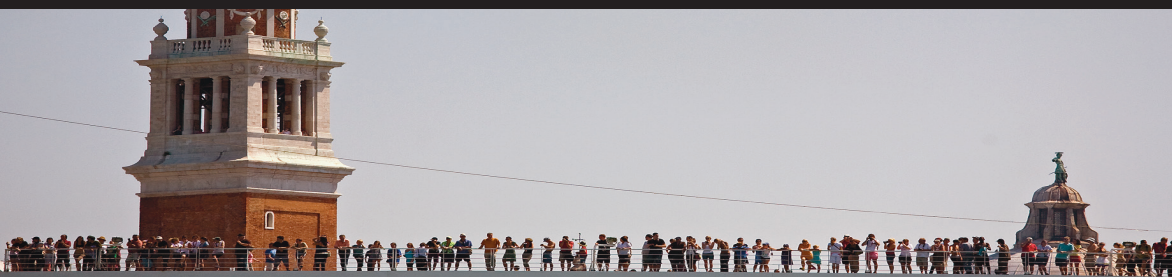


Collana di architettura
nuova serie

PICTURING CITIES

The Photobook as Urban Narrative

edited by
Davide Deriu and Angelo Maggi





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Architettura contemporanea
FrancoAngeli 

Cover image: *Venice cruise in the waters near St.Marks's Square* [detail],
photo by Leonio Berto - mignon, 2016.

Isbn 9788835157724

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INTRODUCTION

Davide Deriu and Angelo Maggi

‘The combination of remarkable images and good design in a book that is beautiful to open and pleasurable to leaf through is an ideal way of conveying a photographer’s ideas and statements.’¹

What is a photobook? And what is its historical and cultural relevance for the representation of urban environments? ‘Photographic book’ and ‘picture book’ are terms that are used to refer to various illustrated publications, with or without text, in which photographic images carry the leading role. Often resulting from the collaboration between photographers, editors and graphic designers, they are typically intended to build visual narratives on specific themes or subjects. In the introduction to the first of their three-volume set, *The Photobook: A History* (2004–2014), historian Gerry Badger and photographer-cum-collector Martin Parr chart the development of this specific medium, as opposed to other illustrated books, by emphasising its ‘ability to move and provoke in a way unintended by its makers – that is to say, [...] the capacity to display a distinctive *photographic* or *book* voice’.² That voice resonates through a number of books that have cities as their subjects, and their capacity to inform – and provoke – the public is arguably more significant than ever in our urban age.

The term ‘photobook’ itself emerged between the two world wars within the avant-garde movement known as New Vision, and counted the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy among its pioneers. Spreading out from the experimental hub of the Bauhaus, it became an increasingly popular genre of publication that took on different forms throughout the twentieth century. In fact, the photobook has a longer history that predates its modernist heyday. Between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, a number of photographers published compilations of pictures that were often conceived – at least initially – as rough sketches. These publications were similar to travel and portrait albums in which original prints were bound together. New photographic and printing processes were gradually applied to illustrate a range of scientific books, manuals and periodicals, a growing field of publications that included architectural surveys. In the early part of the twentieth century, the photobook became integral to the construction of urban narratives. As the city image was reconfigured in ‘the age of mechanical reproducibility’,³ this medium began to replace the traditional illustrated book and photographers took up the authorship of visual narratives that were autonomous from the written text. The function of writing within the photobook became a complementary, if not a completely marginal, one.

How can we map the shifting nature and function of photobooks onto the history of urban representation? This particular form of publication displays a vari-

ety of aesthetic attitudes as well as analytical approaches to the city. Its versatile format has allowed photographers and editors, often working together, to document, imagine and reflect upon urban environments in widely different ways. There is a long cultural and artistic history of photobooks spanning over a century that awaits comparative research. A tentative list should include famous examples ranging from the works of Alvin Langdon Coburn, inspired by Japanese landscape painters (*London* 1909; *Edinburgh* 1909; *New York* 1910), to groundbreaking publications by interwar photographer such as Brassai (*Paris de nuit* 1932), Berenice Abbott (*Changing New York* 1939) and Horacio Coppola (*Buenos Aires* 1936). The city photobook cemented its popularity in the post-war period, as attested by influential works by artists such as William Klein (*New York* 1956; *Roma* 1959). Between the 1950s and the 1970s, in particular, it established itself as a tool to support new and multidisciplinary methods of urban analysis. In Europe, these years saw the rise of experimental plans for the recovery of historic cities, for the development of tourism and for the environmental protection of landscapes. In this context, the photographer often acted as a 'visual designer' who not only configured the image of the city through technical procedures, but defined and assigned cultural meanings and values to it. For example, Josef Sudek in his emblematic collection of views of Prague taken with a Panoram Kodak camera (*Praha Panoramaticka* 1959) identified the functional elements of the urban fabric and extracted them from the context through a series of narrative as well as technical operations. His authorial voice was no longer subordinate to a humanistic culture that had long privileged the textual over the visual content of city books. As the photographer took on a higher intellectual profile, the photobook showed its capacity to overturn this hierarchy by virtue of its disruptive visual force.

This history is further enriched by the work of photographers who, having trained as architects or urban planners, used the camera to investigate specific qualities of places: notable in this regard are Norman Carver and Gabriele Basilico, whose visions of cities around the world were the subject of carefully curated volumes. Above and beyond the most renowned examples, however, there are a number of lesser-known authors and publications that deserve attention. By addressing a series of marginal cases, alongside well-established photobooks that are revisited in critical fashion, this edited volume aims to contribute to the growing debate on a subject that cuts across architecture, urbanism, photography and media studies. More broadly, it seeks to inform a history of urban photographic perception that is still largely to be written. A significant contribution to this history was made by Russet Lederman and Olga Yastskevich in their edited volume *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women 1843-1999*, which provides a cross-historical appraisal of the role of women in the production of photobooks.⁴ This comprehensive anthology includes works by female photographers who depicted cities, such as Henriette Grindant's photobook, *Lausanne* (1952), Evelyn Hofer's consecutive works, *The Evidence of Washington* (1966) and *Dublin: A Portrait* (1967), as well as Laura Quilici's *Pasos por Buenos Aires* (1959). Acknowledging the long-neglected work of these photographers enables us to recast the history of the photobook and its specific place in the representation of cities.

In recent decades, photobooks have been increasingly recognised for their ability to record urban transformations over long periods. Among the myriads of uses illustrated by Badger and Parr in their aforementioned survey, this medium was taken up by artists, historians, architects and designers for an array of urban representation and documentation projects dictated by different strategies. The relationship between photography (as medium), the book (as form), and the city (as object) was tackled by Susana Martins and Anne Reverseau in the edited volume, *Paper Cities: Urban Portraits in Photographic Books*, which underlines the specificity of the photographic book ‘as a crucial agent in the historic processes of city representation’.⁵ Laying emphasis on the interaction between texts and images that play out across the pages of such books, the authors coined the term ‘paper cities’ to describe the particular genre that consists of portraying urban subjects in illustrated publications. While the wide-ranging collection of essays edited by Martins and Reverseau has broadened our understanding of the discursive and visual strategies that underlie the ‘paper cities’ genre, our volume focuses on the photobook itself as a distinct medium which has reconfigured the image of cities and their imagination. The title evokes the double meaning of ‘picture’: intended both as a process of image-making (representing cities in photobooks) and also, in a wider sense, as the multifaceted ways in which cities are described, imagined and understood through this form of publication.

Furthermore, our decision to issue the book in open access recognises the plurality of formats and publics that have emerged in recent times, since the publishing world has been profoundly affected by the digital revolution. A case in point is *Piazze [In]visibili*, the photobook that was published at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when online communication replaced many of the physical interactions that were interrupted by the global health emergency – including access to bookshops and libraries.⁶ With a nod to Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, the digital volume (curated by Marco Delogu) brings together a series of images of empty squares taken by a number of photographers across Italian cities during the first lockdown in 2020, along with short texts by writers who reflect on the paradox of public spaces temporarily devoid of people. By giving a novel interpretation to the time-honoured interplay between text and image, this photobook exemplifies how digital formats can be mobilised in situations that demand creative and rapid responses. While *Piazze [In]visibili* arose out of a unique condition, amid a pandemic that severely hit Italy in its early stages, it also suggests new directions for the production of what might be called ‘instant photobooks’: a means of addressing the transient states of cities and their populations. This highlights the critical aspect of temporality, which has received increasing attention by scholars in recent years and is also central to the present volume.⁷

Other salient topics that call for further reflection concern the technical and compositional aspects of the photobook (not only as the result of a meticulous process of editing a sequence of images but also with respect to the text); the relationship with the historical layers of the city it represents (how photography conveys urban change in relation to collective memory); and the political aspects that

are inherent in a broad range of editorial projects that embrace this medium as an instrument of social observation and critique. Without any claim to comprehensiveness, our volume presents a series of discrete cases which evince a variety of critical and methodological approaches. On the whole, these perspectives reveal the extreme fluidity of the photobook in relation to the city and open up new interpretive hypotheses.

The volume is organised into four parts, loosely framed in thematic categories. The opening section ('Framing Modernities') considers the relationship between photobooks and cities in the interwar period, when this medium emerged with prominence amid the boom of illustrated publications. Focusing on the transformation of Berlin in the 1920s, Birgit Schillak-Hammers discusses how the photobook became an innovative tool for the dissemination of ideas about the modern metropolis. Her essay shows how the role of the photographer was inextricably bound up with that of the editor, as well as the architects who wrote accompanying texts: their collaborations were instrumental in providing elaborate depictions of the German capital. Besides the representation of architectural subjects, ranging from modern housing to industrial buildings, this medium enabled its makers to convey a new type of urban experience. In the following chapter, Ellen Handy revisits Berenice Abbott's now-classic photobook, *Changing New York*, and sheds light on how it distilled the idea of the modern city as a place of relentless transformation. Unlike other photographers of the 1930s, Abbott pictured the metropolis in a state of flux, caught between past and future. Eschewing a simplified reading of this work as a nostalgic lament for lost places, Handy highlights the sense of civic responsibility that animated Abbott's project, a critical documentation of New York whose enduring legacy continues to this day. Lastly, Catalina Fara examines the work of German-Argentinian photographer and graphic designer Grete Stern, whose depictions of Buenos Aires drew out the city's modern aspirations. Focusing on two photobooks published twenty years apart, from the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s, this chapter revisits a multifaceted figure who contributed in shaping the imaginary of Argentina's capital amid the vibrant artistic scene of the twentieth-century avant-garde. Through various photographic techniques, Stern developed a distinct visual language that matched the modernisation of the city at a time of intense social and spatial transformation.

The three essays in the second section ('Urban Imaginaries') illustrate how historical cities such as Florence, Venice and London became the subjects of photobooks that did not simply merge literature and photography, but enhanced and complemented these two forms of expression. According to the first contributor, Roger Crum, the atmosphere of a unified Italy created an ideal backdrop for monumental architectural propaganda as a 'photobook unbound'. The essay provides evidence of a visual history running in parallel with the reshaping of a perceivable national identity on the walls of the main hall at Santa Maria Novella railway station. Here the Italian *vedute* collectively form a kind of architectural frieze, one that is

not carved by traditional means but depicted through photographs instead. The next chapter, by Letizia Goretti, takes the reader into the world of the English artist Ralph Rumney who, in the late 1950s, followed a personal itinerary traversing the Venetian lagoon resulting in a photobook that uses the graphic layout of a *foto-romanzo* (a photo-story magazine genre that was very popular in Italy at the time). Goretti focuses on the fluid relationship between literature and photography in Rumney's 'psychogeographical' piece, whose photo-collage technique and flowing text reinforce the book's texture. Another urban imaginary is examined by Andrew Higgott in his essay on London as a 'dream city'. This wide-ranging survey brings together the work of several photographers who, historically, have adopted the photobook as their preferred medium. As Higgott points out, different aesthetic strategies were deployed by those artists to make sense of the British capital, yet they all contributed to reveal its unique *genius loci*. Even if looking at different cities, the contributors to this section elucidate how picturing the urban experience means not only showing the atmospheric and material conditions as perceived by the human eye, but forging a new imagination of cities through conceptual as well as perceptual means.

In the third section ('Visual Journeys'), five authors follow different methodologies for interacting with the urban environment by combining visual perception and space awareness. The four essays are devoted to photobooks in which various professional and amateur photographers observe the city by walking with a camera. Using a wealth of primary documents, Barbara Boifava introduces the reader to the 'Linnean' lens of landscape and urban designer Lawrence Halprin. Focusing on Halprin's photographic and visual perceptions, the author uncovers a legacy that is only beginning to receive appropriate attention within architectural historiography. The following chapter, by Lilyana Karadjova, examines an influential project by the American photographer Ed Ruscha, based on a Los Angeles streetscape, as a body of diachronic and sequential images. The author shows how photographs can render the passage of time and still reveal a flattened-out 'strip' with its endless procession of commercial store-fronts, residential buildings, parked and passing vehicles representing the experience of a living city. The flow of time is a theme that recurs also in Angelo Maggi's chapter, which looks at the *Visual Metamorphosis* of Venice. The photobooks discussed provide insight into the poetry and lyricism of one of the most photographed cities in the world, while also capturing the enigmatically blurred landscapes and disorientating close-ups that identify the destruction of its physical heritage. Lastly, in their jointly authored essay, Maria Pia Fontana and Miguel Mayorga examine the work of the architectural photographer Leonardo Finotti, whose 'immersive cartography' project offers a sophisticated reading of Brazilian architecture and its relationship to Latin American cities and landscape. All contributions in this section develop a recurrent theme in photobooks of cities, whereby a personal visual survey is composed as or through a journey through places. These essays discuss creative art projects that, unlike documentary photobooks, extend the discourse on cities by engaging with aesthetic and theoretical perspectives.

The final section ('Politics of Representation') addresses multiple ways in which

photobooks have been deployed to explore the social and political aspects of contemporary urbanism. Alexandra Tommasini investigates three projects by Gabriele Basilico which have been instrumental in promoting Italian civic narratives. The photobook was the favourite means of expression of this urban landscape photographer, and Tommasini discusses his influential work – often commissioned by municipalities and other public institutions – in relation to issues of cultural memory. With reference to the context of Italian landscape photography, the chapter argues that Basilico's documentary approach might be understood as a means of engendering a 'progressive citizenship'. A different ethos animates the photobook discussed by Davide Deriu, which stems from the present-day 'urban exploration' movement. With a focus on London, this chapter reflects on how the photobook has been embraced by a group of photographer-cum-explorers intent on reclaiming the vertical city at a time of rampant neoliberal development. Drawing out the element of play that underlies their expeditions, which involve scaling tall buildings and sundry urban structures, the author calls attention to an alternative use of the photobook as a means of picturing urban change. Lastly, Wes Aelbrecht looks at the contested process of urban renewal that has transformed the city of Detroit, and appraises a series of photobooks which, since the 1990s, have adopted diverse narratives in order to depict this phenomenon. The surge in the production of photobooks attests to the significant role of photographers in constructing and challenging the image of Detroit. Drawing on film studies, Aelbrecht deconstructs the key strategies that were deployed in order to represent the spatial and social implications of downtown renaissance: by countering the predominant views of the city's ruination, the photobook becomes a powerful medium for imagining new sites of possibility.

Taken as a whole, this anthology focuses on the photobook as a form of urban narrative: a tool that has been variously deployed to read, analyse and interpret cities through curated sequences of images, often in conjunction with literary or critical texts. It stems from a double session we chaired at the ninth conference of the Italian Association of Urban History (AISU), which took place in Bologna in 2019. The large number of proposals we received pointed to a fecund area of research that cuts across architectural, urban and visual cultures. Although the scope of the case studies is limited to Europe and the Americas (with an emphasis on Italian cities), it can foster a wider discussion about the roles of various figures involved in the production, dissemination and reception of photobooks – not only photographers but also writers, editors, curators and publishers. The conference session underscored how the publication of urban photobooks historically developed in step with the dissemination of illustrated magazines, photography no longer having didactic or decorative functions but rather being increasingly employed for narrative purposes. That debate spurred us to edit this volume, in the hope that it will prompt the further expansion of this field of research to include a broader set of historical, geographical and cultural areas.

NOTES

- 1 Martin Parr, 'Preface', in Martin Parr and Harry Badger, eds., *The Photobook: A History*, vol. 1 (London: Phaidon, 2004), 4.
- 2 Ivi, 9.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935)', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 211–244.
- 4 Russet Lederman and Olga Yastskevich, eds., *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women 1843-1999* (New York: 10x10 Photobooks, 2021).
- 5 Susana S. Martins and Anne Reverseau, 'Paper Cities: Notes on a Photo-Textual Genre', introduction to *Paper Cities: Urban Portraits in Photographic Books*, eds. Susana S. Martins and Anne Reverseau (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016), 7–17; 8.
- 6 Marco Delogu, ed., *Le Piazze [In]visibili* (Rome: Punctum, 2020). Texts in English and Italian.
- 7 For an analysis of how the temporality of city photobooks relates to strategies of 'urban imagineering', see Alexa Färber, 'Traces of the Future: Urban Transformation and the Promissory Multiplicity of Photobooks', *Candida*, no. 12 (2021): 9–22.