



Writing the City with Light and Words¹

Project option, Urban Studies 200 & Geography 250

Elvin Wyly

“The photographic impulse, as I experienced it ... wore two aspects, the creative and the commemorative. The first sought to catch, in the plump snap of the shutter, something vivid and even beautiful in its color and contour; the second aim, more realistic though in a sense grander, was to halt the flow of time. The camera, that highly evolved mechanism, put into Everyman's un-trained hands the chance to become, if half by accident, a death-defying artist.” John Updike.²

World urbanization accelerated with the onset of industrialization in the early- to middle years of the nineteenth century. Photography developed at nearly the same pace as industrialization. In 1833, Thomas Wedgewood figured out how to create profiles by exposing paper or cloth soaked in nitrate to light; Daguerre devised a method in 1838 to print an image on glass (creating what became known as the ‘Daguerrotype’); and around 1851, an Englishman by the name of Archer developed a technique for creating a ‘negative’ before exposing a sheet of sensitized paper. Photography -- from the Greek *photos* (light) and *grapho* (to write) -- evolved in tandem with industrialized urbanism, allowing more and more people to capture the visual elements of the

¹ In other words, “city photo essay.” Photograph: Mid-City New Orleans, Louisiana, July 2007 (Elvin Wyly).

² John Updike (2007). “Visual Trophies.” *The New Yorker*, December 24/31, 144-148, quote from p. 148.

social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics of cities around the world. Now, as many parts of the world are being deindustrialized, and as the meaning of industry is being transformed by new technologies and practices of production, distribution, and consumption, photography remains one of the most widely used tools to chronicle the conditions of cities and urban life.

This project gives you an opportunity to practice the art of writing with light (and words) to learn about cities and urban life. Your job is to choose any photograph of a city or urban subject that you have taken yourself, and to write an essay of interpretation and analysis. You should draw explicit connections between the image and themes explored in this course. How does the image illustrate a concept or theory presented in the textbook, suggested readings, or other academic sources that you've read? What are the (perhaps unseen, off-camera) processes that produced what is shown in the image? If the image is of a well-known place or landmark, have you found books or articles written by people who've taken similar images of the same place?

You should begin by taking a look at *Imaginer Urbanus*, at

<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly/imaginer.html>

and you should also read

Wyly, Elvin (2010). "Things Pictures Don't Tell Us: In Search of Baltimore." *City* 14(5), 497-528.

Then choose a photograph you've taken, and be creative. Explore the connections between your photograph and any themes covered in the course -- in the lectures, or the textbook, or any of the other readings I recommend. And it's fine to draw on your personal knowledge as well as your knowledge of newspaper journalism, novels, films, or other aspects of life in the urban phenomenon depicted in your photograph.

Do consider carefully the ethical choices in photography. It's usually okay to take photographs in large, public areas -- like crowds and broad street-scenes -- where there is no reasonable expectation of privacy. But otherwise be careful, and follow UBC's rules and regulations on behavioural ethics and copyright.

Don't forget invisibility: sometimes the most interesting things about city photographs involve the things they *don't* show. Don't worry if your photograph might not meet all the high standards of a professional photographer: what matters most is the thoughtful interpretation and analysis of the photograph in relation to interesting themes in urban studies.

I recommend that you simply insert your photograph into a word processing document like I've done here. It's not crucial that the photograph be printed in color when you turn in the essay, unless color is a crucial part of your analysis and interpretation.

Submit your essay according to the general instructions on the syllabus and the "general guidelines." Be creative, and have fun!