



Les visions de la construction métropolitaine. Temps de discussion 1

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Séminaire

Les visions de la construction métropolitaine

Jeudi 21 Octobre 2021, 9h30-18h00

École des Ponts ParisTech (12 boulevard Copernic, 77455 Champs-sur-Marne),

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Discussion 1

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Antonello Frongia :

Nathalie and Raphaële, your double perspective that managed to couple a close reading of the photographs and a very competent reading on their semiology, an informed reading in historical terms, is really interesting. Because these photographs do not seem at first sight to be aesthetically interesting at all ! They just seem to be common photographs just like sometimes postcards are. In Italy, this kind of photographs have been historically marginalized as being the product of uncultivated professionals who tend to repeat and to reaffirm visual stereotypes. Well-known in Italy, the Alinari brothers (Fratelli Alinari) have contributed to establish this image of a monumental Italy seen from above, with distance and correct light, etc. But I'm trying to work on illustrated postcards in the same vein on two levels. First I'm trying to contextualize them in the work of specific individuals whose biography needs to be known and reconstructed. Sometimes it's difficult to do it in the case of professional photographers. But when you can get some informations, you can also get glimpses of a visual education, sometimes connected with the world of amateurs or professional associations. The other aspect, now made possible with the digitization and the creation of larger archives, concerns the possibility to analyze large amounts of photographs and, possibly, to put them in a chronological sequence to identify sometimes small minor changes in these so-called stereotyped visual models, minor but significant for our understanding of the general change of approach towards modern city.

Raphaële Bertho :

You say that this kind of images don't seem to be as significant, at first sight, as works of Gabriele Basilico or Olivio Barbieri for example. Because they are artists, authors, and have something to say about the city, they are working with a very specific kind of visual writing, a visual photographic grammar, to express something very specific. Concerning our photographs, it was more subtle. In my point of view, the best way to go through the stereotype and really understand the meaning of this visual culture is to practice this exercise of comparison and parallel between images, like you do for these american photographs.

Sonia Keravel :

Nathalie Roseau, I have a question about the way you've chosen this first photograph, that was very calm, almost rural (cf. view of the ring). Do others pictures expressing the same kind of atmosphere exist in the archives ?

Raphaële Bertho :

I remember that we've found several images like this one, with the same kind of visual imaginary.

Nathalie Roseau :

The photographs that I've consulted at the Pavillon de l'Arsenal are classified according to the sections of the ring road, and in this archive the south section is most covered than others. This predominance of the former part of the ring road is interesting. But we don't know if there were less or more photographs in fact. Regarding your question, we didn't find a collection but five or six images with this kind of pastoral atmosphere. And this was very surprising indeed. We didn't imagine that the ring road looks like this at the beginning, knowing how it looks today... I've also found some pictures of the outside, before going on the ring. These photos underline the continuity and the access to the road.

These photographs are common but made by institutional photographers, specialists hired by the Municipality of Paris. Now we need to go further. Why these pictures ? What are the motives ? That leads to another question about the transnational circulation of images and their influences : we have seen Canadian, Italian, US photographs, and some books have been published on urban themes. How these photographs of New York for example are influencing Italian urban photographers ? How these pictures do circulate?

Antonello Frongia :

I don't want to provide a definition of metropolis, but we all agree that we associate the idea of the metropolis with a transnational, international perspective, beginning around 1920s in Paris... It's interesting to see how photographers depict specific situations, for example Milan, always seen like an exceptional and modern city in Italy... In fact these models, images from previous or foreign metropolis, migrate. For example, the influence of William Klein on Carrieri is evident in stylistic terms. But beyond the stylistic imitation, Carrieri is really constructing images and a visual narrative adapted to William Klein's New York and others of his books, on Rome especially. Both Klein in Rome and Carrieri in Milan have made chapters on religion. Religion is a very important theme for understanding the modernization of Italian culture around that time. Anthropologists and social workers are traveling to the south of Italy, documenting ancient religious and magic practices surviving in small villages. These visual models are sometimes adapted in an explicit way, sometimes implicitly.

Another exercise can be made by comparing photographs with other types of visual representations such as maps or models for example. Ugo Mulas calls his photographs 'peripheries', and he wants to keep them very generic. As an historian it's always interesting to use other sources to find where the photograph has been precisely taken, which area has been explored. This may not be an element included in a caption but to restore the documentary value of these photographs I use this dialogue between different sources. Another important point is « for whom » have these photographs be taken ? In which circumstances ? What have been asked ? Is it for a public commission ? In this case, it's sometimes very hard to understand who is under the order and what exactly has been asked to the photographers... An institution has its own goals, its own archives, and the pictures are quickly public goods. In Italy, we don't have that kind of organization. Even with the books, it's hard to understand who is the target, what is the message (if there's one). In Italy, especially in the 1950s and 60s, the reception of these books is almost non-existent. It is incredible that these statements about the city that entailed so much work remained like a mute voice ! Now we have to reconstruct their role, what were the intentions, etc. This is difficult. How much am I interpreting these books from my own perspective, with my own knowledge ?

Mark Rice :

In the DOCUMERICA Project the photographers tended to be working individually and working close to home. With the NEA projects there was a kind of a debate, although I think it wasn't really actively out there in the public, but people were kind of wondering : who is the best person to visually see and photograph this place ? Is it somebody who is local or is it somebody who is from outside, who can come in with fresh eyes ? In one of the projects that I didn't talk about in my talk, Joel Meyerowitz was hired to do a survey of St Louis, Missouri, a city that he didn't have a lot of experience with. In these other projects in other cities, in Europe, Canada and so on, were the photographers intimate with the place or were they "foreigners" to privilege an external point of view?

Frédéric Pousin :

Mark Rice, we have spoken about photography books and also the uses of photography in exhibitions like in Montreal, and I would like to highlight that only in the uses of photographs in books or in exhibitions we had images about social struggles and about reaction to the damages created by infrastructures, motorways, etc. I wonder why we don't have images about this social reality in the American surveys ? Or maybe you haven't shown us such images although present in the surveys ? Do we have such images about social reactions to these transformations of the city in the 1970s ? It was a very important aspect of the transformation of the cities at that time, and planners and architects were very influenced by these contemporary social events.

Mark Rice :

Generally no, you don't see a lot in terms of social reactions. It's mostly photographs of spaces themselves, although there are some surveys that show communities, like in Galveston, Texas, for example. There's a survey of the corner stores, being the anchors of these neighborhoods, and in the 1970s a lot of Americans were concerned that, with the rise of Mc Donald's and others sorts of mass corporate consumerist culture, these things were going to all disappear. But even in something like that, photographs tended to show just how the stores look like (photographs of the store fronts, of people shopping, of the things on the shelves, etc.). Another survey of East Baltimore, which was a largely eastern European ethnic community, again shows people on their front stoops, or the decorations in their windows, but there aren't many projects that really showed people reacting to these changes. So the answer generally is no. In the DOCUMERICA project, there is more a sense of urgency in terms of ecology, because of the air pollution, gridlock in the city and something that is going to become unsustainable.

André Lortie :

In the Montreal exhibition, the photographers were local, except for the contemporary commission to Olvio Barbieri. The 1960s photographers were mainly or exclusively local. One of them, Armour Landry, was a very prolific photographer at that time. His archives represent more than 80 000 photographs that were given to the National Archives. He would play many roles and appears like a multi-purpose photographer. He would do aerial view commissions over Montreal for the municipality, or whatever. He would also have his own personal projects, photographing different aspects of the city which were important to his eyes, to document because of the changes they witnessed. Indeed, sometimes we are judging too rapidly these commissioned photographs considering that they are not so interesting because not made by what we consider « artists » or so. But sometimes the anonymous photographers, responding to specific commissions, are doing this job as best as they can, in an objective way, and sometimes have their own personal projects that they execute regarding to their own perception and sensibility.

I have a question for Mark. It's surprising that Documerica and the NEA projects are not concerned by people's reaction, because at the same time we can observe a rise of advocacy planning in the United States. Documerica is looking further than what is happening right at this moment, in the beginning of the 1970s, further than reaction of people in these urban areas where these transformations are occurring. It seems they are focusing on more global issues.

Mark Rice :

These surveys were funded by the Federal government and the United States, not being a very activist government... There were, I guess, limitations, and we don't know what kinds of NEA applications might have come in that were denied. There could have been stuff in there more radical, advocacy, but all we have are the ones that were funded. When I started the project, back almost 20 years ago now, all of the records from the National Endowment for the Arts were in an off-site archive, and within two to three years of being shredded completely; they were going to be gone. So I went down to Washington DC and I photocopied absolutely everything that they had, in case they were going to be destroyed. In fact, they ended up preserving the records because enough people recognized that there was something important here. But we almost lost them completely and we still don't know the things that didn't get funded... It's not exactly the same but with DOCUMERICA they were really trying to emulate in some ways the 1930s Farm Security Administration photographic project in the United States. Roy Stryker, the director of the photographic section of the FSA (1935-1942) destroyed negatives, saying that they didn't want to use them, but those tended to be more aesthetic decisions than anything else, I think. But there's possibility too that some of the DOCUMERICA photographs that found their way back to Washington DC weren't preserved, but I have no way of knowing one way or the other about that.

Nathalie Roseau :

Indeed it's very difficult to define the notion of metropolis, but looking to our decades 1960s and 1970s, for example in New York, the urban growth was not focused on the greater New York at this time but on the outside, on the metropolitan area with large suburban growth, which was more vernacular. This was the big change of metropolis, which a lot of people viewed, also looking through an environmental perspective because they were largely aware of the effects of this sprawl. Photographers were also seizing something else than the institutions did at this time. Of course they were under commands but they also were autonomous. Are they some surveys or some documents about this spontaneous metropolitan change, comparing to these voluntary metropolitan changes occurring through the building of large metropolitan objects and the destructions which were the consequences ?

Mark Rice :

I didn't show any of these photographs but there are in the DOCUMERICA project several groups of photographs that show some of the suburban growth around New York City, new developments on Staten Island, and on Long Island for example. In my talk, it was more the development of the cities that were sort of like suburbs-as-cities, such as Phoenix, Arizona, or Dallas, Texas. In terms of some of the older cities, there was some of that.

André Lortie :

Yes, we find some of these periphery views in the archives and I showed one photograph of houses in the suburb of Montreal but there are many others. There should be also films about this transformation of larger metropolitan areas in Canada. I know a little more about Ottawa actually. The Canadian government has made many films about the transformation of Ottawa and these propaganda films were spread in the country to express to the Canadians the faith in the Nation and this great transformation of the national capital Ottawa, trying to enhance the national feeling after World War II.

Antonello Frongia :

In Italy the notion of metropolis was never really an issue, because Italy is the nation of hundreds cities and small villages. In that perspective, Milan is really an exception in terms of public discourse, in city planning circles, in civic circles, etc. Rome has always been physically a large city, with a social stratification that made it a metropolis during the 1950s and 1960s. Naples is also, in my view, the historical country metropolis. In the 1980s and 1990s, Italian city planners and architects expanded their studies about town planning into something different, some diffused city, like the conurbation between Mestre, Treviso and Padua. These three medium-sized centers have been progressively connected by diffused urbanization in the countryside, but still with deep urban characters, services, transportation, culture, made available by the growth of the infrastructure.

In Italy we also have polycentric city or metropolis, like in Emilia-Romagna. All the cities along the media highway, Piacenza, Parma, Reggio, Bologna, etc, give a form to a polycentric city actually. We don't need a major hospital in each city because we can easily travel to the next city, or for certain services, etc. That could not be called metropolis but perhaps, in a way, function in part as a metropolis.

Frédéric Pousin :

JB Jackson has spoken about the photographs made by Joe Deal like showing new models but also something which is going to be permanent. This idea to be able to see what will be permanent is an interesting comment, and I would like to link it with the question of re-identification by the Smithsons. He tried to show us how productive it is in order to analyze the transformation of the city and the new perception that we have of these transformations, and so on. And maybe it's also linked to the perception of photographers like Ugo Mulas or others, that reveal their perception of the new city and the new life, sometimes critical but also with something more complex than a critic. This concept of re-identification is very interesting and has intrigued me.

Raphaële Bertho :

This idea of re-identification is very interesting indeed, and underlines that photography is not only a surface, an object or just an image but also a way of being in the city. You've mentioned that to find the localization of the choices made by photographers is also a way to practice the city, to share an experience of the city. This is maybe how we could analyze these kinds of books on Milano for example, sharing a way to practice the city. The pictures in our presentation show more the way the institutions are projecting the future of an ideal and fictional city. So it could be interesting to cross our visual archives with archives of different experiences of the landscapes, cities and territories.

(question dans la salle) :

In general what do you think about the role of exhibitions in the construction of the image of the city ? Exhibitions are a way to reach the public, to find out how the city was built, how it was, and to appreciate it, and to achieve those archives... When you do your research, do you think the exhibition is a goal, knowing you can reach a large public there ? Unfortunately photographs books like those presented by Antonello Frongia are not well known, but in general an exhibition is a way to show that the architectural photography is actually very well perceived.

André Lortie :

Of course exhibitions are essential ! In the case of Montreal, this exhibition was a commission and I had four years to make research, and actually the topic was not this one at the beginning. At the end the goal was to make an exhibition and my work was to find the best way, the best tools to bring the public and to share these different points of view of the city. Actually it worked !

Mark Rice :

I would like to have the opportunity to organize an exhibition on these surveys too! The Smithsonian American Art Museum has put on exhibitions of some of the NEA surveys, but I don't know exactly what was the curatorial intent. Was it about individual photographs, individual projects or were they trying to develop a sort of more comprehensive representation of what the project was ? The DOCUMERICA was commissioned by the Federal government so it's public domain. The images are not copyrighted in the United States, so theoretically I guess I could go through the huge corpus that has been digitized and select images and create a show that way. It's actually not a bad idea ! I'm going to be using the DOCUMERICA photographs in a class, for the first time in spring, and maybe that's an assignment... Half my students could imagine some sort of thematic cohesion or something about how we might use these to create an exhibition.