

## Visual Spaces of Change

*Photographic documentation of environmental transformations*



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# Photographic narratives of urban transformations

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Time, space, scale and movement are essential aspects of visual data production. Significant changes in cities' flows can transpire in just a few minutes, hours or days, span several years or even decades. A diachronic study of an urban environment could therefore concentrate on the repetitive patterns of many activities and phenomena that occur during a day or focus on transformations over much more extended periods of time. There are several photographic methods that specifically focus on documenting this specific change – it is the case of “interval photography”, “time-lapse photography” and other forms of “repeat photography”.<sup>1</sup> All these, and others, explicitly aim at sequentially researching social change, and physical and cultural expressions as they develop, over time in a particular physical or cultural space.

Yet, visual scholarly communication products also comprise ways to visualize and express insights in novel means, including rich traditions such as social-scientific filmmaking and the “visual essay” approach. Art-based communications – which are the matter we mainly deal with in this issue of *Sophia Journal* – can express insights in even more experimental ways, from “visual essays” to digital storytelling, photo-novels, and other communicative phenomena. Many of the works discussed in this issue involve producing a series of images with a set time span in between, allowing data to be collected at a given period of time and therefore resulting in sequences that document visible changes in the depicted scene. Urban transformations at the Wembley Stadium and Arena, seen through the eyes of Jazmin Charalambous in *Impressions of Wembley Park: Photographic Representations in a Landscape of Corporatism*, or the destructions on the landscape that Marcin Piekalkiewicz brings to us in *Production of Space and Creative Destruction in the Photographic Work of Naoya Hatakeyama*, are good examples of this ability to isolate time through images – sometimes even freezing it completely, as in Hatakeyama's series “Blasts” (1995–2008).

Often, these works depart from pre-existing pictures, produced outside of the research context – that can be drawn from archives, magazines, family albums, picture postcards, etc. – and that are put at play alongside new images that somehow retrace and reproduce the initial framing and conditions of the scene. The changes that are documented by these processes include the emergence of certain elements and the disappearance of others that might have become inaccessible or invisible – and that regain visibility precisely through these photographic means. Paulo Catrica and Rui Mendes' views of the Portuguese new town of Vila Nova de Santo André in *Models, Plans, Clusters & Pine Trees*, Haode Sun's perspectives on the different velocities of urban change in Shanghai in *A Visual Misalignment of Modernity – Documentary Photography of Contemporary Urban Transformation in Shanghai*, or Chloé Darmon's views of the former washhouses in Porto in *Abandoned wash-houses*.

<sup>1</sup> Jon Rieger, “Rephotography for Documenting Social Change”, in *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (2nd ed), eds. Luc Pauwels and Dawn Mannay (Beverly Hills, CA/London: Sage, 2020), 99–113.

*Archiving wash-women practices in Oporto modern urban space*, all follow this procedure and have this power of rendering time measurable and rendering visible the invisible.

Today, the term “visual essay” is used for a variety of formats ranging from concise articles to book-length contributions, short clips to full-length films, poster size compositions to room-filling exhibitions and art installations, making use of pre-existing images or images explicitly produced for the purpose, including non-photographic nature.<sup>2</sup> We could include here Beatriz Duarte’s views on Martin Molin’s collages about the dismissed Power Station of Freixo in *Experimental persistence of change: collages of the palimpsestic temporalities of Freixo’s Thermoelectric Power Station (Campanhã, Porto)*, but also Vitor Alves’ reflection on Luca Galofaro’s digital collages and montages in *For today we browse*.

One of the visual essays’ primary interests resides in the synergetic combination of visual materials with other signifiers<sup>3</sup> – the words, layout, sequence, and design – adding up to its informed statement. The visual essay occupies a very particular place in art and research practice, constantly balancing between art and science, information and personal expression. It, therefore, also constitutes an exciting barometer for “Environmental Transformation”, besides mere “Photographic Documentation”, also because of the narrative power that imbues it. Giuseppe Resta’s analysis of the *Landscape transformations in Albania. A photographic survey on the traces of Italian travellers in the Balkans*, or Luciano Bernardino da Costa and Ricardo Santhiago Costa Pinto’s *Verticalization: Photographic Explorations of Complex Urban Phenomena* with high rise developments in São Paulo and Lyon, perfectly express this balance between the aesthetic power of photography and the information it is analytically able to convey.

Furthermore, boosted by social media, new media technologies and the rise of networking opportunities – which grew exponentially in these pandemic times – visual essays have developed into powerful contemporary vehicles for voicing and visualizing all sorts of messages. These can range from mere personal reflections to a whole set of ideas, arguments, experiences, and observations upon change, thereby making any possible hybrid variation and combination of a manifesto, a critical review, a personal testimony, or just a compelling story. However, their reception and understanding varies significantly according to the different publics and employed media. Indeed, the major strengths of the visual essay “are simultaneously its greatest challenges and a potential source of controversy”: “its broad expressive range, its open-ended, polysemic, multivocal character, its hybrid multi-media or multi-modal and cross-platform appearance and its largely uncoded nature”.<sup>4</sup> Yet, to conclude, I would ask how can the new accessibility and proliferation of visual essays and their highly varied formats help foster a growing pulse of awareness on our urban realms and a more consistent understanding of their transformations?

2 Luc Pauwels, “Conceptualizing the ‘visual essay’ as a way of generating and imparting sociological insight: Issues, formats and realizations”, *Sociological Research Online*, 17(1), 2012.

3 Roland Barthes, “Le message photographique”, In: *Communications*, 1, 1961, pp. 127, 134.

4 Luc Pauwels, *Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 337.