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Towards a “visual turn” in urban studies? Photographic approaches

Abstract

How do researchers use photography in contemporary urban studies? What methodological and epistemological problems does it rise? How does photography change the conditions, rules, objectives and formats of urban knowledge? After a brief historical overview, the editorial presents how the five contributions of this issue answer these questions.

Keywords

Photography, Urban studies, Methods, Image, City

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In the field of urban studies, images are intrinsically related to knowledge, thought and action. From the Renaissance up to the Second World War, urban planning has been built, both as a profession and as an expertise, on a common basis of visual representations, which were used by planners to visualize the physical, social or economic dimensions of space, and to project objects into it (Söderström, 2000). Until recently, the position of photography and film within this iconography, which was dominated by the codes of architectural design and cartography, remained marginal (Cuny, Nez, 2013). Nevertheless, since its inception in the 19th century, photography has been used by public administrations in order to keep records of built heritage that risked being lost to future generations because of the major transformations affecting industrial cities during this period. Several picture-taking missions focusing on monuments or entire neighbourhoods were conducted in France and in other European countries. Whereas the first of these mostly used architectural drawings to document this heritage, the French Heliographic Mission made a systematic record based on photographs (de Mondernard, 1997). Closer to our time, the workshop conducted by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in Las Vegas in the 1970s consisted in exploring The Strip using films and photographs taken from a moving car (Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, 1972). More recently, several scholars have used photography as a research method in order to study urban transformations at different levels (Jarrigeon, 2012; Cuny, Färber, Hägele, 2014; Suchar, 2004), the social use of the domestic sphere (Bonnin, 2007), city memories (Petiteau, Pasquier 2007; Barrère, Levy-Vroelant, 2012) or the social life of cafés and bars (Conord, Steiner, 2010). How do researchers use photography in contemporary urban studies? What methodological and epistemological problems does it raise?

Each of the articles collected in this issue gives a specific answer to these questions. They deal with various types of urban spaces: territories (Ballif), public spaces (Monnet, Schöpfer) and domestic spaces (Jonas, Noël). They use photography as a means to describe urban space and, in so doing, they reflect more generally on the products of social science research: “The semiotic status [of photography] creates an effect of distance, which increases the effect of designation” (Piette, 2007). Indeed, the function of photography is to *show*, but both the photographer and the viewer play a role in the production of meaning. For this reason, Nadja Monnet prefers to talk about “data production” instead of “data collection”. She combines images and sounds in order to reflect the urban dynamics at play in Barcelona’s Plaça de Catalunya. The observation of what happens in this square is closely linked to the photographer’s eye and ear. By combining the two, the author manages to capture the visual and acoustic atmospheres of the place in their smallest details, confirming Albert Piette’s assertion that photography enables us to grasp the “minor-key variations of reality” (1992). But researchers are also interested in the capacity of photography to attest that “what [we see] has actually been” (Barthes, 1982), that is to say its link with memory. Irène Jonas and Jean-François Noël have used photography in one such perspective. In their work, photography seeks both to enrich the description of private spaces and to demonstrate the different types of narratives that emerge from the spatial arrangements of photographs and objects that link Chilean exiles in France to their country of origin. In photographing these objects, these two researchers capture images of memories and the way these memories materialize from a particular spatial arrangement. These images show how people make sense of their lives through visual and spatial narratives, and how they relate to the spaces that they have made

for themselves. Nevertheless, taking photographs in domestic as well as public spaces can also lead people to take on the roles of various characters. In her study on the *peacelines* of Belfast, Florine Ballif tried to understand the way in which these barriers are produced politically and technically. Her photography aimed to document their physical properties. But, by opposing scientific and “artistic” photographs, she also addressed the supposed “neutrality” of photographic documentation. Photography is not a transparent reproduction of reality, as the photographer produces a situated view of it, which takes on technical, social and ethical dimensions (Conord, 2007). Photography can also be used in more collaborative research approaches – for instance, where interviewees photograph their own city or neighbourhood. In one such project, Isabelle Schöpfer combined the devices of *auto-photography* (Noland, 2006) and *photo-elicitation* (Collier, 1967; Duteil-Ogata, 2007): she asked participants to go for a walk in their neighbourhood and take their own photographs, which were then elicited during an interview. Photography conveys emotions and memories, and makes people reflect upon their own choices and practices. It can be placed at the centre of exchanges between researcher and participant (Conord, 2000) and can foster discussion on how to represent a specific place, its inhabitants and its physical, social or historical properties. However, there are no contributions in this issue that consider photography solely as a research method. In the field of urban studies, the scientific use of photography is increasing while the dominance of mapping and architectural drawing are conversely being called into question. As digital technologies spread into public administrations during the 1990s, they profoundly transformed the codes of conventional systems of representation in urban planning. Indeed, they promoted images that seemed to be closer to the shared visual experience, as they showed urban objects from a pedestrian point of view (Bailleul, 2008). During the 19th century, increasing mobility, the rise of urban sprawl and the diversification of lifestyles also changed the urban experience and urban morphology in such a way that the idea of “city”, considered as a continuous and dense built-up area that we can clearly differentiate from countryside, is now challenged. Not surprisingly, therefore, a number of authors regularly remind us of the diminishing capacity of scientific and professional imagery to grasp contemporary social and urban phenomena (Lussault, 2007). In such a context, how does photography change the conditions, rules, objectives and formats of urban knowledge?

Each article presented here shows how the use of photography leads to experimentation of new ways of publishing the results of research in the social sciences and that this question can by no means be reduced to a “simple” communication or drafting issue. As exemplified by Nadja Monnet’s work, taking photographs and capturing sounds reshapes the entire research design, as it forces the researcher to refine the research questions and categories considered. In this case, it also involves the reader/viewer in the dynamics that make the central square of Barcelona a public space, as the images and sounds captured represent the bodies and interactions that can be observed and heard in the square, forming a collection of signs that the reader must decipher. By considering her audio-visual essay as a research result, as she would a map or a table, the author also assigns new objectives to her research: it aims both to answer a research question (to what extent do the social interactions that take place in a public space contribute to its social production?) and to produce a representation of the research object: a public space. In a similar manner, descriptions, excerpts from interviews and photographs are intertwined in Irène Jonas and Jean-François

Noël's article, showing that photography contributes to the same extent as researchers' texts or interviewees' voices to the representation of the four types of "decorative figures" that are explored in their paper. Although Isabelle Schöpfer did not produce any of the photographs she analyses in her article, we also find a representation device at the core of her research design: by asking participants to make their own photographs of their neighbourhoods, she uses photography as a laboratory that enables her to observe how "neighbourhood images" emerge from everyday practice, social interaction and public discourse. Finally, Florine Ballif asks explicitly how the social practice of photography reshapes the researcher's position regarding the field and, more generally, the relation between knowledge and society. Her article shows how the social interactions induced by the use of photography changed her position, which evolved from an initial stance that was falsely objective and disembodied to one that was ultimately more socially and spatially situated and engaged.

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