

I Photograph, Therefore I Am: Photography as Embodied Spatial Practice in the Contemporary City

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Abstract | In an era dominated by visual media, photography has become a routine, embodied way of inhabiting the city. This paper asks how the everyday act of photographing urban space, encompassing both the act of capturing and circulating images, reshapes the perception, appropriation, memory, and design of contemporary cities. Drawing together the observational urbanism of William H. Whyte and Jan Gehl, the visual methodologies of Sarah Pink and Gillian Rose, and the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, the paper situates photography as a multidimensional spatial practice rather than a neutral form of documentation. Through reflective accounts of my own photographic practice as an architect and urban researcher, and through a comparative reading of the High Line and the Promenade Plantée, it argues that photography simultaneously enables embodied appropriation of space and risks producing the homogenised, “Instagrammable” urbanism it documents. In doing so, the paper problematises a photographic culture in which the photogeneity of urban space is increasingly valued over its social functionality, where spaces are designed to be framed rather than inhabited, and where the sensory and social qualities that fall outside the frame are neglected. The paper concludes that designers must not treat photography as an after-effect of the built environment, but as one of its constitutive practices.

Keywords | Photography and Urban Space, Urban Design, Urban Planning, Embodied Spatial Practice, Visual Methodologies, Visual Narratives, Psychological Ownership, Collective Memory, “Instagrammable” Urbanism, Photographic Reproduction, Photographic Culture

Introduction

I photograph, therefore I am.

This reimagining of Descartes's famous dictum captures the essence of how photography has become a fundamental act of existence in the modern world. To photograph is not merely to document but to assert one's presence in a space, to inscribe oneself into the fabric of the urban landscape. Gilles Deleuze, in his exploration of identity and becoming, might argue that this act of photographing is a form of becoming-space—a dynamic process where the photographer, the camera, and the urban environment enter into a reciprocal relationship, each shaping and being shaped by the other. For Deleuze, identity is not fixed but fluid, emerging through interactions and assemblages. In this sense, photography becomes a tool for mapping these assemblages, revealing how individuals appropriate and transform urban spaces through their embodied experiences. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze suggests that “every body, every thing, thinks and is a thought to the extent that [...] it expresses an Idea the actualisation of which it determines” (254). This idea helps frame photography not simply as representation but as an active process through which bodies, technologies, and spaces participate in producing meaning. The act of photographing therefore becomes both a material and conceptual engagement with urban space, generating new ways of actualising the city.

Considering that the growing influence of photography has become so deeply ingrained in contemporary culture, I argue that its implications for architecture and urban design demand greater consideration in their development and operation. Unlike other established practices of analysis and documentation, photography has yet to assume a similarly seminal role in architecture and urban planning, despite its profound impact on how spaces are perceived, represented, and experienced. In this age of smartphones and social media, the modern city dweller is always equipped with a camera and, as such, photography has become an integral part of how we interact with and perceive urban spaces. From tourists capturing iconic landmarks to locals documenting their daily routines, there has not been a day in the city where I have not seen a person holding their camera or phone to photograph a scene. It appears that the act of photographing spaces has evolved into a cultural practice that shapes our understanding of place. This phenomenon is not merely a passive recording of environments but an active process of appropriating and redefining spaces. By framing a scene through the lens, individuals attempt to assert their presence in a space, selecting and composing particular views and spatial relationships over others. In doing so, photography transforms urban space into a personally and socially meaningful experience, creating a visual record that reinforces the photographer's connection to it.

This ultimately raises the following question: how does the practice of photography as an embodied, social, and tactical act shape the way individuals perceive, memorise, and produce urban space, and consequently, what does this mean for the design of contemporary cities? While I later distinguish between the act of capturing a photograph and the subsequent practices of reviewing and publishing images, for now I consider photography as a broader spatial practice encompassing all of these interconnected acts. In order to respond to this question, the paper first examines photography as an embodied urban practice that alters perception and sensory engagement with the city. It then reads the photographic act as a tactical spatial practice through which dwellers appropriate and contest the strategic order of urban space. Building on this, it explores how the act of photography contributes to the formation of memories, collective urban imaginaries, and the social circulation of spatial experiences. Finally, it considers the implications of contemporary photographic culture for urban design, arguing that cities increasingly operate simultaneously as lived environments and visual landscapes shaped by practices of image production and circulation.

Photography as Embodied Urban Practice

The ubiquity of photography has transformed it into far more than a tool for documentation; it has become a mode of bodily engagement with urban space. As cameras increasingly shifted from specialised research instruments to everyday personal devices, the act of photographing began to alter not only how cities are represented but how they are physically experienced. Photography, therefore, operates not simply as a visual practice but as an embodied spatial activity through which urban dwellers navigate, perceive, and negotiate the environments around them.

Urban researchers and designers have long used photography as a medium to observe and analyse how people interact with public spaces.¹ William H. Whyte's seminal work, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, exemplifies this approach, using time-lapse photography to study patterns of behaviour in plazas and parks. Whyte's methods involved positioning cameras to document urban life over extended periods, revealing how subtle spatial conditions influenced collective behaviour, from the arrangement of seating to the attraction of sunlight and food vendors. His studies demonstrated that successful public spaces were not merely aesthetically pleasing but responsive to bodily and social needs. In the 1970s, when Whyte conducted his research, the camera functioned primarily as an observational tool rather than an everyday accessory for the public. His photographic studies documented how people actively engaged with and modified their surroundings, revealing a direct and tactile relationship between bodies and the built environment—particularly fascinating is the example of the “chair” and how individuals interact with the space by rearranging movable chairs to suit their needs (Whyte 34). For Whyte, the criterion that separated aesthetically pleasing space from functionally responsive space lay not in how a plaza appeared in a single frame but in what people chose to do in it across the day. His narrative style reinforced this reading. Drawing on the observational rhythm of wildlife documentaries, his films

¹For a comprehensive overview of visual research methods in urban studies, see Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2016).

invite us to become spectators in a dance of chairs, with Whyte himself narrating the lively performance.²

Jan Gehl extended Whyte's observational approach while moving toward a broader sensorial understanding of urban experience. Like Whyte, Gehl employed systematic photographic documentation to examine how spatial design influences social activity and patterns of occupation within the city (Gehl 71). While his work reinforced Whyte's emphasis on the social activity that takes place within public spaces, it also reintroduced aesthetic considerations—not as formalist concerns, but as elements of a broader sensory experience. Gehl's photography captured how visual quality, along with other sensorial elements, contributes to the attractiveness and success of public spaces (181). This transition from Whyte to Gehl reflects the early stages of a profound shift in how photography mediates urban experience. As the camera evolved from a researcher's tool to an everyday accessory embedded within smartphones and digital technologies, it shifted from a tool for observing human-space interaction into a force that actively shapes it. While Whyte documented individuals actively manipulating their environment, today's urban spaces increasingly cater to a public whose interaction is mediated through photographic practices. The modern urban dweller now moves through the city while simultaneously framing, selecting, and anticipating images, in a way that has altered how the city is lived and experienced, potentially rendering some of Whyte's and Gehl's observations outdated. The definition of "successful" urban space has consequently expanded beyond Whyte's emphasis on social functionality to include photogenic qualities and "Instagram-worthy" aesthetics, attracting a public more interested in capturing spaces visually than physically altering them to suit their needs.

However, this turn toward photographic capture does not amount to a withdrawal from embodied engagement with the city. The digital medium itself has accelerated this shift, moving photography away from its earlier role as an observational instrument, toward an everyday practice of inhabitation. Where pre-digital photography in the city retained a slower and more deliberate character, with finite film and delayed development making photography an undertaking that one equipped oneself for, the smartphone has folded the act into ordinary movement through the city, integrating the camera into a device that is already carried on the body for purposes that have nothing to do with photography. The act of photographing was in itself no less embodied in this earlier period of using a lens finder and manual settings; what has changed is that photographing no longer demands that deliberation, and is therefore no longer considered a distinct activity from simply being in a place. The image is now reviewed instantly, often while still standing in the place that has just been photographed, and photography therefore folds back into the bodily perception of the city in real time, becoming less a tool for recording space than an embodied way of experiencing it.

As Sarah Pink argues in "Sensory Digital Photography: Re-thinking 'Moving' and the Image," digital photography must be understood as "an embodied practice that

²This narrative approach is particularly evident in Whyte's film adaptation of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), where his commentary guides viewers through the "urban ballet" of public space use. The film is available at the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/social-life-of-small-urban-spaces>.

involves not just visual but multi-sensory engagement with urban environments” (4). What Pink describes as the “emplaced” nature of photographic practice grounds the body within the environment it senses; the camera, held to the eye, becomes an extension of that body, both shaping and shaped by its surroundings (*Doing Sensory Ethnography* 36). Emplacement goes somewhat further than embodiment, in that it treats mind, body, and environment as constituted together rather than as a sensing body passing through a setting that remains a backdrop, so that what comes to be known of a place is produced in the relation between them. A photograph, understood in these terms, is perhaps less a view of a place than a trace of the photographer’s emplacement within it, carrying the position from which it was taken and the constraints the place imposed on the body that took it. This understanding applies equally to the researcher with a theoretical framework and to the everyday person navigating and documenting their urban environment; both are engaged in processes of analysis and understanding through the medium of photography, though perhaps with different intentions and levels of methodological awareness. The act of photographing itself therefore becomes a form of spatial practice through which urban dwellers make sense of and claim belonging in city spaces.

Photography creates a flux of embodied experiences within urban spaces, oscillating between anonymity and belonging, immersion and detachment. In my own practice of urban photography, I have noticed how the camera enables shifts between different modes of spatial engagement. Moving through a crowded market with camera in hand, I shift between being an anonymous member of the crowd and a self-conscious observer, between tactile immersion in the space and the visual framing of it. My body adapts continuously to the act of photographing, leaning against walls for stability, crouching to frame particular viewpoints, or pausing while waiting for people and space to momentarily align. When I photograph a street corner or an architectural detail, I am not simply recording what I see but engaging in an embodied process of meaning-making that involves movement, touch, sound, and other sensory dimensions of urban experience. The camera becomes an extension of my body, mediating my experience of the city while also intensifying aspects of it.

This oscillation reflects broader tensions within modern urban experience. As Georg Simmel noted in his classic essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” the metropolis itself creates “the sensory foundations of psychic life” through the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli to which urban dwellers are exposed (410). In response, the urban dweller develops what Simmel calls a “blasé attitude,” a calibrated sensory adaptation that serves as protection against the overwhelming intensity of metropolitan stimulation (414). The blasé response, for Simmel, is not indifference but a form of protective filtering, a way of calibrating attention against the constant demand for it. Photography stands in productive tension with this defence. To raise the camera is to override the blasé reflex briefly, to choose to attend deliberately, even as the camera itself delegates that attention back to a device. Through it, moments of heightened attention and engagement emerge amid the general flow of modern urban experience, allowing individuals to isolate, frame, and re-engage with fragments of the city that might otherwise dissolve into sensory excess.

In a similar way, David Seamon's phenomenological understanding of spatial experience helps illuminate the embodied nature of photographic practice. As Seamon argues, human experience of place emerges through habitual bodily movement, encounter, and orientation within lived environments (Seamon 17). Drawing on Bachelard and Relph, he describes our relation to place as "an inside-outside dialectic" (134), a continuous oscillation in which what is experientially inside for a time becomes outside, and vice versa. Read through this Seamon inspired framework, the position of the photographer can be understood as a phenomenological dialectic of urban photography, in which the camera-bearing body is at once immersed in the urban scene and standing apart from it, framing the same environment in which it is also moving. Photography intensifies this relationship by transforming ordinary bodily navigation into a conscious spatial performance. The act of photographing requires the body to negotiate position, perspective, proximity, and duration, sharpening the sense of emplacement Pink describes: the felt experience of being inside the environment one is sensing, rather than positioned outside it as a detached observer. Emplacement therefore refuses the separation between the perceiver and the perceived; to photograph a place is always to be inside that place, with all the bodily orientations, postures, and rhythms that being inside requires.

This embodied dimension of photography challenges purely representational understandings of the medium. Drawing on Gillian Rose's argument that visual meaning is made not only in the image itself but at the interconnected sites of its production, circulation, and audiencing, that is, the site where images are viewed and their meanings actively made or contested (Rose 374), we can understand photographs as embodied not only visually but through the practices of their making, sharing, and viewing. When I photograph a street scene, the resulting image is not simply a visual record but a trace of embodied experience, a materialisation of a particular way of being in and engaging with urban space. Photography therefore emerges as a spatial practice through which urban dwellers experience, interpret, and negotiate their relationship to the city itself. If photography is an embodied act, however, it is more than a personal one: the image produced through this bodily engagement enters the world as a spatial intervention in its own right—and it is to that productive, tactical dimension of photography that the next section turns.

Photography as Tactical Spatial Practice

If photography is an embodied mode of engaging with the city, it is also a practice through which urban space is actively negotiated, interpreted, and reproduced. The photograph does not simply represent urban environments after they have already been experienced; rather, the act of photographing itself participates in shaping spatial relations and meanings. Photography therefore operates not only as a visual medium but as a tactical spatial practice, one through which urban dwellers assert agency within the structures of the contemporary city.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space provides an important framework for understanding this relationship between photography and urban experience. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that "(social) space is a (social)

product” (26): Space is not a neutral container within which social life unfolds but is continuously produced through the practices, representations, and lived experiences of those who inhabit it. To make this argument work analytically, Lefebvre introduces a conceptual triad, “to which we shall be returning over and over again” (33), composed of three interrelated dimensions, which he glosses as the perceived, the conceived, and the lived, which Lefebvre also names *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces*, the latter two being so close in wording that they are easily confused. The first, *spatial practice*, refers to the daily routines and material organisation through which a society “secretes” its space and ensures its continuity (Lefebvre 33, 38); this is space as perceived, in the routes people actually take across a square, the hours at which they cross it, and the entrances they come to favour. The second, *representations of space*, refers to the conceptualised space of “scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers” (38), the planned and codified order in which the city is conceived, the space of the master plan, the zoning code, and the architectural drawing, as the city is set down on paper before anyone has walked through it. The third, *representational spaces*, refers to space as it is “directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (39), the realm of symbolism, attachment, and informal appropriation, of the corner remembered as the place where something once happened, or the steps that are used for sitting regardless of what the drawing intended. Photography is unusual in that a single act passes through all three. Photographing a public square involves crossing it, pausing and choosing where to stand, which is itself a spatial practice in Lefebvre’s sense; the resulting image reproduces something of the conceived order, in that it tends to frame the square much as the plan intended it to be seen; and in selecting that view over the others available, it also carries the lived attachments and informal uses that the plan did not anticipate.

When I photograph a neglected corner of the city or a temporary appropriation of public space, I am not merely recording these phenomena but participating in their social production. The circulation of such images, whether through social media, exhibitions, or publications, further contributes to the collective understanding and production of urban space. This productive dimension of photography becomes particularly evident in relation to contested or marginal urban spaces. When photographers document informal settlements, street art, or temporary uses of abandoned sites, they participate in making these spaces visible and legible within dominant urban discourses. Such practices can serve either to challenge or reinforce established spatial hierarchies, depending on the intentions, contexts, and modes of circulation involved. This becomes particularly significant within contemporary urban environments which are increasingly shaped by surveillance, commercial branding, and controlled visual identities. The city is often designed to direct movement, behaviour, and perception through carefully organised spatial strategies. I frequently observe visitors photographing new developments from the very vantage points those developments were designed to be seen from, often circulating the images with the hashtags that the developments themselves promote. Such photographs tend to confirm the conceived order rather than disturb it. The “photo spot” markers now installed at many attractions make the arrangement explicit, since they instruct visitors precisely where to stand. Yet photographic practices can interrupt and renegotiate these imposed readings of urban space. Photographing the fenced-off corner

of a nominally public plaza or the armrests fitted to a bench to prevent anyone from lying on it, produces a rather different record, in that it makes visible what the designed image of the space is intended to leave out. Through the selective framing of scenes, attention to overlooked details, or documentation of temporary encounters, urban photographers construct alternative spatial narratives that exist alongside official representations of the city.

Michel de Certeau's distinction between *strategies* and *tactics* further clarifies this process. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau defines a strategy as "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" and "postulates a place that can be delimited as its own" (35–36). A tactic, by contrast, "cannot count on a 'proper'" place; it "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety" and depends on time rather than space, "always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" (xix). Photography can be positioned as a tactical intervention through which urban dwellers assert agency within strategically designed environments. De Certeau's emphasis on walking as a fundamental spatial practice that rewrites the urban text finds a parallel in photographic practices that create alternative readings of the city. Just as the walker³ selects paths and perspectives that articulate a particular relationship to the urban environment, the photographer selects, frames, and juxtaposes urban elements to create new spatial narratives. Both practices involve forms of selective attention and creative recontextualisation that transform abstract space into lived place.

When I wander through the city with my camera, I engage in what de Certeau might call a "rhetoric of walking" (100), selecting paths and perspectives that articulate a particular relationship to the urban environment. The resulting photographs represent not merely my subjective vision but a tactical engagement with the strategic order of urban space. Through framing choices, timing, and point of view, I create visual assertions that may affirm, question, or reinterpret the intended meanings of designed environments. This tactical dimension of photography is particularly evident in practices that explicitly aim to challenge dominant representations of urban space. When photographers document everyday life in neighbourhoods stigmatised by mainstream media, or when they capture alternative uses of corporate plazas, they produce counter-narratives that contest official or commercial visions of the city.

Such practices exemplify what de Certeau calls "*la perruque*" (the wig), the practice through which a worker performs his or her own work while officially on the employer's time. *La perruque*, he writes, "is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer," differing both from pilfering, since nothing of material value is taken, and from absenteeism, since the worker remains on the job (de Certeau 25). The cabinetmaker who borrows a factory lathe to make a chair for his own home, or the secretary who writes a love letter on company time, "actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) [...] for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed

³I read de Certeau's walker as a deliberate move beyond Baudelaire's flâneur. Where the flâneur observes the city from a position of detached aesthetic privilege, de Certeau's walker is materially implicated in producing it; she is, in this sense, less spectator than co-author of urban space.

toward profit” (25–26). Vernacular urban photography has the same structure. The skyline, the plaza, and the boulevard are built, lit, and policed for the strategic purposes of capital and the state; the photographer uses these spaces, while appearing to comply with their sightlines, to produce something else entirely: a personal record, a counter-narrative, a souvenir of belonging that the strategic order did not authorise.

This tactical dimension of photography is not the property of any one kind of photographer; it migrates between commissioned and vernacular practice, and it is in their relationship that some of its most interesting dynamics appear. The distinction I am drawing is one of purpose rather than of skill or professional status. Commissioned architectural and urban photography, produced for developers, municipalities, and design practices, has traditionally served strategic functions, promoting official visions of the city through carefully composed, often depopulated images that emphasise formal qualities over lived experience. Vernacular photography, whether undertaken by amateurs or by professionals working outside such commissions, tends to focus on personal connections to place, social interactions, and ephemeral moments that escape official representation. However, this distinction has become increasingly blurred. The works of famous photographers often influence the stylistic and technical approaches of amateurs who seek to imitate well-known images. I frequently observe tourists at iconic landmarks attempting to reproduce familiar perspectives popularised by professional architectural photographers. At the same time, the “vernacular” style of amateur photography has influenced professional practice, with its emphasis on contingency, embodiment, and lived experience increasingly valued in contemporary urban visual culture.⁴ The democratisation of image production and circulation has created new possibilities for tactical intervention while also generating new forms of strategic co-optation, as commercial and institutional actors appropriate the aesthetic and affective qualities of vernacular photography.

These tensions reveal the unstable position that urban photography occupies between agency and incorporation within contemporary urban visual culture. While photography can function tactically by enabling alternative readings of urban space, photographic practices are also increasingly absorbed into economies of visibility structured by tourism, branding, and social media platforms. The desire to produce distinctive images often remains conditioned by pre-existing visual conventions that determine which spaces become photographically valuable and which remain unseen. Urban photography consequently exists in an unstable position between appropriation and repetition, between tactical reinterpretation and participation within broader systems of visual consumption. Nevertheless, photography continues to provide urban dwellers with a means of negotiating their relationship to the city beyond the terms established by planners, institutions, and official representations. Through photographing, individuals

⁴This cross-fertilisation is particularly evident in the context of social media platforms like Instagram, where professional and amateur practices converge and influence one another. But it could be seen even before the rise of such social media, in popular art by artists in the 1970s such as Stephen Shore, whose early works embraced the aesthetics of everyday snapshots, elevating the casual, unfiltered view of the American vernacular into a form of artistic expression. See in particular the photographs Shore made in 1972 and 1973, later published as *American Surfaces* (Schirmer/Mosel, 1999), and *Uncommon Places* (Aperture, 1982).

participate in the continual production of urban meaning, transforming the city from a fixed spatial order into a lived and contested field of visual, social, and embodied practices. If this section has read photography as the tactical act through which urban space is reinterpreted in the immediate moment of capture, the next section turns to the longer arc of that intervention: how photographic acts accumulate, circulate, and reshape memory and visibility well beyond the moment of the shutter.

Photography Beyond Representation: Memory, Circulation, and Social Practice

The tactical intervention of the photographic act is immediate and site-specific, but its effects extend far beyond the moment of capture. The photograph today exists within a longer sequence of practices that includes reviewing, editing, archiving, publishing, and circulating images across digital platforms. Each of these stages constitutes a distinct mode of engagement with urban space, with its own perceptual, social, and spatial implications. Photography therefore cannot be reduced to the production of an image; it has become a multiple and socially distributed practice through which urban experiences are continually revisited, shared, and reconstructed.

As I have suggested previously, the act of photographing a scene is immediate, embodied, and site-specific. The act of reviewing photographs, however, occurs elsewhere, at home, in a café, on public transport, creating a temporal and spatial displacement from the original context. When I review images on my camera, phone, or computer screen, I enter what Roland Barthes describes as a “different time-space,” engaging with what he terms the “having-been-there”⁵ quality of the photographic image (77). For Barthes, every photograph carries an irreducible claim about the past: it asserts that what we see really existed in front of the lens at one specific moment, however distant the place of viewing may be from the place depicted. To review a photograph is therefore to inhabit two places at once, the place where the image is being viewed and the place that the image insists it once was. This temporal and spatial split is part of why reviewing photographs feels reflective in a way that taking them does not, and it is also what makes the practice of reviewing a distinct urban act in its own right. Such displacement is of course not peculiar to cities, though the condition to which it responds arguably is. As Simmel’s account of the blasé attitude suggests, the street offers far more stimulation than can be attended to at the moment of encounter, and much of it is necessarily filtered out; reviewing is where some of that surplus is recovered later, receiving the attention that the intensity of the city did not allow at the time.

This restructuring of attention also restructures memory. Linda Henkel’s research suggests that the act of relying upon photographs to preserve experience can alter our ability to remember independently, a phenomenon she describes as the “photo-taking impairment effect” (396). When we externalise the work of remembering to the camera, we may pay less attention to the sensory and cognitive processing that ordinarily supports memory formation. As Henkel demonstrates through her experiments, participants who

⁵Barthes’s French formulation is *ça-a-été*, which Richard Howard’s translation of *Camera Lucida* (1981) renders as “that-has-been” (Barthes 77). Barthes treats this as the *noeme*, or the essence, of photography. I use “having-been-there” here as a related rendering closer in spirit to Barthes’s earlier writing on the photographic message.

photographed objects recognised fewer of the objects and remembered fewer details about them compared to participants who only observed the objects (401). Yet this process does not simply diminish memory; rather, it redistributes it among the body, the image, and the digital archive. What the body retains is not the detail of what was seen but the act of having been there, the walk that led to the place, the noises, smells, or heat of the moment, which return as bodily recollections rather than as visual records. The photograph, for its part, holds the details that attention gave up at the moment of the capture, and the archive holds the capacity to retrieve them afterwards, so that remembering an afternoon in the city draws from all three at once. This redistribution happens because photographing cues a kind of directed forgetting: expecting the camera to preserve what is seen, attention shifts away from encoding the object itself and toward producing the photographic record that will stand in for it (Henkel 401). Urban experience increasingly becomes externalised through photographic storage, where moments are remembered not through direct recollection alone but through later encounters with images. The city is therefore encountered not only through direct bodily experience but through its continual photographic reproduction.

The publication and sharing of urban photographs introduce a further set of social and spatial dimensions. As Degen et al. argue, digital visualisations can be understood as “sensorial, serially produced commodities which attempt to appeal to viewers’ emotions through carefully orchestrated place atmospheres” (Degen et al. 21). A similar logic increasingly extends to the everyday circulation of urban photography. When I post an urban photograph on Instagram or include it in a professional presentation, I participate in the production of what might be called “virtual urban space”—a distributed, networked realm where images of places intersect with social responses, accumulate likes and comments, and influence others’ perceptions and experiences. The act of sharing therefore operates as what Bernie Hogan describes as a form of “exhibition,” in which “the artifact is the result of a past performance and lives on for others to view on their time” (Hogan 377). The world, in his formulation, is “not merely a stage but also a participatory exhibit” (377). The spaces I choose to photograph and share become elements in a personal narrative presented to others, reflecting not only my physical movements through the city but also my aesthetic preferences, social affiliations, and cultural capital.

The act of photographing can produce a particular form of attachment to the spaces it captures, beyond the tactical engagement described previously. Pierce et al. define psychological ownership as “the state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is ‘theirs’”⁶ (86). They propose three major experiences through which this state emerges: controlling the target, coming to know it intimately, and investing the self in it (92). Urban photography activates all three. Framing exerts control: What is included in the picture, and what is left out, is briefly mine to decide. Repeated capture builds intimate knowledge, as I learn the morning light on a particular cornice or the rhythm of a market through the day. And the resulting

⁶Pierce et al. develop the concept primarily in relation to objects and organisational targets; I extend it here to urban space, following their explicit acknowledgment that intimate knowledge of a place can produce the same self-target attachment they describe for objects (92).

archive is an investment of self, a quiet record of where I have spent my attention. The street corner cannot be deeded to me, but the photograph functions as a paper title to a feeling of belonging, one that is then carried forward into the practices of reviewing and sharing already described.

These distinctions between photographing, reviewing, and publishing also map onto a broader field of visual methodology. Gillian Rose identifies three main methods through which photographs are produced as research data in the social sciences, each with its own account of who holds the camera and whose meaning the resulting image carries (Rose 308). The first, *photo-documentation*, treats the photograph as “a precise record of material reality” and takes images in a systematic way to provide data for analysis (310); here the camera remains in the researcher’s hands, and the meaning of the image is settled afterwards, in the analysis rather than in the encounter. Sociologist Charles Suchar’s long study of gentrification in Lincoln Park, Chicago and Jordaan, Amsterdam is a defining example of this approach, in that his shooting scripts, drawn up in advance, bind what is photographed closely to what the researcher already wants to know (Rose 310–11; Suchar 17). The second, *photo-elicitation*, reverses the relationship and treats the image as a question rather than an answer, “based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, qtd. in Rose 314). The photograph, often taken by participants themselves, becomes a stimulus that surfaces tacit knowledge and elicits forms of talk that ordinary interview methods cannot reach (Rose 315); what matters in this method is less the content of the image than what is said in its presence since authority over meaning passes from the researcher to the person being interviewed, who may well read the photograph in ways the researcher had not anticipated. The third, *photovoice*, developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris from a tradition of action research, involves “an ongoing and cumulative process of work with a group of people that takes place over a long period of time,” in which research participants produce images as part of a collective process of social learning and empowerment (Rose 315). Photovoice goes further than the other two, in that it “entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for change, in their own communities,” and counts reaching policy makers among its three stated goals (Wang and Burris 369–370). Its purpose is therefore not only to produce knowledge but to redistribute who is able to speak about place, so that those photographed no longer “stand as passive subjects of other people’s intentions and images” (371). Taken together, the three methods describe a gradual transfer of the camera, and of interpretive authority, from the researcher to the people whose environment is being described. What is striking is how each of these methods, originally developed within academic and professional research, has been thoroughly absorbed into the everyday practices of urban dwellers, who now produce, share, and discuss images in ways that mirror their underlying logic.

In my own observations of people and urban spaces, I have found that these three methodological orientations are now fully embodied by everyday city dwellers. While photographing Trafalgar Square one sunny day, I noticed that I was not the only one doing so; my own photographic practice was easily folded into the general behaviours of the public around me. All three orientations were evident in how individuals engaged with photography that day. The photo-documentation orientation appeared as tourists,

architects, photographers, and others carefully framed and captured their selected subjects with deliberate attention to composition and timing. Photo-elicitation emerged organically as these photographers shared their recent captures with companions, discussing reactions and interpretations, often using these images to spark conversations about the space and their experience within it. The collaborative orientation, akin to the photovoice tradition though more spontaneous in form, manifested in groups coordinating their photography—friends directing each other into poses against landmarks, strangers offering to take photos for others, and even impromptu collective documentation of unexpected events in the square. These observations, reveal how methodological habits once exclusive to academic and professional research have become thoroughly integrated into everyday practices, fundamentally changing how ordinary people experience, interpret, and engage with urban spaces.

This convergence of practice and dissemination scales upward into the production of collective memory. In *The City of Collective Memory*, M. Christine Boyer engages Maurice Halbwachs to argue that collective memory is “a current of continuous thought still moving in the present, still part of a group’s active life,” composed of memories that are “multiple and dispersed, spectacular and ephemeral, not recollected and written down in one unified story” (Boyer 66). Boyer’s framing is, in fact, partly cautionary: She warns that postmodern urbanism increasingly reduces collective memory to fragmentary, theatrical imagery. Urban photographic circulation sits ambivalently in relation to this critique, sustaining both the dispersed, multiple quality of memory she defends and the imagistic flattening she warns against. Urban images, when circulated and shared, become part of this living current, helping shape how a group remembers and imagines its environment. At the local level, community photographic archives, whether formal collections or informal accumulations on social media, establish visual narratives about place identity and change over time. When residents share images of street festivals, demolished landmarks, or weather events, they contribute to what Halbwachs called “collective frameworks of memory,” currents of thought and experience within which individual recollections are situated and recovered (Halbwachs 64). Through the practice of photography and the sharing of photographs, the urban dweller asserts themselves within urban society while simultaneously contributing to its formation.

The cumulative effect of these shared archives is the canonisation of certain urban viewpoints. The Manhattan skyline from Brooklyn, Paris from Montmartre, Shanghai from the Bund: each of these has become a standardised way of seeing that structures both photographic practice and spatial experience. As Urry and Larsen describe, the “collective tourist gaze involves conviviality”: Large numbers of people viewing a site are themselves part of what makes it worth visiting, and the presence of others doing the same becomes “obligatory for the collective consumption of place” (19). Tourists frequently reproduce familiar photographic compositions already encountered online, participating in what Urry and Larsen call a “hermeneutic circle,” in which “what is sought for in a holiday is a set of photographic images which have already been seen in brochures, TV programmes, blogs and social networking sites” (179). The act of photographing therefore no longer serves solely as personal documentation but as participation within a collective visual culture that shapes how urban space is perceived globally. Yet within these established frameworks, variations and reinterpretations

continue to emerge, reflecting changing social conditions, technological capabilities, and cultural attitudes.

The High Line in New York City offers a particularly revealing example of how photographic circulation can shape an urban environment. Opened in three phases between 2009 and 2014, the High Line transformed an abandoned freight railway into a 1.45-mile elevated public park along Manhattan's West Side. From the beginning, it was as much a media object as an urban one. As Nate Millington documents, the project's early development was driven in significant part by Joel Sternfeld's photographs of the pre-renovation site, whose romantic depictions of the abandoned railway's spontaneous vegetation were "essential to the project's early popularity and success" (Millington 2330). Once redeveloped, the park's visual identity, characterised by elevated walkways, curated vegetation, and framed perspectives of the surrounding cityscape, established a template that has been emulated in numerous cities. Yet the popularity of these circulating images has also influenced how the space itself is experienced. Visitors navigate the High Line through anticipated photographic moments, pausing at recognisable viewpoints already encountered through digital media. As Millington argues, the park has become a "global symbol of park design," its travels through tourist circuits and broader symbolic registers overshadowing its relationship to local green-space provision (2329). The space therefore functions simultaneously as urban infrastructure and as an image-producing environment, where physical and photographic experiences converge and reshape one another.

A useful counterpoint is offered by the Promenade Plantée in Paris (also known as the *Coulée verte René-Dumont*), a project that predates and arguably influenced the High Line by nearly two decades. As Joseph Heathcott observes, the conversion of disused urban rail lines into linear parks "has sparked the imagination of planners, designers, and citizens in many cities," and the High Line itself represents "the most complete adoption of this strategy to date" (280). Yet, despite these fundamental similarities, the photographic reception and circulation of these two projects differ greatly. The Promenade Plantée functions, in Heathcott's description, as "an amenity for adjacent residents, a destination for Parisians, a draw for tourists, and a laboratory for horticulturalists and students of landscape" (287). Photographs of the Promenade tend to emphasise this quieter and more multifunctional role and its integration into the existing urban fabric, rather than presenting the project as a spectacular architectural intervention. The difference may be partly attributed to timing: The Promenade Plantée developed across the 1980s and 1990s, before the rise of the social-media platforms that helped make the High Line a globally circulated visual object, while the High Line emerged at the moment when digital platforms were actively shaping urban imaginaries. The High Line's reception aligns closely with Urry and Larsen's concept of the "hermeneutic circle," in which actual experiences of a space are mediated by prior exposure to its photographic representations (179). The Promenade Plantée, lacking this curated visual mythology,⁷ invites a more varied and localised photographic engagement, its presence

⁷Heathcott himself notes that "the Promenade now appears in most major Paris guidebooks and on tourist-oriented web sites" and that "a Google search returns over 100,000 image hits and 25,000 video hits" (289). The distinction proposed here is therefore not between visibility and invisibility, but between the

geared toward the needs of its local population as much as the attraction of tourists. The contrast demonstrates how photography shapes not only individual memory but the very visibility, value, and developmental trajectory of urban space.

This uneven distribution of visibility extends well beyond the case of two parks. Certain neighbourhoods, cafés, markets, and streets gain visibility through repeated photographic dissemination, while others remain visually marginalised. Photography therefore participates in the uneven production of urban attention, organising the city not only through physical planning and economic development but through patterns of visibility generated by photographic circulation. As Boy and Uitermark observe in their study of Amsterdam and Copenhagen on Instagram, users “selectively represent their lifeworlds by showcasing images they feel are suited for circulation,” sharing images “as part of strategies of distinction: they picture themselves with friends, in nice outfits, in places that are special to them” (2). The cumulative effect of these individual curations, their data show, is socio-spatially uneven: “the presence of clusters in places around the city is uneven,” with whole neighbourhoods underrepresented in the visual record (9). The spaces that photograph well attract investment, visitors, and discourse, while those that do not remain, in a sense, less real to the wider city. At the same time, the very infrastructure that produces canonised viewpoints also enables alternative and more intimate forms of urban memory. Everyday photographic practices often document overlooked spaces, fleeting interactions, and ordinary routines that rarely enter official representations of the city. In photographing side streets, temporary gatherings, market stalls, or moments of stillness within otherwise accelerated urban environments, individuals construct intimate archives of lived experience that resist purely monumental understandings of urban identity. These counter-archives, though rarely as widely circulated as canonised images, accumulate within the same digital infrastructure and constitute an important parallel record of the city, one that runs alongside, and sometimes against, the dominant visual narratives produced by global photographic culture.

Photography and Contemporary Urban Design

The transformation of the modern urban dweller through photographic practices can be seen to have profound implications for the design and development of urban spaces. As cities increasingly function as both physical environments and media landscapes, designers and planners must reckon with how photographic practices shape spatial expectations, behaviours, and evaluations. If photography has now become an embodied, tactical, and socially distributed mode of inhabiting the city, then the design of urban environments cannot continue to treat photographic visibility as an after-effect of their construction. Photography increasingly enters the design process itself, shaping not only how spaces are represented after they are built but how they are conceived and produced in the first place.

The phenomenon of “Instagram-friendly” design represents perhaps the most visible manifestation of this influence. Across cities worldwide, I have observed the

iconicised, globally curated imagery that surrounds the High Line and the more dispersed and locally inflected photographic record of the Promenade Plantée.

proliferation of colourful murals, unusual architectural features, and distinctive lighting installations that seem calibrated for social media sharing. These elements are designed less to be inhabited than to be framed, less to support extended use than to generate the immediate, recognisable image. Lev Manovich, in his analysis of Instagram, describes contemporary culture as an “aesthetic society,” in which “the production and presentation of beautiful images, experiences, styles, and user interaction designs is central for its economic and social functioning” (117). Within such a society, the production of what Manovich calls *Instagramism*, the globally circulating set of aesthetic conventions that shape what counts as a worth-sharing image (73), extends well beyond the photograph and into the built environment that will be photographed. As Boy and Uitermark have shown in their study of Instagram and Amsterdam, certain neighbourhoods, sites, and aesthetics gain disproportionate visibility through this circulation, while others remain visually marginalised (9). Urban design increasingly operates under the awareness that some forms will photograph well and others will not, and the design choices that follow tend to amplify rather than complicate that asymmetry.

While such design strategies can create visually distinctive environments and attract visitors, they also raise critical questions about the prioritisation of photogeneity over other spatial qualities. The dominance of the visual in contemporary urban design risks coming at the expense of other sensory dimensions that contribute to rich, embodied spatial experience. A photograph cannot record how loud a space is or how hot it becomes in the afternoon, and decisions taken with the image in mind often work against precisely these qualities. Hard and reflective surfaces that read well in photographs tend to produce acoustically harsh environments; the open sightlines that allow a space to be captured in a single frame frequently come at the cost of shade and shelter; and planting chosen for the colour it lends an image may offer little in the way of scent, seasonal variation, or protection from the wind. Seamon’s account is pertinent here once again, since if the experience of place emerges through habitual bodily movement, encounter, and orientation (Seamon 17), then much of what makes a space work is a matter of routine and repetition rather than of appearance, and little of it is available to a single frame. None of this registers photographically, and so the qualities that most determine whether a space can be inhabited for any length of time are also those most easily discounted when success is judged by the circulation of images, as the comparison between the High Line and the Promenade Plantée has already suggested. Moreover, the emphasis on photogenic design can contribute to what Boyer, in a passage cited by David Harvey, calls a “recursive” and “serial” monotony, “producing from already known patterns or molds places almost identical in ambience from city to city: New York’s South Street Seaport, Boston’s Quincy Market, Baltimore’s Harbor Place” (Boyer, qtd. in Harvey 295). The proliferation of colourful staircases, neon signs, and geometric murals across Instagram-conscious cities exemplifies this tendency toward what might be called “distinctive sameness”—visual differentiation within increasingly standardised parameters of photogenic design. The pursuit of a distinctive image globally circulated produces, paradoxically, a homogenised urban environment whose very distinctiveness is what makes it indistinguishable from comparable spaces elsewhere.

The commercialisation of public space through photography-driven development raises additional concerns about accessibility and inclusivity. Sharon Zukin has described

the gradual reshaping of urban neighbourhoods through what she calls “domestication by cappuccino,” with “wilder places getting an aesthetic upgrading by the opening of a Starbucks or another new coffee bar” (4). Photogenic urbanism intensifies this dynamic. Spaces designed to attract a photographing public often implicitly cater to demographic groups with particular technological access, aesthetic preferences, and consumption patterns, while other groups are quietly priced out, photographed over, or simply rendered invisible to the dominant visual record. As Boy and Uitermark’s analysis of Instagram demonstrates, the social-media platforms that drive photogenic design also concentrate visibility on particular kinds of users in particular kinds of places (2). The prioritisation of spaces that photograph well may divert resources from less photogenic but socially necessary urban amenities. This is most apparent in the ordinary provisions that rarely appear in photographs. Public lavatories, shaded bus stops, step-free access, and the routine maintenance of neighbourhood parks are all costly, unglamorous, and largely unphotographed, yet they compete for the same budgets as the signature plaza or the landmark waterfront promenade. Millington’s account of the High Line, to which I have already referred, makes this asymmetry concrete. The park is the most expensive per acre in New York City and carries the highest proportion of staff per acre, funded through a combination of public money and multimillion-dollar private donations, in a pattern he reads as privileging particular green spaces “over the broader provisioning of green space to all residents” (Millington 2328). What it offers, on his account, is less a neighbourhood amenity than “a tourist destination that relies on one-time visits and framed views of the city” (2329). He records a resident at a community meeting in 2013 asking, on learning that fourteen million dollars earmarked for parks had been lost to budget cuts some years earlier, “and how much of it went to the High Line?” (2329). The flagship park attracts sponsorship, press coverage, and visitors precisely because it photographs well, whereas a playground three streets away, which serves the people who live beside it every day, offers the municipality nothing to show. The photographic image then circulates as the city’s preferred face, potentially exacerbating the spatial inequalities.

However, insights from photographic practices might also inform more responsive approaches to urban design that acknowledge the agency of the body in the imagination and formulation of spaces. The same photographic ubiquity that produces distinctive sameness also produces an unprecedented dataset of how people actually use cities. Patterns of where, when, and what residents and visitors choose to photograph reveal preferences, attentions, and engagements that could guide more human-centred design strategies, provided they are read as evidence of attention rather than as prescriptions for form. Photography did not always pull urbanism toward visual spectacle. As Whyte and Gehl have demonstrated through their early observational studies, close attention to how people actually use and document urban spaces can provide crucial information about desired qualities that might otherwise be overlooked in formal design processes (Gehl 209–11).⁸ Their precedent suggests that photographic

⁸Whyte’s Street Life Project mounted time-lapse cameras above sixteen New York plazas to record how they were used across the day, expressly in order to establish the basis of a new code (Whyte 15–16). The zoning amendments that followed in 1975 required plazas to be “amenable to the public as well” as accessible to it, specifying, among much else, a minimum of one linear foot of seating for every thirty square feet (Whyte 112).

data, treated as evidence rather than as a brief, can support exactly the human-centred urbanism that “Instagram-friendly” design otherwise undermines.

These two design imperatives are in productive tension. The first asks designers to take photographic practices seriously, both as evidence of how cities are used and as a contemporary spatial practice in its own right. The second warns that designing for the camera, naïvely, produces precisely the distinctive sameness diagnosed above. The way through is not to choose between them but to hold both at once: cities that work for the photographing body must also work for the body that puts the camera away. In practice, this means designing for the spectrum of bodily engagement that photographic practice itself involves—the steadying, the crouching, the pausing, the lingering, the framing, the lowering of the lens—rather than for the single moment of the captured image. It also means designing for the residents who will inhabit a space long after the visiting photographers have moved on to the next photogenic landmark. By recognising photography as fundamental to contemporary urban experience rather than incidental to it, designers and planners can begin to develop integrated approaches that acknowledge it as one dimension of the broader spatial, social, and sensory practices through which cities are produced. The challenge is not to design cities that photograph well, but to design cities whose photographic life amplifies rather than substitutes for their lived life.

Photography and Being in Space

Through this exploration of photography as urban spatial practice, I have presented how these historical methodologies, contemporary case studies, and emerging digital practices can illuminate the complex relationships between photographic acts, embodied experience, and the social production of urban space. The research question with which it began, how does the practice of photography as an embodied, social, and tactical act shape the way urban dwellers perceive, memorise, and produce urban space, and consequently what does this mean for the design of these contemporary cities, has been pursued across four interconnected dimensions.

The first section examined photography as an embodied urban practice that draws together perception, movement, and sensory awareness. Reading Pink, Simmel, and Seamon, alongside my own practice, I proposed that the camera is neither a withdrawal from the city nor a neutral instrument of recording, but a particular configuration of the body within urban space, one that intensifies attention to certain dimensions of the environment while folding the photographic act back into the real-time perception of place. The second turned to photography as a tactical spatial practice through which urban dwellers actively participate in the production of space. Through Lefebvre and de Certeau, I showed that the act of photographing operates across all three of Lefebvre’s spatial dimensions and exemplifies de Certeau’s notion of *la perruque*, repurposing the strategically organised city for ends the strategic order did not authorise. The third followed photography outward into time and into networks, treating it as a multiple, socially distributed practice through which urban experience is reviewed, shared, remembered, and circulated. Drawing on Barthes, Henkel, Pierce, Rose, Boyer, Halbwachs, Urry and Larsen, Millington, Heathcott, and Boy and Uitermark, I argued that photographic practices reshape both individual memory and collective urban

imaginaries, producing uneven geographies of visibility that organise which spaces become photographically real and which remain at the margins of the dominant visual record. The fourth examined photography as a force that increasingly enters the design process itself. With Manovich, Boyer-via-Harvey, Zukin, Pink, and again Boy and Uitermark as guides, I argued that photogenic urbanism produces a paradoxical distinctive sameness while also generating an unprecedented dataset of how cities are actually used; the design challenge that follows is to hold these two implications in productive tension rather than collapse one into the other.

Returning to the Deleuzian framework introduced at the outset, we can understand photography not as the static capture of pre-existing spaces but as a dynamic process of becoming-space—a reciprocal relationship through which both photographer and environment are transformed. Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of a body is unusually useful here, because it refuses to separate movement from feeling: “A body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude)” (260). Applied to photographic practice, this perspective highlights how the photographer’s body enters into particular configurations of movement and rest, speed and slowness, while engaging intensively with urban environments through the camera. Each photographic act is therefore both a longitude, a configuration of bodily positions and movements within space, and a latitude, a register of affects, attentions, and meanings produced through that configuration.

In closing, I return to the reimagined Cartesian proposition with which I began: “I photograph, therefore I am.” This formulation captures something essential about contemporary urban experience: the way in which photographic practices have become fundamental to how we establish presence, create meaning, and forge connections in urban environments. Photography has the capacity to go beyond seeing to acting upon urban space. Through the camera, we enter into particular assemblages with urban environments: configurations of bodies, technologies, and spaces that generate distinctive forms of embodied knowledge and experience. These photographic assemblages are neither purely subjective nor objectively given but emerge through the reciprocal relationship between photographer and environment, each continually transforming the other through their interaction. In this sense, photography represents not merely a way of seeing the city but a way of being in it: a spatial practice through which urban dwellers navigate, appropriate, contest, and create the environments they inhabit. To recognise photography as fundamental to contemporary urban experience rather than incidental to it is also to recognise that the question to designers is no longer how to make a city worth photographing, but how to make a city whose photographic life amplifies rather than replaces its lived life.



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