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## **Photography as Instrument of Urban Observation: A convergent issue in research on cities**

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### **Abstract**

The value of the image's range as an object of investigative technical support has been widely questioned and, currently, still encounters resistance.

Photography, however, as document and witness, has been resisting for more than a century, and it is product and instrument of urbanization and the expansion and growth of cities, being however, essentially urban, according as it appears at the same time that modern cities born, being several the records of photographers who have focused on them, and significant the works of architects and urbanists who use the imaging support as an instrument of urban life investigation.

Taking as an final example with a new focus the popular settlement Campo Alegre, located between the municipalities of Nova Iguaçu and Queimados, in the metropolitan region of the state of Rio de Janeiro, this paper provides an overview of the importance of the use of photography as a methodological instrument of research and has as objective to relate the importance of the researcher's use of photography as a source of investigation and scientific publicizing during the observation and recording of happenings in urban life: it's stories, it's meanings and memories, in the attempt to decode it's symbols and reveal the contradictions contained within it's reality.

**Keywords:** photography; visual witness; urbanism; popular settlements.

## **Photography: Document and Witness**

The value of the photographic image range as an object of technical investigative support has been widely questioned and, currently, still encounters resistance. Photography, although a document capable of being used as a witness of events from the past and as an indispensable tool for the analysis and better understanding of reality from a particular period, still has not received adequate acknowledgement in human knowledge areas.

Photography, over the course of history, has served political, religious, and sociocultural ideologies, as well as purely esthetical ones. Emerged in the second decade of the 19th century, it provided visual records with views of the social memory of societies, of the conflicts and events of war through photojournalism, of scientific research whose experimentations were proven through image-based evidence and of artistic creation, provided by experimentations expressed in distinct languages and artistic styles.

According to the architect and photographer Boris Kossoy (2001), however, photography, despite having achieved acknowledgement as a still meets cultural oppositions in the majority of institutions which only recognize the writing as expression capable of fully transmitting scientific knowledge, although photography had already been used for documentary purposes since the 1930s. According to Carney Gavin (1985) cited by Kossoy (2001):

Paradoxically, photographic documents, despite their legendary superiority in relation to verbal records, even today frequently pass through the tight mesh of erudition. Libraries diligently preserve miniscule fragments of the notes of a writer, art curators keep even an artist's most unfinished sketch as though it were treasure; however, many cultural repositories contain precious photographs that were never registered in the inventories (GAVIN, 1985, p.9 cited in KOSSOY, 2001, p.29).

Under Roy Stryker's<sup>1</sup> leadership, photographers of great repute reported, through their objective lens, the years of the Great Depression: Dorothea Lange, Walker Leans, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, and Gordon Parks are some names responsible for the rich collection formed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an agency created in 1935 by president, at that time, Franklin Roosevelt.

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<sup>1</sup> Economist graduated from Columbia University who has since based its texts and classes in images.

The FSA carried out pioneering work and one of the largest documentations in history by bringing together a team to witness the farmers lives affected by the 1929 crisis, thus creating one of the largest and most important photographic collections in North America, at the beginning of twentieth century (Nunes, 2011.).

The organization, created to provide support to small farmers and rural communities during the Great Depression, he turned to photography to record the work to be completed by the FSA.

In this way the design of what would become photo documentarism was secured, and the FSA played a role of great influence and importance in the documentaries that emerged from that point onwards.

If, on the one hand, photography had already been legitimized as a documentation source, its recognition in research, through theory and texts, came very recently, beginning in the mid-twentieth century (Rouillé, 2009, p.16), and in academics, Visual Anthropology was one of the first areas to advocate the use of the image in its methodological process of research.

Visual Anthropology has been developing since the 1970s and contains important theoretical and reflective work, which consists on determination and analysis of the properties of visual systems and their discursive strategies, as well as the terms of its interpretation, relating these particular systems with the complexities of social and political processes of which they are a part (Pares, 1997.).

Collier (1973), in the 1970s, emphasized the importance of using the photographic record in the development of anthropological research, believing that only the still image has the ability to reveal aspects of a particular region and town in all its authenticity.

The photograph, as document and testimony, has been surviving for more than a century, and according to Rouille (2009), it is an instrument and product of urbanization and the expansion and growth of cities, and therefore equally and essentially urban, to the extent that it arises in the same time period as modern cities, as there are many records of photographers who have focused on them (Rouillé, 2009, p.29).

To cite some examples, among Brazilians, we find Marc Ferrez (1843-1923), with his vision of landscape, and Augusto Malta (1864 - 1957), with his photojournalistic eye: both documented changes that occurred in Rio de Janeiro, beginning in the late nineteenth century.

Marc Ferrez was the photographer with the greatest level of recognition in his time (Moreira, 2008). He recorded several regions of Brazil supported by the Geological Commission of the Empire and was responsible for portraying everyday scenes and mainly landscape images.

Malta - the Pereira Passos government's official documentary photographer (position created especially for him) - along with Ferrez, was responsible for registering the urban changes occurring at the time, as well as buildings that would be demolished, floods, landslides, events and celebrations organized by the Municipality.

The photo came to be recognized as an documentary instrument of great historical importance. Through it, Pereira Passos intended to demonstrate the advances made as opposed to the previous "delay". Regarding his role as photographer, Moreira (2008) says:

'Emboldened by the result obtained by the photographs, Pereira Passos offered Malta the position of photographer archivist of City Hall [...]. In short, something that corresponded to the joint effort of the City and the federal government for the transformation of Rio de Janeiro into a metropolis in the European manner. But mostly, that left photographically documented both the previous delay and the greatness of each of the works and we cannot forget that photography was seen then as the most real and true expression of an event. But Malta would mainly record results. In other words, he documented the transformation of a typical colonial town still into a real metropolis, and through that transformation - civilize the habits and customs of the population.' (MOREIRA, 2008.).

In Architecture and Urbanism, renowned authors have already spoken about the value of the image as an essential element in the quest for understanding the landscape and the transformation of urban space and began to use the "imagery discourse" as the main path to for understanding the very city in construction and the relationship of the inhabitant to his space.

Kevin Lynch, for example, in *The Image of the City* (1997), published in 1960, defends the importance of understanding the perception of the city by its inhabitants and the discovery of their meanings through their symbolisms and collective memory.

In a moment of strong criticism of the loss of human dimension in modern cities, Lynch made important contributions to the urban field, as he lectured on observation and perception of urban space, exploring not only the temporal question in the history of cities, but also and mainly the visual perception of the city and what feelings this arouses in the individual, following a path that indicates anthropology.

In the book, the author investigated the perception of image through the visual look and feel, both elements that enable us to grasp the nature of a city and codify its collective and individual symbols, giving meaning to what is seen. Thus, with the clarity and definition of this image is then possible to acquire new information and identify what relationship of the observed being has with the world around him.

Following these precepts, the architect and urban planner comes to recognize other methodological processes in the development of his urban research and to accept the recording of images as an essential tool in his studies. He realizes that, at certain times, only the photograph and its visual context enable the collection and extraction of all the information that were not voiced in conversations or statements, i.e.: they make accessible visual understanding of what was not captured through statements and interviews, and finally, restore the narrated image when the rescue and record of looking over the area in question is done.

Later, in the 1980s, while researching at the Center for Urban and Regional Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Lynch writes the book "The Good City Form", another relevant contribution, which discusses mainly the form of the city, understood through mental maps and images that the individual creates over it. Again, a study that aimed to investigate the visual quality of the city (in this case, North American) through the image or mental record that its inhabitants have of it.

More recently, we can cite as references among scholars engaged in the recovery of social and symbolic function of the city and the psychological and anthropological question in urbanism through the sensibility and the human dimension, the architects and photographers Cristiano Mascaro and Boris Kossoy<sup>2</sup>.

Mascaro, for over two decades, performs continuous documentation of the city of São Paulo and its architecture, also, has documented the interior of the capital as well as the historical and cultural heritage of Brazil. On the possibility of portraying the city, Mascaro said in a statement made to one of his exhibitions: "[...] I discovered photography as a fascinating universe, an extremely expressive way, of stopping life as we go observing and walking the streets [...]" (Mascaro, 1993.).

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<sup>2</sup> Mascaro and Boris Kossoy are active researchers and professionals whose focus are on the value of photography as a historical witness and document (See "Fotografia & História" and "Os Tempos da Fotografia: o efêmero e o perpétuo").

With this sentence, we can interpret that the image are not only one of the ways to grasp and penetrate into the dynamics of the city's everyday life, but also an instrument that allows the architect and urbanist to reflect about this universe and analyze it through the eyes of those who search for answers about urban life.

Kossoy casts a keen eye on the life in cities - especially Brazil and NY - on his photographic collection. He believes that the photographic image is "a fragment of the world, which in representing space, sends us back in time [...]" (Kossoy, [n.d.]).

In the 1970s, he photographed political demonstrations and the life of the city of New York, devoting special attention to architecture, while he also suggested fictional photography, for example, in one of his books "Voyage through the Fantastic," published in 1971, at the same time in which he was creating a documentary work, but that always had as a final objective to question the veracity of the reality we see and observe.

In a decade in which photographers were engaged in documentary and descriptive images, Kossoy innovated by publishing images of visual expression of fantastic realism. His series "Anti-Post Cards", according to Vasquez (2010), aims to demystify the idealization on the part of society, a phenomenon created by the "Brazilian miracle" phenomenon. With the series, the photographer revealed the dark side of the country, hidden in the visual ideology intended to be revealed at the military regime period.

About the author, Fernandes Junior (2011) says:

'[...] The interesting thing is just trying to understand in our free association that Kossoy does not follow the tradition of documentary photography produced in the country at that time, but seeks to engage the tension, the moment apparently found by chance, but that was meticulously engineered. Literature is his main influence, and from there comes this feeling of restlessness that excites our curiosity about his photographic representation that creates opportunities to get closer that world represented in our socio-cultural experience.'

Both Kossoy and Mascaro are significant examples of architects and urban planners who have based their work on visual language, and that use it as a guide to better explain and decode the city.

To obtain information on the characteristics of urban space and the consequent ability to deeply interpret them, the architects resort to a central methodological procedure defined by the use of photography, understanding that their nature allows one to achieve, through human

observation and interaction, the ability for a joint vision of the researcher in relation to the environment surrounding his material.

## Application in research: Campo Alegre, a case study

Taking as an example of a new approach application in an largely representative urban area in two municipalities of Rio de Janeiro (Queimados and Nova Iguaçu), which contain some of the most severe housing shortages in our country, the choice of the Campo Alegre settlement is justified primarily by its historical value.

The settlement was implemented by the land reform program in the 1980s, and is considered by the Institute of Land and Cartography of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ITERJ), one of the most representative regarding the conditions of their homes and the formation of their task force, which had very strong symbolic representation in the emergence of several other movements for land that occurred earlier that decade. Campo Alegre is, therefore, a reference among the settlements that emerged in that period in the State of Rio de Janeiro.

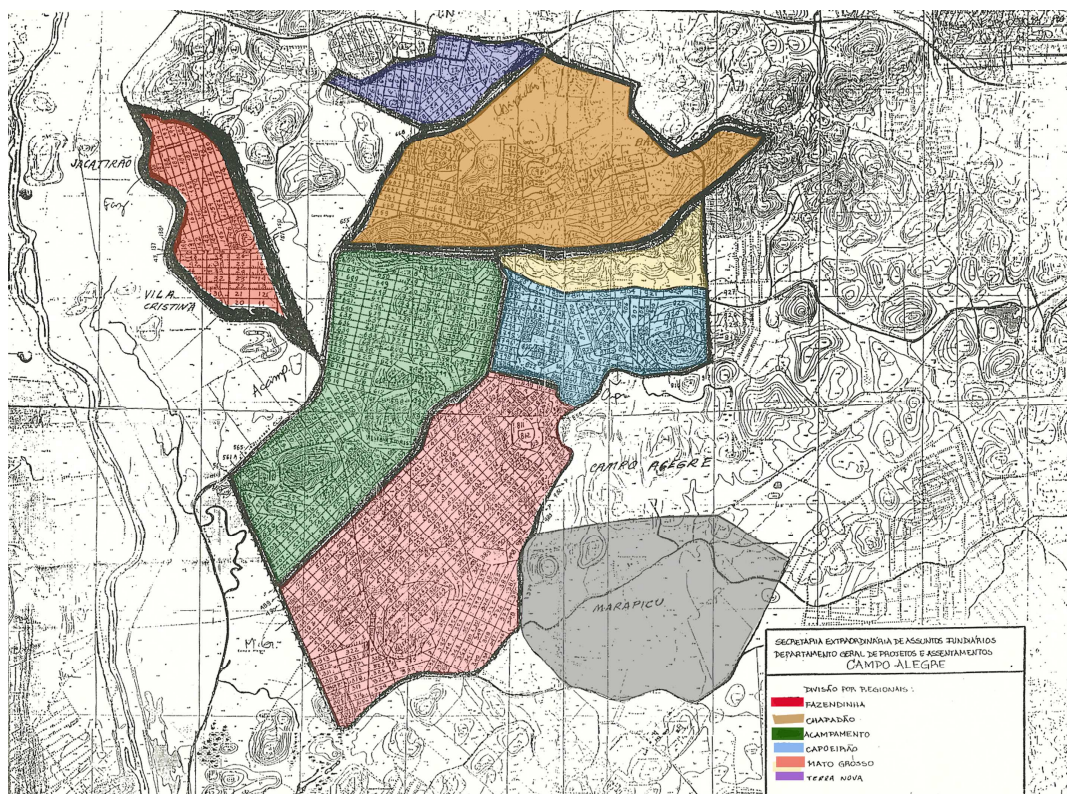
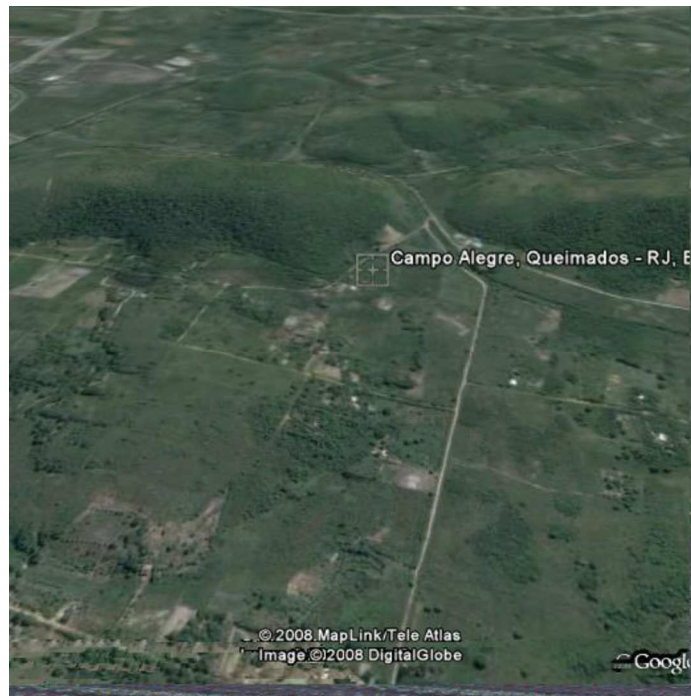


Figure 01: division of the regional settlement Campo Alegre. Source: ITERJ



**Figure 02:** Campo Alegre Settlement. Source: Google Earth, 2008.

Originally, the area possessed rural characteristics, although, nowadays, it is also identified as an urban area, within the framework of ITERJ, since it is located in the metropolitan area of our state, and therefore ends up absorbing the urban characteristics of the space surrounding it.

Therefore, the second reason that led the area to be chosen can be explained by the fact that one finds a smaller number of related research, compared to the vast bibliography of research aimed at housing policies in the major centers when compared with the number of papers devoted to the role of rurality in relation with the city and its urban context, the area mentioned above was chosen as the theme of research.

Believing, therefore, in the contribution wished to offer to a space that has not yet received the attention it deserves, the study is conducted in an area that covers the urban characteristics combined with the occasionally rural ones.

To study the question of how the resident, a settlement occupant, initially irregular, deals with and moves in this space so far from the center, but also included in it, is the question that permeates the project.



With interest in analyzing how the metropolitan area interferes on the construction, organization and development of space settlement, was established for the project as a primary analysis objective the relationship that the resident builds with their habitat. Moreover, the research seeks to understand how the environment external to Campo Alegre (as well as their cities and their neighborhoods) reflects and modifies the habits of its inhabitants, the buildings construction and the area occupation form in this period, knowing that currently, this is already greatly expanded and urbanized, unlike the early decades regarding the period of its implementation.

To obtain information on the characteristics of this process and the consequent ability to interpret them in depth, the project development provides a central methodological procedure defined by the use of photography, understanding that their nature allows one to achieve, through observation and human interaction, the capacity for joint vision of the researcher in relation to the environment surrounding his material, making the photographic camera the ideal research tool, capable of providing the researcher a greater and closer involvement with his subject.

Thus, through the systematic recording of documentary images in conjunction with the collected material from interviews in loco, it is possible to obtain information that helps understand the lifestyle of the settlement residents, analyzing their movements to the central metropolitan region and the transformations that this environment plays in the relationship between the subject and his housing, as well as allowing identify the origins of this change as a social issue.



**Figure 03** - The road to the Regional Mato Grosso, Campo Alegre, 2008. Source: Personal Archives (Picture: Carolina de Hollanda)

### **Social Housing: social, cultural and economic dimensions captured through visual reading**

To study one of the subjects relating social housing in Brazil, the research addresses issues related to the formulation of public housing policies at a time in which it is extremely important to build a new and deeper understanding of the analysis of the construction of urban and housing programs in Brazil.

Factors such as the deficit, inadequate housing and poor sanitation are issues that deserve special attention, especially in a period in which this situation is worsened by sprawling urban growth and disorderly use of soil, resulting in areas increasingly precarious and a context of vulnerability and risk.

According to the UN general undersecretary and executive director of the United Nations Program for Human Settlements (Un-Habitat), Anna Tibaijuka (2010):

'[...] The continued growth of cities calls for new solutions and public policies that help to gather adequate housing with access to goods and services, as well as promote income generation for a population contingent that still migrates from rural areas to cities, in search of better opportunities and quality of life.'

Also according Tibaijuka (2010), exclusion in cultural, social and political aspects is one of the main factors responsible for the economic exclusion of much of the world's population and only urbanization based on the right to water supply, to the sewage disposal system, to adequate housing, to a sustainable environment and to education, will enable a qualitative development of a city and the reduction of those who do not exercise the right to the city.

In order, therefore, to achieve the social, cultural and economic dimensions capable of interfering with the construction of settlement space devoided of the community services and facilities offered to the urban area to which it belongs, the application of a research methodology capable of contributing to the formulation of public policies for urban development and housing programs that increase the supply of urbanized areas and infrastructure becomes paramount.

In this specific case, the photographic camera is the instrument responsible for the documentation of cultural representations and is able to encode non-verbal language present in the everyday reality of its inhabitants.

The systematic registration of images has important documentary value because it represents the recovery of the visual memory of man and his sociocultural surroundings (Kosoy, 2001, p.55). The experienced spaces are superimposed onto images of citizens imaginary and perpetuated in their visual memory.

The photograph, thus, although poorly absorbed as a highly effective tool in the development of a scientific research methodology, makes it possible to obtain an understanding of the urban lifestyle of the city, its changes over time, its mobility as well as the analysis of the relationship of the residents of the area in question, and make it possible to identify them with their habitat.

When photographing the subject and registering it under the angle of the camera, the viewer interacts quite closely with the object and the participants of the scenario, without taking a distanced stance on the social group and circumstances established as a center of his research interests<sup>3</sup>. This points to the camera as an essential research tool able to provide the researcher with a greater and closer involvement with their subject.

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<sup>3</sup> Here is important to notice that in such proximity to the subject, we must consider the photographer who works in the field, who stays at the place of his study and creates socializing bonds with the locals and, therefore, does not register it with a distant view of mere visitor, but, rather, with the eyes of those who absorbed the daily life of the subject whised to photograph and with the aim of creating an effective link with his documental work.

The photographed moment freezes the (static) image and may show the nostalgic sentiment (memory exercise) or the call for immediate transformation of the present space (projection into the future). The "researcher-photographer", when accepting the urban universe as it presents itself, that is, constantly changing, discovers himself to be viscerally connected to the city and brings forth the discussion of socio-cultural practices structured from the image universe.

Documentation in the field allows greater visual analysis control, and allows the recording of certain situations that represent changes in their cultural habits and the junction of photography as an imaging instrument with both disciplines, architecture and urbanism, allows the development of a discussion on space through not only the theoretical knowledge that permeates architecture and urbanism but also the visual context, which will make possible the deepening of one sole subject from two disciplines that complement each other.

### **The methodology of the gaze: local understanding through the image**

In a perfect adjustment with the dynamism of the contemporary city, the researcher uses photography as a source of research and scientific dissemination and observes and records the events of urban life in Campo Alegre: its stories, their meanings and memories that are also preserved visually.

In the specific case of Campo Alegre, the photographic image analysis thus serves to track economic, social and cultural characteristics, believing that such an investigative analysis tool plays a role of significant value for the study of many other settlements in relation to the city and its urban context, providing high contribution in helping overcome problems indicated by the documentary point of view.

Through the systematic registration of images along with the material collected from interviews in the field, it is possible to obtain information that assist the understanding of this settlement residents lifestyle, analyzing their movements to the central metropolitan region and the changes that environment causes in the relationship between the settler and his housing, and also allows the identification of the origins of this change as a social issue.

It is a matter of visually understand what, in an earlier time, got captured through the words of interviews and restore the narrated image of the moment redemption of the glance on the

relationship of the area with its inhabitants<sup>4</sup>: an attempt, through snippets and image support, to decode the symbols and reveal the contradictions contained within their reality, in the search to understand a particular cultural, collective and individual identity of the contemporary city and the being that inhabits it.

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<sup>4</sup> Campo Alegre emerges in the 1980s, and certainly has been transformed and adapted to the reality of the moment.

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