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**Talking Pictures, Silent Pictures: The
Mediating Role of Photographs in Studying
Urban Aesthetics**

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Abstract. This article is an attempt to contribute to the methodological literature on the mediating role of photographs used in research. It considers the multiple ways in which photographs may influence the research practices of an urban and cultural sociologist in the course of making and interacting with photographs. It also looks at how informants actually use the images and involve them in creating their narratives about their city. Drawing on 30 interviews, and self-ethnographic experiences of using the images depicting architecture, with the method of Q-sort in Wroclaw, Poland, I illustrate the power of photography as acting in more-than-representational mode. The article presents how aesthetic choices in the photographs were both contingent and not accidental: on the one hand these choices resulted from theoretical assumptions and research questions, they helped me to reveal the political meaning and imaginaries attached to the architecture in the city, but, on the other, they were also dependent on the practices unfolding in the city on the days when the photographs were taken. But more than that, the resulting photographs were mobilised by the informants differently: they were either strategically used in order to build a bigger argument on the role of architecture in the city or informants let themselves be ‘surprised’ by aesthetic choices they made offering pictures to ‘speak for themselves’ and to lead the narration.

Key words. Visual methodology, photo-elicitation, Q-sort method, urban aesthetics, non-representational theory.

Introduction

One can imagine Frederick Engels taking a camera into the back alleys of Manchester to add documentary evidence to his field study of the working class. Theorists such as Emile Durkheim might have explored such concepts as mechanical and organic solidarity by taking photographs of comparative social arrangements. Simmel might well have photographed the generic social forms he observed in the public interactions he witnessed outside the windows of his Berlin apartment.

Harper, Douglas.

Framing photographic ethnography: A case study (2003: 242)

‘What do you want me to see here?’ was one of the most popular questions raised by research participants, or informants, when faced with the need to verbally comment on the pictures of the city they live in. After either looking attentively at the photographs that I provided them with, and touching pictures as if they were the urban forms themselves, informants were often not clear about what these pictures were expected to say. They asked ‘What do you want me to see here’ and added: ‘Is it the building, the setting, my personal opinion about it, or maybe the importance of the building for the city?’. Both a photograph and a city were present on the table, and describing and evaluating the urban forms through the mediation of a photograph involved a number of concerns for research participants, and for me as a researcher. This mediation is the subject of this paper.

‘What do you want me to see here’ is more than the expression of power asymmetry between the researcher and the research participants: this question and the doubt which it expresses, makes evident the common understanding that we tend to have of photographs – that they are able to communicate a message by themselves. ‘Talking images’ and ‘images as representations’ are most common analytical tropes in the visual methodologies used in social sciences (Pauwels, 2010). The capability of the image to ‘represent’ anything which is already gone, forgotten or simply mundane makes photographs extremely valuable methodological tools (Harper, 2002), especially when we are talking about visually overwhelming and rich urban experiences (Simmel, 1903).

Still, the study of urban experiences and imaginaries through photographs is inevitably accompanied by an almost invisible task of translation of what has been experienced into what is observable in the image right now and back again to create an interpretation. This process of translation is by itself a subject of analysis in this paper. But more than that, the photographs presented for the informants contained imperceptible decisions, as well as unexpected aesthetic

consequences of them, made by me and the photographer at the preparatory stage. Both these issues problematize the 'representative' character of the image in urban studies by questioning what exactly is represented and how it is made to work as such.

This article is an attempt to answer the twofold question. First, what is the role of the photograph in *mediating my aesthetic decisions made while taking a picture*. In other words, I reflect on the multiple ways in which photographs are influencing research practices of an urban and cultural sociologist in the course of making and interacting with photographs. Particularly, I aim to show how I tried to make pictures 'talk' and how, during the research, photos were 'disciplined' and 'disciplining'. Second, I question the role of the photograph in *mediating research participants' urban experiences and imaginaries* in the process of interpreting and describing them. I do so by turning to the actual practices of research participants using photos in making arguments about the city they live in. I ask: What do informants see in the pictures, what is important and non-important for them, but more importantly, *how do they involve images prepared by me in their narratives about the city?*

Social scientists have paid great attention to visual methodologies, and photo-elicitation, photo-voice, go-along, digital storytelling, visual ethnography are just few of them. Scholarship on visual research has already pointed out that there are a few regimes in which photographs can be used in research: it serves as evidence (Leibenberg, 2009; Thrasher, 1927; Wagner, 2001) or as a theory-building tool (Bateson & Mead, 1942), empowerment instrument (Luttrell, 2010; Beilin, 2005) and empirical data (Bourdieu, 1984). This great variety of visual research practices has been accompanied by a valuable reflection on the benefits and limitations of photographs as a methodological tool, which I am not going to contribute to. Instead, I aim to treat the photograph as an object that intervenes into researcher-informant relationships, our judgements and our practices of describing the city. The article thus contributes to the scholarship on the mediating role of photography (Bell, 2003; Peers & Brown 2009; Wright 2009; Botticello 2016; on the role of the recorder in negotiating the researcher-researched relationships see Speer & Hutchby, 2003).

To do that, I draw on research experiences during my field trip to Wrocław, Poland. There I used Q-sort methodology to study how issues of identity-building, memory, nostalgia, and economic and political transitions express themselves in the city professionals' aesthetic judgements on the architecture of Wrocław. Based on 30 Q-sort interviews and my self-ethnographic experiences of working with pictures, this article presents illustrations, reflections and insights on the mediating role of photography in urban studies while using Q-sort method or other photo-elicitation methodologies.

The article starts with the review of methodological reflection on the usage of photographs in empirical research. It proceeds by describing the Q-sort methodology, its origin and main principles. After presenting the method, I illustrate the ways in which photography was shaped by me and other involved

parties. I will then illustrate how the photographs were strategically used by research participants while creating narratives about the city, and how the informants sometimes let the images create the arguments 'by themselves'.

Photographs in social sciences: Manipulation, interpretation, mediation

Photography has multiple faces once it enters social science research practice. The first, and the oldest, way of mobilizing photographs in research is treating it as evidence - a way of proving and representing theoretical or empirical arguments that a researcher makes (Leibenberg, 2009; Thrasher, 1927; Wagner, 2001; Morries-Reich, 2016). Secondly, the photograph can perform a powerful theory-building tool, especially when it comes to micro practices and movements which are hard to catch with the naked eye and traditional observation technology (Bateson & Mead, 1942). Third, visual materials, and photography in particular, can be treated as empirical material by itself, either as a trigger for people's judgements and discussions (Bourdieu, 1984) or as a fully-fledged research subject, which makes evident the political meanings of representations and their inherent social orders (Hall, 1997). And finally, the images can be used as empowerment instruments, redefining the power asymmetry between the researcher, who, in earlier approaches would be the only author of the representations, and research participants, who would gain sufficient autonomy to create their own visual pieces (Luttrell, 2010; Beilin, 2005). Regardless of the regime in which photographs are mobilised, they have mostly been treated as representations (Pauwels, 2010).

Based on that, I ask: what does it mean in practice to claim that an image works as a representation? To answer that, I want to go back to the major questions of the paper, how the image is produced and how it is mobilised by the research participants in their narratives about the city, and examine how these questions may have been treated in the representational approach by social scientists.

Let me start with the first question of how the photographs are produced. By itself, the question that I am raising is far from new. That photos are a powerful instrument for constructing social realities has been a central argument of cultural studies and visual studies for a long time (Hall, 1997). Who is represented, and through what means, was and is considered a tool of power relations, where the manipulation with the gaze of observer is capable of producing and challenging the established social order (Hall, 1989). Visualisation has always been associated with various regimes of knowledge production, and in that sense social science, especially anthropology, has produced an excessive reflection on what image, as a representation, is and how it works by establishing the hierarchical positions between those represented and observed and those observing (Sbriccoli, 2016; Brincker, 2017).

Following this line of thought, by producing a photo as a representation, a researcher is capable of ‘manipulating’ the gaze of the observer: he or she makes something evident, while covering and hiding other aspects of ‘reality’ standing behind the image. Take, for example, the visual ethnographic work performed in farmers’ communities in 1940s. As Douglas points out, ‘Photographs [...] required several minutes of preparation and each film plate had to be stored in its own box. This limited the capacity of photographers to photograph unfolding social processes. The labour, materials and time required to make each image discouraged experimentation. [...] This is primarily a result of the brilliant lighting, which would not have existed in the crowded dining room of the farmhouse’ (Douglas, 2003). This method was not just invasive, and interrupted the everyday activities of farmers, as Douglas underlines, it also tended not to ‘show’ the real attitude of the farmers and their families towards the researcher’s interpretations. They simply do not have access to give their visions of the ways in which they have been represented in the ethnographic material published. As Pauwels states, ‘much research tries to produce images in a systematic way and thus relies explicitly or implicitly on the mimetic strengths of the camera image’, (2010, p. 557), while still making the context of the image production inaccessible or accessible only for other professionals.

To overcome this always-present power asymmetry inherent in visual representations, participatory research methods have been introduced, in which taking pictures, as well as talking about them, serve as a technology of empowerment. Such methods as photo-elicitation and photo-voice provide the research participants with a sense of ownership over the representation, and control over its interpretation (Finney & Rishbeth, 2006; Frith & Harcourt, 2007). The dialog between the researcher and participants and the co-production of photos for the research may not only enable ‘more mindful discussions of everyday practices’ (Bendiner-Viani, 2016) and ‘deconstruct phenomenological assumptions’ about the city people live in (Harper, 2002), but helps to create an unauthoritative way of researching by redefining the ‘entire process of situating, communicating, taking, understanding, and representing through digital images created in the course of [...] fieldwork’ (Boticello, 2016).

Helping to solve the issue of power asymmetry in the process of producing images, participatory research methods also pose the question of how photographs are interpreted by informants. The issue of interpretation of visual data is one of the most prevalent and basic concerns in both visual methodologies and social research in general. Indeed, how do research participants choose between various pictures, what do they pay attention to and what role does the ‘aesthetics’ of the pictures play in this sense? While earliest visual researchers declared the value of using pictures because of their seeming ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’, recent scholarship has questioned the celebration of images’ ‘objectivity’ and ‘documentation character’ (Pauwels, 2010). Instead of emphasizing the objective character of the visual mediator,

scholars pinpointed the 'subjective' character of their readings: photos make sense for informants only in terms of personal experiences they possess (Leibenberg, 2009).

Photographs do provide stimuli for richer narratives during the interviews (Wagner, 1978), but more importantly, images are inherently polysemic, therefore opening up possibilities for multiple stories and interpretations (Douglas, 2002). For example, as Douglas underlines in relation to the above-mentioned photograph of working men having dinner together, which was made in 1945, while 'farmers remembered the social connections they experienced as part of such work crews [...], the farm wives who had prepared the feast the men were eating often contested these idyllic perspectives: the labor exchange required intense preparation and little of the sociability' (2002, p. 21).

What scholars have agreed upon in their reflections on the photographs' usage is that 'places (are) [...] often linked to historical, political, personal or seasonal times both in and outside the photograph itself' (Bendiner-Viani, 2016, p. 17). In this sense, neither a researcher, nor a photograph itself can predict and restrict the way in which it will be interpreted by the informant. Despite the fact that images depict a place or an object in particular time and form, research participants tend to speak of their pasts and of their alternative memories, sometimes greatly differing with what is depicted.

Additionally, photographs, understood as representations 'mimicking' urban realities, possess a power of triggering strong emotional responses from research participants, especially when researcher's vision of the place is considered to be different from what an informant is used to experiencing (Bendiner-Viani, 2016). Images may surprise them, provoking feelings of sadness, pride and sometimes even shame. Images can 'freeze' a place, make routine details observable, while concealing social practices and meanings attached to it, which, as a result, gives a research participant an opportunity to elaborate her story about the picture based on the first affective response of 'agreeing' or 'disagreeing' with how the place is photographed.

While I fully stand with and value the course of the methodological reflection that visual methods and visual studies have produced, the aim of this paper is not to tell a story of a visual research as a dialog between a researcher and a participant, and the ways in which photographs as representations are produced and interpreted. Instead, the fieldwork here is presented as a complex interaction between a social scientist, a research subject and a photograph itself, what it is and how it acts. The paper traces these tripartite relationships in order to examine how the picture of the city and its use by research participants act in a more-than-representational mode (Thrift, 2008). The article thus contributes to the scholarship on the mediating role of photography (Bell, 2003; Peers & Brown, 2009; Wright, 2009; Botticello, 2016; Cabanes, 2017; on the role of the recorder in negotiating the researcher-researched relationships see Speer & Hutchby, 2003).

By stating that photographs are mediating, rather than simply manipulating or being interpreted, scholars pinpoint the active role of the image in interrupting both researchers' and informants' practices. In that sense, the so-called 'intended' message of the image may change during the course of the photograph-making and interacting with it, which possess a powerful analytical utility for the analysis of visual materials (Mohr, 1982). Additionally, the mediative approach pinpoints the non-representational lives of photos, in which they 'can have lives of their own, as their uses and meanings are reconfigured in their passages from hand to hand and from one time to another' (Sbricolli, 2016, p. 296). Scholars have also emphasized how the work of photographing and aesthetic choices made by the researcher may influence the judgement and the course of narration of a research participant (Bendiner-Viani, 2016).

But more than supporting these arguments, in this paper I aim to show how the photographs are actually used by informants: how research participants examine them, choose between them, involve them in building their own narratives and arguments. But before showing that, I want to describe the Q-sorting methodology that I turned to in more detail.

Originating in psychology (Block, 1961), Q-sorting methodology has spread widely within the social sciences, which resulted in adaptations of the procedure to various research goals: studies of the perception of beauty (Kuipers, 2015), educational practices (Bracken & Fischel, 2006), credibility of politicians (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015), beliefs on abortion (Werner, 1993). In it, participants are asked to 'evaluate' pictures, or statements in the original version, according to the scale the researcher provides participants with: a pyramid with grades from -4 to +4, where there is one most disturbing and one the most valued picture, while the neutral value is given to 5 photos (pic. 1 and pic. 2).

The method gives an opportunity for a researcher to examine both the quantitative data by looking at what is valued or devalued, and qualitative data by analysing how something is valued, what arguments are used. But what is even more significant is that this method helps and forces a research participant to think in comparative terms: through comparison of the photos provided, a research participant constructs an argument, a legitimate reason for something to be liked or disliked. Besides, by being allowed to change the places that pictures take in the pyramid, participants not only compare the photos, but the criteria according to which the photos may be graded, deciding whether 'historicity', 'originality' or 'livability' of a building may be of greater importance. It is exactly this aspect of the method that I appreciated highly for my individual research purposes: the analysis of what meanings and values are attached to the architecture of various styles and historical layers in a city with an experience of repossession in order to see how issues of memory, nostalgia, transition from one state or political regime to another may shape the judgements of aesthetics. The reflection and illustrations on the usage of Q-sort method and photographs in studying cities is given in the next sessions.

The process of picture-taking, as well as its aesthetic result, was highly contingent and dependent on many factors. Maria, the photographer who agreed to participate in the project, insisted on using her favourite analogue camera, Canon EOS300, which meant that we could not check the results of the work in the course of the walk, worrying about colours and textures that may be depicted in the photos after printing. All of us were totally dependent on the caprices of the camera and the film. The pictures that were supposed to be the authorship of Maria, were the product of collective cooperation between Maria, Jolanta, myself, and Liubov, as well as non-human elements - the camera, the film, not to mention the weather, shades, urban dwellers passing by, and unexpected urban objects that appeared exactly on the day we were taking the pictures. The process of photographing became *as sensitive to and as interactive with the city as possible*.

The walk was planned and organised not only with a map. Both the map and the imagined composition of the photo that I wanted to present to the participants were results of my research hypotheses and assumptions. Take, for example, the composition of a picture that proceeded from my interest in the question 'What contemporary architecture will be considered as spoiling the 'historic' texture of the city, and what will be, on the contrary, presented as a continuation and respect to the 'historic' tradition of the city?'. To explore and test this question, I asked Maria to include some elements of the surrounding buildings and pavement in the picture: bricks of the neighbouring walls, stone and concrete of the urban forms placed next to the building. I saw it as a framing of the building that can provoke a reflection on the coexistence of architecture of various historical periods. *This is what other researchers call 'intended message' of the image*.



Pic. 3. Centennial Hall, built in the beginning of 20th century by Max Berg. The only UNESCO Heritage site in the city. In front of the building you can see a flea market that takes place every weekend. The co-existence of the seemingly 'informal' practices of selling and highly assessed landmark was expected to be evaluated as a site of disorder by some urban dwellers. Still, only one informant out of 30 paid attention to the practices outside the building. Well established narratives of 'high cultural value' were hard to shake even with the visual trigger. Photo made by Maria Węgrzynowska with camera Canon EOS 300

With this imagery, we went to the Cathedral island, the consecrated area of perfectly preserved medieval brick buildings, so loved and so touristically attractive in Wrocław. There, right in-between the red-tiled-brick architecture, we directed our gazes at the library reconstructed recently, famous among some of the research participants as 'White Ghost', or 'Mirage' (pic. 4).

The 'White Ghost' is a product of two competing architectural paradigms in the city. First is the one that adores historical forms and materials: in case of this construction, it is the baroque composition of the building that was carefully calculated, analysed and realised (pic. 5). The second paradigm is the one that condemns imitation or copies or any kind, which resulted in the white image of the building, making transparent, according to the architect and the city conservation officials, the contemporary character of the site. Still, even though the building did not pretend to be 'historical' and made this declaration clearly with its whiteness, locals met the new construction with hesitation, if not hatred. The location of the library, particularly its visibility among the truly respected and consecrated red-tiled buildings, was considered to be a crime against the identity of place. The unhappy marriage between the Ghost and the Medieval bricks was exactly the image that I wanted Maria to capture.

‘Can you please include the brick wall of this neighbouring building’, - I asked her. My attention was redirected by Liubov to the construction site right next to the library building. ‘Maybe we can include this one as well? It can provoke nice discussions around the urban politics of city center development’. I nodded. It was such a nice observation! I looked at my research assistant, and she was certainly disagreeing. ‘If we need to vote, I will vote against that. Talking about something that doesn’t even exist...No textures, no materials to discuss. I don’t think this is a good idea’.



Pic. 4. The building of the library at Tumski Island.

Photo made by Maria Węgrzynowska with camera Canon EOS 300

After some seconds of silence, Maria asked whether we should include the wall and the roof of the Cathedral standing behind the library building. On the one hand, this move truly would visualise the difference between a contemporary, controversial construction, covering with its whiteness the historic symbol of the city, the Cathedral. On the other hand, the presence of such an important building on the photo may move the judgement from the Ghost construction to the Cathedral. In that sense, thinking of the aesthetic tastes in the city would become an even more complicated task.

I hesitated. The four of us clearly had different views of one single building, and I expected research participants to read ‘the signs’ that we were going to inscript in the picture easily! After we made our decision, and after the camera and the film agreed with it, the picture was printed. It was ready to meet the research participants.

As you can see, I clearly treated a photograph as a representation. What I expected is that material forms included in the image will be successfully decoded by research participants as standing for political processes in the city. Indeed, what various research participants were evaluating was not necessarily the building itself. And not even the location of the building - a consecrated area of old bricks and red-tiled architecture - was always 'the thing' that people saw in the picture. It was the hot discussion living outside the building that was valued sometimes much higher than the building itself.

Nevertheless, what I did not realize was that, despite my aesthetic concerns about what to include or exclude from the images, the objects 'in the photograph' and the processes I expected them to stand for would only make sense for the research participants once they have become a part of their personal and professional experiences. Once I look at the image as a mediator rather than a representation, I stop seeing 'one building' with various perspectives on it. It is not 'beautiful' for some city professionals and 'ugly' for others. As research participants state themselves, the building is both at the same time. 'I simply get used to love the controversy around it, and Wrocław will not be the same without this controversy', - stated architect Lukasz.



Pic. 5. Building of the library before WWII¹

Another example of me being concerned about what to include or exclude from the picture was the presence of people in the images. It happened that some of the sites we visited to take photographs of were completely empty at that point of the day and week. Still, if a picture works as a representation, a trigger,

¹ Photo source: <http://www.gazetawroclawska.pl/wroclaw-sie-zmienia/g/budynekfatamorgana-na-ostrowie-tumskim-kardynal-sie-zgodzil,9980530,18420144/>

provoking narratives about 'the real' city informants experience, then why would it matter if on that day my colleagues and I did not meet any people and did not include them in the images? They would appear in the stories anyway.

You can imagine my astonishment once I realized that these images provoked 'unlively' narratives about the buildings, as if they were deprived of inhabitants, maintenance workers, passers-by, and visitors. The practices unfolding around the buildings, as well as their biographies were rarely considered by the participants of the study. Importantly, this issue becomes even more evident if we think of the characteristics of the groups participating in the research. Architects, planners, city officials possess a well-established language for describing and examining the city, which quite often may leave the dynamic aspects of urban life, people living there, out of the narrative. Therefore, in order to see and to uncover these layers of buildings' life that stand behind the picture, a researcher should be prepared to focus the conversation with participants by specifying how they use it, what kind of life it has during the day, and how was the building site changes its look. The building should not be considered as a person 'acting' by itself. There is something, or someone, acting, that needs to be specified during the interviews accompanied by the visual material.

Still, even as a snapshot, the picture is capable of triggering the imagination of the participant to explore what life a particular urban site may have. During one of the interviews the activist Jacob asked me if I know exactly where the picture was taken and why there are no people on the stairs leading to the street. In another interview, the architect Karolina was trying to imagine the routine of the building by searching for the 'signs' of life - flowers in the windows, curtains, where even air conditioner, a tiny pixel at the photo, became an important factor in putting the photo higher in the scale based on its usage patterns. For her, the building was 'living' because it was breathing.

Me, the photograph

Now let's forget about how the pictures were taken and get back to the photos, the physical objects of 9*13 cm, lying on the table as pieces of photo paper, that are later located in the scale in the form of a pyramid. These are the objects that may possess power over us, just as well as my research assistant Jolanta, photographer Maria, my colleague Liubov and I and the research participants possessed power over them.

Consider the way in which photographs may lead the research participants and even surprise them when located on the scale. After receiving the photographs, informants treated them and inspected them differently. One way of exploring the images was a rather quick classification of them into a few piles, that later appeared to be the categories of 'ugly', 'beautiful' and 'neutral' buildings. To decide within these categories and create the hierarchies asked for by the

design of the method, the informants needed to come up with their evaluation system, picking criteria that would be of bigger and smaller importance for them, such as 'open access', 'level of maintenance', 'historicity', 'touristic potential' etc. In this strategy informants were either aware of the argument that they wanted to make about the city, and they carefully chose the pictures that would make this argument evident, or they treated each image as a separate story about Wrocław, without trying to unite them with a bigger narrative.

Another way of treating the images was rather slow and detailed inspection, sometimes even touching of images, as if they were the urban forms themselves. After receiving the photographs, inspecting them, a number of informants stopped for a moment to make a surprising confession, as Malgorzata did by saying: 'Ha! Look, I didn't know that I like historic architecture so much! Look, all the positive spots are taken by these pictures'. While describing one photo, research participants had a chance to review her choices and reflect on that, sometimes in a shocked manner: 'Well, now I can see that I undervalued high-rises here. Hm, it makes sense, but I didn't plan to locate pictures that way, they make the point themselves, I guess'.

It is not that the participants did not think of their choices strategically or did not pay attention to the task. Rather on the contrary, the design of the task makes it possible for these participants to use photographs as evidence, to treat them as active and capable of speaking by themselves, and then follow them in informants' narratives. As an architect Karolina noticed: 'Actually, I don't know why these three buildings stand higher in the scale than these two...Let me try to describe them and we will check what was the reason'.

In that sense, the pictures simultaneously can be strategically manipulated by the participants, while they use them in order to make a statement, or they may be explored in the course of the interview, delegated with the responsibility to 'make their own statement'. That is why, for example, an architect Lukasz chose the 'best' and the 'worst' pictures as strategically opposite images, while saying: 'To make my point about the artificiality, I will put this picture to the worst pole'. On the other hand, the most beautiful and the least beautiful spots may not be intended by the research participants to be the opposite sides of one argument. Instead, informants may follow the pictures in order to see how the argument unfolds, whether it is logical, valid, or self contradictory. In any case, it is exactly the photographs and the form of the scale that frame the argument and may change it once the participant realises that the photos may speak in a particular, sometimes unpredictable for herself, way.

Conclusion

How can we redefine the role of images in urban studies not as a representation, but rather as a mediator? In this article, I illustrated how the production of images and actual practices of research participants in using them

for building their narratives about the city resulted from interactions with the photograph as a physical medium. This paper illustrates how some aesthetic choices were contingent, while others were supposed to be strategic, and how none of these mattered once informants needed to involve the prepared images into their stories about the city. But more than that, photographs and their interpretations were manipulated and shaped by the research participants as well, who either strategically used photos in order to build a bigger argument on the role of architecture in the city or let themselves be 'surprised' by aesthetic choices participants made - letting pictures speak for themselves and lead the narration. The design of the task, as well as the characteristics of the photographs themselves, make it possible for these participants to navigate between strategic intentionality and more unpredictable self-exploration.

In this paper, I aimed to contribute to the line of literature that challenges the representation approach in visual studies, in which photographs are conceptualised as representing 'reality outside' the image, capable of speaking for themselves. On the contrary, both researcher and research participants make photographs speak in various, sometimes unexpected ways. Images encourage work from me as a researcher and from informants in transforming them from 'silent' pieces of photo-paper into visual arguments. Therefore, to foster discussions on the political meanings of architecture and buildings and their role for urban imaginaries, pictures are supposed to fit with seemingly contradictory criteria. On the one hand, I tried to use them as instruments which would be as 'invisible' as possible: the work of the photographer, of camera, film should not bother or annoy the gaze of the research participant (of course, to a certain extent, considering some professionals' sensitivity to any discrepancy of the pictures we took with the high-class standard architectural photography that they are used to seeing in catalogs). On the other hand, being invisible herself, the producer of the picture should not make the life of the building invisible as well. The aim of the method is not to provide the research participants with excellent pieces of visual art, but rather to provide them with snapshots of the city they know and they relate to, to unravel their assumptions about the city they live in. The combination of invisibility and liveability of photographs is exactly what can help a researcher to succeed in her examination of the meanings and practices unfolding in urban space beyond the picture (pic. 3).

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