



PHOTOGRAPHY AS A DOCUMENT OF TIME: VISUAL NARRATIVES IN URBANISM AND SOCIAL MEMORY

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Abstract

This article analyzes photography as a tool for documenting time and shaping visual narratives in urban studies and social memory. It examines the dual nature of photography: as a means of capturing reality and as a mechanism for interpreting it. Particular attention is paid to the role of photographic images in constructing collective identity, preserving urban memory, and visualizing social transformations. The work draws on contemporary research in visual culture, urban studies, and the sociology of memory.

Keywords: Photography, document of time, visual narratives, urban studies, social memory, visual culture, urban environment, archive, identity, cultural heritage.

Introduction

The scientific novelty of the article lies in the study of photography as a document of time, showing how visual narratives in the urban environment shape collective memory and cultural identity.

Throughout its history, photography has served not only as an artistic or informational tool but also as a key medium for capturing historical processes, social dynamics, and spatial transformations in cities. In the context of urban studies, it is an integral part of the visual documentation of the urban environment, capturing both material changes (architecture, infrastructure, landscape) and immaterial ones (social practices, everyday life, cultural codes). Thus, photography forms a unique "visual archive of time", essential for understanding the past, analyzing the present, and designing the future of the city.



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Sontag noted, photography is a “means of world appropriation” that transforms fleeting moments into lasting visual representations, shaping a specific way of perceiving reality [1]. Allan Sekula emphasized that a photographic document is both evidence and interpretation, carrying not only factual content, but also a semantic framework established by the author and the context [2].

In urban studies, photography is used to document spatial change and urban memory. It allows for the analysis of environmental dynamics, from planned reconstructions to spontaneous processes associated with migration and social upheaval, and actively contributes to the formation of collective understandings of the city as a symbolic space [3].

Photography plays a fundamental role in social memory processes. According to Pierre Nora, collective memory is built on visual representations, so-called sites of memory [4]. Photographic images become anchors of collective identity, allowing society to preserve and reproduce significant landscapes and events.

The modern stage (digital archives, mobile photography) has strengthened this role: the process of documentation has become widespread and accessible, which has led to an increase in the diversity of visual narratives and an expansion of sources for the formation of social memory [5].

Ultimately, photography in the urban context is not simply a technical record, but a cultural mediator between the past, present, and future. The aim of this study is to analyze the role of photography as a document of time in the formation of visual narratives that influence the processes of preserving and constructing social memory in the urban environment.

Since its inception in the 19th century, photography has established itself as a vital tool for capturing historical reality. Its documentary function stems from its technological peculiarity: light-sensitive material allows for the capture of a specific moment, which traditionally accords the photograph the status of "objective" witness or evidence, in contrast to painting [1]. Although this status is constantly being reconsidered, photography remains a key element of historical memory.

Photography serves a multifaceted function, from recording events to shaping collective identity. According to Susan Sontag, photography "stops time", giving fleeting moments stability in historical memory [1]. Allan Sekula pointed out that



photography is not neutral; its meaning is always embedded in social and institutional contexts [2]. In urban studies, documentary photography captures not only architectural objects but also everyday life, infrastructural changes, social movements, and crises. As Elizabeth Edwards notes, photographs form a special visual archive, where the reconstruction of history occurs through images, not just texts [3].

Thus, photography is a valuable source for historians, sociologists, and cultural scientists, and its key functions as a document of time in the urban environment can be analyzed in detail:

Table 1 – Key functions of photography

The function of photography	Content	Examples
Recording architectural changes	Photos reflecting the dynamics of development, reconstruction and disappearance of objects	Comparison of historical and modern street photos
Archiving Everyday Life	Documenting everyday life, cultural practices and the urban atmosphere	Family photos, street photography
Visual evidence of events	Recording protests, disasters, holidays, social movements	Reportage photographs, media archives
Formation of social memory	Photographs as part of collective identity and historical narrative	Photo archives of districts, city exhibitions
Historical and critical understanding	Using photographs in scientific and museum research to analyze the past and visual narratives	Archival collections, visual urban studies

Thus, photography, as a document of time, is not simply an image but a multi-layered source of historical information, capable of capturing both tangible and intangible aspects of urban life. Its power lies in its ability to "bear witness" to the past through visual imagery, as well as in its ability to form the foundations of social memory and identity. Furthermore, unlike textual sources, photography has an emotional impact on perception, enhancing its role in cementing historical events in the collective consciousness [4].

In the context of urban studies, photography goes beyond simple documentation and fulfills a narrative function: photographs not only capture reality but also form



stories-visual narratives-that influence public perception and understanding of urban space. Narrative here is not only the subject of the frame but also the context of perception, the way the image communicates with the viewer, creating ideas of place and time [6].

Ariella Azoulay emphasizes that photography is an act of civic communication that establishes relationships between author, object, and viewer [6]. In the urban environment, these visual narratives are important because they determine which images of the city become "official" and positive (e.g., representations of historic centers), and which are marginalized or "invisible" (e.g., peripheral or industrial areas) [7].

John Berger noted that the interpretation of images depends not only on their content but also on the social and cultural context of viewing. The same frame can have different meanings depending on the historical moment or the audience's perspective [8]. Consequently, visual narratives act as a powerful tool for constructing urban identity. In urban practice, several types of visual narratives can be distinguished, each fulfilling its own social function:

Table 2 - Typology of visual narratives in the urban environment

Type of visual narrative	Description	Examples	Functions
Archival	Historical photographs documenting changes in the urban environment	Photographs of streets from the 19th–20th centuries, state and municipal archives	Preservation of historical memory
Media	Reportage and news photography	Photos in the media, online platforms, visual chronicles	Formation of the public image of the city
Art	Author's photo studies of the urban environment	Photo projects, exhibitions, albums	Critical understanding of space
Civil	Photos taken by residents and local communities	Street photography, photoblogs, social media	Democratization of visual memory
Political	Visual narratives related to protests and urban activism	Photos of demonstrations, street art, and space occupations	Visual resistance and the development of alternative narratives



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This diversity of visual narratives creates a multilayered perception of the city. On the one hand, official and media images create fixed notions of the "ideal" city (tourist postcards, promotional campaigns, state archives). On the other hand, civic and artistic narratives open up alternative perspectives, revealing marginalized spaces, social conflicts, and everyday life.

Contemporary digital technologies amplify this diversity: social media, mobile photography, and geotagging make the process of documentation accessible to everyone. The result is a polyphony of visual narratives, in which the city appears as a dynamic, ambiguous, and polyphonic space [5].

Photography plays a key role in the formation and maintenance of social memory, acting as a mediator between individual experiences and the collective perception of the past. Thanks to its ability to capture not only the facts but also the emotional dimension of an event or place, it becomes a lasting element of collective identity and cultural heritage.

Pierre Nora introduced the concept of "place of memory" (lieux de Mémoire) - material and symbolic objects that concentrate collective memory [4]. Photography, combining the functions of a document and an image, fits perfectly into this category: it connects the past with the present through visual recollection. Marianne Hirsch describes the phenomenon of postmemory, where photographic images serve as a tool for transmitting experience from generation to generation. Images create emotional and cultural connections to the past, even if a person was not directly involved in the events [9]. Thus, photographs serve not simply as evidence but also as a mechanism for reproducing collective memory.

In the urban environment, photography anchors spatial markers of memory: architectural objects, streets, and the sites of significant events. These visual reference points are used in museum exhibitions, educational programs, and urban planning projects, where they actively reinforce cultural continuity and serve as the basis for narratives of the city's identity and history [10].



Table 3 - Functions of photography in the structure of social memory

Form of memory	The role of photography	Examples
Individual memory	Preservation of personal memories, events, emotional states	Family albums, photos of holidays and everyday life
Collective memory	Consolidation of socially significant events, places, and identities	Photos of demonstrations, military events, holidays, and urban rituals
Spatial memory	Linking images to specific places and architectural objects	Archival photographs of streets, buildings, and city squares
Cultural memory	Representation of traditions, symbols, rituals	Photographic documentation of festivals, street celebrations, and iconic sites
Postmemory	The transmission of traumatic or significant experiences between generations	Images of wars, disasters, and lost spaces
Commemorative (memorable) practice	Using photographs for memorial and educational projects	Memorial exhibitions, city archives, street exhibitions

It's important to emphasize that photography is not a passive repository of information. It actively participates in the construction of memory: selection, framing, and the context of display all influence how society interprets the past. For example, official archives can shape a "canonical" version of history, while personal and alternative photographic collections create a pluralistic perception of the past [11].

Modern digital technologies amplify this effect. Online archives, social media, and mobile photography democratize the processes of storing and sharing visual memory. This means that photography becomes not just a source but a dynamic medium in which collective memory is constantly reassembled and updated.

Practical work with photographic narratives in urban studies is an interdisciplinary process aimed at understanding, preserving, and representing urban memory. The goal goes beyond simple recording: it is necessary to activate collective memory through images, making them part of public dialogue. The approaches combine methods from visual anthropology, museum practice, and urban analysis.



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1. Archiving and mapping visual memory. This key area aims to create digital archives and visual maps to track the dynamics of urban change and document disappearing fragments of the environment.

Practice: comparing historical and contemporary photographs to visualize transformations; integrating historical images into interactive city maps.

Tools: geotags, archival photography, digital platforms.

2. Community participation (participatory photography). Participatory Photographic practices engage residents in the process of creating and interpreting narratives. This contributes to the decentralization of urban histories and the discovery of alternative perspectives not represented in official sources.

Practice: crowdsourcing archival and contemporary photos from city residents; organizing street photo exhibitions and photo walks .

Tools: mobile photography, social media, exhibition formats.

3. Curatorial and museum practices. Photographic narratives are actively used to preserve cultural heritage and represent urban identity. Visual images create an emotional connection between citizens and space.

Practice: creation of thematic exhibitions about changes in the urban environment; multimedia installations in public spaces.

Tools: printed and digital exhibitions, QR codes, media installations .

4. Educational and research programs. Incorporating visual narratives into educational projects develops a critical understanding of the urban environment among students, architects, sociologists, and historians.

Practice: visual analysis of photo documentation within the framework of urban workshops and project seminars; interviews with memory bearers, accompanied by photographic materials.

Tools: visual analysis, photo exhibitions in educational institutions.



Table 4 - Practical approaches to working with visual narratives in urban planning

A practical approach	The main goal	Tools and methods	Social effect
Archiving and mapping	Preserving the city's visual memory	Photo archives, digital maps, AR	Documenting changes, accessing memory
Participatory photography	Involving residents in narrative creation	Mobile cameras, social networks , photo exhibitions	Decentralization of urban history
Curatorial and museum practices	Representation of cultural heritage	Photo exhibitions , installations	Emotional connection of residents with space
Educational programs	Developing a critical perception of the urban environment	Visual analysis, lectures, workshops	Improving cultural literacy and engaging in memory formation

Consequently, practical work with visual narratives in the urban environment is not only a tool for recording but also a mechanism for actively shaping collective memory. Through community participation, curatorial initiatives, and digital technologies, photography becomes a mediator between the past and the present, supporting a dialogue about urban identity and the future.

Photography is more than just an image; it's an important document of time, capable of capturing and shaping collective memory of urban spaces. Visual narratives allow us to understand changes in the urban environment, create alternative histories, and influence how society perceives itself and its past. Modern digital technologies amplify this effect, democratizing the processes of documentation and archiving.

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