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Photography in architectural education: A tool for assessing social aspects of the built environment

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Abstract

Architectural undergraduate education uses visual methods within both teaching and design processes. One method, photography, is mostly used for illustrative documentation. However, using photography more creatively offers rich potential for student engagement with the social environments they work within. In this study, students digitally photographed the built environment of Karaköy, Istanbul and went through a process of keywording and interpretation of their photographs. The results function in a documentary capacity, but also provide insights into the students' social understandings of the built environment, which, in the context of architectural teaching and learning, has value for both students and instructors.

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1. Introduction

Architectural undergraduate education uses visual methods such as drawing/sketching, photography and computer modeling as a language within both teaching and design processes. Photography, in particular, has great potential, as a method for students to represent their understandings of the built environment, however is most often used as a form of illustrative documentation of material aspects of the built environment, rather than as a stimulus for critical interpretation or analysis of underlying social issues. Using photography more creatively within architectural design courses offers rich potential for student engagement with the social environment they work within and provides a means for them to assess such spaces.

This paper discusses a study carried out in 2009 with undergraduate architecture students in Uludag University, Department of Architecture, Bursa, Turkey. The study builds on the researchers' previous work using photography in combination with other visual methods to 'read' a village in Turkey in the context of 'place memory'. Since the earlier study proved promising, this current research is premised on the idea that photography is an effective method of communication in architectural education in terms of enabling students to represent their social awareness of the

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built environment. Social awareness, in this sense, includes understandings of social, behavioral, political and emotional dimensions relating to the photograph and the space it represents.

Although the current study generated a large body of images and commentary, for the purposes of this paper we have selected a small sample in order to demonstrate how the methodology works and to consider its potential within the context of architecture education. Specifically, we focus on two photographic images (Figure 2, 3) and accompanying keywording / interpretation from the photographer and five other student ‘observers’ of the image (Table 1, 2).

1.1. Using photography to assess the built environment – ‘reading’ cities, ‘reading’ photographs

The potential for photographs to stimulate discursive reflection is known and increasingly utilized in the social science fields of anthropology (Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002), psychology (Ziller, 1977; Cronin, 1998) health (and general) education (Wang & Burris, 1994; Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001; Kaplan, 2008). However, ironically, in more traditionally visually oriented fields, including architecture, photography is used primarily as a literal form of documentary illustration. To a certain extent, it is not surprising that this is the case, as architecture is primarily concerned with photography as a tool for optical realist recording as a means of documenting the immediate material environment. In this way, photography aids design processes without being used as a stimulus for deep interpretation and reflection. The only exception may be areas of behavioral research that overlap with the field of architecture, where preference studies require users to evaluate built environments through static or dynamic photographic images (Heft & Nasar, 2000). We suggest that photography can be used more fully in the context of architecture education through an interpretive process of ‘reading’ images, a process which fits within a paradigm of visual literacy, but moves beyond a simplistic, semiotic ‘decoding’ of imagery (Elkins, 2003).

We consider ‘reading’ in this context to be a process of interpretation concerned with complexity, which takes account of multiple layers of meaning including: the material, the social, behavioral, temporal (Zeisel, 1986), and cultural (Rapoport, 1990). This process is culturally specific and culturally mediated (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Banks & Morphy, 1997; Rose, 2001). Although neither cityscapes, nor photographs of cityscapes can be ‘read’ in the sense that written text is read (Rose, *ibid*), here ‘reading’ refers to a process of interpretation and elicitation (Harper, 2002). That is, an intentional effort (both inductive and deductive) to comprehend the sensory experience represented in the photo coupled with an awareness and accounting of the feelings, thoughts, memories and emotions which are stimulated through engaging with that experience.

2. Methods

In the study, students worked individually using digital photography to consider the built environment of Karaköy, Istanbul. The participants were asked to take a series of photographs at different times over the course of one day and were encouraged to use a ‘snapshot’ approach to photography, that is, to take their photos quickly in a direct response to their engagement with the area and without spending too much time on composition. This approach has both practical and theoretical implications (Figure 1).

Participants were asked to choose one image among the set of photographs they produced during the initial exercise and interpreted ‘the’ photo in terms of their intentions in taking it and understandings of what it depicts (Figure 2, 3; Table 1,2). Alongside narrative descriptions, participant photographers also generated keywords to describe this image. It was then shared with 20 other participant observers in the class, themselves also participant photographers, who were asked to interpret and keyword the image without knowledge of the photographer’s identity, interpretations, or keywording. All participants shared a familiarity of the Karaköy area, having studied the area through activities as part of the current studio class, however, it was important that the photographs were taken during a single day, within a given week, and interpreted individually without knowledge of each others’ interpretations in order to ascertain whether shared familiarity of the area would lead to shared interpretations (Figure 1).

To facilitate interpretations of the photographs, participants were asked to complete a form with a series of open-ended questions (Table 1, 2). Basic guidelines for ‘reading’ the built environment were discussed in class prior to this activity; however, the concept of ‘reading’ photographs was introduced later, prior to the interpretation activity. Participants were asked to ‘read’ and describe each image, then to choose five keywords and list them in priority

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