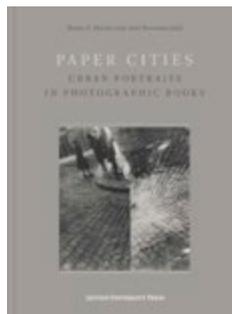

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The City Stares Back: Eleven Case Studies on Urban Photography



Susana S. Martins /
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(a cura di),
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Urban Portraits in
Photographic Books

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While the built environment has long been acknowledged as a defining issue of modern visual culture, book-length studies addressing the role of photography in the urban discourse and in the construal of specific city images are relatively scarce. With the exception of the pioneering work of the late Peter Bacon Hales – *Silver Cities. The Photography of American Urbanization*, originally published in 1984 – and of recent anthologies such as *Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture and the Modern City* (edited by Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray in 2012), scholarship has focused mainly on individual photographers – one thinks of Eugène Atget’s and Man Ray’s Paris, August Sander’s Cologne, or Ben Shahn’s New York – and on notions of architectural representation – as in the 2011 issue of the journal “Visual Resources” on the “Intersection of Photography and Architecture,” edited by Maria Antonella Pelizzari and Paolo Scrivano.

Despite their intrinsic value, most of these analyses circumvent larger problems that historically photographers have confronted in their attempt to investigate, understand, and portray the contemporary city as a whole, as distinct from its constituent parts – its people, buildings, streets, and events. The mere extension and complexity of the urban context has often led the photographer to seek a viable balance between the general and the particular, large scale and small scale, the known and the un(der)represented, relying on the series, the album, or the book to construct fictional accounts of the city based on the sequencing of individual urban ‘facts,’ often in conjunction with texts, maps, and other types of visual materials. To what extent have these photographic accounts ‘invented’ new urban images, eschewing the monumental and the stereotyped in order to come to terms with the anonymous fabric of the city? How have they reflected or reconfigured established notions of photographic ‘work’ and authorship? And how, if at all, have these new images influenced the political debate on the city, the ways in which the *civitas* is collectively experienced, negotiated, memorized, preserved, and transformed?

All these questions lie at the core of *Paper Cities: Urban Portraits in Photographic Books*, a collection of eleven essays edited by Susana S. Martins (Univesidade NOVA de Lisboa) and Anne Reverseau (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), partly resulting from a session they organized at the 12th International Conference on Urban History held in Lisbon in 2014. The book is also a by-product of the research project “Portraits of Countries and Cities: Literature and Photography” led by Anne Reverseau at KU Leuven (<<http://lmi.arts.kuleuven.be/>>).

Each of the book’s contributions addresses a specific case study, focusing mainly on the 20th century but covering such diverse cities as Istanbul, New York, Paris, Prague, Tokyo, Vienna, as well as the German and Italian contexts. Organized in three thematic sections – “Photo-Textualities, between Experience and Experiment,” “City Cartographies, from Document to Sentiment,” and

“History of the Printed Politics of Memory” – *Paper Cities* weaves together a multilayered inquiry that coalesces around the notion of “city portrait.” As the editors state in their introduction, the heuristic potential of this concept lies not only in its *double entendre* – portraits ‘in’ and ‘of’ the city – but, most important, in the conceptualization of the urban as a collective subject that defies the medium’s power of objectification. “The notion of portrait – they write – is here intensely bidirectional: it implies a dual commitment and, what is more, it allows for an agency of the portrayed that the concept of representation somehow fails to offer. Urban portraits provide, then, a dynamic window through which the city can actively stare back at the viewer” (p. 9).

From this perspective, urban photography is seen here less as a photographic genre or technique than as a social practice that takes on different material forms depending on its actual conditions of existence. Accordingly, while many of the essays of *Paper Cities* analyze the photographic book as a major vehicle of image formation and dissemination (Douglas Klahr on Nazi propaganda, Johanna M. Blokker on post-WWII German cities, Cecile Laly on Tokyo, Hugh Campbell on the iconography of the subway, Mónica Pacheco on Orhan Pamuk’s *The Innocence of Objects*), the anthology broadens its scope to scrutinize alternative types of texts, such as Charles Marville’s Parisian albums (Philip Goldswain), the Surrealist magazine “Variétés” (Steven Jacobs), artist’s projects like N.E. Thing Co.’s (alias Iain Baxter’s) *Portfolio of Piles*, 1968 (Simon Dell), and aerial views of the Italian landscape circulated through books, magazines, and films (Annarita Teodosio).

Many chapters strive to provide a long-term perspective on the development of city portraits, yet the most accurate and effective are those that hone in on specific chronological and cultural contexts. Despite its generic title, for example, Steven Humblet’s *The Rhythms of the Street: The Photobook as Walkscape* provides a close comparative reading of two books on New York, *Both Sides of Broadway* (1910) and *Fifth Avenue, New York, from Start to Finish* (1911). Taking cue from Francesco Careri’s notion of “walkscape” and developing a phenomenological analysis of all the elements that comprise the viewer’s experience of the photographic object – size, orientation, sequencing, captions, etc. – Humblet argues persuasively that these books, in spite of their apparent inventorial and commercial character, were meant to stage (rather than merely record) the dialectics of unity and fragmentation, stability and mobility, spectatorship and inquiry, that informed the perceptual framework of the early-20th century urban dweller.

Another penetrating essay is Chris Balaschak’s *The Slavic Court. Lewis Hine and Informal Urbanism in Homestead*, focusing on Hine’s collaboration with Margaret Byington on the sixth volume of the Pittsburgh Survey (the first extensive sociological study of an American industrial city) sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1908-1910. Similarly to Humblet, Balaschak grounds his discussion in a perceptive visual analysis, showing how carefully Hine balanced portraiture, architectural, and landscape photography to articulate “the ways in which community identity was tied to spatial politics” (p. 94). Adding to previous studies by Maren Stange, Alan Trachtenberg, Allan Sekula, and Kate Sampsell-Willmann, however, Balaschak also develops a multidisciplinary interpretation of Hine’s ‘social’ photographs, reconstructing (when necessary) their implicit documentary value and deconstructing their interrelations with the other elements of the book, including Byington’s sociological narrative, maps, and four pastel drawings by Joseph Stella. To do so, the essay draws equally on the history of the medium (offering insightful comparisons with the work of Jacob A. Riis and August Sander), city planning (Hine’s critique of the City Beautiful movement), and theories of place (as with the notion of “informal urbanism”).

Although references at the end of each chapter are kept to a minimum and no comprehensive bibliography has been compiled, *Paper Cities* stands out as a useful and stimulating collection of essays that confront core issues of urban photography from a variety of methodological perspectives – a timely contribution that will certainly spur further scholarship in the years to come.