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A PHOTOGRAPHER'S PERSPECTIVE; AN EXPLORATION OF COASTAL URBAN SITES

Debra Livingston

Since the early 20th century photographers pursued the documentary forum as the medium to help generate awareness about our world and as a method to generate social change (Keim & Bougrel 1965; 61). Considered one of the greatest photographers in the western world, 19th century traditionalist photographer, Cartier-Bresson was deeply influenced by the contemporary movement known as surrealism, a movement that encouraged artists and writers to explore the depths and reveal the meanings hidden below the surface of everyday life (in Panzer 1999-2000). The surrealists changed the way we see the content of photographs and transformed photography to expose a new way of seeing revealing the invisible in everyday objects and settings to portray great beauty or tragedy or humour. As such, photography helps support social theory by documenting a visual representation of urban cultures and places that can be placed into historical contexts. Jay (1988; 3) advocated that:

'it is increasingly difficult to gauge the extent to which way images are made, distributed, experienced and understood influences the social world...[and]...what we can reasonably suggest is that visual technologies photographs, film, video, television, digital images and so on increasingly form part of many individuals' everyday experience' (in Feighey 2003; 76).

Located within this context, the content of the pictures become a framed experience for the audience, even though they are subjective responses to the environment, and created by the photographer. The negotiation between the camera and the subject transform easily to become a narrative presenting a broader and a more enlightened view of our urban coastal places. Such images are instant moments that are caught in what Wollen (in Wells 2003; 76) suggested as the ever 'receding then' and at the same time the 'spectator's now'. The moment we look at the image its duration is not fixed, we can peruse the photograph and study the details captured in the image for as long as desired and revisit the scene time and time again, anywhere, because of the medium's portability.

Now, more than any other time images are often viewed by the audience as a digital presentation, mostly on a computer or a web page on the internet, and as such are governed by filmic time-based methods. Digital presentations are also ruled by a predetermined time, programmed and set by the presenter. Although viewing images on a web page is determined by the viewer, reproducing the work as moving images such as presentations displayed on the computer, can give images a system through sequencing. This can establish a semantic interrelationship of elements structured via a number of photographs that uses a process of montage and editing.

These methods of structuring the elements determine the duration of each image for display on screen. Time-based media such as film are successful tools to create effective narratives. Photographs too, can be seen as narratives by sequencing with other photographs and describing scenes or elements to convey a broader story or to describe a place more fully. Various photographic practices such as photojournalism, photo-documentary and art photography use different styles of narratives to deliver the message, and are perceived as signifying elements recognised by the audience. Art photographs and most documentary photographs normally signify re-presented elements associated with individual processes and methods for building the story.

Images that focus upon the socio-cultural environment can stimulate lively debate about authenticity and the importance photography has on shaping our attitudes as well as influencing our way of seeing. Photographers carefully frame the image that pre-empt the interpretation, and know how to freeze time and motion to capture a particular event. They also instil in the photograph a subjective and a personalised view. Shirato & Webb (2004; 46) suggested that this personalised view displaces the actual meaning and form of the place being photographed and that we are shown the world in an unfamiliar way, 'and from unexpected angles'.

Photographs taken with unusual angles can disturb the viewer because, we become aware about our lived environment and its spatial dimensions; such 'photos trouble us because they show us the world in a way that we don't (think we) actually see it' (Shirato & Webb 2004; 46). Benjamin (in Wells, 2003; 13) argued that photography draws attention to the 'optical unconscious' and that we find it difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is simulated and we take into account the world as re-presented to us (Wells, 2003; 13). 'Socially constructed 'views', interpretations or scopical regimes' which render the world in visual terms provoke many questions about 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see' (Foster, 1988; ix, in Mensvoort; 2003).

Glossy photographs with their high key colour such as those used for advertising can seem more real than reality; we recognize them as the world we know, yet they are more perfect, more ordered, and more coherent than the real world (Edwards 2006; 102).

In contrast to commercial photography urban photography is imbued with similarities to the everyday snapshot such as those taken by the tourist, to family albums and to amateur photographs whose images document life. These contribute important information for anthropologists in their quest to understand the social and cultural world. The public help facilitate understanding of social conditions by capturing what has been before via the snapshot.

Through photographic images we can look at the past and record the measurement of change. Photographs are an excellent way to collect evidence about the processes of decay and renewal as the camera captures the momentum of life very quickly. Keim & Bougrel (1965; 57-61) spoke of photography as succeeding 'in reproducing the unseen reality with more facility than the visible reality' as the camera is able to take pictures where the human eye cannot reach. The camera through the lens takes the 'world outside and the photograph inside'. For example the online 'Urban Reinventors' (2005) involved practitioners of urban sciences, architects, reporters,

writers and directors as well as members of civic associations to document active elements that inhabit the contemporary city in order to analyse the culture of social urban life (<http://wp.urbanreinventors.net/>). The photographer brings their experience of the contemporary city to the Urban Reinventor's project and delivers to the audience the various scenes and views about other places inside their home or office. Although the armchair viewer can only experience the visual aspects of an image, the photographer experiences the places photographed through all the senses.

By engaging with the senses and experiencing the atmosphere of places the photographer can create a narrative of images that uses varying subjective views and perspectives. For instance views of industry, community life and nature sites from a local point of view taken over a period of time can show the transformation of the landscape. Varied perspectives of the social and cultural landscape are made possible with the camera's capability to frame the present and inscribe the past by unfolding for the viewer the changes to these places. Wollen (in Wells, 2003; 76) observed that 'photographs appear as devices for stopping time and preserving fragments of the past, like flies in amber'.

The camera records the place and the physical manifestations of life are made visible, revealing the underlying social and cultural forces that designate the form and meaning of the places photographed. This selection of images offers an aesthetic link between the re-representation of urban spaces and an identity of place. They are presented as a window for the audience to experience a tiny fragment, and represent an association between place, space and identity. Freud (in Burgina 1996: 151) remarked that this association is where space is a projection and an extension of the 'physical apparatus'. He suggests that the apparatus is the camera revealing the things about places that are not so visible in everyday life because it has the technical capability to capture information through facilities such as freezing an object in motion and extending our range of vision by showing us things or events that are otherwise normally unseen.

In this realm the coastal landscape reveals its physicality and inner self through the process of picture taking. The camera is able to stop time and present a fragment of life such as this example of a full moon above stacked shopping trolleys (see Figure 1 – next page).

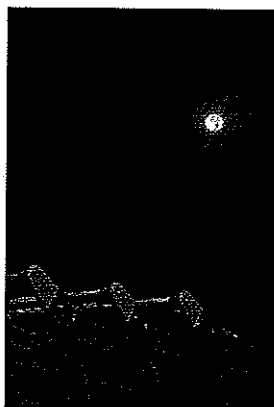


Figure 1: 'Full Moon and Shopping Trolleys', Maroochydore 2007, Livingston

Photographed on the night of the Equinox reveals a strange light in the photograph that was not visible to the naked eye. The shopping trolleys are a signifier for the way we live and were stacked on the footpath, taken by the author in Dupont Avenue, Maroochydore.

Framed via the camera's viewfinder the photographer captures a slice of an event that occurred at that time and that place. The photographer brings into existence the materiality and the atmosphere by showing the diversity in places, such as photographing urbanity at various times. The photographs contribute to shape issues of identity by documenting selective aspects or what the photographer deems important about the spaces being photographed. They convey unique structures and edifices and imbue subjective perspectives of the urban coastal region that are framed in unorthodox ways.

My photographs are intended to confront the viewer about the continually changing face of our local environment. In general, the author's re-presentation of place puts this region into context for the viewer via documenting the social conditions such as the rise of tourism, urbanism and industry, thus the degradation and changes caused by human encroachment on the coast's natural areas is displayed. In order to show these conditions I adopted the role as a mediator between the viewer and the environment by employing methodologies that involve the use of visual complexities and comparisons such as photographs of natural sites juxtaposed against photographs of industrial and urban sites. These include photographs of areas prior to being built contrasted with photographs of the built environment exemplifying our human progress and its changes to the landscape. Photographic images of the urban environment can demonstrate how extensive our manipulation is of the coastal environment via themes such as sea-life that are compared against themes of urban living. Micro views alongside macro views also help illustrate this, as well as display the various typologies of the coastal landscape via exploring a variety of observations taken from different perspectives. These include street-level, rooftops, inside

buildings, dwellings, cliff tops and ground level, comprising of visual texture and aesthetic observations; all contribute to signifying the changes to the landscape.

Various transformations of urban spaces is demonstrated by the photography of Vergara's (2007) themes on life, where he presents the viewer with images of old and renewed buildings to tell stories of their fall, decline and renewal. He captures the decaying side of post-industrial cities and has over many years positioned the camera at different levels and angles to form a dense web of information about those places. The power of his photographs, suggests Beauregard (2007; 1) 'lies in their ability to evoke deep-rooted emotions as well as to tap into stories that we tell of ourselves, and about others'. It is for the audience to imagine and to engage in the narrative about these places; it is the act of storytelling through pictures. His method of photographing over long periods of time enables him to capture the process of change in his local environment. We seem to acclimatize to the changes that are taking place around us and often do not realise what has happened until we pass by and notice something unfamiliar, or new appear in our street. Is this because we constantly view images through a 'gauze-like screen' facilitated by the media presenting a vibrant and healthy perspective and depicting a romanticized life, when in essence, it is not always idyllic? (Vargara; 2005). Vargara (2005) commented that his works are '...of a single future with nothing leading to them and nothing coming after...[and]...we see the sun-drenched marina from the balcony of our condominium, wine glass in hand, partner by our side, but history begins and stops there' (<http://invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html>).

Photographs reproduce a mirror image of elements in the world and present reality that coexisted at a certain moment, but it is also possible to image in a photograph elements, which at that particular instant, did not coexist in nature. For example the recreation of a past scene or the composition of a completely new event does not relate to any reality, past or present, other than a staged event. Wells (2003: 397) informed that photographs produce memories that provoke an 'inter-textual discourse that shifts between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts'. For example Siber's (2004) photographic work is inspired by the proliferation of very tall signs of the American Mid-West, by drawing attention to their advertising perched atop very tall poles, or buildings as beacons emitting messages that loom over us in their glowing plastic perfection. Although his works are re-created scenes manipulated by computer artistry they still retain traces of reality in the form of the original photographs therefore shifting the original meaning to signal that the place could be somewhere else. Slemmons (2003) advocated that Siber's photographic manipulation '... reminds us of the pervasive image/text stream that we swim through every day' (<http://www.siberart.com/>). Influenced by Siber's work, in the example below (see Figure 2), I placed a Domino's Pizza sign to float above Point Cartwright's skyline to portray the threat of increasing commercialisation on coastal spaces.

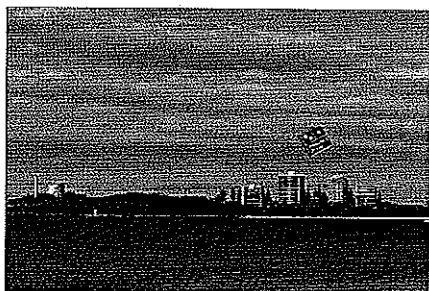


Figure 2: 'Domino's Pizza Sign over Point Cartwright' 2007, Livingston

Digital manipulation allows the artist to create a strong message about the encroachment of commercialisation.

Demonstrated in Figure 3 is a different point of view of increasing commercialisation and Figure 4 concentrates on a small area of Maroochydore to reveal not only urban development but a broader sense of its cultural space that emits an indicative feeling of place, and asks the viewer to engage in this space by looking, seeing and recognising elements that may be familiar. The everyday signs (and text) displayed in Figure 3 signify information about our modernity and about our culture, and builds a story via a selection of photographs positioned closely together to describe a small slice of the place photographed.



Figure 3: Slices of Maroochydore, Duponh Street, Livingston 2005



Figure 4: Slices of Maroochydore, Livingston 2007

We determine the meaning of the photograph by how we read the elements in the picture. We use Semiotic methodologies as a way to understand the contents of photographs, and we disseminate their meaning through reading the signs presented to us. Eco (1886) suggested that these signs are a combination of complex articulations that are governed mainly by technical codes such as optics and perception, along with the broader cultural codes of recognition, representation and iconography, aesthetic and stylistic, and rhetorical conventions (in Wells, 2003; 111).

The visual literacy of photographs is also about determining how these complex codes are formed, for example how the image is constructed by using the various technologies such as the framing, the selecting, the editing, and the decoding that communicates the place the photograph was taken, and in what social context. The complexity of seeing, Mitchell (1994: 16) proposes, is in drawing distinctions between reading, decipherment, decoding, interpretation, and just looking. Shirato & Webb (2004: 58) further explained that we all have the ability to physiologically look, but our ability to read or see or interpret is contingent with 'what we see is not what we get—rather our eyes have been socialized to see, and our minds to interpret'.

Due to technological advancements the human experience is now more visual and visualized than any other time. As our predecessors did, we look at visual objects and phenomena in our world to make sense of them (Mirzoeff 1999: 1). Renowned philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger were sceptical about the extent to which we rely on visual skills or ideas about seeing in Western thought; Jay (1993: 268) established that aural perception was more reliable than the visual (in Shirato & Webb 2004: 63). Yet contrary to Mirzoeff, Jay (1993, 1995) suggested that:

'we are no longer as visually complex as people in earlier periods... [and argued] ...that we are living in a deeply non-visual period, not because there are now fewer visual texts or because the texts are simpler in design, but because we make sense of the world by using non-visual analytic devices' (in Shirato & Webb 2004: 62).

Not only do we use visual interpretation but we also use all of our senses to make sense of the scene in front of us. McQuire (1998: 52) argued that, 'despite the proliferation of digital cameras, what has emerged from the Diaspora is less a complete picture of the world than a mobile army of representations'. He explained that this proliferation diminishes any real structure that gives concrete form to narratives about our world, that the single image is unable to capture the subject completely. Documentary photography and film is imbued with these social slices. As

photography is able to capture fragments not the total scene and it is up to the photographer to image a broader view for the audience. The camera's elasticity and framing capability allows the photographer to tell stories about looking, about seeing a signified world, and about how our lives appear as a static moment reflected back to us as a mirror; embedded as a memory. McQuire (1998) explained that the

'... photographic dissection of the real has often promised to unlock the hidden secrets of existence, because the photographic image appears to offer a natural language rather than a signifier, photographic signs have often been (mis)taken for the wonders of nature itself' (Mc Quire 1998: 53).

Photographs of our surroundings can be a retrospective benchmark for reality and reconstruct the vicissitudes of urban life according to the nature of changes in the environment. The photographic narrative presented in figures 5,6,7 & 8 point towards the constant coastal loss and renewal through urban development where industrial cranes dotting the coastal skyline is not an unusual site.



Figure 5: 'Urban Development Series #1', Chancellor Park, 2005. Livingston



Figure 6: 'Urban Development Series #2', Maroochydore, 2005. Livingston



Figure 7: 'Urban Development Series #3', Maroochydore, 2006. Livingston

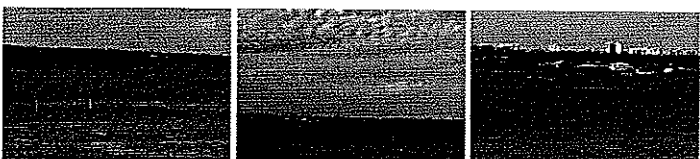


Figure 8: Urban Development Series #3' Kawana, 2007. Livingston

These photographs were taken over a period of time of coastal places and generate the feeling that urban development is constant and relentless.

Unlike Vagara's (2005) concerns about the disinvestment and physical decay that triggers the need for reinvestment in a place, within the Sunshine Coast environment buildings and communities are rapidly appearing on what was once pristine landscape. The urban Sunshine Coast is a relatively new environment now dominating over the few established village type settlements from an earlier influx of European migrants who bought with them a preference for their homeland landscape, such as these Buderim landscaped gardens (see figure 9).



Figure 9: Gardens in Urban Buderim, 2007. Livingston.

Buderim residents favour European styles as their preferred garden plants as described in the left example shows a relatively new garden and the image on the right, an established garden.

In the new urban environment plants are carefully placed amongst the buildings to project a pleasing visual statement of humankind's ability to manipulate nature and the environment in which they live. The coast has now many satellite sprawls whose spaces cater for a variety of commercial life of lively streets bordered by cafes, of housing whose residents can gaze out on a landscape of sailboats nestled in marinas, cafes and modern buildings, and of couples and families strolling along beaches and boardwalks.

The selection of images submitted for this UHPHO8 Conference takes into consideration the value of context, and the recording of actual events about coastal life that was carefully selected to border between, art and documentary, created to pose questions about the real and the artificial. These images signify a deeper concern for our skyline, our natural reserves, and for the residents who live and work on the coast.

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