

Essay on photography urban images

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Ever since the 1920s and 1930s, the allure and absorption with the metropolitan life and the images related to it has resulted in an increased interest in the artistic rendition of urban images in various forms (Alifragkis and Penz 221). Whether in the moving image works of famous urban story tellers, such as Woody Allen, or still image works of admired photographers, such as Eugene Atgets and Man Ray, the interest in urban images is here to stay. The purpose of urban photography can be said to create visual appeal than summarizes the dynamics of modernity in an open or closed manner (Alifragkis and Penz 221). Urban photography is a bold and formal experiment with the iconography of urban landscapes, and it can be descriptively referred to by the adjectival term “ city symphonies” (Alifragkis and Penz 221). Thus, urban photography is certainly viewed as a serious form of art today. While taking into account the fact that urban images can be entertaining as well as distressing, this paper discusses the urban images by considering the example of the city of Hong Kong, and comparing and contrasting the urban images of this city with other cities of the world. The paper also compares the works of some urban photographers, such as the Dada and Surrealist photographer Man Ray.

Urban photography seems to focus on the concepts of patterns, symmetry, depth of field, perspective, framing, and lines (10 Elements of Photography Composition). Patterns can be found at many places in a city when a photographer is observant and has the right intuition (10 Elements of Photography Composition). By emphasizing and accenting the patterns in urban shots, a photographer can produce some very unusual pictures (10 Elements of Photography Composition). Even focusing on the places where a

set of patterns are disrupted can make a great picture (10 Elements of Photography Composition). A good example of the use of patterns in urban photography is a photograph that focuses on the architectural pattern of the windows on the face of a building (10 Elements of Photography Composition). The picture Michigan Central Station (Figure 1), which was started in 1913, but was stopped being used since 1988 is a classic photograph of the urban decay in the city of Detroit (Time Photos). It is interesting to observe the use of patterns to emphasize the sense of desolation in the photograph (Time Photos). The rows of empty windows characterize the decay and negligence of the building (Time Photos).

The symmetry—which is perhaps the exact opposite of pattern—or the lack of it also makes a great urban photograph; such as when one considers the picture of the skyline of a city (10 Elements of Photography Composition). Nevertheless, the photographer has to have the sense to gauge whether or not symmetry is something to adopt or avoid, as a symmetrical picture needs to have a powerful composition and a superior and central point of focus to make a striking shot (10 Elements of Photography Composition). The lack of a central focus in a snapshot focusing on symmetry can make the picture somewhat conventional (10 Elements of Photography Composition). Consider another picture of the urban decay in Detroit, the William Livingstone House (Figure 2), which was built in 1893 in what was once a very high-class neighborhood, the Brush Park area (Time Photos). This was a house that was designed by the architect Albert Kahn (Time Photos). Several attempts to conserve this monument failed, and it has now been demolished (Time Photos).

The depth of field selected by the photographer can impact the composition of the image in a significant manner as well (10 Elements of Photography Composition). Here it is required that the subject of the photograph be positioned as far away from the surround objects, that is, the other objects should be in the background. Thus, the objective is to isolate the subject from its background (as well as the foreground when a shallow depth of field is desired) (10 Elements of Photography Composition). The camera can be put into an aperture priority mode, that is, the mode that automatically enables the photographer to select the aperture size (10 Elements of Photography Composition). In cameras with this function, the other settings can automatically be selected. Moreover, this is a semi-auto mode that also helps in controlling the depth of field by ensuring that the images are exposed adequately (10 Elements of Photography Composition). A large aperture helps in giving a shallow depth of field and a blurred effect to the photograph (10 Elements of Photography Composition). Figure 3 shows the use of depth of field in street photography.

The perspective refers to another photography element often used in urban photography that can have a significant effect on the quality of the image (10 Elements of Photography Composition). Perspective means shooting a picture from an unusual angle, such as clicking the picture from a high angle so that the camera looks down on a subject (10 Elements of Photography Composition). The 1956 picture of the luxury-auto maker, Packard's automobile manufacturing plant is a good example of the use of perspective in urban photography (Time Photos). The shot taken through the broken and dirt window panes intends to show the desolate surroundings (Time Photos).

Just as frames are used to place photographs on display on walls or table tops, the concept of framing can also be effectively used within a photograph to ensure that the focus of the picture is retained (10 Elements of Photography Composition). This concept not only emphasized the basic point of interest in a picture but it also added on the concept of giving “ depth” to a picture by focusing on the depth of field (10 Elements of Photography Composition). The above-mentioned picture (Figure 4) is also a good example of framing.

The uses of urban photography are many. For instance, while the modern digital technology has changed the perception of photography, it has also enabled urban designers and city planners to develop and use metropolitan images to describe and foresee plans of urban development. While photographs have become increasingly important for community planning efforts, the methods of using urban images and their verity depicted in them still needs further research and analysis (Crisman 38). Perhaps there exists an actuality, which is sometimes overshadowed in the artistic fascination associated with the art of photography, that photographs are a potential instrument for conducting qualitative research into the quality of life. The history of an urban civilization can be compared and contrasted by using various approaches of studying urban images. An interesting and useful approach of using urban images to study the history of a city is by using the theory of the palimpsest from historical geography, which means juxtaposing and layering urban photographs, to form a stage that can be employed in a variety of ways for depicting a city (Crang 429). Crang has used this approach in studying the city of Bristol. He has used “ touristic sights,” which

are the images that have been employed and created for heritage displays (430). He has also used the “dispersed memory” found in the archived images of the city (mostly the Reece Winstone archive of Bristol) (430). His analysis of the relationships and disconnections in these archived images highlight the import and intricacies of modern technologies that are used to view the urban landscape (449). However, he condemns the rampant use of urban images as a means of beautifying, glorifying, or mere artistic contemplation of cities. His emphasis is on the fact that images of a city should not be merely used as simple documentations that demonstrate the past years or generations (436). He suggests that urban images should be used in the creation of a variety of historic senses, where the different senses are shown by different methods of perception and diverse processes of envisioning the city (437). According to Carng, in depicting the city of Bristol visually, a variety of technologies should be connected together along with varied perceptions to form a distinct genus of urban scenic photography, which combines a certain “sensitivity to the passage of time” as well as a meticulous understanding of the city (438).

Although the techniques of photography and the equipment used for it have undergone significant changes over the past years, the fundamentals of photography remain constant, such as the manner in which the view finder is used to locate an ideal shot. Several of the ideologies and codes used by photographers from the yesteryears are still being used extensively today. Thus, analyzing the works of photographers from the past along with the works of contemporary photographers can be useful in determining a unique manner of understanding and employing urban images. To begin with, this

paper considers an urban photograph of France-based American photographer Man Ray who promoted the use of solarisation and photograms in urban images. Ray's surrealist works in the era after the World War I distinctly show the mood of the time. His images are noteworthy of the manner in which they show hesitancy and confusion. This was the disposition and zeitgeist of the western world at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a decided attitude toward the modernization propelled by industrial and technological development was still not formed. This is illustrated in the photograph taken by him in 1920 called New York (Trans Atlantique). Here he shows the sense of anticipation of this era with an image of accumulated urban debris, that is, matchsticks, cigarette butts, shreds of paper, and other such waste. After returned to France in 1921, he included the photograph in a collage along with a section of a tourist map of Paris and called the painting Trans Atlantique (Gratton and Sheringham 35). This progression of his work and the fact that he titled the photograph twice is notable of the manner in which he intended to show that while there is a certain homogeny in all urban locations of the world.

Several surreal photographers of this era, such as Andre Kertesz, Ilse Bing, showed in their urban photographs the conflicting nature of cities, that is, the development and decomposition, by contrasting architectural grandeur alongside the degenerated life style of the urban dwellers (Johnson C25). In the year 1932, Kertesz took a photograph of the French Academy through the glass-faced clock (Johnson C25). The photograph shows the large piazza of the academy scattered with several unknown pedestrians—thus representing the urban life—superimposed with the oversized Roman

numerals of the clock. The implication is that the clock is ticking and bringing the people closer to their doom, a reference to the Last Judgment. Similarly, Illse Bing's 1934 photograph, Eiffel Tower, shows the grandeur of the famous Eiffel Tower alongside chimneys and descript roofs of buildings in the city (Mutual Art). One of the earliest and most remembered urban photographers is perhaps Eugene Atget.

Atget realized the demand of pictures of the Paris of an earlier era and began photographing (Urban Photography (b)). He photographed old structures and other such buildings (often before they were demolished) with an emphasis on their architectural details (Urban Photography (b)). He showed street vendors at work, and in 1920, after he sold 2, 500 negatives of his work to the Caisse National des Monuments Historiques for around 10, 000 francs and gained financial independence, he often showed the interiors of the homes of people belonging to varied social classes (Urban Photography (b)). The derelict seemed to have fascinated him as his photographs often showed abandoned statues and paintings (Urban Photography (b)). It is interesting to note that he preferred to use only an old wooden 18 x 24cm camera, even when much more modern equipments were available at his time (Urban Photography (b)). He explained his preference by saying that he used these cameras because they worked faster than he could think (Urban Photography (b)). His interest in details was immense, and often his own shadow can be seen in his photographs (Urban Photography (b)). For this reason, he also used a wide-angle lens, and this brought out innovative perspectives and vignetting in the upper corners of his photographs (Urban Photography (b)). He would often use long

exposures and slow plate films that would result in halation and blurs when moving objects were photographed (Urban Photography (b)).

Contemporary New York City based urban photographer Andrew Prokos, is famous for his photographs of the cityscapes and skylines (Web Urbanist). His photograph of the panorama of Midtown Manhattan during sundown is taken from the Queens area (Web Urbanist). The picture is the very essence of the city of New York with the glittering lights showing the aspirations and dreams that come along with the life in a big city. It is interesting to view the skyscraper, which had become the icon of the 1940s—as shown in photographs such as Alfred Stieglitz’s The Flatiron building—shown in such a different perspective in Prokos’ photograph (Burroughs 24). The Flatiron Building was among the very first skyscrapers built in the city of New York, and it significantly characterized the growing modernity within the city (Burroughs 24). It is remarkable to note the contrast in the perception of the skyscraper over the years; unlike the previous era’s gloomy opinion of the skyscrapers, today it is viewed with a much greater acceptability.

While most contemporary urban photographs of today show the glamour and glitz of western cities, some contemporary urban photographers also focus on subject matters that reflect the current forms of urban expression. In fact, the Eastern and Asian cities of the world are considered far more interesting owing to the variety of societal and religious differences that can be depicted in the photographs of these cities. A very fine example of such as city is the Indian city of Mumbai. Perhaps the irony of urban existence in Mumbai is most famously captured in a moving image medium, that is, the movie

Slumdog Millionaire. The kind of pictures that Atget sought, pictures that reflected the dire existence in a city alongside the luxury and glamour it offers is seen distinctly in cities with a large gap in financial statuses of the citizens. Such a disparity can be seen in the cities of the United States as well, as reflected in the works of American photojournalist Martha Cooper. Cooper captures the temporary art form of graffiti (Martha Cooper). While graffiti can hardly be called to be modern form of art, its photographic capturing is indeed modern. The importance of this form of urban photography emerges from the fact that graffiti art is often a means of social or political expression.

The city of Hong Kong is also known to be a photographer's delight owing to the fact that it is a surprising combination of towering skyscrapers and mystical monasteries (Codino Divino Photography). The photographs of the Chunking Mansions area are captivating when contrasted with the glamorous photographs of Hong Kong's airport area (Codino Divino Photography). The former is one of the most economical areas in Hong Kong, with penniless immigrants from countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India flocking around it (Codino Divino Photography). Right in the middle of the Tsim Sha Tsui tourist district, the pictures of the Chunking Mansions' street vendors selling some very ethnic Asian cuisine in contrast to the pictures of the glamorous restaurants of Hong Kong is very illuminating (Codino Divino Photography). Pictures of entertainment zones like the Disney land, big brand shops, and heritage sites like the Victoria harbor present the urbanized side of the city (Codino Divino Photography). However, the city

continues to present a very “ un-urbanized” with the pictures of areas such as those around the Chunking Mansions (Codino Divino Photography).

This paper views the visual images of a city to be in a constant state of juxtaposition and incongruity, as a city is not only the centre of aspirations and dreams—that are generally inconsistent with the realities of life—but as it also encompasses a variety of social strata and groups that are often exist in a state of conflict with each other. The multicolored display of the urban street life when captured in a photograph and the elements of shock and entertainment in it can either disturb or entice viewers. Thus, an urban photographer has to respond this state of incongruity with a perception that should be unique, one that does not follow any rules. As the urban photographer has to draw his or her inspiration from within the boundaries of a city, he or she has to be observant of the diversity that exists within it. Famous French urban photographer’s Henri Cartier-Bresson’s word best summarize this essay on urban photography: “ Photographers work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds. But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it” (Urban Photography (a)).

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Appendix

Figure 1: Michigan Central Station by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

Source: http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1882089_1850973,00.html (January 5, 2012)

Figure 2: William Livingstone House by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

Source: http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1882089_1850974,00.html (January 5, 2012)

Figure 4: The decisive time span by Marcel

Source: <http://8minutesold.com/?tag=henry-cartier-bresson>

Figure 4: Packard Plant Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

Source: http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1882089_1850981,00.html (January 5, 2012)