

# Special issue: Urban sights: visual culture and urban history

## Introduction

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The fields of urban history and visual culture both thrive on expansive horizons. Streets and rivers, neighbourhoods and stadia, festivals and parks populate the work of urban historians, who examine these and other subjects from local, metropolitan, regional, national and transnational perspectives. Viewing these urban themes with and through visual culture increases the potential areas of analysis exponentially. Not only do photography, film, television and advertising produce countless images of urban spaces, visual culture encourages scholars to take seriously the ways of seeing and practices of looking that shape how people understand and engage with the metropolis. Visual technologies, both old and new, make places meaningful in ways that have broad cultural, political and economic consequences. As digital tools continue to make more urban spaces visible to more people, scholars have a crucial role to play in researching, organizing, contextualizing and analysing these myriad urban sights.

Using the Scalar online authoring platform, this online only special issue argues that visual forms and ways of seeing are crucial to understanding urban history. Drawing on photography, painting, film, television and other visual and textual evidence, these essays explore how diverse visual forms not only shape metropolitan spaces, experiences and identities, but also shape the ways in which people imagine, remember and forget such spaces and events. Focusing on post-war urban history, this issue attends to questions of community, race, class, gender, sexuality, modernity and memory. These questions, familiar to urban historians, can be seen from new angles by foregrounding the visual elements of urban political, economic, social and cultural life. By presenting this special issue through Scalar, we hope to offer both new research on urban visual history and also new models for the visual and textual presentation of such research. In contrast to a traditional print issue, Scalar affords the opportunity to present a large number of images, including colour images; present

selected clips from films and television that are analysed in the essays; and create visualizations to present evidence in more dynamic ways.

The authors of this special issue are trained in History, American Studies, Architecture, Art History and Communications, and this special issue builds on the work of scholars who have examined urban history and visual culture from multidisciplinary perspectives. The work of Cécile Whiting, Joshua Shannon and Rebecca Zurier offer important insights on art and the city, while Dana Cuff, Margaret Farrar, Christopher Klemek and Samuel Zipp have outlined the importance of images in urban renewal. Media Studies scholars Anna McCarthy, Lynn Spigel Marita Sturken and Pamela Wojcik have offered important analyses of the spatial relationships in film and television, while the work of Aniko Bodroghkozy, Herman Gray, Melanie McAlister, Vinzenz Hediger, Patrick Vonderau and Sasha Torres traces the importance of visual media in building, mobilizing, contesting and controlling cities and nations. Taken together, this special issue examines the inseparable relationship between what Carlo Rotella describes as 'the city of feeling (constructed in words and images) and the city of fact (made of steel and stone, inhabited by flesh-and-blood people)'.

In the first essay, Laura Grantmyre examines competing visions of urban renewal in Pittsburgh's Lower Hill District in the 1950s and 1960s. While the city's redevelopment agency circulated images focused on the neighbourhood's built environment, presenting it as desolate and in disrepair, Charles 'Teenie' Harris, a photojournalist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the city's African American newspaper, portrayed the neighbourhood as a vibrant community. Grantmyre's study of visions of urban renewal in Pittsburgh's Lower Hill District shows that over 1,800 Lower Hill District families, mostly African American, were uprooted as part of a redevelopment project. For these residents, and thousands of others forcibly displaced by urban renewal, photographs highlight urban erasures and the traumatic tearing apart of communities through urban renewal, which Mindy Fullilove describes as 'root shock'. Grantmyre reminds us that these 'ghost neighbourhoods', as Phil Ethington calls them in the context of Los Angeles, remain part of the visual history and memory of cities. In this context, the photographs of the Lower Hill District taken by Teenie Harris offer an especially important visual archive of a thriving neighbourhood.

Mona Damluji, like Grantmyre, explores the use of visual culture to define urban 'progress' and 'modernity'. Damluji examines how the British-controlled Iraq Petroleum Company's (IPC) documentary films and public relations materials in the 1950s presented Baghdad as a city made modern through oil industry revenue. The IPC screened the films across Iraq and Damluji argues that these films and their cinematic representations of Iraq's capital 'worked to legitimate political acts of foreign exploitation and control of Iraqi oil, land and labour'. Similar to how Grantmyre shows the Pittsburgh Housing Authority

seeking and receiving support from the African American community for redevelopment efforts, Damluji analyses how an Arabic-language IPC documentary, *Assimatun Ajmel (A More Beautiful Capital)*, shined a favourable light on the destruction of older Baghdad neighbourhoods to make way for a 'capital fit for a modern country'. Gyan Prakash has written that 'urban dwellers experience their globally situated and connected urban space as decidedly local lifeworlds, thick with specific experiences, practices, imaginations and memories'. In Pittsburgh and Baghdad, Grantmyre and Damluji detail how quickly and irrevocably these urban spaces can be destroyed or remade, and how images and films are central to this process.

Bridget Gilman examines representations of everyday cityscapes from another angle in her analysis of Robert Bechtle's Photorealist paintings of San Francisco. Gilman highlights how Bechtle's work avoids the city's natural and architectural icons, or recognizable panoramas from atop one of the city's many hills, in favour of the 'native vision' of residential streets with large quantities of pavement. Bechtle returned to the same source images frequently and Gilman uses overlay visualizations to show how Bechtle transformed a 'single photograph through variations in medium, colour palette, tonal range and cropping'. Bechtle's carefully created photograph-based paintings like *Twentieth and Arkansas* and *Twentieth Street VW* speak to a dedication to ordinary scenes and objects and, viewed in the 2010s, defamiliarize the street level photographs that Google Maps Street View has made ubiquitous.

Gilman's essay emphasizes questions of urban vision – Who can see what? From which locations? With what implications? – that figure prominently in Carrie Rentschler's analysis of film and video reproductions of the Kitty Genovese case. In 1964, Genovese was raped and murdered in the Kew Gardens neighbourhood in Queens, New York. The violent murder and widely reported failure of neighbours to help Genovese made the case a symbol of urban danger and public apathy. The Genovese case remains one of the most famous examples used in social science and popular texts to describe how built environment shapes human behaviour, with the failure of witnesses to call the police serving as a condemnation of apartment living and of some urban spaces as failed neighbourhoods. Rentschler examines how filmic re-enactments and retellings of the Genovese murder, over the past 50 years, raise questions about what it means to be a witness in a vertical city of apartment buildings and trace the architectural and perceptual limits of urban vision. Like Damluji, Rentschler uses Scalar to present and analyse a small archive of films that are not readily available to scholars.

Matt Delmont looks at the flurry of television news coverage garnered by Florida Governor Claude Kirk and Pontiac housewife activist Irene McCabe in the battle over busing for school desegregation in the 1970s. Fearing the image of 'failed neighbourhoods' analysed in Rentschler's

essay, anti-busing politicians and parents mobilized around the concept of 'neighbourhood schools' as sites that needed to be defended from the threat of racial integration. These efforts to protect decades of federally supported racial privilege disavowed explicit appeals to anti-black racism in favour of colour-blind rhetoric to justify segregated neighbourhoods and schools. News coverage brought anti-busing protests in places like Manatee County, Florida, and Pontiac, Michigan, to millions of television viewers across the nation without the historical or legal context for the busing orders.

By developing this special issue in *Scalar*, we have combined our traditional academic analysis with a wide range of images, photographs, videos, maps and visualizations. Like the *Hypercities* platform for the layered historical mapping of cities, the *Curatescape Omeka* application for public history storytelling, the *Photogrammar* archive and visualization platform for United States Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information photographs, and many other digital humanities platforms, tools and projects, we have used digital technology to expand and extend our historical analysis of and to bring this sustained engagement with the past to a wide audience through an open access online format. It is our hope that readers will find this special issue to be generative for thinking about urban history, visual culture and their presentation online.

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This *Scalar* special issue can be viewed at: <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/urban-sights-visual-culture-and-urban-history/index>