

## PHOTOGRAPHY - AN INTERPRETIVE TOOL TO DECIPHER URBAN CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Photography as a technology and as an art form has been an important medium to explore and showcase the socio cultural traits and behavior of the people and demonstrate the setting/ place where people live. This paper highlights the significance of photography to architects and designers, in providing the information for the ideation of conceptualizing and designing of built environment and buildings which is of cultural competence for them. Various methods of photography which can be used by design creators either student to professionals is highlighted in the paper. The paper states that photography coupled with a process of interpretation can serve as an effective and useful tool in nurturing a new generation of architects to be both materially and socially engaged.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Photography, Socio-Cultural, Architecture, Built Environment*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Photography as a technology always fascinated man leading to his use of camera becoming profound and varied which surpasses the primary intent of photography. "Photography was from its inception a medium of thought and inquiry and became an art form soon after," (Spirn 2014, pg. 38). Photography, by its virtue has facilitated the man to explore and express his thoughts and views through the eye of the lens. With the setting of advance technology in the making of camera, man's obsession to explore and extend photography from idealistic type to visual art form and expression types is evident. As an art form, photography has become the tool for man to express his abstract thoughts and realize real world; and empowered the viewers to see and contemplate the subject through the eye of the man as a photographer. Photographs provides fresh perspective on the subject, by being a narration or a story telling, as a documentary traces and as photojournalism in making understand more about the subject rather than see them as face value.

### **PHOTOGRAPHY IN ARCHITECTURE**

It is evident in the field of Architecture that photography was an important to be accepted as a reliable tool for objective documentation of the built-form, the spaces and the activities embodied within to trace the social and cultural aspects. The photography though primarily relied as reliability representations of the buildings, the artistic and purely aesthetic character rather than being a mere tool of objective documentation. Photography as a disciplined is on the way of seeing, exploring landscapes, and expressing ideas. Readings, observations, and photographs will form the basis of discussions on landscape, light, significant detail, place, poetics, narrative, and how photography can inform design and planning, among other issues. In built and man-made environment, photography has enabled to reveal and relive the past,

cherish the present and fantasize the future. “The camera is my third eye, its sensor a third retina, its images a form of thought, speech, and memory.” (Spirn 2014)

The details in the photos and photography has influenced the process of designing and proposal through informed understanding of the place, tracing of the individual’s behavior.

An emphasis, however, has been placed lately, on the importance of visual photography for architects in their profession. In a paper on the use of photo elicitation, Harper (2002) writes “Images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words” in order to understand the nuance of the place and to generate ideas.

## IN URBAN CONTEXT

In designing of urban places within cities, the urban, architectural and cultural dimensions are viewed as a complex and inseparable organism, City or architecture coexists with human presence and performance based on cultural traits. So, a good proficiency in understanding the architectural and urban space and of the human nature is necessitated for making of a viable design solution. While looking at the everyday life in the city, it is noted and defined that the city is an organism with indefinite number of layers - a difficult environment which transient over time and space, And to understand the multiple layers of the city, a needs for an in-depth research inquiry with suitable tools with increased acuity. Hence, the photography can bring out the both an objective and a subjective perception and the balance between both the perspective by means of awareness, increased capacity to observe and trace the behavior of the city/Place and the people for creating an idealist urban development.

To trace the value of life in the city, its characteristics, its flavor, its quality and nuance of architecture - built environment, which are menial or trivial, are the major important architectural elements. The art of photography and the means to capture moments of the place can provide insight and awareness to the role of people, their role in the buildings, building within the context of city, the dynamics of people and the buildings, the built space and the un-built spaces, the awareness and openness in front of seemingly insignificant but important details, the perception of what seems to be real and surreal – all are elements aimed directly to personal and professional realization of an urban designer and architects.

## METHODS

What makes photography as an important tool for visual documentation is its acceptance as a reliable tool having the capacity to depict the buildings in an objective manner because the mechanical nature of the medium seems to limit any subjective interpretation to the representation. As James Ackerman states that “Photographs became indispensable in ways that drawings and engravings could not: in consulting a graphic work, we have no way of determining how accurate a record it is; the photograph, on the other hand, though by no means a transparent reproduction, contains clues as to its degree of documentary reliability.”

Photography is one of the main mediums of communication for the architectural profession. Designers and architects, architecture students learn buildings through their photographs; study from different parts of the world makes discussions about architecture through images on architectural books and magazines. Ezra Stoller points out the power of photography as a conveyor of knowledge briefly states that “The true architectural photograph is primarily an instrument of communication between the architect and his-audience – an audience with the capacity and desire to understand and

appreciate, but lacking the opportunity to experience the work in question at first hand”.

Photography’s main role for architectural profession is to produce reliable documents of buildings, place and the people. For all the uses of architectural photography, it is the object in the photograph that dominates our visual perception, namely the building photographed. In other words, looking at a photograph of a building in a magazine acts as the substitute of visiting it. Architectural photograph is a transparent document, a reliable representation of the built-architecture.

Visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism are social constructions whose meaning arises in the contexts, and thus enable us to understand the cultural core of the Place. Architectural photography is the social construct which shows the physical entity of the building and its related setting with the people. Reading rereading photographs made in one genre as though they had been made in another illustrates this context of meaning. Representation of the city, the place, the building, the built environment, the society can provide inside to the multilayer of organism in the city culture and different meaning in the different organizational context of the city. The above three means of photography, though it is of socio-cultural measurement tool, the understanding of the subject can vary from time to time and place to place and picture to picture.

## **VISUAL SOCIOLOGY**

Through visual sociology – theoretically at least – which includes the study of all kinds of visual material and the visual social world, and uses all kinds of visual material in its methodologies, even visual video making or movie making comes within its fold. In this type, the camera is analogous to a tape recorder. Film and video cameras are particularly well suited as data gathering technologies for ethnography and cultural study, public participant observation, oral history, the use of urban space, etc. The tape recorder captures things that are not preserved in even the best of the researchers' field notes.

Visual sociology attempts to study visual images produced as part of the culture. Art, photographs, film, video, fonts, advertisements, computer icons, landscape, architecture, machines, fashion, makeup, hair style, facial expressions, tattoos, and so on are parts of the complex visual communication system produced by members of societies. The use and understanding of visual images are governed by socially established symbolic codes. Visual images are constructed and may be deconstructed. They may be read as texts in a variety of ways. They can be analyzed with techniques developed in diverse fields of literary criticism, art theory and criticism, content analysis, semiotics, deconstructionism, or the more mundane tools of ethnography.

## **DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY**

Documentary photography is a style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects and events, and is often used in reportage.in the contemporary world setting; photograpy enables the artists began to see the camera as a tool for social change, using it to shed light on injustice, inequality and the sidelined aspects of society. However, social documentary photography is often a subjective art and not all photographers in this category intend their images to aid the bettering of society. And this perspective on the social cultural tension, shale provide the setting on which the building is to be design and also respond to the people on how the building would accommodate their changing cultural behavior.

## PHOTOJOURNALISM

Like a journal, the photo journalism can imbibe an narration/ an story or an supplement to the event in an place with context. Photojournalism is similar to what journalists do, producing images as part of the work of getting out daily newspapers and weekly news with unbiased, factual, complete information as one spectrum and in the other, attention-getting and storytelling blogs. These polarity natures can bring out the cultural competence of the place through the eye of the photographer without detaching from the roots of the socio-cultural base. The journalist nature of the photograph can provide an honest understanding on the varied allied field of though which constitute to the cultural setting of the picture.

## ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Throughout the history of photography, buildings have been highly valued photographic subjects, mirroring society's appreciation for architecture and its cultural significance. Architectural photography is the making of pictures of man-made structures, usually buildings. A tenet of architectural photography is the use of perspective control, with an emphasis on vertical lines that are non-converging (parallel).

Exterior architectural photography usually takes advantage of available light by day, or at night it uses ambient light from adjacent street lights, landscape lights, exterior building lights, moonlight and even twilight present in the sky in all but the darkest situations. Interior architectural photography can also be performed with ambient light transmitted through windows and skylights, as well as interior lighting fixtures. Frequently though, architectural photographers will use supplemental lighting to improve the illumination within a building. These pictures will be used for many purposes. The four major uses are: planning, construction progress, illustrative purposes, and inspection or survey

## CONCLUSIONS

For the designers and the architects, this methodology can provide unique insights into the cultural and social perspectives of the people in the given place or city,. The layering of a person's perspective itself suggests the beginnings of a conversation around the images and ideally the images and commentary can be used more explicitly for the purposes of design ideation and discussion. Whilst the methods outlined here does not attempt to draw definitive conclusions about the method to be mandatory for the exploration of the place and people in the urban built environment, it does offer suggestions for a way of working, which is quite flexible and adaptable. Possible future developments could involve lay members of the community in making and interpreting photographs of their built environments, perhaps alongside students and professionals. Assembling a collection of photo-stories will highlight the differences and defamiliarize the taken-for-grantedness of any single standpoint. As boundary objects, photographs provide a methodological resource for the researcher as well as prompts for informants and decision makers to critically engage how people's lives are shaped and influenced by the cultural habits and social values - for better and for worse - by design. Photography coupled with a process of interpretation can be a useful tool in nurturing a new generation of architects to be both materially and socially engaged.

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