

Visual Spaces of Change: Self-reflection on Architecture and Urban Change Through Photography

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Abstract: This paper synthesizes theoretical aspects of photography related to architecture, city and territory, as well as the case studies coming from the research project Visual Spaces of Change, focusing on the use of photography to investigate the dynamics of architecture and urban change. The project proposed to engage researchers and artists from the fields of architecture, art and image in the creation of visual narratives that promote public debates and a new understanding on urban change.

The methodological framework adopted an integrative approach regarding Architecture, City and Territory integrating a series of open talks, public presentations and exhibitions of contemporary photography projects related to the subjects of Architecture, City and Territory during the years of 2019 and 2020 on several public spaces of Oporto City. A pedagogical experiment was also taken that builds up on previous research and had as base the several impressions from the students collected through quantitative and qualitative survey.

The potential of visual methods for communicating the identity and transformation of architectures and public spaces are made clear through the discussion of photography (including its uses, methods and approaches) as a valuable research tool and technique to disseminate architecture and public space problematics in contemporary cities. The paper presents the results of the qualitative survey made to the audience of four site-specific exhibitions comprehending visual narratives produced in the context of the research project, as well as the survey made to students of Architecture from third year (1^o cycle) in the Faculty of Architecture of University of Porto (FAUP).

Keywords: Visual spaces of change, Urban pathways, Architecture, Photography.

Photography in the field of architecture, city and territory

The uses of photography as a research instrument in the fields of architecture, city and territory follows the proposition that valid scientific insight in social and natural sciences can be acquired by observing,

analysing, and theorizing its visual manifestations (Pauwels, 2010). From this perspective, the use of photography may contribute to the creation of a knowledge-enabling environment that allows a specific study of architectural forms and spatial realities, its transformations and

appropriations, rendering visible aspects of urban spaces where people socialize and interact which would be difficult to perceive without the use of images and photography.

The use of visual methods and tools in research may open the door to a deeper understanding and interpretation of social realities but visual culture continues to be controversial (Albrecht, 1991). Visual studies have been criticized for their insufficient methodological instruments of discourse analysis (Bal, 2002), and certain researchers even point out that an excessive emphasis on visualization and imagery can impoverish communication (Bourdakis, 1997). The discussion on the validity of visual evidence is particularly polemic when it comes to the analysis in the investigation of urban matters and the respective social fields (Schnettler, 2013). In fact, while the use of photography has massively penetrated the fields of architecture, city and territory, there is limited research on the use of visual data in the study of urban matters. This results in shortcomings on current research in visual studies, often facing severe criticism of disregarding methodological issues, including problems of unintended bias, lack of rigour and active misrepresentation (Rose, 2000).

The development of an informed and independent reasoning by a visual researcher and its expression through a photographic series implies the possibility to critically think the political, economic and social dimensions of the object being analysed. From this perspective, the selection of the appropriate methods and the pertinence of its uses according to the specificity of the problem is paramount for developing a visual communication strategy of the object being studied. As

Banks argues, the capacity to correctly select and manipulate visual information, constitutes the unifying element for deciphering how people build the world around them, what they are doing, or what is happening to them in terms that are meaningful and offer enriching perspectives (Banks, 2007). An integrative approach towards communicating, exploring and perceiving architecture and public space transformation requires a number of theoretical and practical challenges, but it is not clear what might be the common level of abstractness of representation methods to be used or the level of complexity of the design issues to obtain an effective communication with the public, e.g., type and level of realism of representation to be used.

Therefore, the type of information that it is intended to communicate can and should explain the use of the different types of representation methods (Neto, 2003). Thus, photography can be combined with other materials and forms of visual expression, introducing an admittedly subjective view that uses the theme and subject matter of architecture and urban spaces to communicate something more than is common in architectural photographs. Through these interdisciplinary approaches, the articulation of photography with other analogue and digital supports of image may be explored, sometimes incorporating texts, personal stories, drawings and other images in addition to photographic images. The combined use of these resources addresses particularly useful aspects in the study of architectural objects and urban landscapes, providing the researcher with essential research tools and communication strategies as seen in the work of, e.g., Martino Stierli; Luca Galofaro; Klaus Bollinger, Florian Medicus and Kiesler Privatstiftung Wien; Eric Margolis and Luc

Pauwels; Theo Van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt and Gillian Rose (Stierli, 2018).

A visual researcher can explore the potential of image in its broadest sense, encompassing photography as an object of thought and production of meaning with the possibility of creating fictional and symbolic worlds. Photography has the ability to move between reality and fiction, rendering visible innovative visions and introducing new links between realistic representations, fictional worlds and symbolic meanings. These features are identifiable in the work of several photographers, for example: Filip Dujardin's work addressing the potential of digital manipulation of images to represent new spatial forms and architectures and creating new imaginary spaces (Gadanhó, 2014); Bas Princen's work rendering visible transformations of urban landscapes that have not yet occurred and altering notions of time (Princen, 2019); Paulo Catricá's work on landscape and architecture that constitutes a synthesis and insightful perspective of a recent past, and present realities of hybrid city spaces (Teixeira, 2018); Paolo Rosselli's and Philip Schaerer's work creating exploratory and fictional images using specialized digital montage techniques (Rebelo, 2016; Bergera, 2016).

Also, in the sense given by Walter Benjamin when speaking of photography as a constructive and depositary object of cognitive forms, capable of establishing a connection between the real and the imaginary (Benjamin, 1983). Or remembering Susan Sontag when she mentions that all the photographs witness the relentless dissolution of time (Sontag, 1977), or, Roland Barthes who says that photography is unclassifiable because it is always invisible, we never see photography in itself but rather what it gives us to see

(Barthes, 1981). For example, the ephemeral character of memory, its apparent fragility and possibility of partial or total disappearance, as well as its complexity, is enough to think that the act of remembering always implies the recovery, from the preserved memory, of something which has already happened, and therefore, incorporates a diffuse temporal structure.

It is important to mention these less evident dimensions of memory related with space, where fictional or artistic expression assume significant relevance for understanding architecture as a comprehensive discipline and practice capable of integrating psychological domains. The city is understood as a living organism, a rich and multifaceted space defined by various experiences and architectural programs that result from the knowledge, beliefs, values and customs characterizing different social contexts. Through this process of memory and experience of space, the visual researcher and audience may find in photography appropriate tools to interact with the physical environment, developing relationships and creating connections with the surrounding space, turning anonymous spaces in meaningful places to which people are connected and that therefore, compete for the construction of their identities.

In addition, connections can be made between identity and place: meaningful spaces, with which there is a certain familiarity and/or a sense of being at home; and between identity, feeling of disorientation or anxiety, and that which is fragmentary and/or an experience of non-place. The photographic image communicates not only the perceptions gathered from these spaces but also

emotions, whether they are sympathies, inclinations, hatreds or other psychic sensations: the set of experiences that move from physical space to the psychic and emotional, transforming the images of photography in the medium through which we establish with these places, known or imagined, a certain understanding. The photographic image always has some influence on how the past is remembered and how memories are constructed in an uncontested way by the various images of past events or situations.

The weight and intentionality contained in the act of photographing proposes that photographic images can be instruments of representation and conception in the practice and discipline of architecture and urban thinking that demand a comprehensive understanding of visual culture, capable of integrating and giving meaning to its various dimensions (technical, social, economic, historical,

political and artistic). This means, among other things, to perceive the photographic image as an instrument of architectural thought beyond a constructive or technical representation and, therefore, a medium of conceptualization in the universe of architecture – the image is used as an instrument of design in architectural practice and theory.

It is relevant to refer the importance of photography being able of communicating the important and singular relationship that architecture can establish with the context in which it is inserted, the poetics of the ensemble, and the work itself (fig.1.), as well as being used to construct a narrative capable of transmitting a sense of sequence of spaces and direction of movement along the lines of what Le Corbusier termed as Promenade Architecturale (Samuel, 2010). In fact, reflecting on the importance of the path for understanding architecture, it is important to keep in mind that our



Figure 1: Left Images is a Diptych of Álvaro Siza's *Piscina das Marés* (Marta Ferreira) and the Tryptic on the Right Side is a Sequence of Different Vistas When Walking Towards Álvaro Siza's *Boa Nova Restaurant* (Helder Sousa), VSC Exhibition at FAUP 2020 (Source: VSC)

perception of space is linked in general to the direction of our path, which involves movement and displacement (Uluoglu, 2006; Pallasmaa, 2008). To summarize, it is important to create through photography visual narratives that might afford the opportunity to explore and communicate, via an architectural and fictional point of view, the real space and their experiences, telling us a story about the spaces through a journey composed of successive moments, ones that are quite close to a real experience. The weight and intentionality contained in the act of photographing proposes that photographic images can be instruments of representation and conception in the practice and discipline of architecture.

Methodology

The case studies of the Visual Spaces of Change (VSC) research project promoted a series of open talks, public presentations and exhibitions of contemporary photography projects related to the subjects of Architecture, City and Territory during the years of 2019 and beginning of 2021. These initiatives intended to broaden the discussion about how architecture transforms and is transformed by trends and ways of living, using as its subject of study Porto's Metropolitan Area.

The methodology developed in this pedagogical experiment builds up on previous research combining blended learning and e-learning with visual research methods and photographic techniques that enable students to manage the whole process of conception, development and implementation of photography projects in a collaborative learning environment. The use of these different components allowed to enhance the articulation of activities between teaching staff, researchers and students, enabling the exchange of

knowledge and explore scientific and technological capabilities of each of the participants. The learning activities of the VSC project have been structured in two main technical and artistic components which enable the researchers to develop individual photographic projects inserted in a collective pedagogical strategy containing various communication tools, representation methods, visualization techniques, and involving multiple interaction levels and new ways for the researcher to understand and relate with various aspects of the public space.

The methodological framework has been designed with special attention to the multidisciplinary character of this project, complementing each other and putting in relation the various aspects covered within this integrative approach regarding Architecture, City and Territory. Within this general approach, the researchers involved in the VSC project developed empirical investigations in concrete case studies of selected urban spaces, confronting the present reality of specific places with documentary photographs and original photographs taken from chosen viewpoints of the study objects. Practical exercises of image manipulation and diachronic reconstitutions of certain landscapes organized in temporal layers, allowed to visualize changes in the configuration of public spaces – these diachronic reconstitutions were not only based in the research of historical records, but were also combined with other techniques of photo montage and the overlap of temporal sequences, among other techniques of image manipulation from existing urban spaces.

The identification of the VSC public spaces for this first case study were restricted to a set of Metro Stations located not so far apart

from each other – because of technical and administrative reasons. This first case study was complemented with the second case study, a major exhibition of those same Contemporary Photography projects that took place at FAUP using its outdoor and indoor spaces, in order to give force to some of the results obtained with the former case study and maximize its experimental potential. The collection and systematization of visual information about the selected places constitutes the working database of the research, which is an ongoing process organized in three main information blocks: cartography (maps and satellite images), photography (document and artistic registries of selected locations), and historiography (monographs and previous research). These elements have been used in order to characterize the main features of each photographic project, providing the means to create a

comprehensive analysis of the territory under study. The contextualization of the collected material focused on the evolution of architecture and public spaces and the modes of appropriation of the cultural and symbolic meaning of particular places.

Informed by the material collected for each architecture selected in the data collection within the VSC project, empirical investigations in the field has been held in order to compare the present reality of each specific place, producing original current records of the same viewpoints found in the data collection surveyed. In this context, a set of critical visual narratives have been constructed about architecture, public space and their experiences, through the art and technique of photography, it was necessary to adopt a photography teaching strategy that integrated, from the outset technical and aesthetic aspects. This meant, first, to convey the idea that photography is a

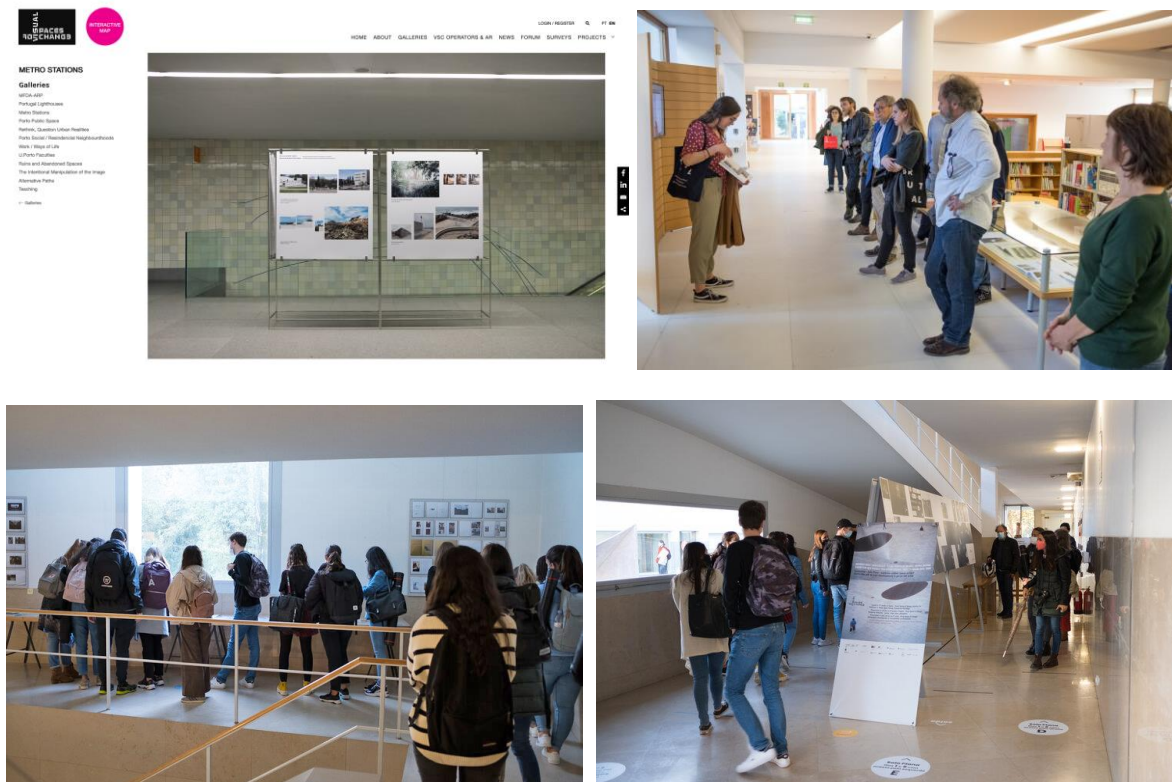


Figure 2: These Images Starting From Top Left Clockwise Direction Display The Visual Spaces of Change Online Platform; Debate and Presentation That Occurred During Ci.CLO 2019; VSC Exhibition at FAUP 2020 (Source: VSC)

unique form (art and technique) of visual language and as such is based on a specific visual grammar.

In both case studies, this research explored the universes of photography and editorial in two complementary strands: (i) The exhibition of Contemporary Photography Projects in several public spaces of collective use located in Porto's Metropolitan Area and (ii) an Exhibition of alternative publications for the dissemination of authors and photographic works with a particular focus on Architecture, City and Territory.

A total of seven photography projects were exhibited, plus one video project. The seven photographic projects are: Fendas Intemporais by Jiôn Kiim and Artur Leão; Claireira by Ana Miriam; Ode by Edu Silva; Piscina das Marés by Marta Ferreira; Contínuo by Sérgio Rolando; Casa de Chá da Boa Nova by Hélder Sousa; Momento. Percepção – Representação by Sofia F. Augusto. The exhibited video project is called Déjà Vu – Uma Lembrança do Presente, a work by Leonardo Motta Campos (AoLeo).

During the exhibitions, that took place between 2019 and the beginning of 2021, a series of public presentations of the projects with the presence of the authors was organized, in order to promote the debate about the multiple representations of the public space as well as its own process of change (Figure 2). The activities proposed in both case studies were oriented towards an understanding of the processes of interrelations between Architecture, Art and Image, identifying the points of articulation of the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of these universes.

The Questionnaires and Its Methodology

The questionnaires applied in the context of each exhibition held within the VSC project for both case studies adopted an on-site approach. It was explained to the respondents that the data provided would only serve for qualitative purposes in the specific context of the scope of the project Visual Spaces of Change, and subject privacy has been guaranteed. Surveys were made face-to-face and individually, and wherever possible the conversation has been recorded, making sure that the area where the surveys were conducted was sufficiently isolated from noises that would impede this recording. Three publicly announced exhibitions of contemporary photographic projects took place. In result of the interest in having the respondents' qualitative evaluation of the exhibition of photographic projects and the questionnaires, several open-ended questions were included in the questionnaires. To test both the exhibition of photographic projects and the content of the questionnaire before conducting the public presentations, some adjustments were made to the content of the questionnaire given to the public in order to facilitate the respondents' answers.

Results

The main results of the research were obtained through interviews and questionnaires used for collecting quantitative and qualitative information about respondents' perceptions towards specific public spaces of Porto's Metropolitan Area. A broad set of issues have been addressed, directing the questions to aspects related with spatial experiences and subjective perceptions of urban transformation. The key aspect addressed in the questionnaires in both case studies was the impact of each photographic project in individuals' perceptions

regarding the transformations of the physical spaces selected as objects of study within the VSC project, reflecting questions about the processes of change that occurred over time, driving the conversation towards individual memories of these places by the respondents.

We will not describe in this paper the results obtained in the first case study, which can be consulted in other publications¹⁹, but will refer to some of the most interesting results obtained with second case study of FAUP and compare these with former and draw some possible deductions.

For the second case study, a pedagogical experiment was taken that builds up on previous research combining blended learning and e-learning with visual research methods and photographic that enabled

students to manage the whole process of conception, development and implementation of photography projects in a collaborative learning environment. The results from this case study had as base the several impressions from 34 students collected through quantitative and qualitative surveys.

A significant result of the questionnaires concerns the high percentage of students considering the exhibition of the photography series and visual narratives important for: (i) encouraging a site visit to the architectures and places being communicated, (ii) for stimulating critical thinking about the architectures and places being communicated, (iii) for modifying our perception for those spaces giving a new insight about the architectures and places being communicated (Figure 3).

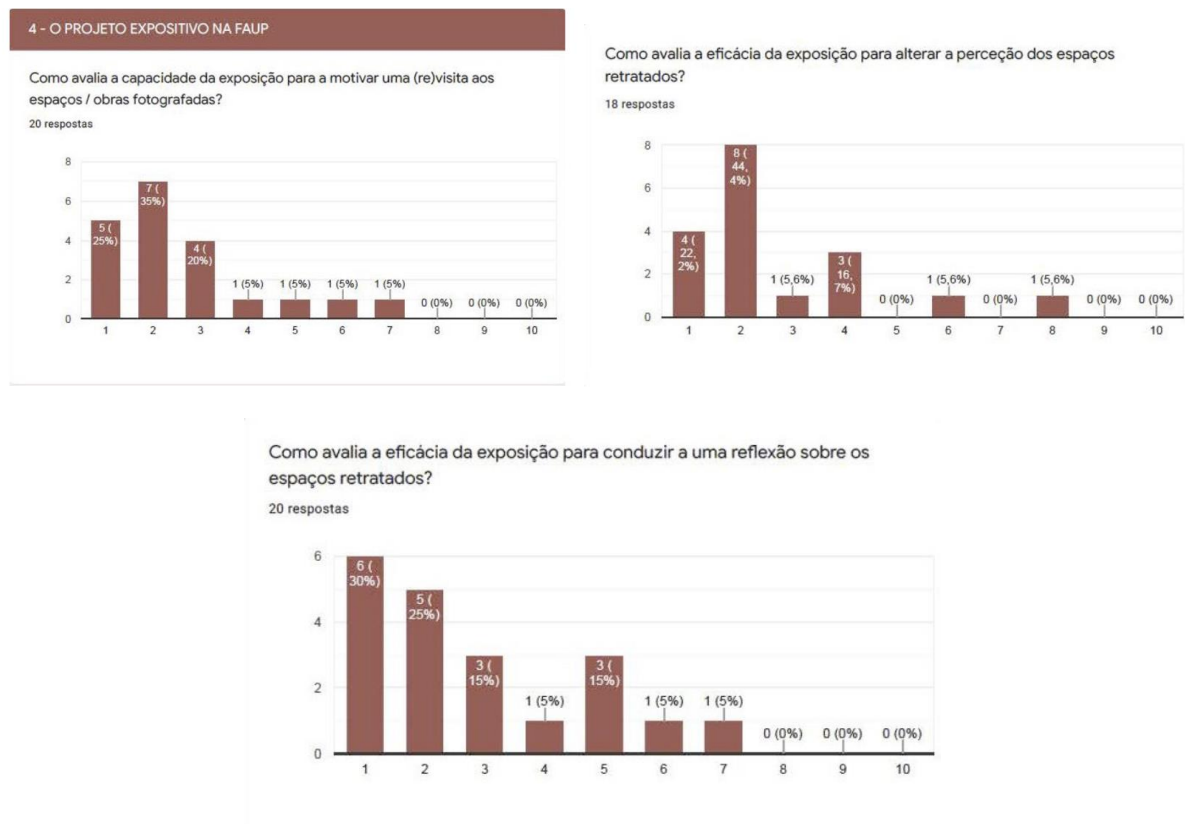


Figure 3: These Charts Starting from Top Left Clockwise Direction Display the Data Obtained from Questions (i), (ii) and (iii) (Source: VSC).



Figure 4: *These Images Starting From Left Display Open Space Presentation to Students and the Right image a Visit to Indoor Exhibition With Tables For Book Format and Videos, FAUP 2020 (Source: VSC)*

These results confirm the importance given to the same issues by the respondents of the 1st case study, just to make a case in point, namely issues as “To what extent your perception about the spaces portrayed has changed?” and “To what extent do you think this exhibition enriches the debate about architecture, public space and urban transformation?”, where a large majority of the respondents recognized that the photographic projects had an impact on their perception about the architectures and places portrayed (Neto; Silva, 2019).

Also, based on the overall results of the queries of both first and second case studies, we can sustain that these initiatives were successful in promoting the debate on the current dynamics of use and appropriation of certain spaces in Porto’s Metropolitan Area. This happened during the 1st case study exhibitions / debates and now with the students in this 2nd case study, which proved to be an important Agora to trigger the debate about the importance of architecture and public spaces, as well as to

reflect about the best ways to communicate and talk about these issues.

While it is not possible within the limits of this paper to present an exhaustive list with the contributions made by the respondents (students) its important, however, to mention their opinion on certain aspects related to visual strategies and ways of communicating architecture through a photography series. One aspect is the importance of the exhibition to integrate several supports (videoprojection, panels with visual narratives and the photographic series and text about the architecture being communicated in book format and online gallery). Then, to have the curator or authors of the photographic series of the exhibition explaining the visual narratives and to have a space and time for open discussion and critical thinking about architecture and public space based on the exhibition (Figure 4). Finally, it is worth to mention that the different kinds of visualization of each photographic series offered by the VSC Galleries were considered very important for the

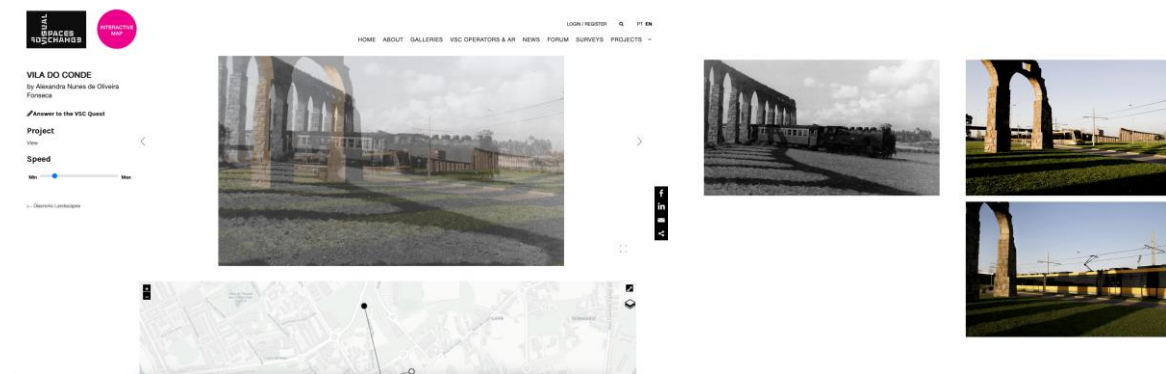


Figure 5: These Images Starting From Left Display the Diachronic Landscapes Gallery, FAUP 2020 (Source: VSC).

individuals' perceptions regarding the transformations of the physical spaces and the architecture being communicated, namely the most sophisticated Gallery called Diachronic Landscapes (Figure 5).

Being still difficult to clearly find a pattern regarding the opinions of the public in 1st case study and students in 2nd case study about the impact of the VSC project in the debate on architecture, public space and urban transformation, we can see that the positive opinions of the younger age groups of 1st case study are reinforced by the opinion of the students in this 2nd case study, namely a positive opinion about the extent to which the exhibited photographic projects enrich the debate and perception about architecture and public spaces and of how these are used by people.

Conclusion

The self-replicating potential of this open public and pedagogical experiment will allow to expand communication and interaction capacities between the public, students, researchers and institutions, namely opening academia to society and allowing the creation of synergies between them. It is expected that the VSC platform will potentiate interaction, feedback, and networking among the participants in a

pedagogical process designed to structure, represent and expose individual and/or collective interpretations of their social reality, stimulating the capacity of the public and academic community to understand and to critically think and act over its transformation. If and when the capabilities of this case study are used in its fullness, these may prove the potential of image for broadening horizons both for academic teaching, learning and research, making citizens in general as well as the academic community more conducive to the construction of new spaces of political discussion and social intervention.

The various photographic projects and site-specific exhibitions facilitated the access to its often- invisible problematics and language, creating localized forums for discussion of perceptions and memories of the city, while contributing to the dissemination of a language that will allow public participation in future discussion on the transformations of urban spaces. And, in doing so, addresses issues such as the need for correctly selecting and manipulate visual information, with the objective of allowing a richer and more comprehensive experience and understanding of architecture and public space.

These distinct photographic projects, with their visual narratives, contributed to enrich and inform the perception and memory of the spaces photographed, while creating “visual pathways” to intentionally interfere with the territory in a self-reflective representation of its own process of change. They give visibility to spatial and temporal aspects that are difficult to perceive without the purposeful use of photography and imagery, which reinforces the claim of photography as an object of thought and production of meaning for rendering visible transformations of architecture and urban landscapes and altering notions of time. The proximity between these visual narratives connected by the Metro do Porto, its stations and urban pathways suggest a network, an “Open Museum” in the metropolitan area, which extend their reach to collectively transform imaginings of the city.

The questionnaires addressed the impact of each photographic project in the perception of the physical space’s transformation, its spatial experiences and subjective perceptions. The results indicate that a large majority of the respondents recognized that the photographic projects had an impact on their perception of the architectures and places portrayed in the exhibitions, and also on the role of the photographic projects in this process.

As a general conclusion, we have enough elements to confirm that the choice of the communication strategy adopted in both case studies for each photographic project should depend on a number of variables to be taken into account, namely the possibility of the authors to be present in live sessions explaining their visual narratives to the public and the use of different support and visual strategies. The research conducted so far confirms that the

photographic projects developed by the researchers and students involved in the VSC project made a useful contribution to make the general public more conscious and to participate in problems of common concern regarding the transformation of concrete public spaces, engaging to the general public in specific issues. The present study certainly confirms this potential while exposing some shortcomings regarding its impacts on urban change. However, it is remarkable that the potential of bringing about real change in urban matters is significantly potentiated by making the research products of the VSC project available online, which will be happening in the near future with more force, allowing a more dynamic interaction between the locations where photographic projects are being developed, and the general public, as well as enabling to communicate diverse aspects of these spaces from various perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds.

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