. Meyer thinks that although the bridges did not shape space, they were undoubtedly an architectural work. The "power of the line", in Georgiadis' words, expressed itself here in the sense of the contour of the structure, and it was at the same time its most important aesthetic component. He was convinced that the use of iron was giving rise to a new architecture, which could be accepted even through a process of "habituation to form". However, he also believed that this new style of building could never completely replace monumental architecture, as some supporters of iron claimed. (Giedion 1995, 35)

It was a new architecture whose seeds lay in the technical field; its forms were born of a new aesthetics. The historian and philosopher Joseph August Lux, in his book *Ingenieur-Aesthetik* (Engineering aesthetics), writes that we had entered a new era, in which developed technology was the most important cultural driving force (Lux 1910). The paradigm to which architecture had to conform consisted of the products of modern technology, the machine: "Our culture is not reflected in the architecture but rather in the vehicles, in modern transportation technology. If we inquire about the style of our time, here we have it" (Lux 1910). Lux states that the engineer is the real architect of the modern age, and it is they who have discovered the language of iron.

Iron construction found acceptance, because it comes from a genuine expression of modern society. The composer Cornelius Gurlitt came up with an exact expression for this: "We have not artistically conquered the work-form of iron [...] rather, the work-form of iron has conquered us and forced us to see it as beautiful, for it is rational and the product of a creative idea" (Gurtlitt 1900). Hermann Muthesius in his book *Stil-architektur und Baukunst* (Style-architecture and building art) says that modern architecture must cater for new economic and transport conditions, new materials and new construction principles. Modern creations have to meet the new needs of society, such as railway terminals, exhibition buildings, bridges, steamboats, railway carriages, bicycles, etc.

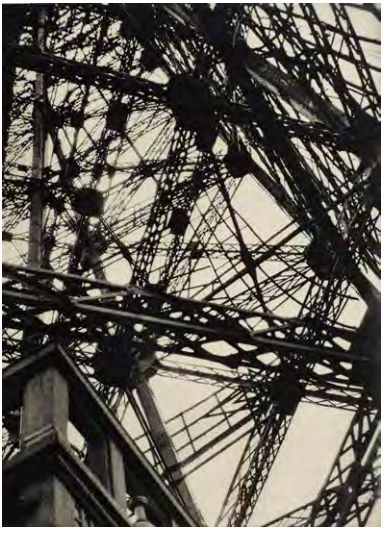
Everything is in transition, and this ongoing transition is at once economic, scientific, political and philosophical, according to the architect Albert Hofmann, ''Can iron construction be beautiful?'', ''Can iron bridges be beautiful?'' (Hofmann 1893) They could be, but this required a new aesthetic gaze, an understanding of raw, mechanical beauty rather than picturesque beauty. Lux argues that iron construction was a matter ''of mere linear contours, of the fleshless skeleton or the open frame, in short, the support that transmits the energies and represents lines of force'' (Lux 1910). The essential characteristic of the aesthetic value of iron lay in the linearity of its construction. This gave rise to new spatial images and therefore the perception of the beauty of iron construction demanded a ''new eye''.

The photographs taken between the 1920s and 1930s of permanent industrial metal structures were fundamental in establishing a new vision and aesthetic of industrial landscapes. ''The lyricism of our time is inscribed in (...) cathedrals of steel (...). Forests of pylons replace centuries-old trees. Blast furnaces replace hills. Germaine Krull is the Desbordes-Valmore of this lyricism'', writes the critic Florent Fels in the foreword to ''Métal''

1. In 1928, Germaine Krull published a photo-book entitled Métal, featured tightly composed images of the Eiffel Tower and other modernist structures in Paris and Rotterdam.

[Fig. 2]
Pont Transbordeur (1905) and Harbor of Marseilles. Archiv S. Giedion, Institut fur Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, ETH – Honggerberg, Zurich.

(Krull 1928). A muse of the engineering works of the early 20th century was undoubtedly the Port Transbordeur in Marseille. This iron bridge was photographed by the likes of Charlotte Perriand, László Moholy-Nagy, Germain Krull and Gideon himself, who even chose it as the cover for "Bauen in Frankreich". Everything in Port Transbordeur is based on mobility; it is not an object, like the Eiffel Tower, but a mechanism. Its interaction with the city is neither "spatial" nor "plastic", its boundaries dissolve and merge with the streets. It creates fluid connections and mutual intertwining. In Giedion's words: "Fields overlap: walls no longer rigidly define streets. The street has been transformed into a stream of movement. Rail lines and trains, together with the railroad station, form a single whole. [...] The fluctuating element becomes a part of building" (Giedion 1995, 90).



The steel tensors of the Port Transbordeur went a step further than the floating staircases of the Eiffel Tower. These iron nets suspended in the air where things flowed defined the basic building aesthetics of the time. There is no longer a defined style, no proper building style, but a collective design. A fluid transition of things. The buildings sought to blur the boundaries between inside and outside, to break with the idea of the hermetic object and to strengthen the connection with the city.

[Fig. 3]
Eiffel Tower photographed by Germaine Krull. Portfolio MÉTAL, 1928.

Temporary Auxiliary Elements

In this initial moment of transferring engineering principles to architecture, the crucial aspect was to recognise that the simple result of the precise calculation of material stresses was not enough to materialise the architectural body; a new building material alone was not capable of generating a new style. Thus, although the importance of technical reason was emphasised, the definition of space did not depend solely on constructive factors, but required an essential vision of beauty: an artistic form (Gastón Guirao and Labarta Aizpún 2025).

"Is construction something external?" Asks Giedion heading one of the chapters of "Bauen in Frankreich". He acknowledges that the artistic side of architecture in the 19th century has become musty; what remains intact in architecture are those rare cases in which construction makes its way. "Construction based entirely on provisional purposes, service, and change is the only part of building that shows an unerringly consistent development", these moments when construction appears intact are in the process of construction. Elements appear that only exist at that instant. These are temporary auxiliary elements. (Giedion 1995, 87)

Photography is the physical evidence that verifies the existence of these elements. Thanks to the constancy of this photographic material, we understand these buildings much better. It allows us to decipher the reasons for the design decisions that have been made and how they have led to this particular end result. The photographs of the construction of the Crystal Palace, the Galerie des Machines and the Eiffel Tower show us the existence of these temporary elements that took shape for a few moments.

[Fig.4]
The scaffolding on the first floor of the Eiffel Tower. January 1888. © Tour Eiffel Collection.

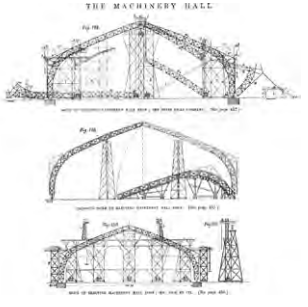
[Fig.5]
Construction of the *Grand Palais*, Paris, photograph by A. Chevojon, 1897–1900. *Le Grand Œuvre*, Photopoche.

We are talking about auxiliary iron structures at the service of permanent iron structures, which means that the boundaries between what is one thing and what is another are dissolved. If we were not aware of the final result of the Eiffel Tower, we might think that this fifth central leg is part of the design as a final result. It would probably not make sense structurally because it would not be necessary, but I do not exclude the possibility that the technique could have been justified on the basis of the form.

Meyer, when talking about the Crystal Palace, invalidates its capacity to generate "space formation" because its mere "spatial cover" is insufficient to respond to certain needs of architectural comfort. In the case of the scaffolding, as with the Eiffel Tower or the Port Transbordeur, its iron skeleton does not need to be dressed, it already represents its maximum expression in terms of the meaning of its function. But there is a big difference, the body of the Eiffel Tower and the Port Transbordeur, although born of technology, have been designed with an aesthetic purpose. As Lux says, "many structures and machines owe their form not to mere mathematical calculation but to a certain kind of experience, which offers the design of certain parts to the sense of form" (Lux 1910). Scaffolding, on the other hand, are pure functional elements that have not been contaminated with an aesthetic purpose. In this case, their aesthetics are pure mathematical.

They are structures that adapt to change, to the constantly changing city. Their nature means that they can be assembled and disassembled in an optimal way, much more so than the early metal structures such as the Crystal Palace. They are meant to be stockpiled, transported and stored. The structure of the Galerie des Machines is not rigidly connected to the ground because it must allow free movement, whereas in the case of scaffolding, its joints must be able to separate from each other and, in some cases, be able to be lengthened or shortened. The nature of their shape is versatility. A single piece must be able to adapt to an endless number of formal possibilities as a whole.

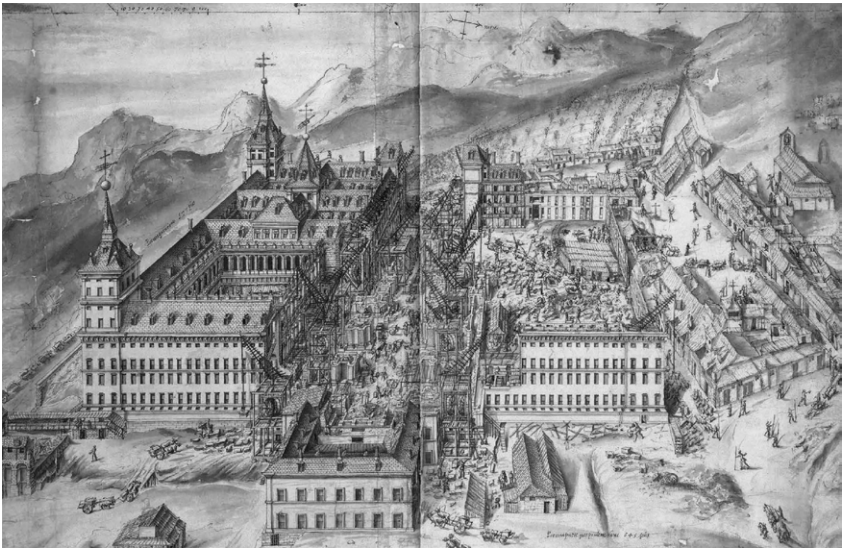
[Fig.6]
Construction of the Galerie des Machines, Paris, 1889. Archiv S. Giedion, Institut fur Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, ETH – Honggerberg, Zurich.



[Fig.7]
Galerie des Machines – Modes of Erecting the Roof, Engineering, vol. 47 (1889).

Scaffolding as a Spectacle

Temporary auxiliary elements have the charm of the fleeting. They can only be contemplated, portrayed or captured at certain moments. This adds value to their existence. In fact, it is a cultural thing to contemplate the works, the process engages the spectator, the uncertainty of how it will proceed. But this is not something new, *La obra como espectáculo* (The Work as Spectacle) is the title used by Pedro Navascués Palacio to comment on a drawing from 1576 of the Escorial under construction, conserved in Hatfield House (Navascués Palacio 1986). The drawing shows cranes, scaffolding, pulleys and all kinds of elements at the service of construction. Value is being given to these elements and aesthetic value is being given to the construction process beyond the final result.



[Fig.8]
Drawing of El Escorial under Construction, ca. 1576, unknown author. Held at Hatfield House.

[Fig.9]
A scaffold in the public space of Manhattan. Photograph taken by the author, 2024.

A scaffolding is not only related to the building or work it is "assisting", it is also related to the body and to the city. Scaffolding is interactive. It is traversed, climbed, lowered, erected and dismantled. On the upper floors it is a narrow shelter from the abundant space of the city. They make it possible to see both the building itself and the landscape from unusual perspectives, they are intrinsic to the characteristic "new height" that Meyer describes. On the ground floor, they transform the city; the pavements become porticoed spaces, where metal structures rest, interfering with circulation. It generates movement, the user interacts with its structure. Regarding their interference in the cityscape, they are transparent because they build the "airspace", but in no case invisible. Just as Meyer corrects Semper by saying that the Eiffel Tower is not invisible, but transparent, since it is the most visible structure in Paris (Giedion 1995, 35). Scaffolding has a strong presence in the city, some might think it has too much.

The aim of the steel structure in the Flatiron Building was not to address an aesthetic concern but a functional one: to reach a height of 87 meters. The structure was intentionally concealed, as it was not meant to be seen. It is somewhat ironic that more than a hundred years later, a metal structure reappears on the façade. While its acceptance may vary, it is undeniably part of the building, the public space, and the city's landscape. Just as society's perception eventually came to accept industrial metal constructions, there remains potential for further refinement in the aesthetic appreciation of temporary auxiliary metal structures. Perhaps this 'new eye' advocated by Lux is not mandatory, but it is highly recommended.

[Fig.10]
Flatiron building under construction. 1901–1902 Fuente: New York Times – Library of Congress. [Up]
Flatiron Buliding 2024 façade repair. Photograph taken by the author, 2024. [Down]

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"Nobody's ever seen the High Line": Joel Sternfeld and the image of the High Line that led to its rehabilitation.

Oscar Barnay

Abstract

This article analyses the way in which a photographic work can participate in both the safeguarding and the transformation of an infrastructure whose heritage value was contested at the time. The article traces the importance of Joel Sternfeld's photographs in the process of safeguarding the West Side Freight Line, which has since become the famous High Line Park, one of New York's most visited landmarks. The article is based on an analysis of the genesis and course of the photographs (in order to analyse their dissemination strategies and reception) and on the discourses of various protagonists. In this example, the relationship between the photographer and his clients, as well as the way the photographs were exhibited and made visible, reflect a conscious desire to put the quality of a renowned photographer at the service of creating a positive collective imagination around a then little-known and little-appreciated infrastructure. While this approach did indeed help save the threatened building, it was also accompanied by a symbolic shift, in which images effectively replaced reality, directly influencing the High Line's restoration projects and their reception by both the general public and the sponsors.

Keywords: Photography ; Industrial infrastructure ; Heritage ; Image; Imaginary

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Today, the High Line urban park is one of the most visited sites in New York, welcoming over 5 million visitors every year. Its success is probably due to its unique configuration: an unreal, wild-looking aerial passageway in the middle of Manhattan. As a park, designed by renowned landscape architects such as Piet Oudolf, highly frequented and secure, the High Line has little in common with the wild. But it nevertheless evokes a pristine imaginary world, in stark contrast to the feverish, mineral urban context of Manathan in which the aerial promenade unfolds.

This imaginary is no accident, nor is it the logical result of a slow, natural feralization of the site. It is the product of a patient, well-informed design, inspired by a transitional state that had passed into a slightly more authentic wildness, at a time when the wasteland was threatened with destruction. One of the factors that helped save the High Line is certainly the photographic work by Joel Sternfeld, which helped shape the new imaginary created by the High Line's architects and landscapers in the 2010s.

From the West Side Freight Line to the High Line Park

The High Line, or High Line Park, is currently an urban park in Manhattan that occupies a former overhead section of the West Side Freight Line, a rail line that linked the St. John's Park freight station to the West Side Yard (now covered by the Hudson Yard real estate development). Built between 1925 and 1934, it was meaned to separate the flows of rail freight from the street. Previously, freight trains had used ground tracks along 10th Avenue, causing numerous accidents with other users and earning the avenue the macabre nickname of Death Avenue. The substantial investment required to build an overhead track was justified by the high level of industrial activity in the neighbourhoods it passed through, such as the Meatpacking District. As a feeder line, the West Side Freight Line passed through a number of industrial buildings, and featured a number of spur-rail terminal installations, enabling warehouses to be directly connected to the rail network. Running overhead from West Side Yard to its southern terminus, the line is built on a steel post-and-beam structure and surprisingly passes through the heart of city blocks, rather than following the line of a street.

From the 1960s onwards, the importance of freight traffic declined, with the relocation of many industrial activities to outlying districts and, above all, the development of road transport. The southern section of the track, from the St. John's Park terminus to Bank Street, was demolished in the 1960s, before train traffic came to a definitive halt in 1980. The 1980s and 1990s saw a clash between property owners and investors (who wanted to demolish the track to free up land) and local activists such as Peter Obletz, who tried to restore rail traffic or propose new uses for the structure. The status quo remained unchanged until the end of the 1990s, not least because of the high cost of total demolition, estimated at several million dollars. In 1991, however, a portion was dismantled to the south, from Bank Street to Gansevoort Street. Despite attempts by real

estate developers and Rudolph Giuliani (Mayor of New York City from 1994 to 2001) to demolish the entire elevated track, 2.3 km of track remained in place, left to lie fallow, between Gansevoort Street and West Side Yard. On the remaining section, spontaneous vegetation gradually gained ground, taking advantage of the thickness of the ballast and the absence of human activity. This abandonment of maintenance changed the city-nature balance, as defined in particular by Mike Davis:

> Nature is constantly straining against its chains: probing for weak points, cracks, faults, even a speck of rust. The forces at its command are of course as colossal as a hurricane and as invisible as baccilli. At either end of the scale, natural energies are capable of opening breaches that can quickly unravel the cultural order. Cities, accordingly, cannot afford to let flora or fauna, wind or water, run wild. Environmental control demands continuous investment and systematic maintenance: whether building a multi-billion-dollar flood control system or simply weeding the garden[1].

From Davis's point of view, there is a permanent, invisible conflict at work in every anthropogenic structure, involving a city-nature relationship whose balance is constantly being called into question. A place deprived of maintenance gives ground in this "conflict" and allows flora and fauna to develop in unprecedented ways. In the heart of Manhattan, the abandoned High Line had a strange, supernatural quality. At once close to the city and yet isolated by its aerial location, it remained invisible from the street, yet particularly present to all the buildings above it. This unlikely situation refers to what Paul Arnould, Yves-François Le Lay, Clément Dodane and Inès Méliani propose to call (paradoxically) an urban "semi-natural space":

> This type of environment occupies vacant land, wasteland or small interstitial spaces, sometimes over large areas but discontinuously. These so-called "degraded", undeveloped environments have undeniable landscape and ecological value, as they contain spontaneous vegetation capable of adapting more easily to urban conditions[2].

It should be noted that, due to the High Line's particular linear shape, this occupation was, for instance, continuous. Officially closed and owned by a private company, the High Line's long viaduct was theoretically inaccessible to local residents and walkers. This condition, which favors the development of non-human inhabitants on the tracks, also attracted a few urban explorers, daring and privileged visitors, who enjoyed rare vistas and an unusual experience. This type of exploratory practice[3] is often accompanied by a photographic motivation, stimulated by the

1 Mike Davis. 2002. *Dead Cities: A Natural History* (New York, NY: New Press,), 362.

2 Paul Arnould. 2011. et al., "La Nature en ville : l'improbable biodiversité," Géographie, économie, société 13, no. 1 : 45–68. Personal translation.

3 Often referred to as "Urbex", a contraction of "Urban Exploration".

feeling of going where few go (and thus bringing back a photographic testimony) and by the particular aesthetics of suspended places, or even of ruins.

> Many researchers have looked at how the perception of ruins has changed over time. We often note that these structures leave us with an almost romantic aftertaste of sadness and nostalgia. On the other hand, their persistence over time leads us to reflect on the resilience of cities and the resilience of human creation[4].

In the early 2000s, the remaining overhead section of the West Side Freight Line was an abandoned infrastructure, a vestige of a historic industrial activity on the verge of extinction. It was a landscape of remnants with singular spatial and ecological qualities, but virtually invisible from the street. It thus seemed destined to fall progressively into oblivion, creating the conditions for its literal physical disappearance.

However, in 1999, the company that owned the tracks, CSX Transportation, finally opened the debate to proposals for transformations, an opportunity seized by local residents. Two of them, Joshua David and Robert Hammond, founded a nonprofit organization, Friends of the High Line, with the ambition of transforming the track into a park, a transformation inspired by that of the old Vincennes track in Paris, transformed into a park six years earlier (inaugurated in 1993) and known today as the "Coulée verte René-Dumont".

In this complex context, under constant real estate pressure in Manhattan, this transformation of use had first to involve a transformation of the way in which the railroad was perceived. The first step was to unlock the possibility of such a transformation: the first challenge was to transform people's imaginaries.

Joel Sternfeld, Walking the High Line[5]

With this in mind, Friends of the High Line approached American photographer Joel Sternfeld in 2000. At the time, he was already world-renowned, notably for his work American Prospects[6], published in 1987.

Sternfeld's photographs, always in color, are taken by view camera. Some of his best-known earlier works, such as American Prospects (1987), Hart Island (1991–1994) and On This Site (1996), are characterized by a 5:4 format, great sharpness and clarity, and above all by a

4 Taïka Baillargeon. 2013. "La ruine de l'en-attendant : un cas d'éphémère continu," Sociétés, no. 120 : 25–34, https://doi.org/10.3917/soc.120.0025. Personal translation.

5 Joel Sternfeld. 2001. *Walking the High Line*, ed. Adam Gopnik and John R. Stilgoe (Göttingen: Steidl).

6 Joel Sternfeld. 1987. *American Prospects*, 1st ed (New York: Times Books in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

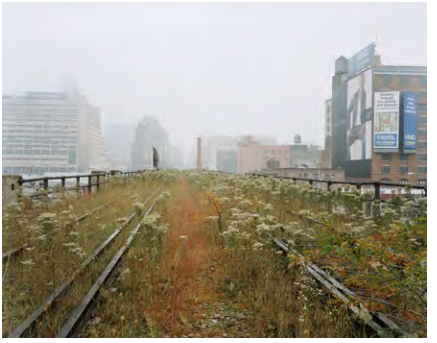
remarkable mastery of light and tonal variety[7]. His series include many landscapes, but also a few situational portraits. They mix scenes and elements of the banal and everyday scenes with more singular, intriguing and even disturbing situations, such as a car caught in a landslide, an elephant sprayed in the middle of a road to protect it from the heat, or the strange context surrounding a burning house. In Hart Island, Sternfeld also explores the question of the memory of place, photographing the landscapes and occupants of a 53-hectare island with a particular history in the Long Island Sound, by the New York Bronx. Sternfeld's approach combines historical research, field surveying and photography. In this sense, it can be described as an investigative approach, as Aline Caillet[8] understands it. Danièle Méaux describes the link between documentary production and the artistic process as follows:

> The inquiry process [...] also breaks down the opposition traditionally established between a desire to be "anchored in reality" and the exercise of "imagination". It aims to reveal aspects of the world through concerted procedures, but these procedures are part of a creative process. [...] it generates new content that does not replicate a prior reality[9].

A prison camp during the Civil War, Hart Island later housed a hospice, a prison, a women's asylum, and was also one of New York's largest cemeteries, where unknown, unclaimed bodies and the marginalized and destitute were buried in mass graves. Sternfeld's photographs show both the traces of these dark past activities, contemporary cemeterial activity and the people, particularly inmates, who occupy Hart Island today. The memorial dimension is also at the heart of another of Sternfeld's series, entitled On This Site, and composed of "fairly neutral, constative overviews of sites that have been the scene of tragic events[10]", such as ecological disasters or high-profile crimes (including those of well-known figures such as Martin Luther King and Harvey Milk).

Memory and political issues, as well as American landscapes and identities, run through Sternfeld's work, embodied in photographs characterized by their richness of detail and tone, and by their ability to evoke what is no longer there. It was probably because of the photographer's singular approach, but certainly also because of his reputation at the time, that Friends of the High Line approached Sternfeld. Both the quality of his work and his influence were to give new visibility to the infrastructural landscape of the then abandoned railway viaduct.

7 Danièle Méaux. 2019. *Enquêtes : Nouvelles Formes de Photographie Documentaire* (Trézélan: Filigranes. 195.
8 Aline Caillet. 2019. *L'Art de l'enquête : savoirs pratiques et sciences sociales* (Milan: Mimésis).
9 Méaux, *Enquêtes*, 16. Personal translation.
10 Méaux, 194.



For the High Line project, Joel Sternfeld took his view camera along the abandoned tracks on numerous occasions over a period of just over a year (from April 2000 to July 2001), enabling him to photograph all the seasons and thus different states of vegetation, the main visual element of the High Line landscape. In this way, we find photographs taken at more or less the same points along the route, but radically different due to the seasons, the vegetation or the weather. In many of his works, such as American Prospects and Hart Island, Sternfeld had resorted to elevated and therefore overhead views, as he explains in a 2019 interview:

> If you're a bit overhanging, you can get very sharp depths of field. Sometimes I'd go up on the roof of a building, sometimes on the roof of a car, sometimes on a hill... I had installed a platform above my Volkswagen combi, just like Ansel Adams, but he used it to photograph mountains, not swimming pools with people moving around[11].

In this case, on the High Line, both photographer and subject are elevated and detached from the ground. Paradoxically, it is both a photograph taken at ground level (since Sternfeld does not elevate the point of view in relation to the subject) and at height (since the track is aerial). The horizon is systematically in the center of the frame. As the photographs are taken along the axis of the tracks (in the photographer's direction of travel, along the viaduct), they are marked by a strong central perspective, restoring the photographer's point of view as surveyor. The lower half of the images is filled by the ground and vegetation, with occasional glimpses of rails, railings or other traces of railway activity. The upper half is taken up by the sky and buildings, whether near or far, visible from the track. Because of the height of the viaduct, the street level, the activities of New York, that "city that never sleeps", remain invisible and out of focus. No human presence is directly visible in the photographs, in which the distant buildings and the activities they host seem no more than a background to the scene. This paradoxical absence

11 Joel Sternfel. 2019., quoted in : Clémentine Mercier, "Entretien Avec Joel Sternfeld," *Libération*, https://www.liberation.fr/arts/2019/11/04/joel-sternfeld-en-tant-qu-artiste-votre-job-est-de-tuer-le-pere_1761536/. Personal translation.

[Fig. 1]
Joel Sternfeld. 2000. Walking the High Line, Looking East on 30th Street on a Morning in May, courtesy of Joel Sternfeld

and inactivity underscores the singular experience offered by the High Line: isolated from the street, vegetated, quiet in the middle of Manhattan, a district renowned for its intense activity. Rust, vegetation-covered rails, chimneys and warehouse access tracks, visible on both sides of the track, evoke the West Side Freight Line's past industrial activity, while at the same time underlining its contemporary state as a wasteland. When Sternfeld took these photographs, the High Line's future was uncertain. Devoid of official use, neither really in ruins nor really in good condition, the High Line was a pending place, characterized by the absence of the activity that led to its construction, and by the presence of traces that convey a form of memory of the place, evoking its past functions.

Joel Sternfeld's photographs reveal a singular landscape, marked by a strong contrast between the highly urbanized backdrop of Manhattan or Jersey City, and foregrounds marked by lush, autonomous vegetation that irresistibly evokes an idea of rediscovered "wilderness". The softness and wide range of nuances in the tones and hues of Sternfeld's photographs lend thickness and depth to the expanses of grass and the few paths that seem to emerge between the groves. In this way, his photographs reveal a landscape "inhabited by very distinct rhythms: that of the erosion of railway installations, that of the seasons and the growth of plants, and that of the photographer's walk[12]". His photographs are marked by a striking paradox between the wildness of the wasteland landscape and the metropolitan backdrop of Manhattan. This visual contrast both intrigues and fascinates. While it certainly lends Sternfeld's photographs their singularity, it is also one of the aesthetic levers that encouraged the conservation and preservation of the infrastructure.

12 Danièle Méaux. 2015. *Géo-Photographies : Une Approche Renouvelée Des Territoires*. Trézélan: Filigranes éditions, 125.

[Fig. 2]
Joel Sternfeld. 2000. Walking the High Line, Looking South at 27th Street. Courtesy of Joel Sternfeld

Birth of a new image

In 2003, again with the aim of combating the High Line's negative image as an industrial relic, and to instill the possibility of its reuse, Friends of the High Line launched an international ideas competition, which attracted some 720 submissions. Local architects and students from all over the world sent in their projects. More or less realistic or detailed, some suggested, for example, transforming the track into a gigantic swimming pool 2.3 km long[13]. Other, more conventional proposals foreshadowed what would eventually become a "green" urban promenade, inspired by the Parisian "Promenade Plantée".

Following the competition, Friends Of The High Line organized an exhibition in Vanderbilt Hall, a monumental former waiting room in Grand Central Station. The 720 responses to the competition for ideas for the transformation of the High Line were presented, topped by monumental prints of Joel Sternfeld's photographs. For the association, the exhibition, like the ideas competition, was aimed at popularizing the railway viaduct, making it a reality in the imagination of New Yorkers. Sternfeld's photographs were intended to raise awareness of the unique quality of the landscape along the High Line, while the responses to the ideas competition stimulated the imagination, inviting us to think about the future of a structure whose future was still uncertain at the time. In the words of Robert Hammond himself, co-founder of Friends Of The High Line :

> Many New Yorkers fell in love with a series of photos taken by Joel Sternfeld on the High Line in 1999 and 2000. These images gave them their first glimpse of this hidden nature, and crystallized opinion on the need to open up this space to the public. A single glance at one of Joel's photos conveys the tension we wanted to preserve when restoring the place.[14].

The large-scale publicity given to Sternfeld's photographs alongside the productions of the ideas competition was intended to convince and seduce public opinion in two ways. Firstly, it was necessary to establish the idea that the abandoned West Side Freight Line was a singular, qualitative landscape that deserved to be preserved for its memorial symbolism and for its once again wild status, all the more astonishing given its location in the middle of Manhattan. Paradoxically, it was also necessary to show how this preservation could be put into practice through a development project that would add value (including economic value) to the existing landscape. As early as 2000, it seemed already clear that safeguarding the railway structure could only be achieved through an adaptive reuse of the viaduct – whatever new functions and uses were to be implemented.

13 Such was the proposal of a Zurich ETH's students, Nathalie Rinne. Visible on :
https://www.thehighline.org/history/? Consulté le 13.12.2022.

14 Robert Hammond. 2018. in Piet Oudolf and Rick Darke, *Les Jardins de la High Line à New York : un modèle de nature urbaine* (Paris: Ulmer), 12.

It is in this sense that Sternfeld's photographs play such a fundamental role. Having become the official images of the West Side Freight Line, they were virtually exclusive representations of it in the collective imagination. They have also been used as photomontages in the proposals of some of the competition's participants, notably in that of New York studio Front Studio, whose "Big Apple Roller-coaster[15]" project suggested leaving the spontaneous vegetation in place on most of the viaduct, while only occasionally installing the structural elements needed to run a vast roller-coaster on and around the viaduct. Other of their collages, again based on Sternfeld's photographs, suggested the possibility of camping on the track, again linking the imaginary of the High Line to that of natural parks, and the enjoyment of natural (or supposedly so) sites.

15 Visible on the studio website : http://frontstudio.com/big-apple-roller-coaster

[Fig. 3]

Front Studio Architects, The Big Apple Roller Coaster, 2003, courtesy of Front Studio Architects

[Fig. 4]

Exhibition of submissions to the ideas competition and photographs by Joel Sternfeld, Grand Central Station, New York, July 2003, courtesy of Friends of the High Line

As Danièle Méaux points out, "Joel Sternfeld's work certainly played a role in the success of the High Line's defense. In this respect, it could be compared to the work carried out by William H. Jackson in Yellowstone in 1870, which contributed to the site's transformation into a national park[16]". Sternfeld himself, interviewed in 2002 while photographing the High Line, refers to Jackson's work:

> In the 1870's, William Henry Jackson was sent out on one of the western exploration expeditions. For years there had been rumors of this fantastic region in the West, with geysers and waterfalls but nobody had seen Yellowstone until Jackson brought back pictures. And as soon as he brought them back, congress made Yellowstone into a National Park. In a way, I feel like Jackson. Nobody's ever seen the High Line, it's been the most extraordinary experience to be in the heart of New York City and see this secret landscape that only a few people have ever seen[17].

For Sternfeld, taking photographs was part of an intention to bear witness to, and convey the elusive qualities of the High Line landscape. While this intention is naturally reinforced by the particular character of the site, it is in fact common to any photographic practice. To photograph is both to observe and to transmit, if only for oneself. According to Siegfried Kracauer, the photographic process has something of the nature of exploration, which goes hand in hand with the idea of testimony:

> Due to the revealing power of the camera, there is also something of an explorer about him; insatiable curiosity stirs him to roam yet unconquered expanses and capture the strange patterns in them. The photographer summons up his being, not to discharge it in autonomous creations but to dissolve it into the substances of the objects that close in on him. [...] selectivity within this medium is inseparable from processes of alienation[18].

In Joel Sternfeld's case, photograph is like a testimony brought back from the exploration of a virgin land (on the subject of the High Line, the photographer notes: "In some ways, it's more pristine than Yellowstone or Yosemite, because every inch of it is authentic[19]"), with a marked desire to show the rest of the world this hidden landscape. For the photographer, the High

16 Méaux, Géo-Photographies, 114–15. Personal translation.

17 Joel Sternfeld, 2002. in : New York Voices: Joel Sternfeld.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk.

18 Siegfried Kracauer. 1997. Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality Princeton: Princeton university press.

19 Joel Sternfeld, *in* : New York Voices.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk

Line represents a singular experience, which he compares to that of Alice in Wonderland[20]: the discovery and exploration of an unsuspected landscape, as if hidden behind a magic door. However, as in the case of 19th-century American photographic missions tasked with bringing back information and images of "virgin" spaces yet to be conquered, photography deploys a particular approach to territory, thought of as a space to be conquered. Commenting on the photographs brought back by Timothy O'Sullivan as part of the Clarence King[21] mission, Julie Meyer notes:

> The gaze cast on this territory by the photographic device defines an aesthetic and political framework for thinking of wilderness as a space to be dominated, transformed and subjugated. In addition to its evidentiary function, photography is used to produce the imaginary of the conquest of a wild territory to be civilized[22].

Sternfeld's photographs reflect the same American imaginary of exploration photography, but the context is markedly different. Above all, Sternfeld does not bring back images of a territory as yet untouched by man (at least by the white settler) and yet to be conquered, but rather of a landscape reclaimed by nature over anthropization. His work is therefore both a reactivation of and a step backwards from the work of nineteenth-century exploratory photographers.

From an image to the High Line Park

However, as was the case with O'Sullivan's and Jackson's photographs, the 2003 exhibition met with some success. Sternfeld's photographs certainly influenced Michael Bloomberg, who became Mayor of New York in 2002, to support the association's adaptive reuse project. In 2004, the city council & Friends of the High Line jointly launched a two-phase architectural competition for the transformation of the structure.

From the fifty or so responses received, four finalist teams were selected: Steven Holl Architects, Zaha Hadid Architects, Terra Gram/Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, and the one finally chosen, made up of landscape architects James Corner Field Operations, architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and garden designer Piet Oudolf, who was then completing the Battery Park project in Manhattan. What appealed to the commissioner about their proposal was that "this team designed a new experience in perfect harmony with the spirit of the place. Other designs

20 « I remember the first time i came here. It was magic. It was an Alice in Wonderland experience. You go through that keyhole and suddenly you're in another world that you never imagined existed ». Joel Sternfeld, in : *New York Voices*.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzr7g8FQgk

21 *United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel*, 1864.

22 Julie Meyer. 2022. "Prises de vue paysagère du territoire états-unien : du sublime burkien à l'esthétique de l'anthropocène," *Amerika. Mémoires, identités, territoires*, no. 24. https://doi.org/10.4000/amerika.15797. Personal translation.

were either very architectural or tried to recreate exactly the original wild landscape[23]". Indeed, the project presented by Steven Holl proposed the addition of a number of buildings above the viaduct, including a tower of hanging gardens. The project by the TerraGram/Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates team envisaged virtually no change to the existing landscape, simply integrating a few visitor entrances and peripheral buildings to provide a view of the viaduct, while the project by Zaha Hadid Architects was resolutely mineral in character, involving the creation of a long building encompassing and absorbing the viaduct.

Paradoxically, the project chosen by the association is the one which, rather than preserving the vegetation as it was, proposed an in-depth renovation of the structure, involving the removal of everything (vegetation, substrate, ballast, railroad...) to rebuild a new bare space that corresponds to the image of the old one. The aerial urban park proposed by Diller Scofidio+Renfro, James Corner and Piet Oudolf was not a repurposed brownfield site, nor is the High Line virtually untouched, as proposed by the TerraGram team. It is a meticulous yet perfectly structured reconstruction, a controlled embodiment of the fascinating image of feralization that characterizes the High Line in Sternfeld's photographs. The winning project by James Corner Field Operations, Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Piet Oudolf builds on this image of the High Line created by Joel Sternfeld's photographs.

The vegetation in the project's park is designed by internationally renowned landscape architect Piet Oudolf, best known for designing gardens that take the seasons into account, combining species with staggered flowering periods and integrating the different states of plants into the composition according to their full cycles, and not just at their most spectacular state of bloom. As in Sternfeld's photographs, which show a landscape that is sometimes snow-covered, sometimes lush in spring or in decline in autumn, Oudolf's garden is conceived in its seasonal variation, which certainly struck a chord with the competition jury. Similarly, while the species selected by the landscape gardener have little in common with the pioneer plants that spontaneously colonized the railway wasteland, they reproduce a garden with a relatively wild appearance, far removed from the parterres, borders and string-trimmed boxwood of the Parisian promenade plantée. Piet Oudolf's composition can thus be read as an evocation of the former High Line, a form of controlled representation of the landscape photographed by Sternfeld. In short, it is the adaptation of an image of nature – wild and fantasized – to the constraints and necessities of an urban park receiving several million visitors every year.

23 Robert Hammond, in Oudolf and Darke, *Les jardins de la High Line*, 12.

In 2005, a new exhibition was held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, curated by Tina di Carlo[24]. It showcased the winning team's project, again accompanied by photographs by Joel Sternfeld, as well as architectural projects that served as inspiration or reference, drawn from MoMa's collections. These include plans, axonometries and sketches of Bernard Tschumi's project for the Parc de la Villette in Paris (1983), as well as a model and numerous drawings (axonometries, elevations, sketches) of Bridge of Houses (1981), a theoretical project by Steven Holl[25]. Once again, the association of Sternfeld's photographs with the various phases of the architectural project contributes to their importance in the storytelling surrounding the High Line.

In the same year, and following federal approval, New York's zoning plan was locally adapted to allow the integration of what would become High Line Park as a public park, with the first section opening to the public in 2009 (between Gansevoort Street and 20th Street). A second section opened in 2012, followed by a third in 2014. Further developments were completed in 2019 and 2023.

24 A synthesis of the exhibition is available on the MoMA's website :
https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/107
25 Originally published in Pamphlet Architecture n°7 (1981) see : *Pamphlet Architecture 1-10* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).

[Fig. 5]
Oscar Barnay, On the High Line Park, August 2019

The major intervention (which involved removing all the substrate, resurfacing the concrete slab on the metal beams, and removing the rails and railings, labelling them with archaeological precision and then reinstalling them once restored) enables the project to establish a finely designed, structurally sound promenade, well served by stairs, ramps and elevators making it accessible to people with reduced mobility and light maintenance vehicles. But at the same time, it annihilates all previous spontaneous vegetation and animal occupation of the High Line. It transforms this industrial wasteland into a place of leisure, and the proximity between the two is now purely visual, a form of staging reinforced by the reuse, in their exact original place, of rails and railings, almost museum-like or archaeological relics of railway activity. Robert Hammond, then Executive Director of Friends of the High Line, claims no different:

> The abandoned High Line landscape, once an authentic ruin, was a popular destination for urban explorers. Reincarnated as a series of contemplative gardens, this same landscape now safely provides millions of people with the experience of that kind of exhilaration associated with discovering unlikely places[26].

Sternfeld's photographs gave an image to the West Side Freight Line's wild character. They also promoted its preservation, building a place for it in the collective imagination of New Yorkers. And yet, paradoxically, the architects' project proposes that visitors experience not this vanished neo-savage landscape, but rather the image of this landscape. In this sense, the High Line designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Piet Oudolf is less an evocation of the railway viaduct than merely of its photographs. It could be argued that the image of the real has here taken precedence over the real itself, and that the memory of the West Side Freight Line has been entrusted exclusively to images, embodying one of the biases of the relationship to the world mediated by the photographic image that Siegfried Kracauer prophesied as early as 1927:

> The world itself has taken on a "photographic face"; it can be photographed because it strives to be completely reducible to the spatial continuum that yields to snapshots. It can sometimes depend on that fraction of a second required for the exposure of an object whether or not a sportsman will become so famous that photographers are commissioned by illustrated magazines to give him exposure. The camera can also capture the figures of the beautiful girls and young gentlemen. That the world devours them is a sign of the fear of death. What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory-image. In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it all the more[27].

26 Robert Hammond, in Oudolf and Darke, *Les jardins de la High Line.*

27 Siegfried Kracauer. 1993. "Photography. 1927. " trans. Thomas Y. Levin, Critical Inquiry 19, no. 3.

Joel Sternfeld's photographs began as a means of raising public awareness of the qualities of the abandoned railroad. They became one of the strongest arguments in favor of preserving the High Line, before becoming the embodiment of its state of neglect and suspense. Today, they are used as a form of legitimization for the urban park, which presents itself as a surrogate experience – an heir to the image provided by Sternfeld's photographs – that has become accessible to all, and can be valorized from a real-estate point of view for gentrified neighborhoods such as Chelsea, or fast-developing ones such as Hudson Yard. Although Sternfeld's photographs were important actors in the repair of a post-industrial landscape, they may also have contributed to a relative instrumentalization of the memory they sought to preserve.

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Plywood Publics: Thin Politics in Carrie Mae Weems's Painting the Town

Justin Fowler

Abstract

Carrie Mae Weems's *Painting the Town* documents the traces of a politically charged moment in the recent history of Portland, Oregon where protests in the name of Black lives in the summer of 2020 quickly became a nightly ritual as buildings, authorities, and demonstrators alike armored themselves for gradual escalation. These photographs of boarded-up storefronts with plywood painted to cover the liberatory messages once carried by graffiti stage a confrontation with the material reality of erasure. Unlike much of her photographic work, Weems's series here is largely evacuated of space and human figures, and is presented in large scale and in full color. This paper considers this shift in light of Weems's previous interrogations of architecture and urban space in series such as *The Louisiana Project*, *Roaming,* and *Museums* and in conversation with related developments in new art photography from artists such as Thomas Demand and Thomas Ruff, who have been positioned as protagonists of confrontational and surface-oriented work in "the tableau form." Critically, the approach of Weems's work in *Painting the Town* also supports both a formal and a political turn away from a theater of inclusion to a demand for justice, solidarity, and a resistance to erasure. Reading the photographs alongside recent theoretical work from Ruha Benjamin and Xine Yao advocating a renewed attention to the "thin description" of surfaces and to the liberatory potential of antisocial affect among marginalized communities suggests how survival necessitates a move beyond the reparative.

Keywords: Photography, Abstraction, Public Space, Race, Justice

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In the summer of 2020, the city of Portland, Oregon was the site of some of the most intense and sustained popular demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. For months, demonstrators gathered downtown in front of the Multnomah County Justice Center and the Hatfield Federal Courthouse for nightly clashes with police and with the buildings themselves, which quickly resulted in a proliferation of makeshift defensive architectures constructed by governmental authorities and local property owners. From perimeter fences to plywood board window coverings, these constructions kettled demonstrations onto narrow sidewalks where loitering and camping were formally discouraged in the name of pedestrian use—itself a product of the increasing criminalization of homelessness that had long rendered the sidewalks as contested spaces. These defensive architectures also rendered the city into a series of surfaces, at once evacuating the interior life of the city from public view while also collapsing public life and protests over systemic injustice into layered confrontations—projectiles to the glass of a storefront window, paint to plywood, riot shields to their homemade doubles, COVID-19 to fabric masks, and tear gas to those same masks, later upgraded to respirators with full face protection.

Portland-born artist Carrie Mae Weems returned to the city that summer to photograph this interplay, focusing specifically on the BLM slogans and other provocative missives applied to plywood surfaces around town following their erasure by way of crudely applied swaths of paint. In her *Painting the Town* series from 2021, Weems produces pictures of deceptive and haunting calmness with subtle agitations emerging from the misalignments across building form and material, plywood coverings, and various fields and colors of paint. Further, the pictures are printed large (149.9 x 223.5 cm) and the views are mostly frontal, often with an almost suffocating absence of space. And, even in those few images with perspectival views, the building forms project outward toward the viewer—ejecting them from the space—or they again utilize a tight crop that minimizes contextual cues from the city and limits the visible space to that of the sidewalk in a manner that mirrors the mechanics of crowd control deployed throughout Portland's "summer of rage."

Two of the works (numbers 1 and 4) were recently exhibited in the *Policing Justice* (2024) show at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art. [Fig. 1] There, with an uncanny abstraction often associated with the work of someone like Thomas Demand, the photographs stood out among the more exuberant interpretive, data-driven documentary, and activist work on display for its relative bluntness about the political charge of surfaces in everyday life. This unrelenting directness also recalls transdisciplinary scholar Ruha Benjamin's recent theoretical work on the analytical value of "thinness" in engaging with systems of racial oppression and socio-economic injustice—where, too, political questions emerge through the medium of photography,

as with exposure standards for film stock that biased against darker-skinned persons.[1] And, as exhibit co-curator Cleo Davis describes, the photographs also speak to another loaded period in Portland's history of racial oppression where plywood was the ubiquitous visual marker of Black-owned properties deemed by authorities as blighted. This paper will examine the surface abstraction of Weems's recent work, its relation to contemporary developments in new art photography, and the political implications of the thinning these works register in public space, suggesting a need to move beyond repair to reconstruction.

Picturing power

Art critic Carolina Miranda, opening a recent essay on architectural photography in the *New York Review of Architecture* writes:

> When I worked at the *Los Angeles Times*, a photographer colleague once told me that the assignment he dreaded most was shooting "building mugs." This consisted of photographing the exterior of a building—often the headquarters of some international corporation—as a way of illustrating a story in which the human subjects were unwilling or unable to stand before the camera. Think of the myriad images of Purdue Pharma's Stamford, Connecticut, headquarters that have been used to illustrate reports about the OxyContin scandal.[2]

1 Ruha Benjamin. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity Press.
2 Carolina A. Miranda. 2024. "Baan Voyage," *New York Review of Architecture*, No. 43/44.

[Fig. 1]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2020. Painting the Town #4.

Here, the absence of a human figure in the photograph is a form of indictment by omission, with architectural abstraction serving as both the symbol and vehicle for an injury that is then described in the accompanying story. The photographic strategy is effectively a political gamble since it eschews illustration and defers human connection or narrative content to the supporting text. The picturing of abstraction in these "building mugs," then, speaks to a specific context and an actual building or urban environment while also evoking a more generic or portable sense of horror with the capacity to emerge at any real site of trauma. In effect, there is a political depth to the surface of these works that both exceeds and requires their immediate sites and their histories.

[Fig. 2]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2006. Palazzo Dei Congressi, Mussolini Rome.

[Fig. 3]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2014. Echoes for Marian.

A recurring thread in Carrie Mae Weems's practice is her critical engagement with the subject of architecture and urban space. Developed during her residency at the American Academy in Rome in 2006, the *Roaming* series sees Weems staging scenes for the camera in which she becomes a spectral, black-clad figure in the middle ground of a host of monumental urban environments and shoreline landscapes. Among the sites she interrogates are Mussolini's EUR district [Fig. 2], Rome's Jewish ghetto, and the Piazza del Popolo. Similarly staged photographs that year include works sited at the Louvre, Guggenheim Bilbao, and The Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of her *Museums* series which implicitly critiques both the longstanding institutional exclusion of Black artists from major museums along with the imposing and perhaps hostile presence of the museum structures themselves. And, the practice has continued in works such as *Echoes for Marian* (2014) [Fig. 3] where the Weems figure stands on the staircase before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., recalling and inverting the performance of Black opera singer Marian Anderson on those same steps in 1939 after she had been barred from performing for an integrated audience in Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

What is notable about the later photographic works above is the dress and address of the figure who performs for the camera by turning her back to the viewer, always facing toward the scene. Further, the figure's black dress here is itself a kind of temporal abstraction, as it does not refer to a specific historical moment or vary to correspond changes in setting. The figure's garments and mode of address adapt the approach of some of the more quietly confrontational photographs included in Weems's 2003 series, *The Louisiana Project*. [Fig. 4 and 5] While this series marked the appearance of Weems's haunting proxy who would appear in *Roaming*, here, the figure who performs for the camera is clothed in antebellum period dress as she moves and occasionally dances through a range of Southern landscapes and interiors, and encounters the colonnaded exteriors of imposing manor homes that were once the anchors of American slavery. The works in this series are generally more animated and their frames more varied, as though Weems here was surrounding her subject in search of a thickened pictorial description of historical trauma.

[Fig. 4]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2003. Excerpt from A Single's Waltz in Time from The Louisiana Project.

[Fig. 5]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2003. Approaching Time from The Louisiana Project.

The *Roaming* series and the works that follow in that vein focus more precisely on the confrontation between person and monument in a literal face-off. In these black and white images, the figure invites the viewer to see the scene through her while also rebuffing the viewer's ability to fully enter and inhabit the space of the work. Weems herself calls this figure her "muse" and her "alter ego," as well as a "witness and a guide." Weems continues, "Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a Black woman leading me through the trauma of history....an engaged persona pointing toward the history of power. She's the unintended consequence of the Western imagination." Weems ends her description by adding, "It's essential that I do this work and it's essential that I do it with my body."

As Kimberly Juanita Brown argues in her reading of Weems's photographic persona, the figure "perform[s] a kind of covert exposure" in an attempt to answer the question of how "can one envision the totality of slavery's traumatic legacy without leaving the collective body in pieces? How can one be seen without violence? Turn one's back? Refuse and include?"[3] The overall effect is the unnerving one of a figure out-of-time standing amidst living ruins. The scenes are both magisterial and intimate, but always on the verge of being oppressive as a viewer is never permitted unfettered access either to the guide or the site. This ambivalence sustains the work, as does the alluring refinement of its presentation.

On the question of her work's seductive qualities, Weems has argued for its strategic function. "If there is a beauty and elegance that allows my self and the viewer to be engaged," she notes, "then I have a sense that you'll be more willing to enter the terrain and ask the difficult questions."[4] Increasingly, however, another access point here in the case of *Roaming* and the *Museums* series are the escalating physical size of the prints themselves. By way of example, the first digital inkjet printing of *When and Where I Enter the British Museum* from 2006 measured approximately 76.2 x 50.8 cm, while a more recent print edition from 2023 measures 182.9 x 152.4 cm (sheet and mount). This scalar shift amplifies both the viewer's bodily relationship to the work as well as the suffocating monumentality of the scene itself as the staging reaches a kind of immersive breaking point.

3 Kimberly Juanita Brown. 2015. "Photographic Incantations of the Visual" in *Carrie Mae Weems*, October Files 25, eds. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier. 2021. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

4 Carrie Mae Weems. 2018. qtd. by Robin Lydenberg, "Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement," in *Strategies of Engagement*, eds. Robin Lydenberg and Ash Anderson (McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College.

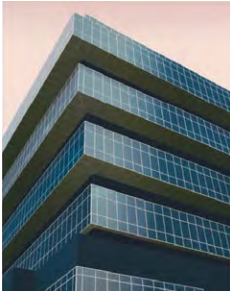
The tableau form

Following Jean-Francois Chevrier, art theorist Michael Fried has insisted on the critical importance of "the tableau form"[5] in contemporary art photography, as evident in the work of artists such as Jeff Wall, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer, and Thomas Demand. While Fried goes to great lengths to connect this development to the anti-theatrical tradition he first championed in response to minimalist or "literalist" art of the late 1960s, what is crucial here in this theorization of new art photographic practice is first, the size of the prints—namely, that they are intended to be exhibited on a gallery wall rather than viewed in a publication—second, quoting Chevier, "the importance of 'the confrontational experience'," supported by "an enforced distance between work and viewer, without which the mutual facing off of the two that underlies the notion of confrontation would not be possible,"[6] and lastly, a renewed attention to surfaces themselves, be they human faces or architectural interiors. Fried develops this last point by way of the early work of Thomas Ruff whose frontal, passport-like portrait photographs of friends [Fig. 6] were initially printed at 24 x 18 cm before later being enlarged to 210 x 165 cm. While these pictures were of very real people, Ruff's impersonal staging of the works was intended to elude a viewer's capacity to identify or empathize with the represented figures. "They tell no stories, no anecdotes." Fried here quotes an essay by Régis Durand attempting to account for the seeming indifference or impersonal qualities of Ruff's work, adding that his photographs "do not stage a brief moment of the world's theater....They are perfectly and massively 'realistic' and precisely because of this realism they undercut any attempt to look for clues that would allow one to go beyond them." There is, in effect, something suffocating about the works and their unrelenting, but thoroughly stylized realism. While a human face would typically provide the viewer with a means to ground their experience, here the photographic approach and scale of the prints reinforces the surface of things, heightening "the confrontational experience" above all else.

5 Michael Fried. 2008. *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. Yale University Press.
6 Ibid., 144.

[Fig. 6]
Thomas Ruff. 1988. Pörtrat. P. Stadtbaumer.

Thinking with Carolina Miranda and her invocation of the photography of "building mugs" above, it's not difficult to make the leap that Fried does from Ruff's portrait photography to the photographic practice of Thomas Demand who eschews human figures entirely in favor of uncanny, but matter-of-fact pictures of fastidiously constructed architectural models that are themselves often extracted and abstracted from documentary photographs. And, while the content of Demand's photos varies, many of the scenes he re-stages in paper for the camera are interior spaces of trauma or criminal activity where the violence itself is rarely shown except in traces—disturbed objects, windows broken, doors ajar. Further, the violence Demand tracks is often structural or systemic and made known through the smallest of backroom bureaucratic machinations at one end or in physical devastation at the receiving end. If an architectural model or a work of sculpture would usually suggest an invitation to maneuver around or inhabit the constructed space, Demand's photographs reject this mode of address, first by photographing the models and then by destroying them once they have fulfilled their function. As Demand notes: "You can walk around a sculpture as often as you like, and with photographs—mine are very large so that, as with the sculptures, you can also walk around them—you have a [single, forever fixed] moment and my particular angle of vision. My tyrannical condition, as it were, is that I prescribe your vision."[7] Further, as Fried argues, many of the photographs Demand stages are framed—as in the many documentary and news images he references—so that the viewer feels safely excluded.[8] As the scenes are rarely ones that a viewer would want to inhabit by virtue of their seemingly indifferent abstraction, unnatural lighting, and haunting subject matter, they also force a kind of confrontation with the idea of structural violence itself.



7 Qtd. in Fried, 271.
8 Fried, 266.

[Fig. 7]
Thomas Demand. 2024. One Stamford Forum from the Portals series, published by Gemini G.E.L.

To return to Miranda's building mug example, the Purdue Pharma headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut, it's interesting that Demand himself also landed upon the imposing gridded glass curtain wall façade of this inverted ziggurat of a building as the subject for a photograph in a recent series published by Gemini G.E.L.. In *Portals* from 2024, Demand presents a series of exteriors of notorious structures ranging from the U.S. government's recent Mexico border wall prototype to the balconies of the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship that was quarantined for nearly a month in Yokohama, Japan in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the relatively small size of these lithographs (83.19 x 71.12 cm) feels like a conceptual misfire, the series retains many of the critical qualities of Demand's earlier work. In that company, *One Stamford* Forum [Fig. 7] is another view onto an opaque emblem of systemic corruption and violence implicated in hundreds of thousands of opioid-related deaths that would eventually result in January 2025 in a $7.4 billion USD settlement between Purdue Pharma, its Sackler family owners, and legal representatives of thousands of victims and the governments of several U.S. states and localities. Again, though, the photographic image itself does not illustrate or narrate these matters, but rather serves as an alluring affront to the viewer who is unable to ascertain where they stand in relation to this deceptively straightforward document of power hiding in plain sight. Translating a familiar, yet inaccessible object like the Purdue Pharma building into an accessible medium like photography while amplifying the strangeness of the referent's prominence in light of all the harm it has given shape to is the political charge of Demand's work here. Isolated by Demand's staging from the city and skyline in which it sits, the Purdue Pharma building is, like Thomas Ruff's portraits, a face that can only be confronted, not engaged in conversation or a relational exchange.

Antisocial aesthetics

Where scholarship on artists such as Ruff and Demand has tended to highlight matters of surface and form, enlisting them in longstanding Modernist aesthetic debates, critical responses to Carrie Mae Weems's work have often adopted a different tenor. As Huey Copeland writes, her work has been "all too often flattened into a caricature of its reparative content," arguing instead that it, in fact, "always cuts deep into the space of representation, asking us to look hard into the image, even when it is patently two-dimensional."[9] Indeed, much of Weems's work engages cinema, theater, and performance—all vehicles for narrative communication and storytelling that would not tidily fit within a critical framework like Fried's. At the same time, however, there is a great deal still to unpack in those "patently two-dimensional" works, particularly as they begin to relate in scale to other tableau form works and in form to an increasing preoccupation with inaccessible surfaces. If, as noted earlier,

9 Huey Copeland. 2023. "Specters of History" (2014) in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Shape of Things*. MW Editions and Luma Arles.

Weems has long found it "essential" to "point to the history of power" with her body[10]—as a persona, witness, or guide—then what necessitated the shift away from this bodily mediation in the unpopulated photographs of boarded up Portland buildings in 2020? Evacuating both body and representational space from these works, Weems at first appears to be taking a detour with the photographs in the *Painting the Town* series. Yet, seen as an evolution of the work that began with *The Louisiana Project* and *Roaming*, the Portland photographs begin to mark a transformation where confrontation is no longer illustrated with the use of a body, but rather *embodied* in the formal structure of the work. Whereas before there was a guide who seemingly held a viewer's hand through a series of difficult encounters even while her back was turned, now even this cautious or indifferent sociality is dispensed with. That these images are rendered in full, saturated color adds to the shock of these scenes that have collapsed into surfaces.

From across a gallery, these works appear as color field paintings capable of anesthetizing a viewer through their warm, all-over embrace. [Fig. 8] To view them closer, however, is to face a suffocating set of armored surfaces—layers of plywood defensiveness and painted erasures of anti-racist insurgency. The authorship of these makeshift fitted barriers and crudely applied patches of paint here becomes almost immaterial given the ubiquity of their production. The violence they both represent and physically effect, on the other hand, is incredibly precise and instantly recognizable. It is a deep structural violence known through its material confrontations

10 Weems, "Mutual Beliefs," 30.

[Fig. 8]
Painting the Town #1 and #4 at the opening of *Policing Justice*, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, curated by Nina Amstutz and Cleo Davis. 2024. Photo by the author.

across surfaces both built and bodily. The specifics of the encounters vary, but the place from which they emerge is seemingly omnipresent and its history inescapable. As the "Woman in Black" narrator of Weems's theatrical work, *Grace Notes*, describes:

> Imagine you are out for an evening stroll....From the corner of your eye, you see a police car speeding by, red strobes flashing. For reasons unknown, imagine that police car comes to a full stop right in front of you, and the officer, for reasons unknown, gets out, and for no apparent reason, demands your ID. You've heard the news, you know the story, and because recent circumstances have taught you a thing or two about the limits of these fatal encounters, your fingers are crossed. Fearing the possibility of becoming yet another statistic, you wholeheartedly comply....Imagine you or your child living in a state of constant fear, under constant pressure, constant suspicion, troubled by this unrelenting history of violence, where time and time again, an encounter with those who are meant to serve ends with your death.[11]

Because you "know the story" you fear becoming "yet another statistic." What here would be gained by telling another version of this story or recapitulating the statistics? In many respects, this is the political question at the heart of Ruha Benjamin's, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019), and it's worth reading Weems's Portland photographs in the light of Benjamin's methodological framing to define a field of "race critical code studies." Focusing on the intertwined concerns of technology, visual culture, and racial injustice, Benjamin proposes a mode of transdisciplinary analysis where "the point is not just to look beneath the surface in order to find connections between the categories, but to pay closer attention to the surfaces themselves." She continues, "Here I draw upon the idea of thin description as a method for reading surfaces—such as screens and skin—especially since a key feature of being racialized is 'to be encountered as a surface'."[12] In effect, this approach is a critique of the longstanding embrace of "thick description" in anthropological circles which aims for ever more complete pictures and stories obtained either through overreach or extraction, always at the risk of replicating colonial violence by other means. Benjamin instead argues for an approach that is at once more "humble"[13] and more direct—respecting the boundaries of marginalized individuals and communities who veil aspects of themselves in response to the persistent threat of violence, while also clearly naming instances of that violence when they erupt and assigning blame to the perpetrators. Here, too, as voiced by the narrator in Weems's *Grace Notes*, when people are murdered based on the color of their skin it is politically insufficient for art to continue to build complexity into that familiar story or simply add another data point. Thickness, in this case, is beside the point if it doesn't stop the violence.

11 Carrie Mae Weems. 2023. *Grace Notes* (2016), qtd. in "Histories of Violence," *Reflections for Now*. Hatje Cantz Verlag.
12 Benjamin, 45.
13 Ibid., 45.

One of Benjamin's primary concerns here is the tendency in "design thinking" practices to substitute *empathy* for either *justice* or *solidarity*. Thinking through this dynamic by way of the growing popularity of virtual reality "empathy machine[s]"[14] Benjamin notes how easy it is now to see the world through another's eyes, yet the content placed before those eyes can function to re-traumatize marginalized persons as potentially more privileged viewers replay their life experiences and "consume human anguish."[15] As Benjamin argues, "By simply changing what (as opposed to how) we see, do we really leave behind all our assumptions and prior experiences as we journey into virtual reality? Perhaps we overestimate how much our literal sight dictates our understanding of race and inequity more broadly?"[16] Here, a more nominally "inclusive" form of aesthetics might in fact serve as an impediment to justice.

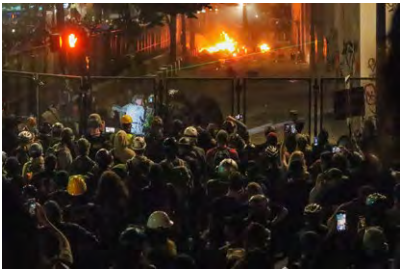
This, too, is among the arguments advanced by literary scholar Xine Yao in her book, *Disaffected*, which explores practices of "unfeeling" among marginalized persons "that fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression."[17] The terms Yao associates with these practices include: "withholding, disregard, growing a thick skin, refusing to care, opacity, numbness, disassociation, inscrutability, frigidity, insensibility, obduracy, flatness, insensitivity, disinterest, coldness, heartlessness, fatigue, desensitization, and emotional unavailability."[18] And, while many of the descriptors above have been used in praise of the works of artists such as Ruff and Demand, they could just as easily be deployed critically against artists from communities long othered by the art world and by culture at large. Disaffection, then, as the right to defy social expectations of access and availability, is both the domain of privilege and that of insurgency.

In many cases, this form of antisocial refusal is a common "defensive tactic of everyday psychic survival"[19] in oppressive environments where affective exposure in the performance of respectability poses a risk of exploitation or exhaustion. Yet, as Yao argues, to leave it there is to ignore the critical potential of these practices, as "we may consider disaffection to be the unfeeling rupture that enables new structures of feeling to arise....[those] alternate forms of sociality made possible by feeling otherwise."[20] Further, it is a means for surveilled communities to strategically obscure themselves, or rather, to maintain a level of autonomy in when, where, and what they choose to present of their lives and work. Such an approach is less a play for privacy than a performance of self-determination long denied—producing spaces where collective work might thrive.

14 Ibid., 169
15 Ibid., 169
16 Ibid., 171.
17 Xine Yao. 2021. *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*. Duke University Press.
18 Yao, 11.
19 Ibid., 15.
20 Ibid., 6.

Confronting Portland

Documentary accounts of the nightly Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Portland's Chapman and Lownsdale Squares and Terry Schrunk Plaza from the summer of 2020 include countless images and videos of masked individuals facing off against the boarded-up and fenced-off Multnomah County Justice Center. [Fig. 9] Designed in 1983 by ZGF Architects, the symmetrical elevation fronting the square boasts an open colonnade that converges at entry doors on center capped by a barrel-vaulted arcade of gridded glass. The inset plywood coverings fitted to this façade removed its public sidewalk beneath the colonnade and made for a perverse spectacle of articulated blankness. A carceral monument under siege, the building gained both new layers of fortification and new messages and scars with each successive confrontation. Each night as the demonstrations would escalate, authorities would poke out from behind closed doors at the Justice Center or the neighboring Hatfield Federal Courthouse [Fig. 10] and launch tear gas into the crowd before finally emerging in full force and riot gear to disperse or kettle the remaining demonstrators using more gas along with "less than lethal" munitions designed to maim bodies if not outright disable them.[21]



21 See Forensic Architecture, *'Tear Gas Tuesday' in Downtown Portland* (April 2023): https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/tear-gas-tuesday-in-downtown-portland on tear gas use and news story on munitions; and Conrad Wilson, "Portland protester disabled by 2020 incident with US Marshal gets $7.65 million," *OPB*, February 14, 2025: https://www.opb.org/article/2025/02/14/portland-oregon-donavan-labella-head-wound-disabled-2020-less-lethal/

[Fig. 9]
Multnomah County Justice Center. Photo by the author.

[Fig. 10]
Tear gas from the Border Patrol Tactical Unit and fires at the Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse during the 2020 protests in Portland (July 22, 2020). Photo by Tedder.

In Portland, the sumptuous staging of a lone woman quietly interrogating a monumental structure as in Weems's photographs was supplanted by more physically charged encounters as communities already exhausted by political complacency and armored against COVID-19 turned up both the volume and the protective gear, while also developing collective networks of mutual aid and communication—or "counterintimacies" as Xine Yao might describe them. Immersed in this evening theater were any number of hosts, guides, and interlocutors along with reporters and more casual observers. It's notable perhaps that in approaching the demonstrations, Weems chose not to focus on the theater itself but on its traces throughout the city, where storefronts boarded up to avoid stray projectiles became the built equivalent of keeping one's head down in a crisis. In *Painting the Town*, Weems evacuates her photographed scenes both of human figures and narrative content, but also of representational depth. The disappearance of Weems's alter ego here is notable as is the collapse of the middle ground spaces that the figure often occupies when facing one of Weems's chosen monuments. *Painting the Town #1* [Fig. 11] which centers on the protruding corner of a boarded up building is something of a transitional work that both repels the viewer from accessing the space while introducing the surface materials of masonry, concrete, glass, plywood, and paint that will appear in various configurations in the flattened, elevational images in low relief that follow in the series. In those frontal works, the accretion of surfaces is suffocating, particularly as the close-cropped views (see numbers 3 and 4) [Fig. 12 and Fig. 1] exclude even a hint of the sidewalk for scale or grounding. The fully saturated colors and plywood textures on display only reinforce the primacy of the picture surface here.

Whereas in *The Louisiana Project*, *Roaming*, and *Museums*, Weems always offered the viewer a way into the work even if only to deny full access, here, that empathetic overture is withdrawn,

[Fig. 11]
Carrie Mae Weem. 2021. Painting the Town #1.

[Fig. 12]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2021. Painting the Town #3.

as is the politics of recognition it might support. These are big, inescapable, works that don't require the viewer's empathetic response for their meaning. Both the form and the subject of the work are engaged with erasure. While the viewer is presumed to understand that the crudely applied washes of paint are covering some kind of graffiti, the communicative content of those underlying marks is never revealed. Stories, pleas, and demands on behalf of the dignity of Black lives are all subsumed beneath cosmetic patches of color. [Fig. 13, 14] Given the haphazard application of the covering, there is no reason to think that the motive of their unknown authors is anything other than erasure. This is not coordinated neighborhood beautification or even broken windows policing with all their racist implications, but the suppression of voice itself. Weems's work here appears to question the value of sharing stories in an environment that casually snuffs them out as soon as they emerge. Why continue to provide a guide and expose or re-traumatize another Black body if no one is willing to listen to what they have to say? Instead, Weems here adopts a more confrontational address, photographing painted surfaces in such a way that the works themselves appear almost more painterly than their objects. Further, the attention to plywood here, as noted by the co-curator of the *Policing Justice* exhibition, speaks directly to Black Portlanders who saw their communities decimated by redlining and the boarding up of family properties deemed by authorities to be blighted.[22] It's these stories of lost generational wealth, too, that are marked by surfaces of erasure and what reparative urban development projects such as Portland's Albina Vision are intended to address.[23]

22 See: Cecilia Brown. 2019. *Root Shocked*: https://vimeo.com/343674629
23 See: https://www.albinavisioninc.com/

[Fig. 13]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2021. Painting the Town #17.

[Fig. 14]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2021. Painting the Town #5.

While the latter narrative is perhaps less available to casual viewers of the photographs, the connection is no doubt integral to the work as Weems's subject remains a meditation on the history of violence—an abstract and recurring phenomena with concrete episodes. As such, Portland-based viewers of *Painting the Town* might also register in the blank plywood facades the vacant city blocks lost to the opioid trade, and of those suffering from addiction or houselessness attempting to merge into the recesses of a storefront façade in the hope of a night of uninterrupted sleep as their very existence is criminalized. And then, there are the local business owners and pedestrians who also contest and lay claim to the thin space of the sidewalk in concern for their perceived safety or livelihood as a proxy for more thickened and systemic forms of political and economic dispute that often confound the emergence of solidarity. A lack of justice pervades each of these instances of violence, reflecting a thinning public sphere whose armor is increasingly naturalized as in the ballistic glass and perforated metal screens soon to upgrade the defenses of the publicly accessible entry spaces of the Multnomah County Justice Center—hardened transparency supplanting evidentiary layers.

As the physical memory of the 2020 demonstrations fades and many of its political gains eroded in broad rightward turns in both state and federal arenas in the U.S., the charge of Weems's *Painting the Town* photographs remains present. For scholars such as Ruha Benjamin, the "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) and even "access" initiatives now being attacked and rolled back at the federal level were themselves inadequate stopgaps where justice and solidarity were what was needed. Here, the indiscriminate, yet pointed erasure-by-paint recorded in Weems's work is systematically being reenacted at every level, as is the intentional collapse of the space of public dissent and debate. The officially sanctioned demolition of the Black Lives Matter Plaza mural in Washington D.C. to avoid threats of funding cuts to the city in March 2025 is but the latest effort to whitewash the modest recognitions of the recent past.[24] Paint to plywood; hydraulic breaker to paving stones. In this environment, it's the foreclosed project of post-Civil War era Reconstruction that looms large, forcing every conversation on systemic justice into the framework of piecemeal repair, itself a reach so long as even the most fundamental stories of human dignity continue to be erased.

24 Ashraf Khalil and Jacquelyn Martin. 2025. "'More than brick and mortar:' DC begins removing 'Black Lives Matter' plaza near the White House," *Associated Press News.*
https://apnews.com/article/black-lives-matter-white-house-trump-bowser-f130daeb762e438fc8eddd3dd4da7982

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Documenting and Staging Alternative Urban Living: Miyamoto Ryūji's Cardboard Houses and its Materiality

Mengfei Pan

Abstract

This paper focuses on the Japanese photographer Miyamoto Ryūji (b. 1947) and his *Cardboard Houses* series (photographed between 1983 and 1996, and published collectively in 2003), examining how this body of work documents and presents an alternative form of human dwelling amid a rapidly changing urban landscape. It argues that the series illuminates possibilities for alternative ways of living that emerge in the interstices of urban space and underscores the cyclical nature of the city itself. By staging meticulously details of these houses and employing specific installation methods, *Cardboard Houses* invites viewers to reflect on the materiality and spatial experience of photography, as well as the impermanence of the subject matter. Situating the series within both Miyamoto's broader œuvre—which consistently pursues and captures the transience of architecture and the city—and a wider body of postwar Japanese works that express an enthusiasm for small-scale urban structures, this paper demonstrates how the series constitutes an aesthetically inflected and critical documentary of human dwelling, one that actively engages with the material conditions of the urban environment.

Keywords: self-built houses of homeless, impermanence of city, architectural photography, Japanese photography, Tokyo

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the Japanese photographer Miyamoto Ryūji (b. 1947) and his *Cardboard Houses* series (photographed between 1983 and 1996, and published collectively in 2003), examining how this body of work documents and presents an alternative form of human dwelling amid a rapidly changing urban landscape. It argues that the series illuminates possibilities for alternative ways of living that emerge in the interstices of urban space and suggests the cyclical nature of the city itself. By staging meticulously detailed images of these houses and employing specific installation methods, *Cardboard Houses* invites viewers to reflect on the materiality and spatial experience of photography, as well as the impermanence of both the medium and its subject matter.

This paper situates the series both within Miyamoto's œuvre, which consistently pursues and captures the transience of architecture and the city, and within a broader body of Japanese works from the past half-century that reflect an enthusiasm for small-scale urban structures. By contextualizing *Cardboard Houses*, this paper demonstrates how the series challenges conventional architectural photography, offers an aesthetically inflected and critical documentary of human dwelling that actively engages with the material conditions of the urban environment, and stages an alternative way of living through the spaces of exhibition.

"Ruin Photographer" and His Projects on City Transience

Miyamoto began his professional life as a photographer and editor for a few publications including the architectural journal *Toshi Jūtaku* (*Urban Housing*) from the early 1970s. His first works with *Toshi Jūtaku* was of the vernacular architecture in the Yanaka neighborhood of Tokyo, an area survived the natural disasters and wars and showed a mix of old and modern buildings. At *Toshi Jūtaku*, he was also involved in a project documenting the slums in central Hiroshima, known as *genbaku suramu* (atomic bomb slum), where he first encountered with "hand-built architecture (*tedukuri kenchiku*)" (Cushman 2018, 95).

After establishing himself as an independent photographer in 1975, Miyamoto's observant eye on the changing urban landscape and his persistent questioning of architectural permanence became increasingly apparent. As he later recalled, he turned his camera toward the drastically transforming Tokyo during the collapse of the economic bubble (Miyamoto 2021, 17). One major subject during this period was the demolition of buildings such as prisons, cinemas, factories, and other aging structures. This series was collected in the celebrated photobook *Architectural Apocalypse* (Miyamoto 1988b), which earned him the Kimura Ihei award, a prestigious Japanese photography prize established in 1975, and led to his popular reputation as a "ruins photographer." The foreword in *Architectural Apocalypse* by architect Isozaki Arata (1931–2022) discusses ruins as a vision of the future city and remarks that Miyamoto's photographs visualize the very principles of ruination (Isozaki 1988).

Miyamoto later explains that these subjects are not "classical ruins" (Miyamoto 2021, 16), which are typically associated with past civilizations and experiences of the sublime, but rather ordinary buildings that have been abandoned or are in the process of being demolished. The theme of change has long attracted the attention of photographers, as exemplified by Charles Marville (1813–1879)'s mid-nineteenth-century survey of Paris during Haussmann's reconstruction of the city (McQuire 2008). In this respect, Miyamoto appears to align himself with a long-standing photographic tradition.

However, his *Cardboard Houses* series—photographed on the same roll of film as *Architectural Apocalypse*—clearly reflects his focus on modest-scale structures and their diverse, improvised yet functional designs, distinguishing them from the works of Marville and others that emphasize large-scale architectural and urban transformations. These houses, made from cardboard and other readily available urban materials, present a different facet of the city—one that does not necessarily signify progress or growth.

Cardboard Houses also inspired his later project *Pinhole House*, in which he constructs temporary "camera obscura" houses on the street and uses these self-built structures to photograph and record the city outside. To produce these works, Miyamoto enters the house, waits for the exposure to finish, and the resulting images often contain faint silhouettes of his own body.

The *Cardboard Houses* series occupies a position between projects that focus on massive, abandoned structures and those that involve the photographer's body in documenting the city. It aligns with *Architectural Apocalypse* in its concern with the impermanence of architecture, but shifts attention to much smaller, improvised, site-specific structures. Whereas the *Pinhole House* project incorporates Miyamoto's own body and actions as a means of mediating between the photographic work and the city it represents, *Cardboard Houses* maintains a certain distance.

This distance was initially quite close when Miyamoto first published several photographs in the weekly graphic magazine *Asahi Graph* in 1984. All ten photos included were in color: one showed the inside of a house, another depicted a group of homeless dwellers—likely "neighbors," and another portrayed a house's "owner" sitting at its entrance. The accompanying essay by Miyamoto introduced these dwellers' previous occupations and current ways of living, and quoted their words about how they built their houses and how they enjoyed inhabiting them (Miyamoto 1984). As Miyamoto reflects, while photographing, he directly interacted with the homeless individuals, offering alcohol, cigarettes, and other items as gestures of goodwill in exchange for permission to photograph them (*SPA!* 1994, 27; Sanada and Miyamoto 1995).

This human presence and attempt at storytelling about these people's lives would be eliminated in Miyamoto's later publication of *CARDBOARD HOUSES* as a photobook in 2003. As critic Iizawa Kōtarō puts it, Miyamoto shifted away from his early "reportage" approach toward "a highly refined style" (Iizawa 1995, 186). This "highly refined style" is characterized by the absence of human beings, monochrome rendering, and brilliant handling of light and shadow, which together further accentuate the visual presence of the houses and the ingenuity of their construction. In addition, in contrast to the glossy paper of the weekly magazines where these photographs first appeared, the thicker matte paper used for the 2003 photobook—with the place and date printed on the left page and a single photograph on the right—adds a solemn atmosphere to the images (Fig. 1).

[Fig. 1]
Miyamoto Ryūji. 2003. "Tokyo 1983"

The book consists of 67 photographs of self-made dwellings by homeless individuals, primarily constructed from cardboard (Miyamoto 2003). The photographs were taken between 1983 and 1996, with most captured in Tokyo (46 works), and the rest in Osaka (7), Kawasaki (6), London (5), New York (1), Paris (1), and Hong Kong (1). In this photobook, Miyamoto recalls his first encounter with these "pockets of makeshift dwelling" as follows:

My first sightings of cardboard houses were in 1983. Underneath a bridge over a filled-in canal by Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market, around the disused Shiodome railway freight station, near the old Akihabara Fresh Produce Market, along the Nihonbashi River in the vicinity of the Tokiwa Bridge, little shelters that somebody had made for himself to live in. These were built as separate isolated single dwellings, not collective settlements nothing like the squatter slums one sees in the great cities of Asia, Africa and Latin America. No, these had none of the boisterous energy of family life that overflows those slums; these were quiet, solitary retreats. As if someone had sought out hidden seams and buffer zones in the constructed urban fabric in which to stake individual claims and hide away unseen (Miyamoto 2003, 3).

Miyamoto points out the distinctive quietness and sense of solidarity embodied in these houses, in contrast to the slums depicted in another of his projects, *Kowloon Walled City* (Miyamoto 1988a). He himself uses terms such as "castle," "salon," and "masterpiece" to describe and evaluate their forms (Miyamoto 1984).

A Lineage of Interest in Forgotten Urban Objects

Miyamoto's fascination with these improvised dwellings can be understood within a broader cultural context in Japan, including writer Abe Kōbō's (1924–1993) novel *Box Man* (*Hako otoko*) (1973), the Street Observation (*Rojō kansatsu*) art movement from the 1980s, architect Suzuki Ryōji's (b. 1944) barrack studies, and installation artist Kawamata Tadashi's (b. 1953) *Field Work* projects from the late 1980s to early 1990s. These examples share an aestheticization of small structures—such as homeless dwellings, defunct architecture, and constructions made from abandoned materials—as well as a critical inquiry into urban redevelopment and the relationship between human and the city.

Abe's *Box Man* is a literary work that portrays a marginalized, homeless figure living in the city. It depicts a vagrant residing in a cardboard box, maintaining his anonymity and absence while continuously gazing out at the city through a narrow slit of the box. The cardboard box becomes a symbol of urban life, marked by isolation and a persistent desire to gaze. Miyamoto himself cites *Box Man* as an inspiration for his later *Pinhole House* series, which seeks to observe details in a flat, unprejudiced manner—mirroring the gaze of the box man (Miyamoto 2021, 19–20). *Cardboard Houses* appears to have served as a first step, with Miyamoto's position remaining outside the houses.

The collective art movement known as "Street Observation" approaches the city in a humorous way. Formed by a group of architects, illustrators, and editors in the late 1980s, it was led by Akasegawa Genpei (1937–2014), a prolific artist and writer. Akasegawa challenged conventional definitions of art and, in the 1980s, coined the notion of "Hyperart Thomasson," referring to architectural remnants that have lost their original function but are still maintained as if they served a purpose. The term "Thomasson" comes from Gary Thomasson, a highly paid American baseball player for the Yomiuri Giants who spent much of his contract sitting on the bench due to poor performance. Akasegawa adopted his name as a metaphor for structures that remain visible but serve almost no purpose. For example, in 1972, he found a staircase outside a hotel building in central Tokyo that had once connected to another structure. As that structure no longer existed, the staircase now leading nowhere had become useless. Akasegawa later named it a "pure staircase (*junsui kaidan*)" and published its photograph (Fig. 2), along with other "Hyperart Thomasson" art, in a book accompanied by his theoretical writing (Akasegawa 1987).

Akasegawa himself also showed an interest in the accidental encounter between the materiality of cardboard and the space of the street. A reprint edition of his book *Principles of Art* (*Geijutsu Genron*) (first published in 1991) features on its cover a photograph taken by Akasegawa, depicting a bicycle on the street wrapped in cardboard (Fig. 3). Akasegawa titled this photograph "Armored Bicycle (*Sōkō jitensha*)," but in a way, its form also resembles a small elephant. This symbolic photo reveals Akasegawa's vision, which sees the universe in wrapped objects and blurs the boundary between accidental, mundane life and the deliberate creation of art.

[Fig. 2]
Akasegawa Genpei. 1987. *Pure Yotsuya Staircase* (*Junsui Yotsuya kaidan*), 1972, photography.

[Fig. 3]
Akasegawa Genpei. 2006. *Armored Bicycle* (*Sōkō jitensha*), 1986, photography.

"Hyperart Thomasson" later became part of the broader Street Observation movement, which expressed a shared interest in ordinary, yet somehow humorous or oddly out-of-place structures found on the street. One member, dentist Ichiki Tsutomu (n.d.), for example, devoted himself to collecting fragments of demolished buildings (Ichiki 1985), offering another example that illuminates the impermanence of architecture and how abandoned materials can mediate between personal memory and the collective memory of buildings and cities.

Although the subjects of *Street Observation* and *Cardboard Houses* differ—with the former focusing on accidental architectural remnants or functionless street objects, and the latter on fragile purpose-built shelters—the two share a method of framing specific structures in ways that aestheticize them. This aestheticizing impulse is most clearly articulated in Miyamoto's own words: "The 'builders' knew that their houses were to be destroyed, but I often found 'art' in their works" (Miyamoto 1994, 50). This framing reflects a shared interest in often-overlooked street corners and a keen awareness of the rapidly changing city that gave rise to both forgotten urban structures and their dwellers.

Miyamoto's act of collecting and valuing cardboard houses also resonates with architect Suzuki Ryōji's fascination with barracks—simple, temporary, and often poorly constructed buildings typically erected in times of emergency, poverty, or displacement, such as after earthquakes (Suzuki 1988). Indeed, the *Cardboard Houses* series evokes the aftermath of earthquakes and wars that have struck the country (Iizawa 1995, 190–191; Cushman 2018). While Suzuki collects examples and elevates the barrack to a form of architecture, Miyamoto's photography offers an aesthetic attempt to set them apart from the everyday gaze that tends to overlook them, while also presenting a vision of the city's duality: the deconstruction of huge, massive structures and the construction carried out by marginalized groups using resources discarded by a growing city.

While the previous cases are either literary or photographic, Kawamata, by contrast, turned to material expression, installing small structures in urban environments (see Kawamata 1991). His *Field Work* project collected abandoned wood scraps and garbage on-site, assembled structures in various urban corners without permission, and allowed them to naturally collapse over time (Fig.4). Isozaki Arata noted that Kawamata's installations were intriguing because they invited viewers to imagine the conflicts, confrontations, accidents, and even the homeless occupants inside (Kawamata 2001, 13). Kawamata's practice presents an art of building the ephemeral—an approach in which both the site and the materiality contribute to the meaning of the works. Art critic Murata Makoto also linked Miyamoto's *Cardboard Houses* with Kawamata's *People's Garden* at Documenta IX in 1992 and Krzysztof Wodiczko's (b. 1943) *Homeless Vehicle* (1988–1989) (Murata 1994). Although their works stem from different artistic intentions, Murata's comparison affirms the positioning of Miyamoto's work within the field of art rather than as a humanitarian endeavor.

While Kawamata creates new structures as part of his artistic practice/experiment, Miyamoto abstracts form by employing an unemotive photographic framing and emphasizing the urban setting. In contrast to photographers Sakokawa Naoko (n.d.) Takamatsu Hideaki (b. 1970), and Noguchi Kengo (b. 1984), whose works depict street people (Sakokawa 2004, 2013; Takamatsu 2009; Noguchi 2025), and architect–writer Sakaguchi Kyōhei (b. 1978), who produced a manual focusing on the forms and building processes of such houses (Sakaguchi 2004), Miyamoto's more thorough erasure of human figures, especially after the 2000s, redirects attention to the locations of these structures, offering a stark visual contrast between the shelters and the cities that produced them.

[Fig. 4]
Kawamata Tadashi, *People's Garden*, 1992
Courtesy of MISA SHIN GALLERY.

Documenting the Informal Urban Structures

Miyamoto's photography has often been described as carrying a strong documentary tone. In discussing Miyamoto's photographs of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, journalist Mikami Kimio states that they present the "bare facts" of the event (Mikami 2004, 2). Art critic Hayashi Michio compares him to a "surveyor" inspecting his subjects (Hayashi 2004, 197). Iizawa Kōtarō likewise notes that Miyamoto's photographs consistently compel viewers to interpret them as documents (Iizawa 1995, 188).

This documentary character first emerged from the collective presentation of the works: Miyamoto was not particularly concerned with arranging the houses geographically or chronologically.[1] The order of the works published in the monthly magazine *Asahi Camera* in 1994—Osaka 1993, New York 1991, Hong Kong 1993, and Tokyo 1994—and in the weekly magazine *SPA!* in the same year—Hong Kong 1993, New York 1991, Osaka 1994, and two from Osaka 1993—appears rather arbitrary. In the *CARDBOARD HOUSES* photobook, the 67 photographs follow a chronological order but shift back and forth between locations. Rather than suggesting geographic differences or a linear progression over time, the photographs collectively articulate a sense of objectivity through encyclopedic documentation, akin to the approach advocated by the pioneering Japanese photographer Nakahira Takuma (1938–2015) (see Cushman 2018, 48–51).

Secondly, the "bare factness" of *Cardboard Houses* is emphasized through a calm representation of their materiality and setting. Philosopher and writer Kobayashi Yasuo states that Miyamoto's photographs consistently express the "materiality of space (*kūkan no bushitsukan*)" (Kobayashi 1997, 82). This materiality is conveyed through minute details. Miyamoto uses a large-format 4×5 camera that captures these fine details (Sanada and Miyamoto 1995, 64). The materials of these houses, as Miyamoto himself lists— "cardboard, scraps of wood, Styrofoam, mattresses, plastic sheets"—originate from logistic circulation and are discarded by the city (Miyamoto 1997, 61). A careful observer might also notice corrugated metal sheets, umbrellas, duct tape, and plastic strings—all items that can be gathered in the city and assembled to sustain a sheltering structure.

As Iizawa has already pointed out, among all the materials, cardboard is the most symbolic, as it was mass-produced and discarded during Japan's industrial transition from production and processing to distribution and services (Iizawa 1995, 188–189). The materiality of cardboard resonates with the condition of the homeless, who are likewise discarded by society and excluded from the circulatory flows of capitalism.

1 Miyamoto. 1999. notes certain cultural differences, such as the practice in Japan of leaving shoes outside the house and how the proliferation of plastic bottles in the 1990s brought some changes. However, he primarily emphasizes the universality of the houses he observed across major cities around the world.

The series also consistently identifies city names and visualizes the locations of these shelters—under bridges, inside underground passages, or adjacent to trees, roadside guardrails, expressway columns, and breakwaters. The photographs reveal the unexpected nature of these locations—what Miyamoto refers to as the "gaps (*sukima*)," "blind spots (*shikaku*)," or "empty spaces (*kūhaku no basho*)" of the city (Miyamoto 1997, 61; Miyamoto 1999, 107). They underscore the builders' resourceful use of existing urban infrastructure to stabilize their shelters, stay dry, and remain out of sight from passing pedestrians.

The locations—often situated in city centers—are noteworthy. These areas not only provide materials for housebuilding, food, and access to public lavatory these people need, but also create zones of anomie, allowing for deviation from social norms and enabling alternative ways of living. It is no coincidence that Miyamoto first encountered these houses near logistic centers, where cardboard was discarded in great quantities.

Some of the locations are immediately identifiable. One can see Miyamoto's intention to deliberately juxtapose these self-built, anonymous, and ephemeral structures with monumental buildings and urban infrastructure. For example, the first photograph in the photobook *CARDBOARD HOUSES*, depicting a house standing in front of the massive Bank of Japan building, is especially telling (Fig. 1). As Hayashi Michio has already noted, the Bank of Japan is "a veritable heart pump in the circulatory system of capital," while the cardboard house was "a small, stagnant pool left behind the main current" (Hayashi 2004, 200). In an early "reportage" article, Miyamoto himself specifically mentions the architect and completion date of the building—Tatsuno Kingo (1854–1919) and 1896. He further satirized the building's imposing atmosphere as embodying the prestige of the Japanese Empire and overwhelming the surrounding buildings. The only structure that could stand against this imposing presence was the cardboard castle of the free people (Miyamoto 1984).

Another photograph taken in front of the Umeda Sky Building in Osaka clearly demonstrates Miyamoto's attention to the contrast between two types of architecture (Fig.5). Designed by the world-renowned architect Hara Hiroshi (1936–2025) and completed in 1993, the Umeda Sky Building, located in the heart of the city near major transport hubs, has long served as a symbol of Osaka. Yet the informal dwelling that Miyamoto captures shortly after the completion of the Umeda Sky Building shows no sense of intimidation; rather, it humorously echoes the massive structure in the background, as both feature rooftops elevated from their main bodies. While the Umeda Sky Building is defined by a void beneath its rooftop, the homeless person's improvised shelter, by contrast, piles boxes at the front. This playful angle and juxtaposition underscore the vitality of these "small, stagnant pools."

Staging at Exhibition Spaces

In addition to publications, the series has been featured in exhibitions. A few photographs titled *Tokyo's Cardboard Houses* (*Tokyo no danbōru no ie*) were first shown in the group exhibition *Tokyo* at the Seibu Department Store in Yurakuchō, Tokyo, in 1990. This was followed by the solo exhibition *Cardboard Houses* (*Danbōru no ie*) at Yokohama Portside Gallery in 1994; a major retrospective, *Ryuji Miyamoto Retrospective*, at Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, in 2004; the third Berlin Biennial in 2004; and *Time of Box* (*Hako no jikan*) at the Museum of Tohoku University of Art and Design in Yamagata in 2005.

These exhibitions encouraged bodily interaction, inviting viewers to engage with the "private space" of homeless individuals and complicating their experience by blending the original context of the street with that of the art spaces. For the 1990 group show, Miyamoto used nearly one ton of cardboard to create four square mounds, onto which he attached his *Cardboard Houses* photographs (Cushman 2008, 104). At the 1994 exhibition, with the help of Yokohama residents, he collected approximately 3,000 cardboard boxes from the port area near the gallery and constructed a cardboard enclosure from floor to ceiling (Masuda 1994). A one-meter-square opening was left for visitors to pass through in order to view approximately 40 photographs displayed inside (Fujiwara 1994; Cushman 2008, 104).

[Fig. 5]
Miyamoto Ryūji. 2003. "Osaka 1994"

The installation evoked a vicarious experience of encountering an actual cardboard house on the street (Masuda 1994). A reporter from the art magazine *Geijutsu Shinchō* wrote that he experienced a sudden warmth, as if he had stepped into his own home (*Geijutsu Shinchō* 1994). Another reporter from the magazine *BRUTUS* noted that she perceived these works as imprints of life within the urban mirage (Fujiwara 1994). Art historian Hayashi Yōko described them as so mysteriously bright and warm that one could not help but fall into the illusion that a utopia from another world existed there (Hayashi 1994). The small opening resembled a *nijiriguchi*, the entrance to a traditional Japanese teahouse, requiring visitors to crouch and squeeze their bodies in—thus creating both a spatial and psychological contrast between the inside and outside of the installation.

At the 2004 exhibition *Ryuji Miyamoto Retrospective* at the Setagaya Art Museum, the cardboard house photographs were displayed close to the floor, recreating the pedestrian's view from above and inviting museum visitors to lower themselves to examine the dwellings. These installation methods—including the creation of massive cardboard enclosures and the placement of photographs on the inner walls of the enclosures or near the floor—were employed again in Berlin in 2004 and in Yamagata in 2005. As Hayashi Michio observes with regard to the Setagaya Art Museum exhibition, this positioning of the photographs "disturbs the comfortable state of mind that we usually enter when viewing 'works of art,' partially reconstructing our lost memories of the city inside the white cube" (Hayashi 2004, 203). Notably, the photographs were never framed in these exhibitions, reflecting a deliberate intention to return them to their original context. The exhibition methods thus disrupted the conventional museum experience, encouraging viewers to re-engage their senses as they would on the city streets, within the gallery setting.

Miyamoto has consistently experimented with installation methods. For the Japan Pavilion at the 1996 Venice Architecture Biennale, he divided a photograph of ruins in Kobe—devastated by the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake—into four panels with zigzagging cuts and contours, reinstalling them as murals to emphasize the fragmentation and debris caused by the disaster. He later exhibited them in a further deteriorated state at his show at the Setagaya Art Museum, where the materiality of the photographic installations evoked the fading memory of the event. In this way, Miyamoto's exhibited works transcend conventional photography: they adopt a three-dimensional scale, invite physical interaction from viewers, engage with their own materiality, and pose questions about the materiality of their subjects—architecture and cities.

Critiquing the Progressive City

Through documenting the small stagnancy by unusual ways at exhibition spaces, Miyamoto critiques the city that linearly grows is telling as he eulogizes the cardboard houses. He remarks his experience inside one that they are like veils, wrapping human bodies, and that he felt strangely comforted, even cozy in a way (Miyamoto 2021, 48). This comment resonates with that of poet Sasaki Mikirō, who depicted a homeless couple gradually expanding their cardboard house along the Sumida River, one of Tokyo's major waterways (Sasaki 2003, 36–38). Observing their peaceful life, Sasaki saw the cardboard house as a prototype for the dwellings of migrants who had come to Tokyo from other regions (Sasaki 2003, 38). Sasaki even drew a parallel with the shrines along the Bagmati River in Nepal, which served as shelters for traveling monks, suggesting that the cardboard houses in Tokyo could likewise be seen as a kind of shrine (Sasaki 2003, 39).

Miyamoto did not see the religiousness as Sasaki does, but he likens their acts to those of primeval times (Miyamoto 2003, 3). Miyamoto compares them to the behaviors of animals and birds that gather materials and select sites for their homes on their own (Miyamoto 2021, 48) and refers to these self-builders as "hunter-gatherers of the contemporary city (*gendai toshi no shuryō saishu min*)" (Miyamoto 2003, 3). This also echoes with Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of "bricolage" that works with whatever materials are at hand, assembling and reassembling fragments in creative and improvisational ways, rather than following predetermined plan (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

This bricolage highlights the *terrain vague*, defined by architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales to encompass three intertwined meanings: movement and oscillation; void and absence, yet also potential; and vagueness and uncertainty (Solà-Morales 1995, 119–120). By capturing a specific form of *terrain vague* associated with the homelessness, seeking their space in the city, Miyamoto reveals how the city materially produces the conditions—particularly the resource of cardboard, and a zone where this social group can wield their creativity to build their "quiet, solitary retreats."

The potential of the *terrain vague* of the cardboard houses lies in presenting a "freedom from the norm of the city" (Yonezawa 1997, 41) and "reformulating notions of property and ownership" (Vij 2012, 35; Cushman 2018, 115). The *Cardboard Houses* series exemplifies what Igarashi Tarō (2000) describes as "urban recycling," or what Cushman and Risteen (2020) term a "logic of reconstruction"—an adaptive practice that adopts a pre-modern or animal-like approach to gathering materials, claiming space, and dwelling within a city caught in a constant cycle of destruction and reconstruction.

Conclusion

The *terrain vague* are ephemeral. As Miyamoto writes, "in the urban spaces left after the removal of barracks, cardboard houses, and ruins, eerily new buildings, which know nothing of the slow ripening of time, merely glitter against a bleak skyline" (Miyamoto 1986, 55). He explains that photography was the only means of recording the ephemeral houses, which could change every few days (Miyamoto 1999, 101). He further notes that the reason for publishing *CARDBOARD HOUSES* in 2003 was that "the interesting cardboard houses had ended" (*Bijutsu Techō* 2003, 23). Like the subjects of his other projects—the *genbaku suramu* in Hiroshima, the Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, and the ruins in Kobe after the earthquake—the cardboard houses have been replaced by parks and new buildings. They have disappeared due to forced evictions by police, the redesign of public spaces that expelled the homeless, and urban management efforts aimed at clearing them from the streets. Their materiality has also changed: with the distribution of blue vinyl sheets by public authorities, the appearance of these dwellings has become increasingly uniform (Shirasaka 2003, 64). The era of diverse cardboard houses has come to an end.

This series registers a bygone era while also reflecting a persistent condition of the city—its continual production of *terrain vague*, the nooks and crannies that emerge between processes of deconstruction and construction. Miyamoto captures this urban dynamism and challenges prevailing notions of monumentality, permanence, and the linear progression of architecture and the city. *Cardboard Houses* and its exhibitions broaden the scope of architectural photography, positioning themselves as both aesthetic and critical documents of a form of urban life that originates from the city itself, yet gestures toward its demise and cyclical regeneration.

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Making Temporal Landscapes: A Visual Essay on Snow, Site, and Seeing

Mattias F. Josefsson

Abstract

Making Temporal Landscapes: A Visual Essay on Snow, Site, and Seeing explores the relationship between landscape, perception, and the physical act of engagement through a process developed at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO) since 2019. In these workshops, first-year landscape architecture and architecture students are introduced to an extended form of fieldwork that aims to expand their initial reading of public space. The essay describes a pedagogical approach, conducted in 2025, that combines embodied experience and material transformation as a way to engage with place.

The workshop highlights the value of fieldwork in design education. By working directly on site, students learn to understand landscape through both action and reflection. The process moves them beyond a first person perspective into a position where space can be observed from the outside. Through images, the body becomes an instrument for measuring and framing. The temporary nature of the interventions, both as photographs and spatial forms, opens a discussion about the relationship between what is constructed, what is left behind, and what continues to change in the landscape.

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Material appears to flow down the slope. Is it soil, or merely water? A lorry, half tilted, interrupts the scene, a witness to the artificiality embedded within the material. It is only when we read the title underneath the photo, that we recognise what we are seeing: *Asphalt Rundown* (Smithson 1969). In this work, asphalt becomes more than surface; it becomes an agent that reveals the hidden contours of the terrain. It runs across the ground, absorbing each depression, outlining the micro-reliefs that our eyes might have overlooked unless the added material declared them visible by contrasting the existing surface. The photo makes the asphalt stiffen, transforming it to something that preserves. The asphalt follows its own course, allowing us to see, along lines shaped by gravity and chance, the steep decline of the hill. The asphalt shifts our reading of the geology from the ordinary to the sculptural. The photograph amplifies this contrast, becoming more than a record, perhaps an interpretation, or an encounter that stands on its own. When we introduce a sculptural form that contrasts with the landscape, do we see things that we would not have seen otherwise?

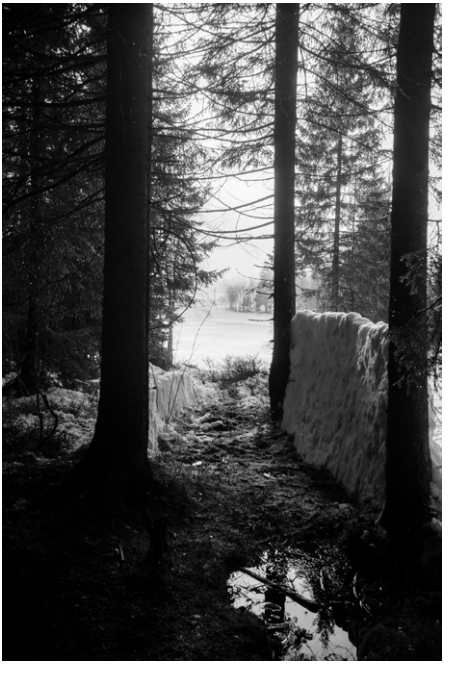
Each winter, the first snow arrives as a quiet shock, restricting and redefining our freedom to move. It covers familiar paths and gentle slopes, silencing the details beneath a uniform white surface. Beneath it, roads and tracks vanish. In response, the snowplough begins its work, removing the forgiving layer that restricts our movement. In this fragile negotiation between weather and human will, the priorities of society reveal themselves in lines of salt and cleared asphalt. Routes once trusted may become inaccessible, shaped by the snowplough's passage. Banks and piles of snow become boundaries that separate what is accessible and revealed from what remains hidden. They emerge through repetition and the mechanical limits of the plough. As temperatures shift between thaw and freeze, edges harden and become more defined. These urban snow ridges function as both obstacles and monuments, evidence of how snow, machinery, and daily routine combine to form a temporary structure in the city.

A landscape is never static. It transforms with time, and how we approach the pedagogy of landscape design must reflect this constant transformation. Rather than beginning with drawings or abstract plans, we start with an experience of the specific place. The workshop has been developed since 2019, with a focus on using performative engagement as a process of discussing the use of public space. By thinking of the collective body as a tool to explore space from another perspective, photography becomes a process of adding a new level of understanding when seen from a third-person perspective. In February 2025, first year landscape and architecture students ventured into the vast forest of Oslo in a continuation of this process, now adding an element of design at a scale of 1:1. A four-day workshop explored how minimal interventions, embodied presence, and material transformation allow us to see otherwise. The course also aims to help the students to verbalise spatial qualities using form in the landscape. Finding a site is part of the process, so that the discussion of the boundaries and extension of a site and its relationship to the larger field becomes part of the understanding.

[Fig. 1]
Performative engagement workshop 2019 – Students AHO

[Fig. 2]
On the Flat – 2025

[Fig. 3]
In the Dense – 2025



A group of five to six students received a term to guide their selection of a site. They should find a place that they feel has the property of being *on* or *in*; on *the edge (på kanten), on the flat (på flaten), in the steep (i det bratte), or in the dense (i det tette).* The students were asked to locate a site that corresponded to their given term and to begin a discussion around why that place felt embedded in the word. Why does a landscape feel flat? Do we need the forest to define where, and in what way, it feels dense? How steep does a terrain need to be to feel steep? In this exercise, the selection of the site and the later design on that site has consequences in an extended field. The expansion of the place should subsequently guide the size and form of the final design.

Through bodily and performative actions, we continued our investigation of the snow-covered landscape. Five verbs structured our work on site on the second day. Each group carried out all five to activate and expose the particular attributes of the terrain. The students spent the day discussing how *to enclose, to surround, to reinforce, to contrast, and to extend* the landscape they had chosen using the sum of bodies within the group. How do you enclose an edge or extend a flat surface? This exercise allowed the students to intervene directly, using their bodies as instruments to register and alter the spatial conditions. The photographs served as documentation and as a tool for seeing the site from a flattened perspective, influenced by the presence of figures. Moving from being in the landscape to analysing it through images required a shift in perspective. The photograph captured gestures and actions that revealed the complexity of the terrain and invited further interpretation.

This physical registration laid the foundation for the next stage. On the third day, the workshop shifted from exploration to intervention. Equipped with simple tools and a growing understanding of the site, students worked directly with snow to produce forms that responded to specific landscape conditions. These interventions were not final designs, but pedagogical exercises aimed at articulating spatial qualities through temporary transformation. Some groups used the contrast between vertical forms and flat ground to emphasise the horizontal plane. Others created barely perceptible edges with distinct geometries, extended views and explored how the suggestion of depth could strengthen the experience of flatness. Some carved snow walls that framed views, revealing the contrast between open white surfaces and the density of the forest floor. Others shaped new paths or boundaries, clearly distinguishing between light snow and the dark uncovered ground, drawing attention to the tension between openness and intimacy in the tree-filled landscape. Some groups removed snow to create hollow spaces that suggested shelter and invited occupation, while others introduced a horizontal line through snow walls to indicate the reclining character of the terrain. In every case, the goal was not to impose form, but to explore how subtle gestures could reshape the perception and use of space.

[Fig. 4]
To Reinforce – 2025 – Lars Hovland

[Fig. 5]
To Extend – 2025 – Lars Hovland

Snow proved to be an instructive material. It resisted, collapsed, and shifted, reminding us that form in the landscape is always provisional. What seems stable in the morning may disappear by dusk. This did not call for control, but for responsiveness. The interventions highlighted edges, amplified slopes, and exposed boundaries that the snow cover had hidden. The simplicity of snow as both medium and recorder made our design decisions immediately visible, but also fragile.

On the final day, we returned to the school to reflect and present our findings. Black and white images of bodies in the landscape and of the transformed snow surfaces were displayed in the gallery. Each group gave a short presentation explaining how their assigned term shaped their reading of the site, how physical actions revealed new understandings, how those actions translated into form, and how the site changed through intervention. These presentations were not reports but opportunities to reflect on the value of direct, embodied fieldwork in design education.

Seeing and creating are often perceived as separate, but here they became part of the same process. The landscape architecture project functioned because of creative production, combining representation with observation and poetic reinterpretation. Working at a scale of one to one, the act of sketching became a form of fieldwork that merged process and production. A place was no longer a predefined object or space waiting to be used, but something that emerged through time, use, and imagination. In this context, to work on site is to understand it.

What did we learn? First, that a landscape form may be read and understood in relation to the surroundings and the human-made forms imposed on it. Second, that design may emerge through modest, temporary acts that respond to the shifting conditions of a site. Third, that the act of making, even in its simplest form, requires attentiveness to material behaviour and the environment. By working at full scale and within a changing context, we saw that design is not only about imposing form, but also about negotiating with the forces that exceed our control. The snow, the bare surface underneath the trees, the flatness of the frozen lake, the forest edge surrounding it, and the slopes surrounding it all become part of an ongoing conversation between what is there, what is constructed, and what is left. The temporary snow forms will vanish with the next thaw, but the knowledge gained remains embedded in how we see and how we design.

The workshop was carried out in 2025 with first-year landscape architecture and architecture students at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO), in collaboration with, Christine Petersen, David Eladio Hugo Cabo, Eirik Stokke-Mikalsen, Espen Ropstad Heggertveit, Mads Øiern, Petter Kveseth, Silje Kolltveit, Sindre Wam, and Anna Røtnes. Three of the photographs were taken by architecture student Lars Hovland; these are indicated under the image. The workshop is part of an annual curriculum.

[Fig. 6]
To Enclose – 2025 – Lars Hovland

[Fig. 7]
On the Edge – 2025

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[Fig. 8]
The Steep – 2025

[Fig. 9]
On the Flat – 2025

Where Fireflies Unfold

Oskar Alvarado

Abstract

Deleitosa is my village. It is located in the province of Cáceres, in the region of Extremadura in Spain. Here my parents, grandparents, great grandparents and other ancestors were born, going back through centuries of family genealogy. Deleitosa was the village that Eugene Smith chose to realize in his photographic essay "Spanish Village" that was published in the American magazine Life on April 9, 1951.

Far from showing the perceptible appearance of Deleitosa or some of the visual references linked to what was a photographic icon of the social and economic backwardness in Spanish rural society, my gaze has some subjective nuances linked to a series of experiences, places and personal memories. Reminiscences that have endured as apparitions in my memory. Images that intermingle episodes that float in my imagination with the new realities that coexist in the village.

There is an emotional need to reflect on the territory of which we are part. To explore our identity in the echo of the places that still speak to us, or in the absence-presence of the people and beings that inhabit them. To form a visual interpretation that evokes the mystery that manifests itself in everyday rhythms, in the poetic condition that underlies the strange.

Oskar Alvarado Born in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain. Oskar Alvarado is a visual artist currently living in Barcelona. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts at Basque Country University (UPV), a MA on Curatorial and Cultural Practices in Art and New Media at Higher School of Design (ESDI) in Barcelona and a Graduate Diploma in Management, Preservation and Dissemination of Photographic Archives at Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona (UAB).

His photographic work has been exhibited at the Instituto Cervantes in Belgrade (Serbia), National Museum of Helsinki (Finland), Fotonoviembre Atlántica Colectivas (Spain), Photo Israel (Israel), Archivo Histórico Provincial de Cáceres (Spain), Verzasca Foto Festival (Switzerland), Addis Foto Fest (Ethiopia), Solar Foto Festival (Brazil), BFoto Festival (Spain), Angkor Photo Festival or Voies Off Awards (France) among others.

At the same time, his work has been recognized in awards such as Sarajevo Photography Festival, Kolga Tbilisi Photo Award, Gomma Photography Grant, Photometria International Photography Festival, The Prefix Prize, Photo Collective Stories, Festival Images Gibellina, OpenWalls Arles, Flow Photofest, Lucie Foundation Fine Art Scholarship, Santiago Castelo International Photography Award, Life Framer Photography Award, Helsinki Photo Festival, Art Photo Bcn or Restart Lithuanian Photographers Association and awarded with the Fujifilm Photography Grant at XXIII Photography and Journalism Seminar of Albarracín.

To approach a visual narrative of a place over six years means accepting the interplay of changing forms. But am I the same person who started this journey? Even my shadow on that wall projects a silhouette transformed by the passage of time, where maturity invites me to shed the superficial layers of ephemeral personalities that make our journey through life easier.

The photo essay in which Eugene Smith immortalized Deleitosa served as a catalyst, prompting numerous photographers to make pilgrimages to the village, perhaps seeking to perpetuate the visual essence of the LIFE magazine article, which still lingered twenty years later due to the region's slow socioeconomic progress. Maintaining a documentary spirit, they emphasized the enduring image of those original photographs, which the media had presented and which the magazine's readers, unfamiliar with the area, accepted as a representation. The residents of Deleitosa, however, were less so, and their varied opinions on the article suggested that there were other, less biased interpretations of the village.

The series Where Fireflies Unfold avoids focusing on the perceptible appearance of Deleitosa or any of the visual references associated with what was once a photographic icon of social and economic backwardness in rural Spain.

The key difference between this project and the occasional photojournalistic visits undertaken during the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of this one is that I've spent many seasons there since childhood, which gives me a very intimate connection with the town. This means that my perspective, while not strictly social documentation, possesses certain subjective nuances linked to a series of experiences, places, and memories that nourish my imagination.

To this end, I established a ritual of movement in search of visual fragments that would form a coherent visual whole. I've revisited most of the town's streets, spaces, and surrounding areas time and again during the years of the project's development. I've meticulously observed the private corners of my family's environment. The first impression a recurring place gives you is usually shaped by the things you like to look at, and each time you return to that spot, you confirm that the aspect, shape, or object that attracts you is still there. You have to discard this readily apparent image to delve beneath its ritualistic veneer of the habitual. Beneath it emerges the unusual, the unsignified.

In this context, mentioned earlier, of changing forms that are perceived when revisiting the same spaces in different eras, the first revealing evidence points to how certain elements of rural architecture, rooted in nature, especially on the periphery of these small settlements of barely 700 inhabitants where adaptation to the natural environment and functionality prevail, are often ephemeral in existence.

Not only because their forms can be modified, deteriorate, or even disappear due to environmental impact, or because certain places, after a certain time, are no longer accessible for capturing the image from the same perspective, but also because, in combination with these factors, the very incidence of light, natural or artificial, at a given moment bestows upon the space a unique, fleeting, and ephemeral singularity. This situation makes us aware that sometimes we only have one opportunity to record a space in the best possible way—the way whose representation grants the maximum expressive and symbolic weight within the context of the narrative.

This has been one of the main motivations: to connect in some way with those mental images that represent those episodes lived in the town, those that have remained latent to a greater or lesser degree in my memory and that come to me recurrently. Along with this, there is also the need to explore our identity in the echo of the places that still speak to us or in the absence of the people and beings that inhabit them. To revisit these spaces, to project myself into them and try to perceive the subtle changes that may have occurred in the town. Or simply to allow myself to be surprised by whatever, as I pass by, emits subtle signals that can activate my capacity for evocative abstraction.

Another piece of evidence is how we position ourselves in relation to these spaces. How we amplify their scale or diminish their presence depending on how they resonate within us. We decontextualize their appearance, prioritizing the human factor. It's a matter of examining whether, throughout these years of creative process, our personal evolution has also changed the way we see. And how this new perspective connects with other possible visual and mental scenarios. Reminiscences that have lingered like apparitions in my memory. Images that intertwine episodes floating in my imagination with the new realities that coexist in the town.

One of the main premises in my work is to stage strangeness. Situations out of context, which suggest more than they tell, and which are presented as open works, ready for the viewer's reading and interpretation. My intention lies in evoking mystery. The mystery hidden in everyday rhythms, in the poetic quality that underlies the strange. Ultimately, my intention is to give a seemingly unremarkable place like my town that magic that every place possesses and that can emerge through a search connected with oneself.

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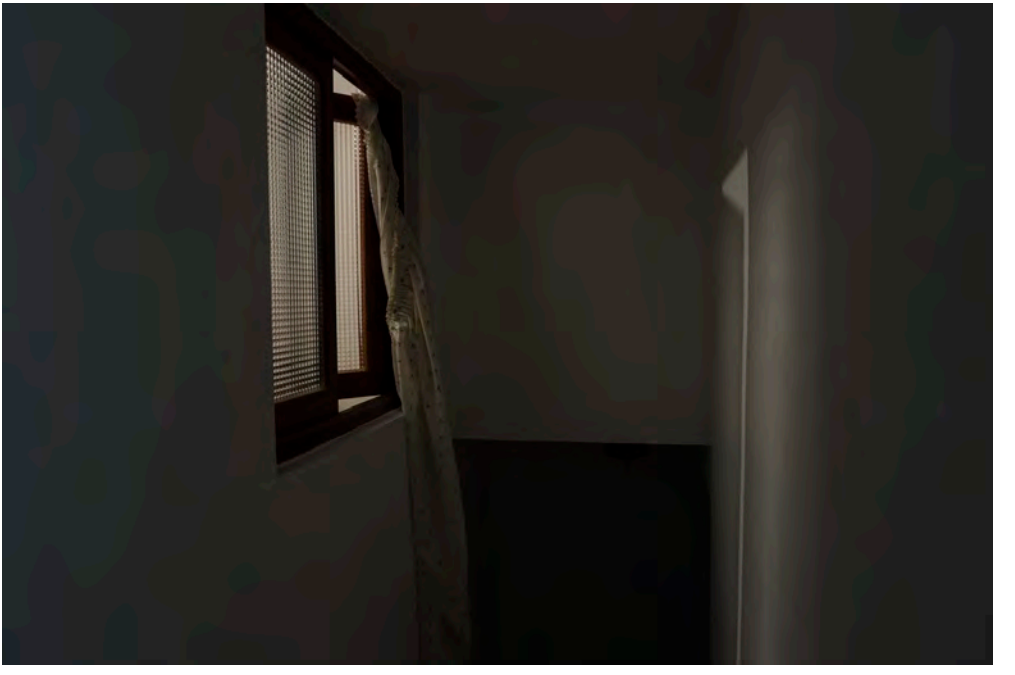
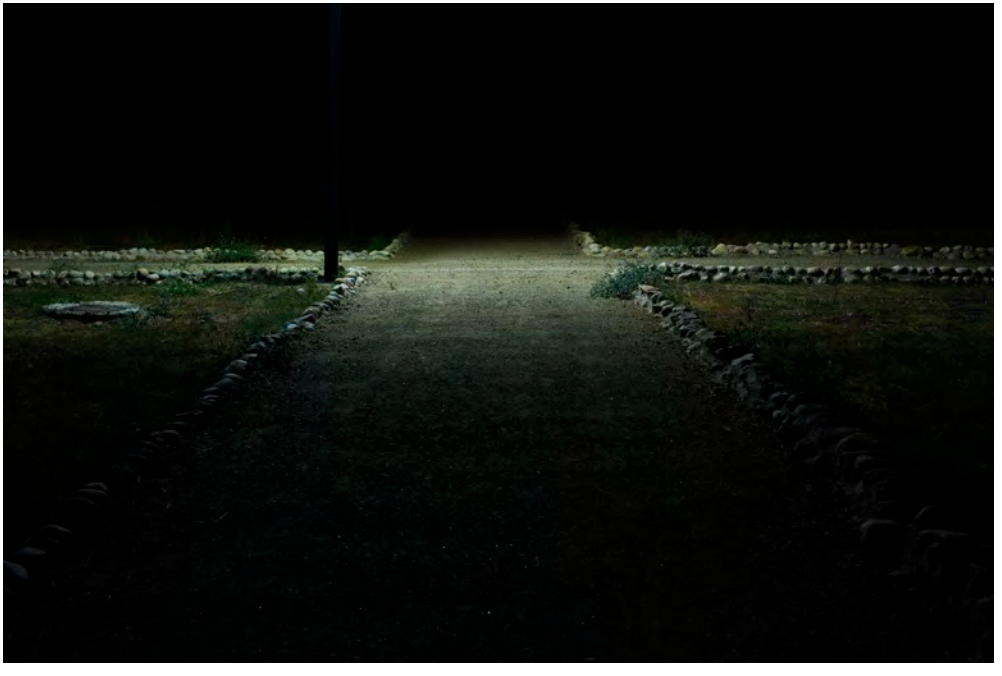
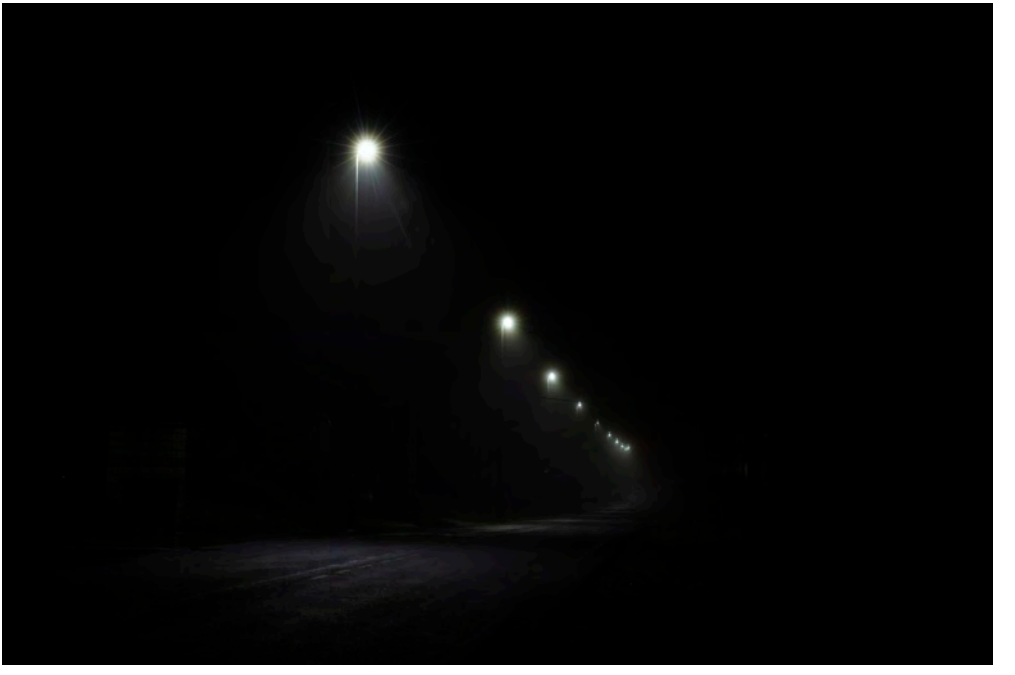
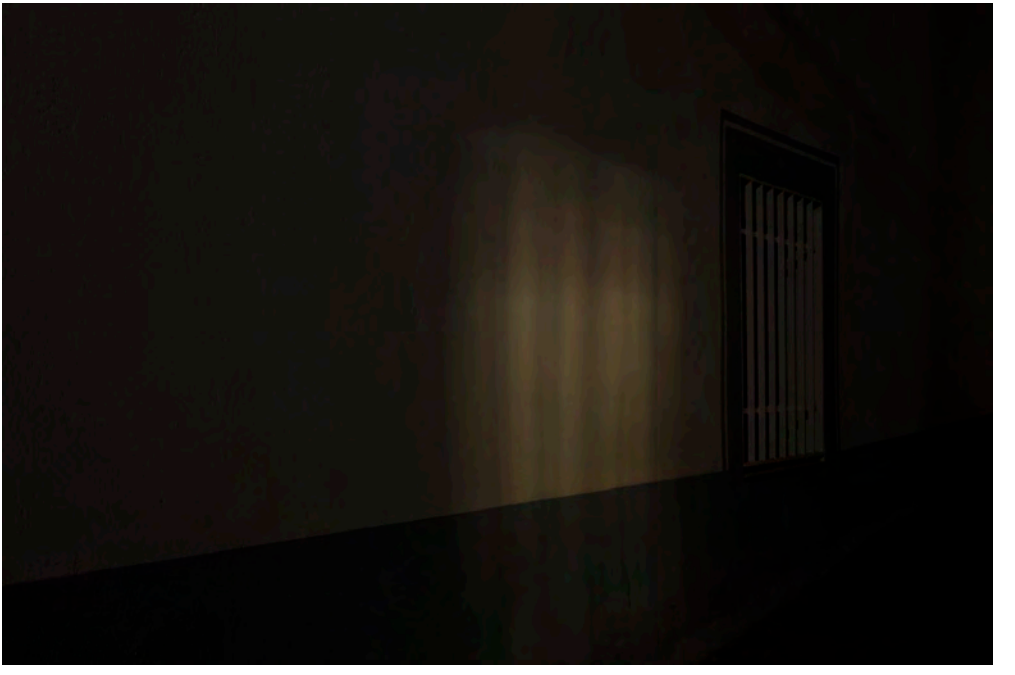
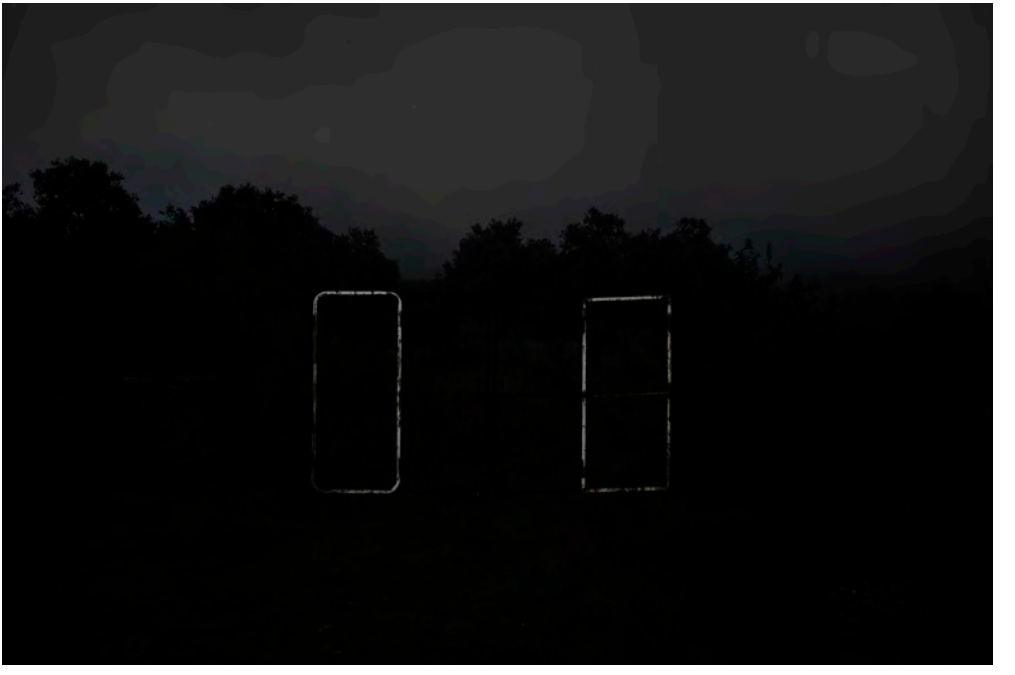
[Fig. 1–10]
Where Fireflies Unfold











The American Dream

Alicia Fernández Barranco

Abstract

Holy Hope Cemetery (founded in 1907 in Tucson, Arizona) was the city's first Catholic cemetery that was not directly a part of a parish. The upkeep of the graves used to depend on the families of the deceased, but over time the state diocese took on the commitment. With all this, structural inequality and neglect have progressively deteriorated the cemetery.

It is currently divided into two clearly differentiated sectors. On the one hand, the northwest sector (the historic core of the complex), where the remains of Mexican citizens are buried. There are signs of neglect, with graves without tombstones, levels of uncleanliness and a disrespectful use of the space. It is known locally as "the place of the forgotten", and contrasts with the second sector, the southeast, set aside for well-off families. This division symbolises a social frontier that transcends mere architecture.

Without knowing the history of the cemetery, in 2022 I had the chance to explore it. I documented its state of repair and life through a photographic project, *The American Dream*, which sets out to retrieve and showcase the memory of the Mexican heartland of Holy Hope Cemetery. Some of these photographs were exhibited in 2025 in Almería (Spain) and were well received, despite the modesty of the exhibition.

However, it is paramount to continue sharing the reality of this architecture until another one can ultimately be related and portrayed. This visual essay reveals Holy Hope Cemetery as a wounded landscape and calls for its repair.

Keywords: Tucson; Mexico; Cemetery; Conservation; Documentary photography

Alicia Fernández Barranco (Granada, 1989). She holds a degree in Architecture (2014, University of Seville), a postgraduate degree in Exhibition Design (2013, University of Seville) and a Master's Degree in Architectural Design (2016, University of Navarra). In 2024, she completed her studies on the Doctoral Programme in Applied Creativity at the University of Navarra. After working as an architect in Spain and Portugal, she became a professional architectural photographer, initially being contracted as the official photographer of the Madrid College of Architects. She has taken photographs for national and international architects and has won photography competitions, both in Spain and abroad. She currently combines her work as a professional architectural photographer with her personal work, simultaneously lecturing in the Degree in Interior Design, the Degree in Architecture and the Master's Degree in Interior Design at CEU San Pablo University (Madrid), while also being a lecturer at the University of Navarra.

In 1907, a group of American investors (led by J. Knox Corbett, John M. Ormsby and Frank L. Culin, members of the Tucson Cemetery Association) purchased 48 hectares of agricultural land north of the city, later handing over its management to the Diocese of the State of Arizona. This resulted in the first non-parochial Catholic cemetery in Tucson: Holy Hope Cemetery. In the early days, the diocese created a revenue stream exclusively intended for the upkeep of the cemetery, so it was the families who ensured the state of repair and security of their loved ones' graves. Over time, the diocese said it would take on both commitments, although structural inequalities and progressive neglect were eroding the promise of a dignified space.

The first graves (located to the northwest of the cemetery) house the remains of Mexican citizens (given the origin of the city), while the later extensions (to the southeast) are home to the most affluent families. As a result, the cemetery is currently divided into two sectors. The first — and original — reveals that the descendants of the deceased cannot afford the minimum maintenance costs. The opposite occurs in the second sector.

The Mexican heartland of Holy Hope Cemetery is only cleaned twice a year (after decades of poor conservation) and is frequented by private neighbourhood patrols due to the disrespectful use of the space. The cemetery is not structured in any order and family members are even allowed to bury their loved ones without a tombstone, making it more affordable for them. This practice, although understandable thanks to its compassionate component, adds to the gradual destruction of the cemetery and the loss of its identity. This might be why people in Tucson refer to this area of the cemetery as the place where "the forgotten" live. Prickly desert undergrowth has grown in this area, dry dust permanently blurs the misty horizon, and confusing paths prevent us from understanding where the cemetery begins and ends. At the same time, in the wealthy (well-preserved) sector, an immense structure of stone tombstones gives order to the space, which in turn is covered by a blanket of spongy grass criss-crossed by meticulously paved paths. The differences between the two sectors are so evident that they seem to build another symbolic border, rather than a landscape contrast.

Without knowing its history beforehand, in 2022 I had the chance to fully explore Holy Hope Cemetery. It was May, but there were still remnants of the Day of the Dead Festival (celebrated on 2 November). It was hot and there was no shade anywhere. I wandered among mass graves marked with crucifixes and crumbling tombstones and observed some prefabricated concrete pieces stacked up waiting to finally close the space. I stopped to look at acrylic and clay statues of the Virgins of Guadalupe, Frida, Diego, Zapata and Catrina, and I witnessed colourful flowers resisting time. As a result, I decided to portray the place respectively, experiencing its silence and suffering its inclement sun. I photographed the Mexican heartland of Holy Hope Cemetery to demand its upkeep, to boost its roots, to revive the collective memory of those called "the forgotten" and of those who cannot afford to watch over them, to celebrate the strength, character and survival-focused identity of its landscape and, above all, to support its resistance.

These photographs were submitted to national and international photographic contests months later, but it was not until April 2025 that they were exhibited thanks to the interest of the La Jaquería Association in Almería, Spain (La Jaquería 2025)[1]. The exhibition was not a purist exhibition space, nor did it have an expensive format, or even a professional catalogue. With all this, the proposal was well received and soon reviewed by two provincial media outlets: the (*Diario de Almería 2025*)[2] and (*Candil Radio 2025*)[3].

However, I think it is necessary to continue sharing the reality of this cemetery until a better one can be related (and portrayed). Private financial management publicly questioned on social media by the deceased's relatives (among other reasons) make this place an architecture that turns its back on its roots. Holy Hope Cemetery is a wounded landscape crying out to be repaired, and this visual essay is the chronicle of its hopelessness.

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All Images belong to the photographic project The American Dream. Holy Hope Cemetery, Tucson, Arizona, 2022. © Alicia Fernández Barranco.

[Fig. 1]
Muddy and cracked.


969 PRIVATE
REV. JENS W. JENSEN
1886 — 1913
ROBERT
LANGSTON
ILLINOIS

[Fig. 2]
Southeast sector.


DAVID CRUZ

[Fig. 3]
Visual outline of the northwest sector.

[Fig. 4]
Cemetery.

[Fig. 5]
The Mexican heartland.

[Fig. 6]
Virgin of Guadalupe.

[Fig. 7]
Cemetery (2).

[Fig. 8]
New interventions.


PEACE
JOY

[Fig. 9]
Mass grave.

[Fig. 10]
The American Dream.

Who Do Cities Belong To?

Plywood Publics: Thin Politics in Carrie Mae Weems's Painting the Town.

Documenting and Staging Alternative Urban Living: Miyamoto Ryūji's Cardboard Houses and its Materiality.

Félix Solaguren-Beascoa del Corral

The intersections between photography and art as modes of social expression and as critical instruments are profoundly suggestive. It is within this intersection that Carrie Mae West's work during the popular demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in Portland is situated, a project that opens up a broad field of inquiry and reflection on the contemporary city.

The city, conceived as a space of life and coexistence, becomes a site of disenchantment when a specific event exposes a much deeper social imbalance. Photography assumes the role of a notarial record of this condition, while a fundamental doubt emerges in the collective consciousness, an ancient, almost timeless question: who do cities belong to?[1]

This question is not new.

1968: Paris, May: Sous les pavés, la plage. Multiple issues converged simultaneously–Vietnam, unrestrained capitalism, institutional authoritarianism–yet the core of that uprising lay in the aspiration to abolish class-based society. Workers and students occupied the streets, transforming urban space into an open manifesto: il est interdit d'interdire![2]

Cities were altered by that effervescence, and with them, so were we. People –peoples– took to the streets to claim what they understood as just; social expression became a critical tool against both unfolding events and established structures.

Graffiti emerged whose scale and significance were unprecedented. A relentless and indiscriminate wave of collective fervour took hold. Alarms were triggered, and the actors, astonished by the magnitude of their actions, found themselves converted into victims of a process that, in retrospect, seemed inevitable: rebellion had taken root.

1980: Bonjour Tristesse[3], the title of Françoise Sagan's 1954 novel, reappears decades later on a corner, high on a building designed by Álvaro Siza in Berlin. The phrase articulates the city's

1 Harvey, David .2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution.* Verso Book Editorial. London-New York.

2 Besançon, Julien. 1968. *Les murs ont la parole.* Tschou editeur. Paris, France.

3 Sagan, Françoise .1954. *Bonjour Tristesse*, Editions Julliard, Paris, France.

social despair, a persistent echo of a malaise that transcends time and geography. It was said that the inscription was executed by the architect himself.

For some time now, forms of peaceful rebellion have also manifested in Barcelona: crowds of tourists traverse La Rambla in an incessant flow. The scene repeats itself daily, prompting once again the same persistent question: who do cities belong to?

Cities are –and must remain– a continuous site of social and symbolic claims. From their bustle, an abrasive cry occasionally emerges: Tourists go home! Graffiti proliferates across walls, façades, doors, and both public and private buildings, accompanied by improvised posters and banners hanging from windows and balconies. These marks constitute the voices of those who inhabit the city—a rebellious response that disrupts and reconfigures the urban landscape.

Who, then, do cities truly belong to?

2013: Black Lives Matter. Once again, the urban panorama is anew unsettled; protest re-emerges. The cry –the recurring rebellion– shakes the foundations of collective life.

2020: the city, astonished, bears witness to the scale of events. Graffiti, banners, and peaceful demonstrations are no fully satisfactory. Looting, destruction, and bonfires return. Enough. Cities are fortified. So-called defensive architectures emerge: vast wooden panels shield offices, shops, and storefronts. In their anonymity, they often go unnoticed; it is tacitly understood that they function as barriers against the vandalism associated with protest.

Yet within this act of protection, a new possibility arises. These banal, repetitive surfaces are transformed into large-scale canvases, unexpected supports through which rebellion adopts alternative signs.

The process is clear: new visual expressions appear on the panels, evoking events that citizens refuse to forget. These collective visual laments resonate with a long iconographic tradition of pain and accusation: echoes of Picasso's engravings –Guernica[4], Korea[5]– the iconic image of Goya's The Third of May 1808[6], with its raised hands that arrest the viewer's breath, or Eduardo Chillida's lithographs, where the scream and despair are conveyed with restrained intensity.

Justin Fowler situates his analysis within this context in Painting the Town, his examination of Carrie Mae West's extensive body of work. Developed over many years, this work is sustained

4 Pablo Ruiz Picasso. 1937. *Guernica. R*esponse to the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Museo Nacional Reina Sofía. Madrid, Spain.

5 Pablo Ruiz Picasso. 1951. *Massacre in Korea.* Picasso Museum. Paris, France.

6 Francisco de Goya. 1814. *The Third of May 1808*, Depicting the dramatic execution of Spanish patriots by Napoleonic troops following the uprising of May 2, 1808. Prado Museum. Madrid, Spain.

by ideals and by questions articulated through photographic practice. West listens to and records the voices of citizens expressed through hidden and ephemeral graffiti, frequently erased by rollers of black paint or covered beneath neutral tones applied to plywood panels intended to protect shops and offices. It is Portland in a state of collective outcry.

Thus, parapets erected against violence are transformed into an artistic position in response to social demand.

This is an act of rebellion.

Writing once again exposes shame and demands justice. The roller of black paint that obliterates images evokes both Leonardo's ATreatise on Painting[7] and Malevich: figuration tied to a specific site is abstracted into a dark stain, as if an attempt were being made to deny the articulated claim, to expel the graffiti through erasure.

Yet rebellion does not disappear. Even when concealed, it remains latent. The very brushstrokes intended to erase it draw upon what lies beneath and ultimately determine the final composition of these surfaces, much as ancient cities are constructed upon ruins and successive historical layers.

Carrie Mae West operates as a visual notary. She repeatedly presents the civic clamour of a deliberately veiled insurrection. This is not an isolated phenomenon.

Fowler invites us to attend carefully to these photographs in order to uncover a deeper narrative: a dispositif that amplifies questions citizens should never cease to ask. As with the paintings from Goya's now-lost Quinta del Sordo[8], West's images function analogously, translating Portland's contemporary graffiti into photographic tableaux that preserve the memory of the causes behind those cries.

Cities, ultimately, are composed of layers that endlessly accumulate, relinquishing certain elements to acquire others. They are recycled, transformed, and continually rebuilt upon what they once were.

Once the storm subsides, Portland's panels will be dismantled, the murals removed, and everyday life will reclaim its space, restoring the normality desired by its inhabitants. What, then, will become of these paintings? Will they share the fate of the frescoes from Goya's estate and become museum objects that shape collective memory and sensibility?

7 Leonardo da Vinci. 1956. *A Tratise on Painting*. Princeton University Press.
8 *La Quinta del Sordo* was the home of Francisco de Goya in Madrid between 1819 and 1824.

Perhaps they will; perhaps they will not. The originals –the wooden panels– may end up in a landfill or be consumed in a final, anonymous combustion. Yet the chrysalis will have already transformed into a work of art. The process is inexorable, like time itself.

For this reason, reflection on Mae West's work ultimately revolves around a fundamental value: the notarial value of the gaze, a frontal, contemporary gaze, devoid of veils.

Through the magic of the camera's viewfinder, coarse brushstrokes are transfigured into works of art that expose injustice and imbalance, becoming testimony to a collective suffering that –as Goya and Picasso once demonstrated– remains unresolved. This suffering, underscored by Fowler, permeates these images, which compel us not to forget, once again, who cities truly belong to, even as we contemplate the aesthetic power of West's work.

But the question does not end here. Professor Mengfei Pan introduces us to the work of the Japanese photographer Ryūji Miyamoto in his series Cardboard Houses.

It is a different context, yet the question remains just as valid: who do cities belong to? Do they really belong to their inhabitants?

The city is not a continuous fabric. It has fissures and produces waste. It is precisely within these margins that new realities emerge, realities that may perhaps alleviate the despair of those who are left outside the established urban order. Because, ultimately, the question persists: do cities belong to those who inhabit them, or to those who are able to remain in them?

Within these fissures, in this terrain vague[9], an alternative way of inhabiting appears, marginal and fragile, amid a rapidly transforming landscape. Discarded materials offer the possibility of a poor shelter for those whom the city itself expels through its habitual, cruel inertia. The city is anonymous and, therefore, there are no culprits.

Improvisation governs these ephemeral constructions, built from whatever can be found, in the same way that graffiti appears on the wooden barriers in Portland. Here it is a different kind of wood. There is no aesthetic intention: the goal is survival.

The scream is replaced by the cardboard man, the box-man, who looks outward through the gaps in his protective shell and who, at the same time, seems to disappear in Miyamoto's images. As suggested by these images, the box becomes a symbol of urban isolation and the desire to remain visible[10].

9 The concept of *terrain vague* was used in the 1970's to refer to spaces disconnected from the capitalism and the functional logic of the city.

10 Mori Art Museum, *Cardboard Houses – Tokyo 1996*, by Miyamoto Ryūji, 1996, gelatin silver print, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.mori.art.museum/en/collection/2441/index.html.

All these shelters are alike and, yet, all are different. They share a common purpose, but the final result depends only on what can be found. Aesthetic value is renounced because the objective is another one.

This same logic of displacement and attention toward the marginal is also transferred to the way the photographs are shown to the public.

Miyamoto's work, presented by Mengfei Pan, refers us to a collection of 67 black-and-white photographs, carefully published and framed.

His unconventional display compels the viewer to bow repeatedly—perhaps in homage to the images themselves, or perhaps to those marginalized, fringe figures who, in a quiet gesture of rebellion, remind us, once again, who cities truly belong to.

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Exploring, documenting and narrating landscapes. An interview about the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens

Giulia Marino, Luigi Latini, Patrizia Boschiero, Davide Gambino

Abstract

We present an interview on the experience of The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens, organised since 1990 by the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche and awarded for the 33rd time in 2024.

This Prize is a research project focused on the study and care of places particularly rich in natural, historical, and creative values. One of the key features of this Prize is that it is awarded to specific places recognized for their value, rather than necessarily to iconic objects. The mission of the Prize is precisely to study and communicate the values identified by the Scientific Committee in the selected places. Often, these are landscapes and specific places created through the meticulous efforts of the communities living there (e.g., the Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan in China or the Wild Apple Forests of the Tien Shan in Kazakhstan), or landscapes that exist thanks to a very close relationship between forms of life and forms of land (e.g., the Jardín de Cactus in Lanzarote or the Valleys of Güllüdere and Kızılçukur in Cappadocia).

Reflecting on the different editions of this Prize, we see a selection of positive past and present experiences, many of which are not yet sufficiently recognized as good examples and practices.

After the selection, research, and documentation stages, the activities related to the Prize include two books (usually in Italian and in English), numerous public events, an exhibition, and, since 2014, the production of a documentary film dedicated to the awarded place, its history, and its transformations.

For this reason, this Prize can also be considered as an important platform to reflect on the role of photography and documentary film in shaping a contemporary way of narrating and understanding these challenging landscapes.

Introduction

The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for the Gardens[1], already arrived in 2023–2024 at its XXXIII edition, is a study and care programme centred on a place selected because of its particular 'values of nature, memory and invention', as stated by the first director of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche and creator of this project in 1990, the architect Domenico Luciani.

From the beginning – and still today, as the initiative is curated by Luigi Latini and Patrizia Boschiero – the Prize has been conceived as a research project, as a tool for recognising the values of certain places, going beyond the logic of preservation, repair or conservation, but rather in the spirit of understanding and documenting the transformations of some places chosen for their extraordinary importance and significance in the context of landscape culture.

This Prize is therefore not just an institutional formula, but a multifaceted activity which, through different stages and many tools, allows us to explore – to quote some very effective concepts proposed in the call for papers of this issue of "Sophia Journal" – how cultures, beliefs, behaviours and practices interact with and shape the physical environment of different territories and their architecture, but also to acknowledge contemporary discourses and uses of the concept of landscape.

In each edition, a place is awarded and, during a ceremony in Treviso, a member of the community that looks after it receives a symbolic object representing the Prize. The Scientific Committee is responsible for choosing the site to be awarded and its decision is the result of a process of research, both in the available literature and on the field. For each edition, the committee travels to the site to study it in depth and to confirm or reconsider its preliminary findings. After the fieldwork and the selection of the site, the human and scientific relationships established during the trip are consolidated, as are the lines of research, which are then developed into a book, an exhibition, a conference and many other public events, as well as a documentary that, following a circular pattern of research, collects and organises the work done and itself becomes a source for further research. The Prize is therefore both a research programme and a communication project.

GM: From all these years of work on the Prize – whose general objectives and working methods are linked to other activities of the Foundation, whose research method it has helped to structure and strengthen – what idea of landscape design and memory can be derived?

1 https://fbsr.it/en/the-international-carlo-scarpa-prize-for-gardens/

The interview took place in January 2025. In March 2026, the Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche awarded the thirty-fourth International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens (2025–2026) to Hospitalfield, a place dedicated to art and ideas in the Scottish landscape.

LL: The first thing that comes to my mind is that usually when a foundation makes an award, it makes an award and that's it; usually the award corresponds to the institution and vice versa, the awards are associated with juries, with institutions that only deal with them in a very narrow way. The Carlo Scarpa Prize, on the other hand, was created in a very unique context, within a study centre that sees the Prize itself as a form of in-depth study and exploration that also involves the whole life of the Foundation from a research point of view, both in terms of cultural objectives and in terms of tools. It is a project that shows a specific way of thinking that corresponds to the way the Foundation was conceived from the outset, in its organisation, in its methods of communication, in the materials it uses and, above all, in the way it understands research as an interweaving of tangible relationships between experts rather than as the result of an immaterial place.

At the same time, I would like to say this: the Foundation works in the field of landscape and, in an attempt to explore a subject that was relatively unexplored and pioneering when it was created in the 1980s, it decided to focus on some key themes that have a particular strength in building or renewing a language and a constantly evolving reflection on landscape. The Prize is therefore based on these methods and this way of working, according to which working on a subject that is not a work of art, not architecture, not a literary work, but rather a multiform field that slips through our fingers, is more suitable for a thoughtful reflection on landscape; a landscape understood as a strongly interdisciplinary field, although often seen in a purely historical or purely scientific light. And it is in this context, made up of a convergence of different perspectives, that the Prize's research programme began.

The relationship with memory, then, comes almost automatically. This is because, in general, the Prize deals with living structures that belong to concrete physical places that are the result of consolidated cultures; even if we are talking about the hyper-modern or archaeological, memory is part of the widest range of in-depth studies in the field of landscape. The Prize is thus, in a sense, a non-codified tool that can be used to find a point of intersection in the ambiguity and multiplicity of contributions inherent in landscape research. Hence the idea, already mentioned, to focus the Prize not on an author, not on a work, but on a place: a way to explore and develop research in the field of landscape, overcoming a sectorial vision. Other prizes may, as is often the case, choose certain historical periods or certain categories or even typologies; here, however, we are dealing with places and issues that arise from the tangible nature of our world, from its physical, social and political aspects, from the need to understand the meaning of the historical continuum.

As I said, I think it might be a little strange to 'give a prize to a place'. The prize is not an entity, it doesn't exist as a subject, but it is a way of saying that to talk about landscape it is not enough to have a drawing, or to wave an ideology, or to record a correct plan. To support and transmit the

content of a Prize like this, a narrative is needed. I believe that this was not clearly stated at the beginning, but as the Prize developed it became a natural and fundamental consequence, and all this regardless of the aesthetic qualities of a place and its evocative power: it resonates with a lived, shared experience, better if not an authorial one, and this is once again a way to reflect on the meaning of landscape and, above all, on the broad meaning we give to the word 'garden'.

Very often the narration of the places has a strongly project-based value. You, Giulia, refer to 'landscape project': in my opinion, 'landscape project' doesn't exist, but what does exist is the equipment that allows us to design the landscape. Passionately setting up a way of narrating is therefore already the beginning of a design approach, because it forces us to be responsibly ready for a transformation, to be already equipped and ready to belong to this landscape and not just to represent or describe it. Extracting the essence of these places, their ways of life, the people, the research, has a strong design-oriented outcome, because it is an invitation to act responsibly, also in the sense of being able to project their evolution into the future, to be 'designers' and not just 'conservators'.

This attitude also allows us to refresh the vision of the Modern, which has always been seen as indifferent to, if not opposed to, the reasons behind the landscape. And I would add that our research, which is methodologically aimed at achieving synthesis – something we also do from a personal point of view, trying to work in a multidisciplinary team – is perhaps, even unconsciously, linked to the search for simplification and synthesis that the Modern has always tried to achieve.

GM: During the period of research that I was able to carry out in Treviso as a fellow in 2024, studying publications and archival material, as well as the Foundation's current ''Agenda'', I noticed that everywhere, like a mantra, there was a very clear pattern that could be summed up in the motto 'document – research – transmit'.

This pattern describes a circular, not linear, method of research. A research project is not completed with a single repetition of this pattern; but, many repetitions are needed to reach the end of a process that is, in any case, always on-going, with a mindset that today would be defined as 'collaborative' and 'open source'.

In fact, at each stage there is the idea of adding another research circuit and so on: the documentation, which is selected, studied and organised, becomes a wealth of resources that other researchers can consult in the Documentation Centre – archive, image library, map library and library – for the purposes of their research; the research involves numerous people who bring their own specific areas of interest to the project and at the same time learn from it, in a virtuous mechanism that is strengthened in every possible way; the transmission which, thanks to the Editorial Office, takes the concrete form of the curatorship of various products – books, exhibitions and documentaries – which immediately gather the main results of this process,

but which themselves become materials for others to study and learn from, that means 'new documentation'.

How does the Prize, which undertakes a new research project for each edition, manage to make this circular process work for such different places and landscapes?

PB: There is no doubt that the working method – which corresponds to the main features of the research project – is linked to this theme of 'circularity'. The Prize actually works in accordance with this concept.

The first step, the starting point in a way, is that from the very beginning the Foundation has welcomed researchers, external collaborators and, above all, this working group, configured first as the Jury and then as the Scientific Committee of the Prize, composed of professors of landscape architecture, but also of philosophy, architecture, art history, who teach in various universities or who develop landscape projects or who write about landscape: it is the end of the 1980s and in this group there are some of the leading experts on landscape culture in Italy and in Europe.

The starting point is therefore the reflection of this group of experts who travel and 'look at the world', primarily interested in the macro-themes of garden and landscape, collecting reflections, ideas and projects that then become concrete through the choice of a key place. In other words, it is a research that is carried out in the field and not just through personal memories or literature; a research that comes to life through our movement in ever-changing geographical areas.

GM: : Luigi previously used a beautiful image when he said that research is not an abstract concept, but is made up of relationships: it seems to me that the theme of the journey captures this idea very well.

PB: The journeys undertaken as part of the Prize's programme – which bring together different ideas, books, people, stories, geopolitical regions, climates and environments – are fundamental stages, also from a methodological point of view, as are the discussions and site visits, which broaden the collective perspective, also thanks to meetings with the people who live in these places or who have designed or managed them.

This is where the choice is made. After considering the many possibilities, at the end of each journey the working group has to come to a single decision and then, during the same edition of the Prize, the cycle begins again. In fact, after choosing the place, a series of specific activities begins to realise what we can call the products of the Carlo Scarpa Prize: a series of conferences and public meetings, a collective book – which has grown and transformed over time, becoming bilingual, for example, while at the beginning we produced it only in Italian – but also a photographic documentary exhibition and a press campaign.

This brings us to the issue of spreading the culture of landscape. The Prize is also a communication project and it is therefore essential to reach as wide an audience as possible, one that is sensitive, curious, or interested in the culture of landscape as well as in the value of these places.

Of course, the press campaign also includes the use of images: in order to talk about the places we are awarding and their landscapes, press offices and journalists ask above all for pictures! From this point of view, we have always used both contemporary and historical photography, as well as cartographic documents and other forms of representation. In 2014, while working on the 26th edition of the Award, we decided, as the Foundation, to also produce a documentary film about the awarded place. It's not that we had never used film before; we had, but rather in an extemporaneous way, with short, unprofessional videos made in-house, or using pre-existing material, such as documentaries or short videos produced by others, in other contexts, but which were useful for describing the chosen location.

All these activities will then come together in a series of public events to be held at our headquarters in Treviso, at the prize-winning venue and then elsewhere, in different contexts, in schools and universities, at festivals, in cultural institutes abroad, etc.

GM: It's interesting that within the same edition of the Prize, a multitude of stories can be told, starting from a single specific place. We can look at the two most recent editions: the Espacio Escultórico of the Mexican edition tells a very long story, of the settlement on the Pedregal and the very lively life of the UNAM [Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México]; while the Prize awarded to Natur Park in Berlin narrates the multiple urban natures and a story that is short in time but very dense in historical and symbolic terms, and portraying the transformation of a city but also of a country, and perhaps even of Europe in those years.

PB: A practical example of this polyphonic narrative, built around a place with the book, the seminars, the exhibition and the documentary, an explicit sign of this centripetal and centrifugal force, can be found in the titles of the different editions of the Prize. In fact, in recent editions we have chosen broader titles that don't stop at the name of the place: for example, "Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände and Berlin's urban nature" or "L'Espacio Escultórico in Pedregal de San Ángel, Mexico City". This may seem like excessive labelling, but I think this aspect also helps to explain the philosophy of the Prize.

The Scientific Committee's falling in love with a place – I don't use that word lightly, even if it may make you smile – brings with it the relationship of that place to its immediate surroundings, but also to its wider context, in a constant dialogue with other places and other people encountered during the preparatory reading or during the journey. I have the idea that the kind of knowledge we try to have about the selected place is something like meeting someone: if you really want

to get to know them, you have to find out about their background, who their friends are, what they'd like to do in the future, what kind of trouble they've gotten into and what problems they need to solve. Maybe we could talk about topophilia, it is certainly an adventure that is also a process and a project of care.

GM: As we have already mentioned, the production of a documentary film has been part of the Prize's activities now for almost a decade. This film serves as the 'eyes of the public', enabling everyone to engage with the research carried out by the Scientific Committee. At the same time, it communicates, in an inclusive language, the understanding of a particular place. Has this approach raised awareness that photography and film can be both valuable research tools and effective communication tools?

PB: For some time, we had been thinking that we didn't want to simply show our movement in and around the site through videos that were not our own, as we did for the 23rd edition of the Prize, dedicated to the Bosco di Sant'Antonio in Abruzzo, when we came across a beautiful film by Ermanno Olmi entitled "Mille anni", specifically dedicated to the 2012 prize-winning site. Nor did we want to rely on amateur videos and photos taken during the study trip.

Then, in 2014, our wish finally became an investment, albeit a modest one. The Foundation was able to produce a documentary film in collaboration with a specialist chosen for his sensitivity and interest in the subjects covered.

It is also no coincidence that the novelty of producing a documentary coincided with a change in the approach to photographic documentation: at a certain point, it seemed useful and appropriate – and at the same time possible – to involve not only a director but also a professional photographer. So for about ten years now, for each edition of the Prize, we have also involved a photographer for the on-site photographic campaigns.

GM: I'm not sure that 'documentary' is technically the right term, but it is certainly a visual narrative which embodies an insight that has allowed the Prize to reach a wider audience through a medium – video – that we are all increasingly familiar with. It is important to note, however, that this medium complements, rather than replaces, the other forms of media previously used.

DG: Although it didn't happen in the first editions of the Prize in the 1990s, I believe that the decision to produce a documentary was a pioneering insight in line with the work of the Foundation, combining the creative/productive practice of documentary making with the research carried out in the context of the Prize. I think it should be almost compulsory, and I say this not out of self-interest, but with the deepest conviction. Let me explain. As I see it, documentary filmmaking is a reflective practice in which the act of making shapes reflection, and reflection inspires the act of making.

I think the term 'documentary' is limiting, to say the least. It is certainly a language, a tool that serves the purpose of narration. We could talk about the 'fiction of reality', or the 'cinema of the real', which is a term that has now been accepted. In fact, the term 'documentary' often evokes a perspective that is limited to recording reality with a conservative approach. Sometimes, behind the 'screen' of memory, one could say that the documentary seems to fulfil its function, limited to this and not going beyond it. But I don't think this is the case, because when you make a documentary – and once again I think this is perfectly in line with the work of the Foundation – you are already using your critical thinking about the present, the past and the future, which goes beyond preservation; you are already starting a process of reflection on the identity of the place and of the people who narrate it. The latter are fundamental because they are the voices that allow the place to live; because the place itself, without a language, without insights or creative representations, could not live in a narrative key, but would remain motionless in a documentary dimension. For this reason, it is essential to rigorously 'emphasise' documentation and memory, and to develop a critical reflection on the present, questioning its dynamics and its implications.

Having said that, I believe that the documentary is one of the most relevant creative languages for working on the landscape, accepting the ambiguity of this term, which Luigi mentioned earlier, the documentary fits into the workflow with the same ambiguity. In fact, it is an intrinsically ambiguous and permeable audiovisual tool, capable of adapting to an interdisciplinary and polyphonic research, without renouncing a necessary critical distance.

This is always very exciting in the work I share with Luigi and Patrizia: to see how the paths explored by the documentary can provoke discussion, create an open platform for imagining possible futures for places, and act as a tool for critical investigation.

For me, there is nothing more inspiring than exploring such ambiguous topics as landscape and investigating them in this necessarily diachronic dimension, because it is linked to both history and archives, and aims to tell a story that allows us to deal with aspects that are symbolic and social, as well as technical, of course.

Whether we use a video camera or a photo camera, the aim remains the same: to reach an audience through a narrative that combines scientific rigour with emotional effectiveness, that can be remembered by the widest possible audience beyond the experts, that can offer a serious service, in line with the task that any form of communication should fulfil. This is another challenge: to act as a mirror between scientific research and the wider public, to strike a balance between rigorous in-depth analysis and accessibility, between the complexity of knowledge and the ability to engage people.

GM: I think that the documentary takes part in all three phases of the work 'documenting – researching – transmitting' and not only in the last one, as one might think. Davide, do you also find this circularity in your work? How do you keep all these levels of work together, as well as all the research topics that keep coming up?

DG: It's definitely a challenge every time. The only position I try to take, with as much awareness as possible, is one of declared instability from many points of view. First of all, between not being able to tell everything and trying to find the right narrative dimension. In fact, the story is always more exciting where it's more difficult!

The innate silence of the place, its inability to express itself, is extraordinarily fascinating. It is precisely in this voicelessness that the most stimulating challenge lies: to shift our gaze, to reveal what would otherwise remain invisible. This should be the essential task of cinema: to go beyond mere communication or simple reporting by offering a point of view that can question, evoke and give new meaning. The interesting thing about going to places is that you have to put yourself in a listening position, but it can't be passive listening, you have to interact, provoke situations, approach reality with a critical spirit and be disciplined in trying to have a structure, a hierarchy of thought from the beginning.

This unstable position is necessary, it leads to desire, it leads to curiosity. So it stimulates you in the first phase; then you need to impose a little order, you need discipline, I always say jokingly, almost military discipline.

It's a process similar to writing an academic essay, where you try to organise a structured order, often inspired by the Aristotelian tripartite division between introduction, body and conclusion. As far as I'm concerned, there are actually three phases of writing, even in the audiovisual field: a phase of developing the idea and writing tout-court, a production phase in which the ideas are given concrete form, and a post-production phase in which an attempt is made to bring order to the complexity of the whole process.

In the early stages you go to the sources and start your research, but it's not just about gathering information for its own sake. I think it was Oliviero Toscani who said that life is a bit like driving a car: you look in the rear-view mirror, but in the meantime you have to drive and look at the road ahead. It's a bit like that in all three phases. In the production phase, you look back at the writing phase, but you are already thinking about post-production. And so on and so on...

You have to collect material while thinking about the feasibility of what you want to produce, and at the same time you have to think about how to present it in a language that is accessible to the public: the three stages of writing always influence each other.

So you move in this oscillating position during the writing phase, but also during the production phase – where you obviously try to confirm the insights you have had without making them

rigid, trying not to 'straitjacket' reality but keeping yourself open to possible surprises – and during the post-production phase, where you try to verify the two previous phases.

In fact, each project is different, so there can't be a standard method. Certainly, the choice of place and the work done by the Foundation's Scientific Committee in the preliminary phase are crucial. It is necessary to have a sensitivity that is not only scientific, but also human and artistic, in order to relate and resonate with the places and the people who inhabit or look after them. All this produces a very interesting creative ecosystem, in which the ambiguity of the documentary language allows us to enter into the gaps of reality and to put scientific research, dissemination and communication in a constant fruitful relationship, at least that's what we hope. It's a really atypical dimension of planning and for that reason I think it's very stimulating and very fruitful!

GM: Has your work over the years brought to light any other interesting considerations, for example about the relationship between some of the key words we have mentioned several times so far, such as 'film', 'research' and 'landscape'?

DG: With regard to the interaction between 'film' and 'scientific research', I can say from my experience that there is often a kind of reluctance, a mistrust, on the part of the world of 'research' towards the world of 'communication', which is seen as a sector that uses sensationalist approaches – which is sometimes true, sometimes not – or approaches that simplify in an extremely synthetic way. Another criticism of the language of film is that places are used as mere decoration, as backgrounds, as maquettes. It could not be otherwise, locations are often part of the ingredients of

cinema and are used to establish different narrative dimensions. However, in the context of my collaboration with the Foundation on the documentaries for the Prize, the locations are the real protagonists of the story, in an attempt to balance the need for scientific rigour with that for solid communicative effectiveness. I believe that the uniqueness of our collaboration lies precisely in this synthesis.

PB: On the subject of landscapes used as locations and sets, the work on the valleys of Cappadocia is an emblematic example. But I'm not talking about cinema, I'm talking about an approach to advertising that leads to purely commercial exploitation and promotes tourism in the most superficial and damaging way to places and their culture, to landscapes – like the one you filmed, Davide, with Gabriele Gismondi, in Cappadocia, with a radically different spirit – and which produces a completely opposite narrative to what our documentary did, taking into account all the research and meetings with a wide range of people on the ground. The same could be said of the image of 'green Ireland' that the Prize presented in the film Céide Fields, shot in the middle of winter, in snow and hail, crossing the expanses of peat bogs and Neolithic dry-stone walls, in the freezing wind, together with archaeologists, farmers and shepherds...

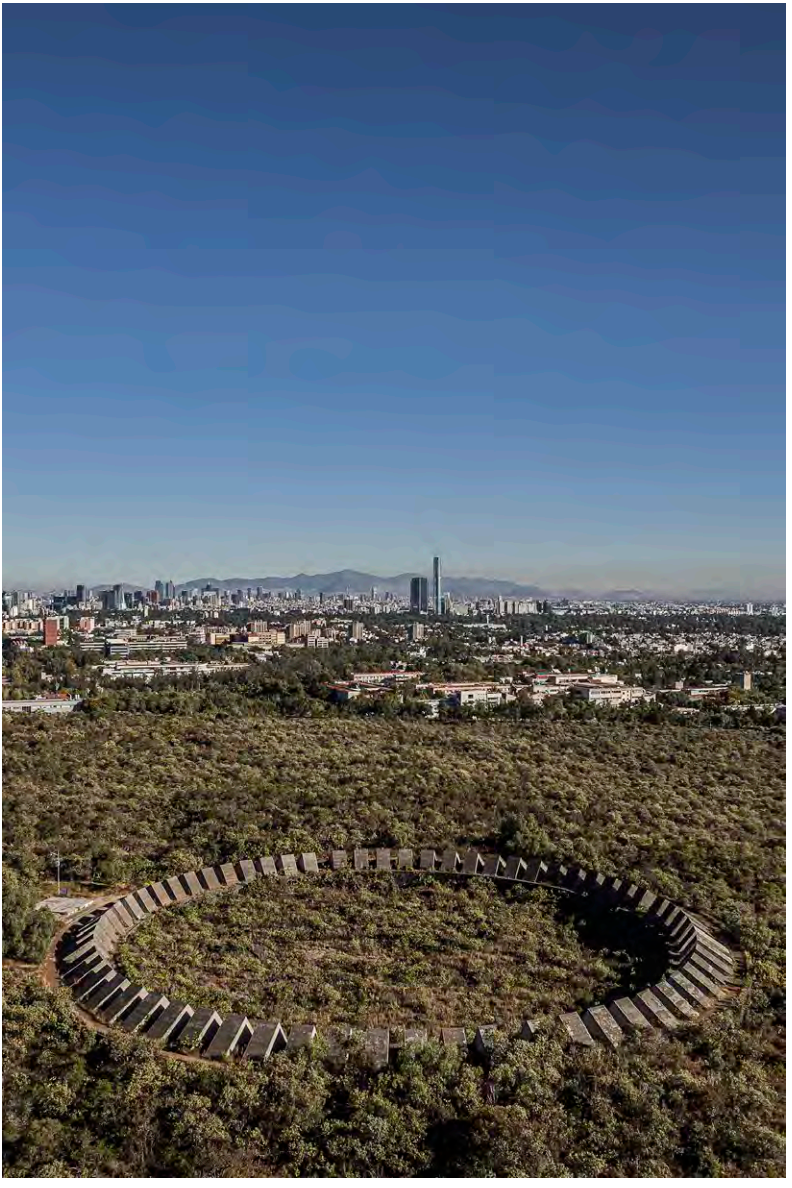
DG: Another key word, I think, is 'conflict', or rather 'places of conflict'. Conflict is an ingredient of the narrative and helps to put these places and their contradictions into perspective. Moreover, public spaces are often places of intersection, experimentation and conflict, such as the aforementioned Espacio Escultórico in Mexico and the Natur Park Südgelände in Berlin.

PB: It is also interesting to note that art, as well as landscape planning and design, has played a key role in the history of both places.

DG: It's true! Even from a dramaturgical point of view, art already has a media dimension, and artists have been very important figures in the making of documentaries.

GM: Thank you, because I think it's very significant that we've managed to combine theoretical and methodological issues with practical and technical aspects, starting from a concrete experience such as the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens. I think, and above all I hope, that the observations made and the insights gathered here may soon be helpful and inspiring for other research paths, in a virtuous process of circularity, like the one we mentioned in relation to the working method of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 1]
Espacio Escultórico in the Pedregal de San Ángel, Mexico City 2023, ph Andrés Cedillo, Courtesy UNAM–FA.



[Fig. 2]
Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände, Berlin 2022, ph Marco Zanin, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 3]
Espacio Escultórico in the Pedregal de San Ángel, Mexico City 2023, ph Fabian Martinez, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 4]
Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände, Berlin 2022, ph Marco Zanin, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 5]
The film crew in action on the site, Mexico City 2023, ph Fabian Martinez, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 6]
The film crew in action on the site, Berlin 2022, photo by Marco Zanin, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

[Fig. 7]
The film crew in action on the site, Mexico City 2023, ph Fabian Martinez, Copyright Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche.

Iñaki Bergera's *Poetics of Abandonment. Siza in Panticosa* [1]

Pedro Leão Neto

The first connection with Iñaki Bergera came from his engagement with architectural photography as both a scholarly and creative practice, a twofold commitment that has consistently defined his trajectory. An architect and photographer who has dedicated much of his research to understanding how photography is not only an instrument for documenting architecture but also a significant means of constructing its meaning, Bergera has collaborated for many years with the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP) through the research group Architecture, Art and Image (AAI) of Nuno Portas Centre for Studies (CENP), namely with its editorial project focused on the intersection of photography with architecture call scopio Editions. His academic work, publications, and curatorial projects reveal a sustained and rigorous inquiry into the relationship between built form, representation, and time. Over more than a decade, this inquiry has found one of its most compelling expressions in his photographic engagement with the abandoned High Performance Centre (CAR) designed by Álvaro Siza at Panticosa, in the Spanish Pyrenees.

Poetics of Abandonment. Siza in Panticosa is the culmination of this long-term project. It is not merely a photographic book, nor simply a record of architectural decay; rather, it is a reflective and layered investigation into the capacity of photography to reveal latent meanings within architecture—meanings that emerge most forcefully when function collapses and time takes over.

The book´s main focus is the complex condition of Panticosa itself. As Bergera refers, this is not simply a geographical site but a landscape shaped by centuries of interaction between nature and human intervention, a hybrid terrain where architecture and territory coexist in tension. The CAR building by Álvaro Siza is the central figure in this narrative. This building was almost completed but was suddenly abandoned following the collapse of the Spanish real estate boom, becoming an architecture suspended between intention and entropy, between completion and decay.

Bergera's photographic approach entails a particular way of observing, namely in its restraint, since his photographic narrative avoids both overt denunciation and sentimental nostalgia. He achieves this by adopting a studied, almost forensic vantage point that allows the site's inherent contradictions to emerge. In this way, Bergera's work encourages the viewer to engage in a broader reflection about architecture's life cycle and the fragile conditions that underpin its realisation. His work stimulates the viewer to engage critically with what is seen and, equally importantly, with what is suggested.

1 Bergera, Iñaki. *Poética del abandono: Siza en Panticosa.* Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas, 2026.

What is of great value in this book is that Bergera's photographic invitation is closely tied to its structure: a sequence of images that constructs a perceptual journey. Here, we can speak about the notion of the *promenade architecturale*, as defined by Flora Samuel[2]. The *promenade* becomes particularly relevant in this work because of its capacity to make us simultaneously experience space through movement and interconnect a network of ideas that sustain architectural understanding. In fact, the photography series operates precisely within this dual condition. The viewer does not passively observe isolated images but is guided through a spatial and conceptual path that unfolds across the pages, suggesting movement, direction, and continuity.

As Juhani Pallasmaa has argued, our perception of architectural space is intrinsically linked to movement, to the act of traversing and inhabiting space over time[3] . We can see the reverberation of this understanding in Bergera's sequencing, as his photographic series constructs a path that the reader mentally inhabits. The book allows, in this way, to transcend the static nature of photography, proposing instead an experiential reading in which time and space are reconstituted through the act of viewing.

The condition of abandonment acquires a profound temporal dimension in Bergera´s photographic series; in fact, the phenomenological path he builds with those images reveals the traces of an ongoing process: ceilings collapsing, materials decomposing, surfaces altered by humidity and exposure. None of these is understood just as signs of decay because they act as layers of superimposed records of time's passage that transform the building into a palimpsest. The architectural space becomes both subject and archive, simultaneously preserving and eroding its own identity.

However, as Bergera's images make clear, this process does not obliterate the architecture. On the contrary, it reveals its resilience. Siza's design—characterised by its careful insertion into the landscape, its controlled volumetry, and its subtle orchestration of light—retains a remarkable presence even in its unfinished and deteriorated state. The building does not appear as a ruin in the conventional sense but as something more ambiguous: an architecture in suspension, incomplete yet enduring.

2 What is of interest here is the notion proposed by Flora Samuel when she defines promenade architecturale as being simultaneously an experimentation of the space in movement while we walk about the building and a network of ideas (that sustain the work of architecture). See Flora Samuel, Le Corbusier and The Architectural Promenade, Birkh.user Architecture, 2010.

3 Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema", in Belks Uluoglu, Ayhan Ensici, Ali Vatansever (eds.), Design and Cinema: Form Follows Film, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006. Available at: http://www.cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/58510 .

Reading Siza's thoughts about the project, in which he acknowledges both admiration and unease, we better understand this ambiguity. This is so because he recognises the value of the photographs while lamenting the state of the building, noting that it does not read as a ruin but rather as an unfinished work, one that remains recoverable and whose exterior retains a certain perfection. This idea is noteworthy since it reframes the condition of Panticosa not just as a terminal failure but still as a latent possibility, an interrupted narrative rather than a concluded one.

In this regard, Bergera´s photographs can be understood as documenting what might be termed "false ruins": architectures that were never fully inhabited and therefore never completed in their social and symbolic dimensions. Unlike traditional ruins, shaped by gradual decay, these structures emerge from an abrupt interruption—materialising not the passage of time, but the collapse of expectation. Panticosa´s photography series engages with this condition in a particularly subtle way, presenting these spaces as if they were monuments—silent, dignified, and suspended in time—while simultaneously exposing the economic, social, and political forces that led to their abandonment.

Bergera's photographic visual grammar increases the power of this engagement through precise control of composition, light, and framing, and a unique sensitivity towards the overlooked and the marginal. There is a recurring attention to "invisible" or neglected spaces—secondary rooms, transitional zones, residual areas—where the effects of abandonment are often most palpable. In this regard, his work resonates with the legacy of the New Topographics[4], particularly in its capacity to register the banal and the overlooked with a quiet, almost forensic clarity.

At the same time, the photographs possess a strong poetic dimension. Truly, as Marc Goodwin[5] suggests, there is always more to a photograph than what is immediately visible, and Bergera's photography series conveys meaning through our imaginative engagement with it, just as architecture itself carries an atmosphere that extends beyond its material presence. Bergera's images operate precisely within this expanded field. They do not simply depict space; they evoke it, activating the viewer's imagination and inviting a deeper, more introspective form of perception.

4 See "Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz, 2009 November 15–17" in (https://www.aaa.si.edu/ collections/interviews/ oral-history-interview-lewis-baltz- 15758#transcript); International Centre of Photography (ICP) Archive (https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/ constituents/lewis-baltz?all/all/all/all/0).

5 "There is always more to a photograph than the picture. It conveys because of our fantastic sense of imagination [sic]." Pallasmaa's argument for the sort of poetic image discussed by Gaston Bachelard strikes a chord: all spaces have an atmosphere, so presumably do all photographs." in Marc Goodwin, "A Hinge: Field-testing the relationship between photography and architecture". https://www. researchcatalogue.net/view/30884/32382.

This interplay between analytical rigour and poetic suggestion is one of the book's most compelling qualities. It allows the work to function simultaneously as documentation and interpretation, as record and reflection. The images are grounded in a clear architectural understanding, yet they remain open-ended, resisting definitive conclusions and encouraging multiple readings.

Moreover, the sequencing of the images reinforces this openness. Each photograph is the result of a deliberate act of selection—of framing, positioning, and exclusion—that defines what is visible and what remains hidden. As these images are brought together in a series, they construct not only a spatial path but also a conceptual framework, a network of relationships that shapes the viewer's understanding of the architecture and its condition.

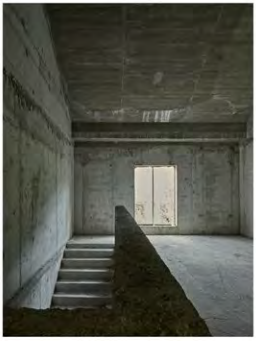
The landscape of Panticosa plays a fundamental role in this construction. Far from being a passive backdrop, it acts as an active force, both contextualising and transforming the architecture. The interaction between the building and its environment—between concrete and vegetation, structure and erosion—becomes a central theme of the work. The architecture is not simply placed within the landscape; it is gradually reabsorbed by it, becoming part of a larger ecological and temporal process.

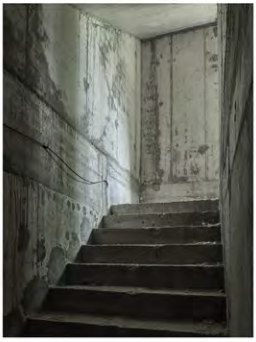
Ultimately, *Poetics of Abandonment. Siza in Panticosa* is a profound meditation on the relationship between architecture, time, and representation. It confronts mainstream understandings of architectural photography and proposes instead a photographic practice that is altogether critical, reflective, and deeply sensitive to the complexities of the built environment.

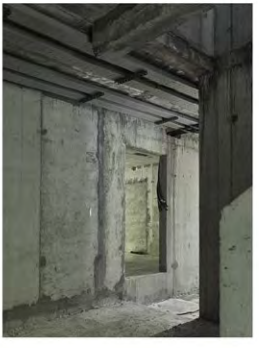
By presenting these abandoned structures as both objects of study and subjects of contemplation, Bergera invites us to reconsider the meaning of architectural failure. Rather than viewing abandonment as an endpoint, the book reveals it as a condition rich with potential for reflection—a moment in which architecture, stripped of its functional and economic frameworks, can be re-examined in its most essential terms.

In this way, the work not only documents a specific site but also contributes to a broader discourse on architecture's role in contemporary society. It exposes the vulnerabilities inherent in its production, the forces that shape its realisation, and the unforeseen trajectories that may follow. At the same time, it affirms the enduring capacity of architecture—and of photography—to generate meaning, even in the face of uncertainty and decline.

Bergera's accomplishment rests precisely in a subtle balance between diverse features, such as distance and empathy, analysis and poetry, or the visible and the imagined. His lens acts as an inquiry tool that transforms the abandoned architecture of Panticosa into a space where the poetics of abandonment allows for the rethinking of the nature of architecture itself.







Balneario quedaron paralizadas. Algunas de las instalaciones como el Gran Hotel o el edificio termal ya estaban en uso y debieron cerrar temporalmente. Otras se quedaron interrumpidas en fase de estructura como el Apartotel o parte del aparcamiento ubicado a la entrada del recinto y las obras del edificio de Siza se paralizaron totalmente cuando apenas quedaban poco más que acabados, pintura, remates y equipamiento para entregar la obra. Este potente y elegante proyecto construido concienzudamente con una doble piel de hormigón quedaba así abandonando a su suerte y a merced de una naturaleza hambrienta de recuperar lo que era suyo.

Siza diseñó el CAR pensando en amortiguar su impacto visual en el territorio, gracias a la ubicación de una gran parte de su amplio programa a nivel de sótano y a sus cubiertas planas ajardinadas. Los 3.400 m^2 de parcela se ocuparon en tres niveles: el de acceso, con la recepción, el restaurante y un salón, el primer nivel donde se ubican más de 20 habitaciones, y un nivel subterráneo, con el spa, la pista polideportiva, el gimnasio y los vestuarios. La potente y quebrada volumetría resultante dialoga con la sobriedad y el dinamismo de los espacios interiores recorridos en rampa hasta la terraza exterior superior y tensionados siempre por la presencia de la luz que se vierte al interior por huecos y lucernarios.[2]

En diciembre de 2011 accedí por primera vez, con los permisos oportunos, al interior del CAR. Comenzaba así la serie "Standstill Architecture", un proyecto fotográfico personal desarrollado durante más de 10 años centrado en documentar visualmente la realidad del Balneario de Panticosa, un particular paisaje del abandono y la ruina, un sistémico conflicto entre arquitectura y territorio, cartografiado visualmente por una mirada personal —artística en este sentido— que huye tanto de la denuncia o la crítica exacerbada como de la melancolía. Mi trabajo fotográfico encontraba en este contexto otro buen ejemplo de estas arquitecturas en suspenso, piezas inacabadas[3] que dejan paso al tiempo para que transforme su latencia en herida y su espera en deterioro.[4]

Con la mirada propia de quien es a la par arquitecto y fotógrafo, el proyecto documenta mediante una narrativa aséptica y respetuosa las contradicciones y tensiones existentes entre las lícitas pretensiones formales, constructivas y materiales de la arquitectura de Siza y sus conflictos dialécticos con un territorio exacerbado, imbuido todo de esa cierta poética trascendente que cualquier proceso de ruina y abandono conlleva. Se trataba de volver y revisitar el espacio exterior e interior para levantar una patética acta de las inexorables cicatrices y huellas que el paso del tiempo iba dejando, como capas superpuestas, sobre el alma del edificio: falsos techos desmoronados, vidrios y carpinterías rotas, revestimientos verticales derruidos, suelos levantados y una materialidad trasformada por la humedad y los procesos de pudrición.

La inexorable acción de la naturaleza y el clima sobre esos abandonados espacios de la pulcritud aportan el argumentario para una narrativa visual diferente del espacio arquitectónico. Como si de un maravilloso pecio hundido en el mar se tratase, contemplar estas intensas imágenes nos incita —una vez sacudida la lástima que nos produce el hecho en sí— a reconsiderar críticamente los procesos que desencadenan y gestionan la ejecución de los proyectos y la ética que ha de ponderar la transformación del territorio por parte de la arquitectura, al tiempo que nos reconcilia con el valor de la buena arquitectura, que mantiene sus elegantes esencias incluso enmascaradas en su ruina.

Iñaki Bergera

Poetics of abandonment. Siza in Panticosa

Few places reveal with such intensity the relationship, particularly edgy in this case, between architecture and territory. Panticosa is more than a territory or a location; it is a landscape in its own right, shaped by the hybridisation of sublime nature and human intervention. Lying in a granite basin at 1.630 metres above sea level, in the heart of the Aragonese Pyrenees (Spain), the Panticosa Spa bears the imprint of centuries of glacial sculpting. Today, it stands as a setting for mineral-medicinal thermal waters, natural springs, *ibones* (mountain lakes), and powerful alpine torrents.

Evidence of the baths dates back to the mid-17th century. Over more than four centuries, the evolution of the spa complex has built up a layered memory of an exciting adventure narrated by chroniclers, tourists, tuberculosis patients, photographers, and artists drawn by its promise of health, leisure, and glamour.Yet the Spa's history is a sublime drama, imbued with richness and vitality at its peak in the early twentieth century, but also burdened by failure and disaster, sometimes brought about by the forces of nature—snow avalanches that on several occasions swept away parts of its facilities—as well as by fires, the decline of tourism due to mismanagement, and, more recently, a disproportionate attempt at transformation that has partially turned it into a landscape of ruin and abandonment.

Fortunately, the memory of Panticosa has been preserved through photographic collections held by institutions such as the National Library, the Ramón y Cajal Institute, the Diputación de Huesca, as well as in various private archives[1]. Since the first photographic survey and architectural plan in 1865, generations of photographers —both national and international— have journeyed to this remarkable site, capturing not only the essence of its architecture, cascading waterfalls, and rugged mountains, but also the lives and activities of its visitors.

Images from the 1950s vividly reveal the spa's final moments of vibrancy as a summer retreat for families, offering leisure, sport, and easy access. The economic downturn of the 1960s, coupled with the challenges of maintaining an ageing infrastructure, led to its closure in 1979. From that moment on, the complex became a melancholic site, frequented primarily by day-trippers, hikers, and mountaineers. In 2000, the Nozar company, a real estate firm owned by the Nozaleda family, acquired the decaying establishment with the ambition of transforming it into a luxurious international resort. Their plan involved demolishing most of the old hotels, restoring the original spa buildings, and constructing new facilities, with investments exceeding sixty million euros and the promise of more than four hundred jobs.

Spain's post-1997 'Guggenheim effect' fuelled widespread confidence in iconic architecture and star architects among investors, developers, and politicians. Two distinguished Pritzker Prize winners —Spanish architect Rafael Moneo and Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza— were commissioned for key projects: Moneo oversaw the expansion and restoration of the Casino and the Grand Hotel, while Siza was entrusted with the design of the striking High-Performance Sports Center (CAR) and an apartment hotel. Meanwhile, Belén Moneo, Jeff Brock, and Jesús Manzanares took responsibility for the new thermal buildings and the parking facilities.

Yet the story —a contemporary fairy tale— never reached its happy ending. The 2008 international economic crisis, coupled with the bursting of Spain's real estate bubble, and the ensuing lack of credit, forced Nozar into bankruptcy, abruptly halting all construction across the complex, with each facility left to a different fate. Some, such as the Grand Hotel or the thermal building, briefly opened but soon closed; others, like the apartment hotel and sections of the car park at the entrance, remain unfinished. Siza's works at the CAR came to a complete standstill, with only finishing touches, painting, fixtures, and equipment delivery pending. This formidable and elegant project,

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