



FIG 1 Autopista Costanera Norte, dirección oriente sector Lo Saldes / *Costanera Norte freeway, Lo Saldes area east direction.* Vitacura, Santiago, 2015. © José Ignacio Vielma

THE CITY AS ACCUMULATION:

SEARCHING FOR THE COMMON IMAGES OF SANTIAGO

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Based on a thorough review of several photographers who have dedicated to portray everyday urban landscapes, this article offers a selection of images of a common and ordinary Santiago. Away from the pretension of becoming tourist postcards, these photographs show a city built through accumulation; that is, although they are common images they are paradoxically made up by the sum of self-references.

KEYWORDS · photography, ordinary, everyday, as found, cityscape

ACCUMULATION

Walter Benjamin founded his urban critique on a direct experience with the city and noted in it the earliest signs of modernization and consolidation of the city as a capitalist space. Despite his criticism of the socio-economic model consolidated in the commercial arcades and its resulting mass culture, within one finds the accumulation of “phantasmagorias” –an accumulation of experiences associated with the masses, commodities, and space– to which he responds contemplatively recognizing an opportunity. As a reproducible representation, photography is for Benjamin, a vehicle to express this vision and extend the critical discussion to the modern urban society so that it ceases to be an object of passive and ritual contemplation of the elite to become a mass media capable of building awareness (Benjamin, 1936).

From this perspective Benjamin confronts the surrealist critique that attempted to ascribe Eugène Atget –the pioneer photographer of the other Paris– as part of this movement and insists in the documentary character of his work describing his photographs as “crime scenes”; these documents do not represent the monumental and grandiloquent Paris of nineteenth century modernism but express the ordinary point of view of any pedestrian walking through any space: the docks of the Seine, playgrounds, carousels, bridges, street signs, bare walls, and shop windows. Thanks to the selection, frame, and contrast with the established discourse on Paris, the common is presented as something radically strange. The understanding of this view of ‘the other’ in Atget’s photographs moves them away from the documentary and places them as inaugural pieces of an expressive and aesthetically modern urban photography (Campany, 2009).

Many of Atget’s photographs transmit the idea of a random accumulation of materials, advertisement and commodities. In the radical absence of people, they are replaced by the fortuitous encounters of objects, building fragments, spaces, or signs that take on a life of their own. The subjects photographed coincide with Benjamin’s idea that the city of phantasmagoria is the space of an accumulation of the desirable: the multitude for the *flaneur* or the showcase on the streets and arcades of Paris. Benjamin understands this collection of ruins and parts as an accumulation of geological layers where things and experiences settle on top of each other. In this way, the remains of predominately unconnected objects from a society recently made obsolete are accumulated. In this scenario both forgetting and fully perceiving are impossible (Benjamin, c.1936). In the city the same thing happens that he described in his well



FIG 2 Avenida Nueva Tamar. Providencia, Santiago, 2015.
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known *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*: driven by progress, the angel of history inevitably moves away from the past which is no more than an indistinguishable heap from which nothing can be rebuilt or recomposed, provoking terror and impotence before the accumulated waste of many other material cultures (Benjamin, 1940; Carter, 2015).

Accumulation, as an unorganized pile, can be recognized as a characteristic of the urban space resulting from a fragmentary and insensitive modernization. Thus, an inseparable set of objects, systems, and waste seems to predominate in the city after the action of the instrumental mechanisms of urban construction: real estate speculation, social housing, settlements and informal urban spaces, self-referential spaces for consumption and leisure, exterior advertising invading the visual space, the autonomous layout and construction of infrastructure networks, and the abandonment of spaces of memory because of their inability to integrate into current production methods. The current city is presented as amorphous, piled up. This perception is linked to what Koolhaas defines as “junkspace”: “what coagulates while modernization is in progress: its fallout”; the junkspace “replaces hierarchy with accumulation (...) a colossal security blanket that covers the earth (...) the sum of all the untaken decisions, ignored problems, unchosen options, priorities left without definition, perpetuated contradictions, adopted compromises, tolerated corruption” (Koolhaas, 2000:23). This space is an accumulative and promiscuous identity that privileges quantity, loses all form, and amounts to a landfill where trucks dump their load one by one. Thus urban production by accumulation moves away from the idea of crystallization proposed by Mumford (1961). The city ceases to be the place of positive convergence, institutional creation, and cultural sophistication; at most it is the site of a dissident culture, of the other, of the strange, and perhaps of opportunity.

PHOTOGRAPH ANYTHING, EVERYTHING

The common, the ordinary, the as found or the vernacular emerged as arguments in architecture towards the end of the fifties while the city as a collective construction reappeared in architectural discourse.

Concurrently, Edward Ruscha accompanied and influenced part of this exploration with his photographic work. Although he grumbled over his photographs and insisted that they were simply supportive documents for his work, he published various limited edition photo-books and consolidated a description of Los Angeles from a convergence of the photographic themes he explored. He sought to photograph a series of buildings and spatial types, which in his opinion, as a resident, made up the fundamental experience of the city. For *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1965) he placed his camera on a tripod at the back of a small truck and photographed each building of this emblematic street. With this he made a series of photos mounted in a continuous image for each side of the street which was reproduced in a very long, fold out book. For another book, *Thirty Four Parking Lots* (1967), Ruscha rented a helicopter and flew with a professional photographer on a Sunday morning to record empty parking lots. He sought correct compositions and abstract views that highlight their emptiness. The parking lots are described as enormous surfaces of asphalt whose greatest purpose is to accumulate oil stains.

Maybe that is why Yve Alain Bois acknowledges Ruscha as the great enumerator of the small trifles that devour the city, something analogous to the dust that accumulates like a growing mountain of indifferentiation that gives the city an amorphous sense (Bois & Krauss, 1997). Ruscha’s photographic approximation broadened the field of possible urban experiences, creating a dialogue from the lower city with discourses that appreciate the vernacular and the townscape.

Shortly thereafter, based on her previous experience in California and interest for the North American landscape associated with the car and the highway, Denise Scott Brown drove the academic investigation that would decant in the book, *Learning from Las Vegas*. The studio trip for the Yale



FIG 3 Avenida Presidente Riesco. Las Condes, Santiago, 2015.
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course taught with Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour included a four-day visit to Los Angeles where they toured Ruscha's studio and photographic work. Back in Las Vegas the work included taking photographs and film material with the aim of creating a neutral record emulating Ruscha's documentary style. They took more than five thousand slides and the images were used as individual pieces to illustrate the work, but they also generated series and thematic grids on signs, gasoline stations, wedding chapels, and casinos in order to make collages.

Las Vegas, one of the most adored cities in popular taste and most detested by high architecture culture, then became a reference for post-modern architectures. This is curious as it represents a collision of fairly singular buildings and programs: casinos, gas stations, wedding chapels, parking lots, and motels, as well as signs, images fixed and variable, typography, spectacular lighting, fake historic facades, urban sprawl and giant asphalt surfaces as support for cars, including the street and parking as infrastructure that make it possible to access this experience. Recognizing the value of accumulation, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour made an open apology to the ugly and ordinary and insisted on an architecture of inclusion, of the sum of signs and not from conventional urban beautification.

WITHOUT AUTHOR, WITHOUT INTENTION

The photograph of anything in the city has relied on the apparent objectivity and banality of its subject. It tries to be a photograph where the author supposedly does nothing, as if the camera had placed itself in front of the object, or as if the image was a photocopy of what was seen (Fontcuberta, 1998). Already in the seventies the trend to study everyday territories of agglomeration or dispersion had been consolidated and had abandoned the modern view of formalism in the studied frames, capturing



FIG 4 Avenida Vicuña Mackenna. Santiago Centro, 2015.
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people in daily street activities, or searching for the sublime landscape. This kind of photography should be aesthetically and ideologically neutral without an apparent author, and without the interference of personal points of view (Fontcuberta, 2015). As a result, urban spaces are recorded without explicit meaning, apparently un-formulated, and where there are only inert objects. The common and ordinary that had given the meaning and refreshing humor as seen in Las Vegas became disturbing as the huge void recorded in so many author's photographs grew evident.

This concern unfolded in the *New Topographics: Photographs of the Man Altered Landscape* exhibition presented in 1975 in Rochester, New York and curated by William Jenkins. The nine invited authors coincided in showing the city that remains after the process of expansion and gentrification, and



FIG 5 Avenida Vicuña Mackenna, esquina/with Avenida Matta. Santiago Centro, 2015.
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recorded stifling repetition and an intense feeling of emptiness related to the limitless expansion of suburban housing, industrial zones and in-deindustrialization, service warehouses, enormous parking lots, highways, and the abandoned downtowns (AA.VV., 2010; Rohrbach, 2013).

Among the participants, Stephen Shore's work deserves to be noted here. His photographs depict his travels throughout the United States and his special interest in the banality of smaller cities. The photos on display belong to the series that would later be known as the Uncommon Places and would be accompanied by the record of everyday situations. Unlike the aestheticism of the other authors exhibited, Shore's photos are in color. There are people. There are foregrounds, backgrounds, and there's a shifting interest between buildings, banal spaces, details, or interiors. In his images, the viewport cannot find where to position itself, and his work can be described as an altered tourist act that replaces the monument –considered obsolete and irrelevant– and dedicates himself to the most mundane: the highway and author-less architecture (Schmidt-Wulffen, 2004).

The idea of the city as accumulation is reflected in Shore's work not only as analogous to the journey, as a process of piling up temporary experiences, but in a particular visual sense where there is no emphasis on a single object. On the contrary, as in the city, the observer can perceive many objects in detail placed in no apparent order. His photos are characterized by a discomfort that leads us to wonder if it is worth all the effort to photograph something so un-extraordinary (a question that upon observing the images more carefully, one responds with yes) (Dahó, 2014).

AT HOME

In recent Chilean urban photography, Nathalie Goffard had revised various works where the apparent neutrality of the documentary style implies a kind of emotional detachment from the recorded object (Goffard, 2013). That is, an interest that is parallel to the indifference to the common urban subject, which establishes a distance due to the impossibility of acting upon this territory of an unsightly and homogenous nature.

In this scenario Rosario Montero's work of repetition of the common stands out. She explores the senseless structures and urban voids of the



FIG 6 Avenida Américo Vespucio. Huechuraba, Santiago, 2015.
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FIG 7 Avenida La Montaña Norte. Huechuraba, Santiago, 2015
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Chilean city. In *Ciudad ideal* (2010) she made a record of houses located in different suburban developments throughout Chile; houses that were originally identical but slightly customized by their inhabitants are recorded with the same frame, zoomed in on the object, emphasizing the frequent symmetry of their schematic design, and isolating them from all interaction (Montero, 2010). This work perfectly describes the repetition of the house devoid of all urban relationship and with the minimum expression of a supposed ideal private world. In her images there is also evidence of the perverse accumulation of urbanization systems aimed at the instrumental and speculative occupation of the periphery.

Meanwhile, from the accumulation of the heterogeneous, the work of Francisca Eluchans fully exploits the photographic representation of a city where an enormous amount of objects, bodies, and buildings coexist without the possibility of differentiation. In her series *Espacios en Construcción*, *Metrópolis* or *En algún lugar*, Eluchans builds three-dimensional, large-format collages taken from specific urban locations: a neighborhood, a city, a cemetery. Supposedly identifiable surroundings of well-known or coherent image that are suddenly illegible due to the excessive accumulation of possible perceptions in a very effective spatial simulation. The author claims to work by “uniting images and inventing unreal and impossible situations from real elements obtained from their own surroundings” (Eluchans, 2015). Like in the city, the eye can lose itself for hours looking at each part without being able to rebuild a coherent whole.

TAKING SAMPLES

Given that the city is plagued by complacent arguments about itself in which values, heritage, landscapes, or moments of intensity are identified and later converted into common, shared urban images (or commonplaces), it could be the time to ask ourselves, What else makes up the urban image of Santiago? What are the daily experiences that are never published in institutional magazines or touristic brochures? What is least discussed in the universities, the least likely to be considered from its origins or opportunities for transformation?

From this idea of the city as accumulation, a record was made that places the spectator in front of the most common Santiago, the city most lived-in but perhaps least discussed. The photographs presented here are based on the paradox proposed by Stephen Shore in *Uncommon Places*: what is common in the focus becomes the uncommon in reflection,

and what is common in the debates ends up being the least frequent in experience, quite uncommon.

As a measure of situations that operate through accumulation, the photographs reflect those places where things have been placed without any solution of continuity with the other, the present, or the possible.

All the images show the result of decisions framed in legality and planning. They don't represent underground, hidden places; on the contrary, some are extremely commonplace. With the exception of some graffiti on the walls, there are no more signs of informality or surreptitiousness. The images aim to make visible these issues of Santiago's urban landscape which otherwise can only be described as the expression of a paradoxical response to many supposed needs: the audacity with which mobility infrastructure, the carrier of experience, is superimposed over the city and evades all possible integration (FIGS. 1, 6); the unilateral action of built bodies contrasted with urban moments or built remains of a very different sense (FIGS. 2, 4 Y 5); the agglomeration or thoughtless, opportunistic extension of housing units in any possible configuration and completely insensitive with immediate surroundings (FIGS. 4, 5 Y 7); the vague expectant spaces waiting to be occupied; the involuntary resistance of already obsolete pieces of the city (FIGS. 2, 3 Y 4) or of traces proper to the valley landscape (FIGS. 1 Y 7); the arbitrary occupation and changing destiny of land for whatever use or building type lacking any joint solution with the next (FIGS. 2, 3, 4 Y 5); the obscene exhibition of infrastructure, electrical lines, telecom antennas, or pieces of outdoor advertising (FIGS. 4, 5 Y 6); the condition of the public space built with minimal resources (always privileging the automobile) or produced solely through instrumental decisions (FIGS. 2, 4, 5, 6 Y 7); and lastly, the proliferation of hermetic banal structures that, regardless of the surroundings, do not propose meanings, but rather they build the mirage of a modernized city with sparkles and mirror-reflections (FIGS. 1, 2 Y 3).

These images seek to consolidate this idea of a city built by the sum of self-references. It is a common image that is not unlike the generic city that has spread without identity nor opportunity for transcendental experience, and whose only option is knowing where to look for the possible opportunities to insert meaning in between the layers generated by accumulation. **ARQ**

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