

Article

# City-view Photography: Developing Kyiv's Vernacular

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AS CITY DWELLERS, WE ARE SURROUNDED BY AN URBAN FABRIC THAT ACTS AS A BACKGROUND FOR OUR EVERYDAY PRACTICES and it is therefore rarely noticed or verbalised. However, typical urban landscapes, spatial structures and familiar surroundings form the vernacular environment as a mental construction, an image of the city in its residents' minds. It may appear that, since these views are mainly non-reflexive, photography serves as a perfect medium for capturing and exploring the city vernacular. In this paper, therefore, I analyse how the contemporary image of Kyiv vernacular developed with reference to the very first guidebooks produced about Kyiv. I also consider photographic evidence to argue that the vernacular environment engenders a sense of belonging that operates on the basis of a shared imaginary.

With regard to the urban environment, 'vernacular' appeared as a theoretical construct in the 1960s at first, concerning only folk architecture. The word derives from the Latin 'vernaculus' where it meant 'native,' 'local' and 'everyday'. It was used in English as early as the seventeenth century to refer to a mother tongue. In architecture, the term denoted architectural designs that were developed without the input and technical expertise of professional architects. Building practices that relied on traditional ideas and building canons were deployed rather than those associated with technical architectural expertise. In her book, *Map of the Vernacular Regions in America* (1971), Ruth Hale introduces the concept of 'vernacular region'<sup>1</sup> to analyse inhabited spaces with which certain communities identified and which did not correspond to administrative divisions. This notion highlighted the identification of residents

with space and community. It is also worth stressing that 'vernacular region' as a mode of perception arose from people's spatial sensitivity, as it were, not as a product of qualified professionals from such fields as geography, urban studies or urban planning.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, the term "vernacular environment" refers to typical city buildings, structures of streets and public spaces – everything that, in the eyes of inhabitants, constructs their everyday environment. Hence, it is a mental construction that correlates in different ways with the physical space of the city. The urban environment of Kyiv is far from homogeneous, but in the eyes of its residents the city's vernacular environment is now identified with the architecture of the city centre. As was noted, the perception of a 'non-specialist' lies at the foundation of the vernacular concept; thus the question of indicators for these mental notions arises. The city's recent antidevelopment protests could serve as an example of people's view of Kyiv's vernacular environment.

Before the Maidan revolution of 2013-2014, protests against development projects in city space made up a stable 9-10% of all protests in the city.<sup>3</sup> In the remote districts of Kyiv, people's disapproval of real estate development companies' construction projects was driven by functional issues such as the disappearance of green zones, playgrounds and other local amenities. However, in the city centre, these issues tended to be less important than those which are symbolic. Usually, protesters had particular ideas as to what contested places should look like and their justifications referred to the arguments that can be summarised as that which corresponds to their idea of "Kyiv-ness". Here we deal with a stereotype that serves as a basis for identification with the city, something that is perceived to have value that residents want to protect regardless of its functional significance. Inhabitants' vision of the 'inherent,' 'intrinsic,' 'native,' or 'authentic' architectural face of the city is mostly non-reflexive, since the vernacular environment is usually the largely unnoticed background of their everyday practices. However, this understanding becomes more explicit when rapid changes in urban space give rise to opposition from local residents.

What is understood by anti-development protesters as today's Kyiv vernacular was created both as a physical environment and a mental construction at the turn of the twentieth century when Kyiv was undergoing a period of significant change. Two epochs were juxtaposed, the familiar one that was already destined to depart and the new, alien one that was fast approaching. At that time, Kyiv was a *fin de siècle* city where numbers on the buildings had just recently replaced the medieval tradition of image signs, and a clear street plan had been introduced; where Christian crosses installed in squares, roads and near the temples had just recently been succeeded by monuments; where tram lines, which would soon cover the entire city, had not yet replaced horse-drawn carriages and omnibuses; and where the townspeople had not ceased wondering at the 'realism' of the *Calvary* panorama near St. Alexander's cathedral when the first motion picture was brought to the city.

Among new technical wonders that flooded the city, photography occupied a prominent place. It appeared in Kyiv ten years after its initial development. From the late 1840s onwards, foreign daguerreotypists came to the city and taught local photographers. In 1851 the negative mode of photography was invented. It was cheaper, more mobile and suitable for reproduction on paper, all of which contributed to the spread of photography. It is established that the first city-view photographs (pictures of urban landscapes) of Kyiv were shot during the years 1852-1853. They depicted the construction and opening of the Chain Bridge and were taken by John Born at

the invitation of the bridge builder Charles de Vignoles, since at that time the bridge was the largest of its kind in Europe.<sup>4</sup> The first photography studios opened in Kyiv in the late 1850s; ten years later, there were more than twenty of them.



The Chain Bridge in Kyiv at the turn of the twentieth century.

As the city rapidly changed, Kyiv citizens on the edge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries encountered transformation with both fascination and a retrospective glance back to the 'good old days' which referred to a time just a few decades previously. Townspeople complained about new high-storey constructions in the city. In the 1870s, Franz de Mezer's four-storey tenement house was considered to be a skyscraper. This building was so unusual for Kyiv that nobody dared to live in it, which resulted in its owner incurring debt. However, early twentieth century guidebooks suggested that people should visit the twelve-storey Ginzburg building as the tallest building in the city, 'From the balconies of the upper floors of the 'skyscraper', a wide view on the Old Town opens with its ancient churches; from here, in sunny weather one can observe the whole city 'from a bird's-eye perspective'.<sup>5</sup> Kyiv's citizens were proud of the newly installed Michael mechanical lift (funicular); the guidebooks presented it as 'a miracle of modern technology, an embodiment of a witty wizard's design' where 'cars are like balloons, and everything beneath looks ephemeral from a bird's-eye perspective'.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, new buildings made using modern methods employing iron and concrete were developed on Khreschatyk street. People said of these new buildings that:

They create an impression of the factory kind of cold. That cannot be said of the baroque tones of Pechers'ka Lavra or St. Sophia Cathedral with its seal of personal taste, with its exterior physiognomy; or about the housing of the second part of the last century with its stores of different 'old romantic rubbish'.<sup>7</sup>



Ginzburg skyscraper towering the city in c.1910.

There is little doubt that the changes in the city's physical fabric as encapsulated in images from 1860-70 coincided with a rich period of Kyiv's city-view photography.

The early twentieth century articles recall names of nineteenth century Kyiv photography ateliers, firms and photographers, though the majority of their work did not survive. The Kyiv Society for amateur photographers, *Daguerre*, operated from 1901 to 1917. It promoted various photography events in the city: the Second Congress of Russian Empire Photography; the Second International Photography Exhibition of 1908; and the Salon of Art Photography in 1911. As postcards were sold in bookshops, in open stalls on Khreschatyk street and at the Contract fairs, the images most often captured were determined by commercial interests. Customers were primarily interested in personal photos, pictures of sacred places and other sites of interest. Therefore, photography studios made portraits and shot city panoramas, historic sites and prominent buildings of Kyiv.<sup>8</sup>

That is why Kyiv photo-cards captured the rapidly changing urban landscape of the late nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. These images showed new architectural landmarks that changed the face of the city and became new sights of note. Previously, the views of the traditional Kyiv holy places and sites dominated as the city had always been a centre of Orthodox pilgrimage. The postcards featured cathedrals, churches, monasteries, the conventional images of the University of St. Volodymyr and the Institute for Noble Maidens. However, starting from the early twentieth century, new objects attracted the gaze of photographers. Those included the Pechersk and Lypky districts, the City Museum of Antiquities and Arts, the new Opera House, the Pedagogical Museum, and the Besarabskyi indoor market.<sup>9</sup> There was also a series of postcards, 'Beautiful Houses of Kyiv', which consisted of elaborately decorated private and tenement houses. Furthermore, photographers recorded scenes of urban life and gathered them into series of 'urban types' postcards that were popular in the nineteenth century. The authorship of these pictures was of no consequence in comparison with its importance for the first city view prints. Therefore, the authorship of the pictures intended for mass reproduction by the new technology was not advertised, with a few exceptions when it came to some important events.<sup>10</sup>



A postcard from the series 'Beautiful buildings', beginning of the twentieth century.

Roland Barthes' 'studium' is a useful concept with which to consider the development of Kyiv city-view photography. The studium applies to pictures that are habitually perceived in the field of certain knowledge and culture, since it refers to units of classical information. Thousands of pictures were taken in this mode. These photographs duplicate reality, but do not transmute it. There is nothing indirect in such pictures; as only banal features are present, these shots do not provoke anxiety. Barthes believes that regarding such photos merely a general, polite interest can be felt. They can only produce an affect connected with training, education and knowledge that allow us to understand the photographer. Photographs of the studium category can be of interest as evidence or historical document. Spectators become involved in these images as cultural representatives. As viewers, their main interest here is in gaining ethnographic knowledge where the photograph presents a collection

of partial objects and features of everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely studium photography that serves as a medium which develops and imprints the city vernacular. Bourdieu notes that, in the history of photography albums, we mostly see landscapes, islands of photographic experience that are focused on aesthetic or historical factors. Therefore, our interest in such photography is largely an interest in the everyday life of ordinary people, as opposed to collective experience. Our vision is conventional because it is based on the categories and canons of a traditional worldview. That is why the experience of photography is the experience of stereotype.<sup>12</sup> Diachronic study of Kyiv city-view photography provides insight into how the stereotype of the city's vernacular image was formed and changed over time and gives an opportunity to compare it with the representations of Kyiv in the official governmental discourse.

Views of the vernacular environment in a particular space, as well as their correlation to the materiality of the city, are time-biased. Thus, at the turn of the twentieth century, when the contemporary Kyiv vernacular environment was being formed, the historicist style (or the so-called architecture of styles) dominated in the city. Its distinguishing feature was the integration of certain past architectural traditions, into the design of modern buildings. Such a fusion of styles elicited various reactions from residents. For instance, the author of a 1918 guidebook to Kyiv, K. Scherotskyi, contrasted the local tradition that, in his view, was embodied in the baroque and wooden church architecture, with the attempts of planting an alien tradition of a 'Moscow' style and classicism as the 'style of Empire'.<sup>13</sup> The author contrasted a baroque building by architect Alioshyn — that used to be situated opposite the bell tower of St. Sophia Cathedral — with the official buildings constructed during the reign of Nicholas I. Scherotskyi called Alioshyn's house:

a lucky attempt in the modern architecture to approximate to the typical features of the style that became organic for Kyiv and without which the image of ancient Kyiv is unthinkable. Only the buildings of the state offices disturb the general view of the square.<sup>14</sup>

Similar assessments were made of other Empire style buildings. For instance:

at the end of Velyka Volodymyrs'ka street stands an awkward Desiatynna church with its flattened onion-shaped domes [...] how the awkward forms of Desiatynna church sink in estimation in comparison to the neighbouring St. Andrew's Church.<sup>15</sup>



State offices building to the right in the foreground; Desiatynna Church in the background, beginning of the twentieth century.

To counterbalance it, the baroque architecture was highly praised in Kyiv. This style is traditionally associated with the Cossack period of Ukrainian history. It is often called the 'Cossack baroque' since Cossack elders (*starshyna*) donated money for building churches, monasteries and cathedrals; they also preferred this style in civic buildings:

Baroque character is engraved in architectural lines; the breath of the powerful and prosperous age with its unbridled energy is sensed [...] It was the time when Ukrainian culture, science and arts prospered, whilst people's well-being and overall satisfaction with life improved following several centuries of military life. At that time, strict masculine beauty was appreciated and consequently expressed in the layout of the city and in thick, smooth walls, but was also softened by corner projections, lines of windows and modelage. Ideas of power and beauty were thus combined in the Baroque style which embodied the flourishing life of this period; it became the people's achievement, an expression of popular culture.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to formulating the vision of Kyiv's vernacular environment, aforementioned political connotations attributed by residents to architectural styles perform a contra-present function of cultural memory. The latter entails a sense of the shortcomings of the present and appeals to a past which is viewed as an heroic era. By doing so, the contra-present function of cultural memory subverts the present social state, so that, typically, such forms of memory occur in transitional periods when contra-present dynamics of myth may take a revolutionary character, especially under foreign rule.<sup>17</sup> In Ukrainian history, the Cossack period has been presented as the heroic epoch since nineteenth century. For Kyiv, these were the times when the city had administrative autonomy according to the Magdeburg Law, when, owing to the city brotherhoods, 'Ukrainian people managed to defend their nationality', and Kyiv Brotherhood School (later Academy) became the centre of Ukrainian enlightenment. The author of the 1918 guidebook sums it up this way: '300-200 years ago, the masses were much more cultured than contemporary people downtrodden and uneducated due to the Russification of Ukraine'.<sup>18</sup>



The entrance to Kyiv-Pechers'ka Lavra. Remodelled in Baroque style with the money donated by Hetmans Ivan Mezepa and Ivan Skoropads'kyi.

Today, Baroque, Empire style, various styles of historicism architecture, and later Art Nouveau — everything that was the subject of debate about the 'inherent' and 'alien' to Kyiv at the beginning of the twentieth century — is a part of a vernacular environment in the perception of its current inhabitants. However, representations of the city in the official discourses have not changed much for the last hundred years. As the capital, Kyiv has always combined two memory narratives, a local one and a more generic one that reflected official founding myths of the state to which Kyiv belonged at that particular time. Imperial Kyiv, as a part of the Russian Empire, was conceived within myths of 'Jerusalem of the Rus' lands' and 'mother of the Rus' cities'. During the Soviet era, they were transformed in the state memory discourse into the mythologem of 'the cradle of three fraternal peoples'.<sup>19</sup> These myths emphasized the Kyivan Rus' period of history that was, at that time, coloured entirely by the colonizers' discourse (at first, the Russian Empire, then the USSR). However, the physical environment of Kyiv did not fit into these mythologies even in the early twentieth century. Thus, in 1912 Zinaida



Shamurina visited Kyiv with expectations of seeing 'the centre of public pilgrimage, the first "holy places" after Jerusalem'.<sup>20</sup> But the real Kyiv subverted her expectations. She wrote that when you 'walk along neat "European" streets with trams, cars and festively dressed houses, you feel slightly disappointed - where is ancient Kyiv?'.<sup>21</sup>



Khreshchatyk Street – main Kyiv street at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Therefore, the physical vernacular environment of the city can be an essential factor of resistance to the dominant collective memory discourse. This physical environment serves as the basis for the vernacular as a mental construction, as the city's imagined dimension for its inhabitants. Thus, for them, their familiar environment is no less important than recognized symbolic buildings, since interaction with the past and the present, with buildings and the spaces between them, creating an urban dynamic and a spirit of the place. As Orbasli states, for users, the urban environment is an interpretation through personal identification and attachment of the existing physical fabric of the city, sets of buildings and street networks.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to the question of media, certain characteristics of photography make it a perfect medium for demonstrating the history and grasping the visual representation of the vernacular environment. One of the main features is, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, the miracle of so-called objectivity of the photographic image consisting in its ability to disclose a biased world. He believes that in contrast to meaning, the role of the image is to reveal actuality in the object. In most cases, the ability of the image to reveal the bare fact of existence is ignored in favour of ideology, aesthetics, politics and the need to recognize links to other images. While most images tell stories after having erased silent signification of their objects, photography helps to dispense with the subject's influence and allows the magic of objects to be revealed. The camera has a certain neutrality which allows it to grasp objects' appearance unobtrusively. It does not seek to investigate or analyse reality. In contrast, a photographic gaze touches the surface of things. Baudrillard paraphrases Wittgenstein: 'What cannot be said can also be kept silent through a display of images.' He therefore proposes to replace the triumphal epiphany of meaning by the silent apophany of objects and their manifestations; to resist the

imperative of sense by demonstrating the lack of signification in photography.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the photographic image creates an impression of presence that can be explained by the fact that, due to its analogical nature, photography is a message without a code. As one kind of image among others, photographs can transmit information without using any discrete signs or transformation rules. On the level of the literal message, the photograph's signifier and signified are connected not by the relation of transformation, but by the relation of imprinting, so that the very absence of code only reinforces the myth of the "naturalness" of the photographic image. The mechanistic process of shooting is the key to the photograph's objectivity, while human involvement in the act of photographing (frame construction, selection of distance to the subject, lighting) belongs entirely to the connotative plan. Everything happens as if at first the photograph exists as such, and only then, viewers provide it with signs using certain techniques drawn from their cultural code. Barthes believes that it is the opposition between the cultural code and natural non-code that reveals the specifics of photography and explains the type of consciousness generated by it. Photography does not invoke an impression of an object's being-now (any copy can cause such feeling), but of its being-in-the-past. Thus a new space-time category emerges that localizes in the present an object that belongs to the past. Breaking the rules of logic, photography juxtaposes notions of 'here' and 'once'.<sup>24</sup>

This juxtaposition of the past and the present that leads to the recognition of a depicted place lies at the foundation of the reading modes applied to the old city-view photographs. The perception of nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs by contemporary viewers is guided by the preferences of the editors of the albums in which they are published. The placement of photographs, their positioning regarding the contemporary pictures and image's captions, induce a certain reading mode. On the basis of these different types of recognition that derive from the juxtaposition of 'here' and 'once', several regimes of the old city-view photography reading will be analysed.

The album *Kyiv Yesterday and Today*<sup>25</sup> presents four photos on every double page; a page to the left containing ancient pictures is styled to look old, whereas the right page consists of modern photographs of the same places shot at the angle best resembling the one in the original pictures. The left page's image captions are made using the names of streets and buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the right page's are contemporary. Such design operates within a mode of 'guided recognition'. It ensures recognition, since viewers do not require any special skills to perceive the continuity or rupture of times presented in the album.

*The Kulzhenko's Kyiv* album is constructed in a similar vein.<sup>26</sup> The editors emphasize that black-and-white printing was chosen deliberately even for modern photographs. Such representation guides a viewer towards a sense of the continuity and perpetuity of time. For example, a nineteenth century photograph of Sophiivska Square does not differ much from the contemporary one. The same is true for pictures of St. Andrew's Church or the monument to St. Vladimir.



Guided recognition: a sense of continuity. St. Sophia square, Kyiv at the beginning of the twentieth century, above, followed by how it looks now.

Quite often this feeling is deceptive, since the modern photographs show not the same buildings that were in front of the camera lens in the nineteenth century, but rather their modern replica or restoration. In the images of the central part of Kyiv-Pechers'ka Lavra, Mykhailivskiy monastery or the monuments to Princess Olga, these buildings seem not to have changed for the last hundred years, though in the modern photographs we see reconstructions of these buildings made between 1998 and 2002. Although restoration may create a beautiful copy, it cannot recover the original.



Guided recognition: false continuity.  
Mykhailivskiy monastery built in the twelfth century in an early twentieth century, above.  
Followed by the reconstruction of Mykhailivskiy monastery erected in 1999 in the  
contemporary photograph.

A comparison of photographs of places that have changed significantly since the turn of the previous century are perceived as a time gap. Take for instance photographs of the Golden Gates, Khreshchatyk street, and Dums'ka (Independence) square.



Time gap. Dumska square at the beginning of twentieth century became Maidan (Independence square).

Recognition of sites in Kyiv that have changed less significantly can be described as a pinprick made by a certain detail in the photograph that leads to a sharp shift in the focus of viewers' attention and encourages an active reading of the picture. This detail, which possesses a power of virtual expansion that stimulates the imagination, can be an indicator of the ellipse in time, as well as a sign of its continuity. If one observes photos of Bibikovs'kyi (Shevchenko's) boulevard, initially the old and the modern ones seem to be identical. But the next moment, when the gaze focuses on the upper left corner of the modern picture, there is a modern glass skyscraper that, of course, is absent in the photograph from the early twentieth century.

Other differences become apparent, including a change of the statue at the beginning of the boulevard. At the dawn of twentieth century it was a statue of railway investor Count Bobrinsky, whereas now there stands a monument to Shchors, a hero glorified for his role in the Soviet era civil war (1917-1922).



Prick with the detail: reading the differences. Pictures of Bibikovs'kyi (now Shevchenko's) boulevard.

In contrast, a photograph of the nineteenth century Desiatynna church does not resemble the same place in the twenty first century. However, the dome of St. Andrew's Church in the background of the picture serves as an incidental detail that still leads to recognition.



Prick with the detail: searching for recognition. Desiatynna church on the foreground of the old picture, while on the modern picture, only St. Andrew's Church against the background remained.

Another type of construction is used in the albums entitled *Old Kyiv*<sup>27</sup> and *Kyiv on Postcard of the Late Nineteenth - early Twentieth Centuries*.<sup>28</sup> They present only old photos of the city, the year of shooting and sometimes the author are stated, and all the street and buildings names are written as they were at the time when the images were originally taken. These albums do not contain any references, footnotes, comments or clarification of what is shown. Therefore, on the one hand, an immersion into ancient Kyiv occurs, while, on the other, a certain cultural competence is required to recognise the objects depicted. Without such knowledge, it is impossible to locate within modern Kyiv a picture of Irynyns'ka column, of St. George church, Desiatynna church by the architect Stasov, Iron church or the city's vernacular environment, since it is not stated in the albums which buildings survived. In this case, the process of reading could be described in Bergson's terms as the process of narrowing.

At first we position ourselves in the past in general, then in a certain area of the past that appears as a virtual image.<sup>29</sup> At the next stage, an eye searches for a mark or detail, the recognition of which would enable the reading of the picture.

In the pictures of city streets, these are mostly well-known objects, symbols of the city or other structures that make up part of Kyiv citizens' visual experience, such as the building at the corner of Prorizna and Volodymyrs'ka streets or the former Frommet's house on the Shevchenko's boulevard.







Reading as narrowing. Corner of Prorizna and Volodymyrs'ka streets.

A further popular genre of city-view photography is panorama. Reading panoramic photos resembles a new sensitivity of the gaze described by Roland Barthes. This gaze contemplates the city from above, it has not only to perceive, but also to read, since it is essential to see objects in their structure. The city becomes an intelligible object without losing its materiality. Panoramic vision starts with spontaneous distinguishing of certain points, their recognition, combination with each other, and then their perception in a large space. After the operations of separation and grouping, the city appears as a virtually prepared object that needs to be constructed by the mind in order to be perceived as a general view. Thus, the panorama is an image that we are trying to decipher by recognizing familiar places and identifying the landscape. The lack of a predictable object in a certain place induces viewers to observe the photograph one more time searching for the location of the omitted structure. In that moment, cultural imprinting competes with perception. The analytical work consists of reconstructing, forcing memory and senses to work together creating in the mind a simulacrum of the city, the elements of which are right before the viewer, who is disorientated by the total space. Furthermore,

observing a city from above means imagining its history, thinking about the mutations of landscape, the mystery of time starting from prehistory to the present day.<sup>30</sup> This describes the process of the creation and comparison of a mental map that occurs while viewing the panoramic photos of Podil or general views of central Kyiv from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Reading a panorama picture. Panorama of Podil district in Kyiv.

Following Barthes' metaphor, photography is an adventure that can affect viewers but that may also leave them feeling indifferent.<sup>31</sup> This adventure with old city-view photography takes place at the intersection of recognition and active work of imagination. With reference to semiotics, the punctum and off-frame space, these processes might be explained. As Susan Sontag noted, photography is a slice of time and space. Every photograph can have dozens of meanings, as if a picture hinted that it is only a surface and it is for the viewer to think and feel what is behind it. A photograph can explain nothing by itself, but it induces deduction and the work of imagination.<sup>32</sup> The latter is provoked

by the details referred to as pinpricks earlier associating them with Barthes' punctum. When the punctum emerges, it creates a 'blind field'; something external to the photograph's frame appears. This dynamic presence of the blind field takes the viewer beyond the frame.<sup>33</sup>

Photography cuts out a part of the referent; that is why a sense of reality prevails, meaning that a photograph is often perceived as an indexical sign where the signifier is connected with its referent not by social convention or similarity, but by direct connection with the world. Indexicality lies in the physical process of making photos, in the principle of shooting, since it is a 'drawing with light'. That 'cut out' piece of time and space remains unchanged (unlike the rest of the surrounding reality) and avoids the resultant oblivion of being displaced by the following 'shot'.

What remains in the off-frame space will never get into the frame of the picture, will never be seen. It is this absence, this lack, that constitutes the gaze and exercises the imagination of the viewer. The power of the reality excluded from the rectangle of paper induces viewers to imagine what is left out of the frame regardless of their lack of empirical knowledge about its content; viewers cannot stop dreaming, imagining something in place of the off-frame space emptiness. Photography is perceived as suspended knowledge, since viewers do not confuse a signifier (a photograph) with a real-world referent, they know what representation is, but nevertheless gain an uncanny sense of reality (the denial of a signifier). Thus, photography metonymically indicates the lack, and metaphorically fills it.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, Barthes' punctum is a detail that animates off-frame space. The photograph by itself is a site of presence and that is constantly haunted by the feeling of boundary that is the past, a lost time. It is an ambivalent feeling of near and far as with Walter Benjamin's concept of aura that combines feelings of authenticity, uniqueness, and distance.

Photography is perhaps the most effective medium for the mental construction of vernacular environments, since both operate on the pre-symbolic level. The imaginable photographic referent avoids verbalization, as putting into words presupposes providing the pictured with certain meaning. Meanwhile, photographs accomplish a deictic function pointing out that something existed in the past without any further conclusions. Thus, photography leaves enough space for extra-semantic recognition that can reveal the vernacular.

Vernacular environments are an important factor in shaping a sense of belonging to a certain space and a certain community. The vernacular is a conductor of the anonymous that eludes all forms of institutionalized power carrying the invisible presence of a non-symbolized but emotionally loaded community of strangers. It is a community of recognition based on shared conventional experiences. As Elena Peterovskaia argues, what seems monotonous, endlessly replicated and mundane provides affective ties that lie within the scope of the collective imagination. Since the latter is structured as cliché, commonplace has a quality of singularity when truism and platitude are places open to accidental encounters and common use.<sup>35</sup> The vernacular environment is an alternative to symbolic identification and thus a more inclusive way of creating community and a sense of belonging to a place.

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## Notes

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