Outside the Frame: a Critical Analysis of Urban Image Surveys
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Environmental designers and planners are making increasingly greater use of photographic images to depict and envision the contemporary city, yet the methods for employing photographs and their precise construction have not been adequately analyzed. We often lack a critical or ethical basis for creating these images, while viewers are frequently unaware of the manipulation of form and content or the potential biases built into a photograph’s construction. Discussing the increasing reliance on images in architecture, Cambridge Professor Andrew Saint notes that “the long-term challenge for the architectural profession…is to ride this exciting, undisciplined, licentious, and dangerous beast, to control this irresponsible lust for image that pervades our culture.”

While there are several methods of using images in the design of public places, this essay specifically examines image-based survey methodologies such as the “Community Image Survey” and “Visual Preference Survey™” that guide many planning processes. The inclusive and participatory intentions of these methods are laudable, as is the desire to bring the physical qualities of environments to the fore, but image manipulation and delivery skills often outpace critical analysis of their effectiveness. The predominance of image over bodily experience, the exclusion of intertwined socio-economic, historical and political specificity, and the commodification of place engendered by these surveys raise serious concerns. Rather than making specific recommendations for improving urban image surveys, the following critique questions our dependence upon this increasingly popular but inadequate methodology. Hoping to encourage more critical analysis of urban image surveys, it also suggests possibilities for more thoughtfully engaging physical conditions in the participatory design process.

What Lies Outside the Frame
One stated intention of these surveys is community involvement in place-making. “The Community Image Survey is a powerful planning and public participation tool that can help decision-makers and their constituents. Rather than using words to describe places, the Survey uses visual images to help people better understand crucial planning elements and make more informed, pro-active decisions about creating places where they want to live, work, shop and play.”

The trouble lies in the definition of what constitutes a place. Place encompasses the specificity of bodily spatial experience, not merely the visual image of a place. An image-based approach to urban planning runs the risk of inattentiveness to—and subsequent undervaluing of—the socio-economic, historical and political realities of a specific place. Aristotle and Heidegger bestowed place with important symbolic and political values representing the structure of social relations, or the res publica. This raises a question: How can one truly understand and rate an urban place without knowing more about what lies outside the frame—realities that cannot be
captured by the camera? The predominance of vision over the other bodily senses in these surveys presents another problem. We understand the urban environment through our multi-sensory experience of a place in time. In The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses (1996), Juhani Pallasmaa describes the contemporary dominance of vision or ocularcentrism, probes the importance of peripheral vision to spatial experience, and argues that the senses are not independent, but interactive and synergetic. Texture, sound, weight, and bodily measure literally disappear from the two-dimensional “picture,” presenting a severely limited perception of place and an inadequate basis for the “scientific” data generated by image surveys. These public surveys aspire to reach out to the “outsider”—especially those outside the environmental design professions. Yet this worthy intention towards inclusiveness becomes reductive by relying on decontextualized images that leave many issues “outside” the frame. Ironically, a methodology that attempts to reach “out” excludes considerable content “outside” the discussion. The inclusive ends up being quite exclusive by reductively insisting on the instantaneous visual image.

**A Brief History of Urban Image Surveys**

The most widespread urban image survey is perhaps the Visual Preference Survey™, developed by Anton Nelessen and first tested in 1979. In his book, Visions for a New American Dream: Process, Principles and an Ordinance to Plan and Design Small Communities (1994), Nelessen provides a detailed description of VPS™ and its role within his planning process. Residents are shown a fast-paced sequence of photographic images of their own town and other places and asked to rate each numerically as “either acceptable or unacceptable” on a computer scan sheet. Tabulated and analyzed survey results lead to the attachment of a calculated value for each photograph. An optional questionnaire elicits marketing and demographic information and written comments. This process is intended to “articulate the residents’ impression of the present community image and build consensus for its future character. The conclusion of the process is called a Vision Plan.”

The Center for Livable Communities, a national initiative of the Local Government Commission, based its “Community Image Survey” on the Visual Preference Survey™. Their website describes the survey as “a very effective tool for educating and involving community members in land use planning. The Community Image Survey consists of forty slides from a community or region. Approximately eighty percent of the slides come from the specific locale in which the survey is administered. Taken as a whole, the forty slides present contrasting images of our living environment - its streets, houses, stores, office buildings, parks, open space and key civic features.”

Numbers on how many urban image surveys have been conducted are unavailable, but A. Nelessen Associates had conducted approximately 50,000 Visual Preference Surveys™ by 1994. It is likewise difficult to determine precisely when this quantification of urban image “appropriateness” or “likeability” began, since several practitioners developed processes for evaluating urban visual appearance and image simultaneously. This lineage can be traced to John Zeisel’s book, Inquiry by design: tools for
environment-behavior research (1981). More recently in The Evaluative Image of the City (1998), Jack L. Nasar makes connections to psychological theory and recent environmental behavior research while building on Kevin Lynch’s seminal work on mental maps in The Image of the City (1960). It is important, however, to distinguish between Lynch’s use of the word “image” as an experientially derived cognitive image developed by each individual, and the Community Image Survey’s use of the same term for a photograph of an urban condition. While a quick web search yields hundreds of examples of urban image surveys currently in use, this critique focuses on one case with which the author has first-hand experience as a resident.

A Case Study

The Milwaukee Downtown Plan, prepared for the City of Milwaukee by A. Nelessen Associates in 1999, employed a “Public Visioning Process” based on a Visual Preference Survey™. During a three and one-half month period, over 1600 Milwaukee residents viewed a rapidly timed sequence of 230 simulated images and carefully framed photographs of existing local, national and international urban conditions, including Venice, Denver, Boston and Sacramento. Using a computer scan sheet, participants numerically rated each image from +10 to -10 as “appropriate and acceptable or inappropriate and unacceptable” for their city. Median value and standard deviation were calculated for each image. In a subsequent “Visual Translation Workshop” conducted over three days, participants located appropriate sites for applying the positive VPST™ images. Aside from the results of a brief Demographic, Market and Policy Questionnaire, workshop participants were given little context for understanding broader socio-economic, historical, racial, cultural or political conditions beneath the images’ surface—especially those images not located in Milwaukee and probably never experienced by the participants. The image survey methodology does not acknowledge that all photographs—whether family snapshots or “fine art”—are actively configured constructions of the referent (the thing to which they refer), rather than single referents to reality. For instance, cropping and viewpoint contribute to the construction of all photographs, but the carefully framed CIS and VPST™ street scenes establish an apparently unmediated tableau—a city of isolated, picturesque moments that cut out the inevitable contrasts and complex continuities that occur in every city. Taken as a group, the photographs serve to create a seamless, themed urban realm free of unsightly social and economic problems. The viewer remains unaware of the photograph’s or photographer’s artifice, and is not compelled to question what lies outside the frame.

While examining a CIS survey prepared for Georgetown, Texas, a photograph from my own city, Charlottesville, Virginia, appeared as a highly rated image. By carefully excluding the large expanse of pavement and the immense hospital across the street, the photograph depicts a place very different than the one I experience everyday at lunchtime…free of busy traffic and car exhaust, the rumble of the
elevated railway line overhead, and the irregular urban fabric across the street and just outside the frame. This single example suggests the need to grasp more fully the power and responsibilities that accompany the use of photographic images. By analyzing images from the Milwaukee Visual Preference Survey™ through concepts of formal structuring, translation, meaning, and the relationship between caption and photograph, we can see how a photograph projects a particular range of readings and conceptual content about the “real” place. Although the VPS™ photographs seem to depict an unmediated “this is,” they too are constructed to convey “this means.”

Cropping
Cropping, the primary and perhaps most crucial formal manipulation used in the making of images, is often taken for granted by the viewer. The world that has not been included is essential to the construction of any photograph, yet carefully framed and formally simple street scenes like those used in the VPS™ appear unmediated and closed. In the VPS™ Boulevard photograph (fig.1), the planted median is tightly cropped to downplay the six-lane arterial that detracts from the image’s intended reading. Most of the VPS™ and CIS images present whole objects and places, and seemingly whole ideas. Like advertising images, they lull the viewer into abjuring critical consideration of the complex reality that lies outside the frame—physically, socially or economically. “When a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world is cut out. The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents.”

Viewpoint
The photographer’s use of point-of-view provides another means of locating the viewer. Theorist Victor Burgin noted, “It is the position of the point-of-view, occupied in fact by the camera, which is bestowed upon the spectator...[T]hrough the agency of the frame, the world is organized into a coherence which it actually lacks, into a parade of tableaux, a succession of decisive moments.” The most effective way of achieving the coherence noted by Burgin is to center the camera/viewer within the frame. Many survey photographs use centered framing to make the viewer comfortable, in control and satiated within the image (figs.1-2). For instance, in figure one the viewer is centrally located in a place rarely occupied by humans—the planted median of a six-lane arterial. The potential for inhabitation and tranquility projected by this image seems unlikely given the safety issues, noise, and fumes from the adjacent vehicular traffic. This central position does not reveal discordant places and complex issues beyond the frame, but reinforces an idealized perception free of reality.
Tension between Reality and Formality

A photograph offers evidence that a place seems certain to exist, but what is one intended to “see” or believe? In *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, André Bazin claimed that “the objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making,” while Roland Barthes went one step further arguing that photography is fused with its referent and the essential of photography is “that has been.” Consider the credence given to a photograph, as opposed to a drawing of a place. Many modern and contemporary photographs, however, challenge this common belief in the denotative function of the photograph in relation to the photographic real in several ways. Indicators of time and place such as legible street signs, usually structured to reinforce the authenticity of an image, may be obscured to erode a place’s specific reality. Although the Milwaukee survey photographs are not formally constructed to disrupt the authenticity of the referent, locational clues are often obscured in order to focus the viewer on abstract qualities of the places depicted and facilitate their transfer to Milwaukee. The real place does not equal the photographic image of it. While posing as ordinary snapshots, another form of dislocation occurs. Depth perception is reinforced and the viewer is drawn into the photographic space through perspectival views, such as the regularly spaced, receding lampposts of the waterfront image (fig. 3). The homogenized image dislocates the viewer, who is seduced to project one city onto another, irrespective of specific production or evolution of place. Red bricks and a handful of ubiquitous shops appear to be easily transposed from Venice or Sacramento to Milwaukee—irrespective of climate, culture or political economy.

It seems possible that the physical environment could be addressed in a more thoughtful public process. There have been attempts to use video and film to overcome some of the limitations listed here, but these tools are inadequate in much the same ways. The current image survey method might be improved by always presenting an eye-level photograph with a plan or bird’s eye view that encompasses a larger area and clarifies connections between places, but there is no substitute for the real thing. Taking resident groups on a survey of real places within their community—places that are culturally and historically specific to them—is the only way to truly understand the feel of space as informed by all their senses beyond sight. This is not an unreasonable suggestion, since the actual number of survey respondents is usually manageable and could be achievable with a series of weekend walkabouts. Participants might be asked to take photographs during the walk to bring back for reference in a discussion about what they saw. In this way, the photo as a referent to some larger whole might be more meaningful than a disembodied image, removed from its context. If the objective is to more fully engage residents in the design of their city, it is crucial that they have a deeper understanding of limitations and opportunities beyond the visual.
Acts of Translation

All photographs are made twice over—first configured by the photographer, and then more significantly reconfigured by the viewer. Neither of these acts of translation can ever be “objective”. The survey images, however, do not acknowledge these acts of translation. For instance, Anton Nelessen sums up the VPSTM process as follows: “The VPSTM provides the pictures/vision of what your community wants and what it does not want on its land. The images are not arbitrary; they are not unreasonable. They are a product of a public process. They represent public consensus from people who have experienced the place. They provide insight and reasoned responses. They represent a consensus vision. It is planning and design by democracy.”

Public process and widespread citizen engagement in the planning process are essential, yet one must separate this important intention from the means with which it is sought. One must ask whether these image surveys produce a meaningful public process, or set up a self-fulfilling prophecy. While proponents of the VPSTM and CIS imply that the photographs they employ are value-free, a majority of the 230 images shown in the Milwaukee survey display three dominant qualities: wealth, leisure and nostalgia (fig.4). Survey respondents are assumed to concentrate on the spatial and formal aspects of the places depicted, but one photograph after another contains signifiers of prosperity; athletic white pedestrians amble along brick streets lined with fashionable shops, cafés and mock gas lamps. The viewer relates the photograph to personal experiences of places and events, subjecting “this is” to individual interpretation and translation, thereby influencing her perception and survey ratings (fig.5). VPSTM and CIS participants the made-placeless survey photographs—casting votes for those that exhibit attractive trappings of contemporary consumer culture and constructed nostalgia.

Meaning

Can these survey images hold meaning? If so, to what degree of precision can this meaning be predicted? Numerous theorists have examined this question in terms of both painting and photography. Perceptual psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim wrote that pictures “do not offer explicit formulations of intellectual concepts, which are the prerogatives of language.” He argued that we are affected by pictures, but do not know what they mean—insisting that images are poor conceptual communicators. Victor Burgin countered this position, insisting that “content, too, may be produced as deliberately as one may plan the formal composition of the photograph.” What is the meaning of figure six? Is it really that “Harley Davidson, a corporate American success story, should be more visible in Downtown,” as the survey authors maintain after the ranking was complete. How would an African-American respond to figures four through six, which are all photographs dominated by white pedestrians ambling through upscale commercial districts? Differences in the individual viewer cannot be discounted. The VPS images fulfill many preconceived expectations of the viewer for picturesque and seemingly value free
ideal urban conditions. The juxtaposition of the 230 images in the Milwaukee survey creates an intentional third effect. When each photograph is projected for a few seconds in a sequential presentation, a serial relationship between them is established that transforms the meaning of each image. The viewer is drawn into complicity with a set of values and meanings intentionally or unintentionally structured into the survey photograph sequence by their authors. Perhaps the survey process would be improved if participants could see all the images first to establish a context, then rank them at their own pace in a more thoughtful manner than the “‘gut’ reaction to the images” approach of the CIS.

Text and Image
A photograph is polysemic—containing different meanings that are usually controlled by juxtaposition with the verbal text of a title or caption. Roland Barthes discussed the function of text in relation to image as either relay or anchorage. “In relay, the image and the linguistic text are in a relationship of complementarity: the linguistic message explains, develops, expands the significance of the image.” Text can anchor one meaning from several possible connotations inherent in an image, while clearly rejecting the others. The VPS™ photographs in the Milwaukee Downtown Plan use captions to anchor the desired connotation (fig.6). However, because these captions were not attached until after the survey, the currently anchored meaning may not be the same meaning participants rating image “appropriateness” had in mind. Did most viewers think, “Police must be visible…” as they rated this photograph of two beautiful horses carrying smiling uniformed men through a lovely park (fig.7)? Initially projected as straightforward snapshots of real urban places, the captioned VPS™ photographs published in the Milwaukee Downtown Plan are now anchored to the expert planner’s interpretation. What are the alternatives? What if captions were added first, since the survey’s creators already know what they want each image to “embody”? For instance, Nelessen’s book provides a long list of positive and negative planning and design features that can be extracted from the survey images. Moreover, what if the images were accompanied by clear captions listing location, time, and other relevant information to anchor the image more specifically to place?

Representation and Identity
The pervasive influence of language is felt without the presence of captions. “Even the uncaptioned photograph, framed and isolated on a gallery wall, is invaded by language when it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other; what significant elements the subject recognizes ‘in’ the photograph are inescapably supplemented from elsewhere.” The idea that one brings individual experience to the photograph assists our understanding of the constitution of the human subject within representation. Representation creates identity, and we form ourselves—and our places—to be like images around us. Those who represent the
culture to itself have the power to create identity, making the inherent power of photographic images in culture readily apparent. Representations of architecture, landscape and urban space within real estate promotion, advertising and public planning processes have immense power to shape formal and spatial expectations or norms. Photography, film, television, digital media and advertising teach us not only how to “see” the world, but how to construct our understanding of the city and our own place in it. For this reason, those immersed in contemporary culture—both those who inhabit and design the built environment—would benefit from greater critical awareness of how to receive and construct the photographic images increasingly used to design the urban environment. Urban photographs are not a simple depiction of a real place, but an image intentionally constructed by both maker and viewer. Urban image surveys are about what someone wants the city to “look” like—not what it feels like to be there, or how it works. Photography and simulated urban images are valuable, but inadequate tools by themselves for understanding existing urban conditions, imagining better places and implementing positive change in the city. A richer set of methods might support a more meaningful collaboration between designers and inhabitants addressing complex urban realities outside the frame.
fig. 2

+7 This type of walk is highly desired at the water's edge

fig. 3
fig. 4

Pedestrian realm with outdoor café

fig. 5

This commercial sidewalks accommodate cafés, outdoor displays and high volumes of pedestrians
4.4 Harley Davidson, a corporate American success story, should be more visible in Downtown.

fig. 6

Notes


2 Quote from the Center for Livable Communities website at http://www.lgc.org.


5 In a short essay about the reissue of his seminal book, Pallasmaa further develops his thoughts on vision by considering the role of peripheral vision. “A remarkable factor in the experience of enveloping spatiality, interiority, and hapticity is the deliberate suppression of sharp, focused vision. This issue has hardly entered the theoretical discourse of architecture as architectural theorizing continues to be interested in focused vision, conscious


7 Nelessen, 83.

8 See [http://www.lgc.org](http://www.lgc.org) for the *Community Image Survey* developed by the Center for Livable Communities.


16 Nelessen, 97.


