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## **Documenting the City: A Construction of Urban Memory<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The text reflects on photographic methods of documenting the city. The paper is parted into four sections: the first presents the issues surrounding documenting, the second discusses historical examples of urban documentary, the third analyses the modern tendency of construction and, finally, the last fourth section introduces examples of contemporary art practice. Written with regard to the concepts of François Soulages I will discuss, among others, the following projects: *The Inventory (Inwentaryzacja)* by Ireneusz Zjeżdżałka, *A Sky over Warsaw* by Juliusz Sokołowski and *The Other City (Inne miasto)* by Wojciech Wilczyk and Elżbieta Janicka. All examples focus on different aspects of documentation: they allow preserving in a viewer's mind the lost past, create a contra-image of a city or reveal the unseen and forgotten fragments of history.

**Key words:** photography, documentary, urban memory, artistic practice

How do we imagine cities? What initiates any recollection of urban space? Is it a physical experience or visual representation? Usually, we recognize cities through images published in books, presented in films or on Internet sites. Even during our travels, when we change ourselves into an army of tourists and we think that we are “just taking photos”, we often forget that the images of Paris, London, Berlin or Venice produced by us and glued carefully into our material albums or inserted into virtual ones will stand in place of these real spaces for years. These photographs that represent places and objects will serve as markers of cities more efficiently than the blurred experience of our memory.

The article has two goals: the first is to consider the function of the visual documentation of urban space, the second – to find a difference between architectural and documentary photography. Is such documentation only an image of passing shadows and traces of streets and buildings? Or, maybe, is it a process during which the memory of the city is created? Urban photographs usurp the position of images of real space and last in our memory forever.

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<sup>1</sup> The article develops and revises some ideas presented in an essay *Portretowanie architektury* (Portraying Architecture), “Autoportret” 2013, no. 1 (40), pp. 46–51.



























Let's now look at the last example. In 2011 Elżbieta Janicka and Wojciech Wilczyk worked on a project entitled *The Other City*. They photographed a part of Warsaw, where between 1940 and 1943 the Jewish ghetto was founded by the Nazis. Completely destroyed due to the ghetto's liquidation following the Jewish Uprising, after WWII it was rebuilt – and in a real-socialist manner filled with blocks of flats. Nowadays, the area is surrounded by significant objects like the Pałac Kultury i Nauki (The Palace of Culture and Science, a symbol of communism) and the Arkadia Shopping Centre (a symbol of neo-liberal times). To the east of the area is Nowe Miasto, Plac i Ogród Krasińskich, Plac Bankowy, and the historical PAST edifice; to the west Żelazna and Okopowa streets with the Jewish and Stare Powązki cemeteries.<sup>31</sup>

The photographs, shaped by a tool that is employed in the project (4x5 inches camera), recall the instrumental photography of the 19th century or Bechers' documentary style. The authors decided to use colour footage to omit the trap of a black-and-white anesthetisation discourse. The point of view was situated high up: on roofs or the last floors of buildings. Pictures were taken on sunless days that erased the contrast between light and shadow. Like in Daguerre's famous view on the Boulevard du Temple, there are no people. Warsaw seems to be abandoned, which fits in well with the message of the project. The city seen from above reveals the incoherencies of urban planning. What remains of the pre-war urban planning seems to be covered with modernist buildings and new, often uncontrolled development. The project documents what really exists but also re-creates the past that is hidden under the new buildings. It is a panorama of what was erased by history. The frantic, recent development has left "holes" in the urban tissue, places where buildings were never rebuilt, fragments of new constructions, and a few monuments of the past. There is an "other", spectral city under the present one, which is visible. Changing the point of view and moving from the level of the streets to a bird's eye perspective has deconstructed the view of Warsaw popularised by the tourist industry as well. Such a city image is unknown or deliberately concealed. On the other hand, when we once look at the view of Warsaw created by Janicka and Wilczyk, their image of the city will last forever in our minds.

## Conclusion

All things considered, we might ask what is the relationship between photography and architecture, between a picture and a city. From my point of view, photography always adds "something" to our view of buildings and streets. It allows to supplement the representation of the real city with personal imagination and to see the phenomena previously unnoticed. A good example here is the book *Istanbul: Memories of a City* by Orhan Pamuk. The author analysed closely photographs to reconstruct his own past, but also the history of the city. Ara Güler's images chosen by Pamuk as an illustration for the text do not only depict a space and time that could be unknown for readers, but also create in their minds an atmosphere that was important for Pamuk – the black-and-white photographs represent *huzun*, a certain kind

<sup>31</sup> Information at: <http://zacheta.art.pl/article/view/1342/janicka-wilczyk-inne-miasto> (access: 30.09.2013).

of a Turkish melancholy. Therefore, the imagery can be seen as a representation of a memory, but it also might be a substitute for the memory for those who have never been in a city.

In the article I have described various examples of artistic practices that may change viewers' ideas of the cities and broaden their knowledge on their historic and contemporary state. Architectural photography seen basically as a planner's instrument in the hand of an experienced artist turns into a touching vision of the city. Furthermore, a documentary image may reveal implicit meanings of the city space. Photographers know the great power they have over the visual memory of a viewer. They will never change our memories of smells or tastes – but they can have an influence on what it is that we really see.

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