

DSDHA's grounded research agenda: collective impressions

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DSDHA, Collective Impression of London's Royal Albert Hall.
This image is a combination of the first hundred images gathered after conducting a Google keyword search for 'Royal Albert Hall'.

Keywords: grounded research, personal landscapes, overlay, human presence, design, technology

ABSTRACT: when architects give lectures about their work they tend to show a series of photographs of their completed buildings: striking images (often devoid of human presence) taken by third-party professional photographers, suggesting a totally unproblematic relationship between design practice, physical artefacts and their photographic representations.

But this is clearly not the case. Arguably indeed architects do not make buildings; they rather craft the instructions and oversee the processes that eventually lead to their completion. Processes over which they have no monopoly – as they can take place even without their mediation and always involve many other 'actors'. What is it then that makes the photographs of those buildings so central to architectural discourse?

This paper will first unpack the complex nature of the relationship between architecture, buildings and photography, to then introduce the way in which DSDHA, as research-oriented architects, experiment with the photographic medium; using it to portray the 'differential' in value that we bring to our projects, and treating it as a design tool that contributes to, and speaks of, our approach – rather than simply fixing on glossy images the final outcomes of our endeavours.

The focus will be on DSDHA's techniques of 'grounded research', which use photography as their starting point to investigate our sites and identify the latent concerns, aspirations and trends of the many individuals which inhabit them – all aspects that often remain hidden to the generic gaze of statistics and evade the canonical artifact-focused photographic representations of architecture. The images we manufacture by means of these techniques are our starting point to map what we call 'personal landscapes', and understand how individual narratives relate to the urban morphology as well as to the history of a place. It is from this vantage point that we then proceed to speculate on future scenarios.

a. architects do not make buildings

At architecture school we do not learn to physically produce buildings, but rather to craft the instructions that eventually bring them to life. Architectural education, and consequently the profession, are often divorced from the materiality of the built environment they study and help to mould.

This has been true since Leon Battista Alberti formulated the concept of *design* and formalised architecture as we know it today.¹ In the Renaissance Alberti postulated that a building had to be composed in the mind first, then its idea translated into a standard graphic code – plans, elevations and sections. The product of these operations he defined as *design*, which was to be transmitted to someone else (the builders) to be mechanically executed, in strict conformity to the drawings. This procedure ensured that the architect was the only one responsible for the *design*, its only author, whilst builders were only executors. Alberti was so adamant about the distance between *design* and *building* that he recommended architects not to even enter the building site.

To impose this new method, Alberti had to struggle against a building industry dominated by very different conventions, where buildings were never designed beforehand. The moments of ideation and construction were not separated, and the building process was a collective effort in which every workman applied the secret knowledge he possessed as a member of the guild.

If architects do not make buildings, why do they insist on using photographs of completed artifacts in order to talk about their own work? And more in general why are building's photographs so crucial to architectural discourse?

b. photography and architecture

There is a fundamental difference between the discipline of architecture and that of, let's say, engineering, law or economics, whose knowledge typically consists of a body of theory which you learn and then apply. A structural engineer could give you a clear theoretical explanation of what a door or a window is and the way it functions, but with architecture things are a bit more complicated, since **the discipline's knowledge tends to reside in the object itself**. As an architect, to know what a window is, you need to look at many of them, observe the relationship between the walls and their openings, the views they offer from within and without, the quality and quantity of light and air they let in, and so on. This is not to say that there can be no body of theory associated with architecture, but rather that this typically follows the study of that which is already there. As such it is part of the architect's training to acquire a series of *techniques* to extrapolate the knowledge embedded in the built environment and put it to use; particularly as buildings and cities are not straightforward objects to read: they do not give away their knowledge easily (not to mention that it takes a certain amount of effort and money to travel from one to the next).

Architects thus do not make buildings, yet the knowledge they need as practitioners is embedded in them: a paradox that photography, since its introduction at the end of the 19th Century, has helped the profession coming to terms with. Due to its capacity to vividly portray reality, the photographic medium has indeed allowed to capture architectural knowledge, in a way 'separating' it from the artifact in which it is entrenched, whilst keeping a semblance of objectivity (something that a sketch cannot achieve for instance).

It is no coincidence therefore that architectural history is usually presented and studied as a vast archive of photographic images (better if black and white) arranged in chronological order – from the Pyramids to Zaha Hadid. The history teacher is typically ‘armed’ with slides and books that show a series of photographs acting as a surrogate of the buildings they portray. Unlike the originals though, these pictures are portable, collectable, easy to compare and circulate. In his 1947 book *Le Musée imaginaire* (Museum without Walls), French novelist and politician André Malraux even postulated that art history, and the history of architecture by extension, had become “the history of that which can be photographed”: no longer describing and dealing with actual works, but rather with the archives of photographic reproductions; essentially shaping the disciplinary discourse whilst being divorced from material reality.

Another paradox is that the value and strength of an architect’s *Design* is not evaluated *per se* – as a set of more or less well crafted instructions –, but rather on the basis of the building it produces, or, to be more precise, of its photographs. In analysing the way in which the awards system as well as the procurement system operate (the systems through which architects get recognition for their projects, or source new ones) indeed, it is clear that judging panels and new potential clients are mainly interested in seeing photographs of finished buildings as the ultimate proof of the quality of an architect’s work.

Photography has thus amplified and distorted that distance between *design* and *building* that Alberti had set as premise to the architectural profession. While the first-hand ‘encounter’ with the object was made superfluous to extrapolate architectural knowledge, the photographic gaze became essential to the system of evaluation of architecture. But what are the wider consequences of this phenomenon for the way we, as architects as well as citizens, inhabit the built environment?

c. the terror of the artefact: people, buildings and photographs

While teaching History of Architecture at the Architectural Association (AA) in London, I have noticed that architectural students are generally rather reluctant to leave their place of study to go out and look at anything, despite our city being reasonably well-stocked in terms of architectural examples and case-studies. If asked to write an essay on standardisation, for instance, they would typically approach the topic via books or photographic representations (preferably digital rather than in print), instead of taking a walk or a bus-ride to see some examples of Victorian or council housing in London. It is as if they had a sort of ‘terror’ of encountering the actual artefact and interrogate what is there. The photographic surrogate is easier to engage with and make sense of.

This ‘fear of the object’ is not limited to the architectural students’ community though. When visiting a renowned site or building, we all tend to take pictures from a number of finite angles and locations. Instead of wandering freely and record our own subjective impressions, we often end up replicating the views we have already seen in print or on the Internet. Of course some angles of a building might be more photogenic than others, proving more popular among people, but what underlies this phenomenon is perhaps the rather unsettling nature of the first-hand encounter with the physical artefact.

Reality doesn’t often match expectations. The information gathered beforehand (no matter if actively sourced or not) often haunts our experience. This is why we typically wander around a site until we finally recognise those familiar views, and photograph them to ‘manufacture’ some sort of ‘proof’ of our experience. The question remains open though as to whether we are portraying the building in front of us or rather the pictures that already exists in our mind.ⁱⁱ

Pierre Bourdieu's work provides some interesting insights into this phenomenon.ⁱⁱⁱ He analyses the everyday practice of photography by a number of amateur photographers – looking at the family snapshots, wedding portraits, the holiday prints, etc.. His work exposes the twofold nature of this medium, both objective and subjective, and shows that, although photography may seem a spontaneous and highly personal activity, its social use is instead rigidly structured and systematic, driven by a set of implicit canons and norms that define the occasions and its subjects. He suggests that the objectivity of an image doesn't lie in its agreement with the very reality of things but rather in the conformity with superimposed but implicit rules (pose, angle, technical treatment, framing, lay-out, use of colours, etc.) that define the aesthetic canons of a particular social class and determine its aesthetic expectations.

Besides the social implications of this phenomenon, how can we – as architects whose practice, as discussed, is so bound to the photographic medium – put this awareness to work? How can we use it to identify the traces of those practices and bodies that inhabit and modify the urban spaces we are working on?

d. DSDHA's ethos and methods

Rather than simply fixing on glossy images the final outcomes of our endeavours. At DSDHA we experiment with the photographic medium as a design tool enabling us to read particularly complex sites – take for instance Conservation Areas, or socially/politically contested areas – and to formulate effective hypothesis about their development.

In this presentation I will thus focus on those techniques of 'grounded research' in which we make use of the photographic medium in order to 'get under the skin' of a site.

When undertaking a project firstly we overcome our 'fear of the object' and embed ourselves in the site to observe the way individuals behave. We typically interview a number of passersby asking them what has brought them to the area and where they are directed; we record their movements at different times of the day and across the seasons.

The first step indeed is always **a map of movement and views through and around our site**. To produce this we typically observe and record the density of pedestrian and vehicular flow, considering the frequency and speed at which cars, cyclists and passersby tend to navigate that portion of the city. Then we test the information gathered through observation on the ground against the digital traces that people leave behind, either knowingly or unwittingly. For instance we compare our map with geotagged maps which visualise the density of Twitter, Instagram or Facebook feeds in the area (i.e. the frequency with which people tend to use they smartphone devices to share their experiences on social media), delineating an image of the urban environment based on its occupation across a consistent period of time.

Subsequently we determine what elements of the landscape are responsible for the modality and pace at which people engage with the city – asking for instance how monuments, landmarks, visual clutter, edges, paths, etc. affect our movements, perception and use of the space.^{iv} Certain landmarks (whether of historical/touristic importance or not) for instance are essential for orientation, they facilitate the movement of car-drivers who can spot them from afar; others are touristic attractions and often cause large stationary crowds to gather in front of them in contemplation.



This exercise allows us to create a site's **'taxonomy of key views'** and establish their relationship to urban flow. Once we have photographed and catalogued these key views, we use a series of techniques to determine how to intervene in order to enhance urban experience. For instance to understand where to position a new landmark/artifact in order to modify existing fluxes and allow for new uses/activities to flourish. Or to 'craft' the views to and from a new building, stimulating a dialogue between the activities within and the external environment, with the scope, for instance, to activate the life of a street.

What follows is a description of the different techniques that we use in order to study the key views of our sites.

Barrier Analysis

Inspired by Baldessari's works of subtraction – erasing a portion of the picture to disturb the hierarchy of vision – we edit out the urban elements that, in our key views, create either physical or visual obstacles to particular important landmarks or places of interest, thus diminishing the urban experience. These barriers are typically vehicular traffic (particularly buses), signage, surfaces, fences and steps. By 'erasing' them, it becomes evident to what extent they halt our appreciation of the environment, by taking away portions of our vistas towards a particular landmark or key access.



DSDHA, Analysis of visual and physical barriers obstructing the movement and view towards the Albert Memorial, in the Albertopolis.

Urban Proportions Studies

The analytical diagrams below abstract and dissect a perspectival view in order to highlight the compositional features of an existing streetscape. They help us determine how our new proposals can insert themselves in the urban scene, harmonising, or even correcting, the proportions of the existing neighbouring buildings, without for this directly copying any of them.



DSDHA, Analytical diagrams highlighting the composition and articulation of the existing streetscape and testing how the new proposal (on the far right) relates to the compositional themes and urban morphology of the neighbouring buildings.

Historical Overlay

The following image is a combination of photographs of the same prominent urban landmark, taken by different photographers (professional or not), from the same viewpoint and in different epochs. These images are sourced and then overlaid respecting their chronological order. We use this technique to study the 'permanencies' in the urban landscape: to spot which elements have remained unchanged through time, influencing the morphology of the urban landscape as well as the life and memory of its inhabitants; as opposed instead to what has undergone many iterations.

This allows us to determine what is worthy preservation and which aspects of our design proposals can instead be more daring. We also derive suggestions as to how to 'touch' buildings of historical importance, determining the sort of relationship – in terms of proportions, materiality etc. – a new proposal should entertain with them.

This technique is particularly helpful when we have to confront old and new preconceptions of local stakeholders and design officers about what should remain unchanged in our cities. We typically use it to demonstrate how a new proposal relates to the history of a site, perhaps reinstating old morphologies and proportions that were transfigured by subsequent interventions.



DSDHA. Historical Overlay of the view towards St John's Gate. London, showing that there have always been imposing masses on its right hand side. This allowed us to make the case for a proposal of similar proportions adjacent to the monument.

Google images overlay

After conducting an online keyword search and sifting through photo sharing sites, DSDHA have carefully layered hundreds of images on top of one another, creating a single image of the Albert Memorial: a 'collective impression' which brings strangers together into a shadowy dialogue across time and space.^v This image proves that this prominent London landmark is almost always photographed from the same location and viewpoint. Interrogating the relationship between tourism and mass media, this layering technique exposes a tenet set by the 'image generation' – namely that images are always citations and that within every picture is another picture.



DSDHA, Collective Impression of London's Albert Memorial. This image is a combination of the first hundred images gathered after conducting a Google keyword search for 'Albert Memorial'.

DSDHA have used this technique to understand where people tend to gather, either alone or in crowds, where they stand still to take pictures, etc.. We have then proceeded to analyse the connection between these behaviours and the visual qualities of a site. A 'desired line' typically has a physical connotation: it is intended as a social trail created as a consequence of erosion caused by human or animal foot-fall or traffic, and it is something that, designers tend to incorporate in their projects. With this overlay technique we have tried to expand the concept of a 'desired line' to encompass, along with the physical, the idea of a visual interaction with the environment – something less tangible perhaps, but equally important to understand people's behaviours. We have used these insights to develop a public realm strategy that will improve the visitors' experience in the area.

CCTV overlay



DSDHA, Collective Impression of the Circle in Broadgate, London. This image is a combination of the stills captured by a CCTV camera over 24 hours.

The 'collective impression' above resulted from overlaying the stills captured over 24 hours by a CCTV camera monitoring one of the sites we have worked on. We used this technique to understand the density of occupation of the public space in question (in this case a Privately Owned Public Space) over a consistent period of time. We established that people were actually using it pretty badly – with crowds of pub goers typically gathering on the north east side of the circle. Our design strategy aimed at disrupting these modes of occupation, softening the space and making it more welcoming, particularly to women, dispersing the crowd and inviting it to occupy the whole circle.

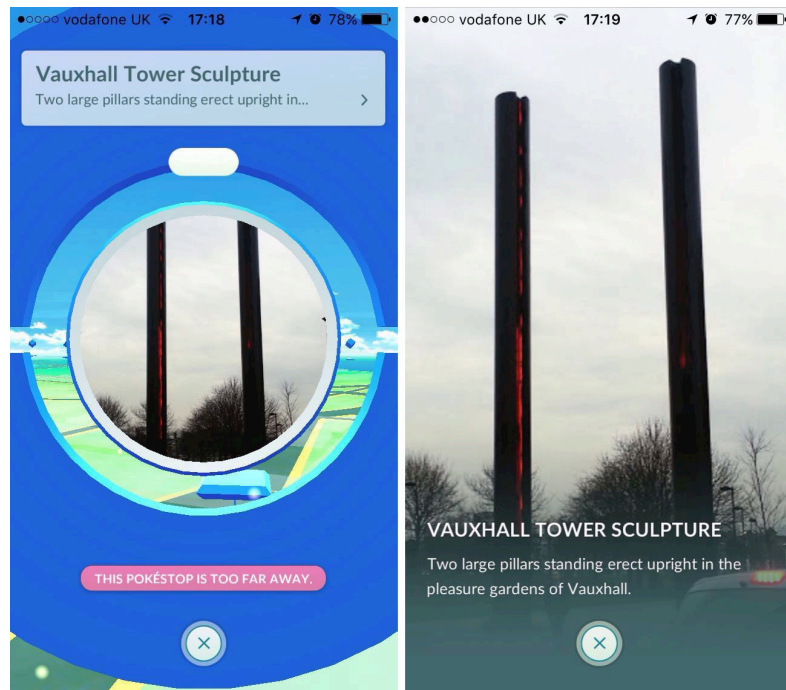
the view from the road... and the view from the screen

Another element we take into account when analysing our sites is the perspectival shift determined by the diffusion of handheld devices and the technologies with them associated. The roof of a building for instance – usually a leftover space reserved for plant or lift overruns – is perhaps the first aspect one appreciates when navigating the city via the mapping technologies and satellite views available on one's phone, an aspect demanding attention on the part of the architect; as if it were a sort of fifth elevation.

Our smartphones though are not just navigation tools that help us orientate through the urban environment; *de facto* they augment the city, condensing on their screens streams of data and

the reality before our eyes, often projecting onto it those 'collective impressions', or pre-existing images that precede our direct physical experience of a place.

How do these new ways of navigating the city under the guide of such devices and technologies affect our perception and appreciation of space? How do they impact on the emergence of desired lines (whether visual or physical) and how can *design* act upon them? For instance how can our methodologies take into account the new ways of exploring the city which a viral augmented reality videogame like *PokemonGo* has engendered?



DSDHA, screenshots of the PokemonGo App on my phone. One of our projects, the entrance to the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, is a PokeStop: a location marked in the augmented reality video game PokemonGo as a place that allows you to collect items such as eggs and more Poke Balls to capture more Pokemons. Interestingly PokeStops are what allows the App to make money: shops, bars, shopping centres and so on, pay it in order to be designated as PokeStops, thus becoming places where people tend to gather, guided by the Augmented reality App, and eventually then shop. This is one of the ways in which this new technology tries to moulds our experience of the city.

f. are these methods scientific?

Arguably in the last years there has been a transition from the 'culture of science' towards that of 'research'. "Science is supposed to be cold, straight, and detached; conversely research is warm, involving, and risky. Science puts an end to the vagaries of human disputes; research creates controversies. Science produces objectivity by escaping as much as possible from the shackles of ideology, passions, and emotions; research feeds on all of those to render objects of inquiry familiar."^{vi} Bruno Latour suggests that the formidable energy of most scientists came from this conviction that they were marching toward a modernity that set the archaic past apart from the enlightened future. Reality however proved quite different. Years of modernisations made us more 'entangled' than ever. But we no longer expect science to enter a chaotic society to put order into it, making controversies die away (take for instance the environmental crisis: we have given up on the idea of solving it once and for all and promptly replaced 'sustainability' with 'resilience'); we rather expect research to multiply the number of entities with which we have to deal in our collective life, making us more aware of the 'ingredients' which make up the world around us, more equipped to recognise its inherent dangers and exploit its opportunities.

In the same way our methodologies are tools to raise questions, unveil the complexity of an urban environment. Perhaps they do not share the same scientific, mathematically verifiable qualities of the 'Smart City' approach (and certainly do not manifest its same blind faith in statistics); but clearly they help us make better projects and in a way, if not totally resolve, at least come to terms with the paradoxical relationship of our profession: split between the materiality of the physical artefacts it conceives and the ephemeral nature of their photographic representations.

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h. CV

Roberta Marcaccio

Roberta works for the London-Based multidisciplinary studio DSDHA, coordinating the practice's research and communication aspects. In 2016 she was awarded a 2-year Research Fellowship in the Built Environment by the Royal Commission for The Exhibition of 1851, to study the future of cycling and transport infrastructure across London.

Roberta has lectured internationally and she teaches History and Theory of Architecture at the Architectural Association (AA) as well as a Design Studio at the CASS – London Metropolitan University. She studied Interior Architecture at the Politecnico di Milano and received her Masters in Histories and Theories of Architecture from the AA in 2010.

ⁱ See Carmo, M., "Architecture in the Age of Printing: Orality, Writing, Typography, and Printed Images in the History of Architectural Theory", Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Demand's work investigates and exposes this curious phenomenon underpinning our relationship to photographs, namely the fact that every picture contains many other ones. His approach indeed centres on "found" images that relate to scenes of cultural or political relevance, which have come to our attention through the mass media.

After gathering a large number of these photographs the artist starts reconstructing the spaces they portray. He does so by means of a cardboard 1:1 model that he personally builds in his studio. Then he captures the scene again, photographically, from a particular angle and with a certain light.

The photographs are the end product of Demand's work, they resemble the pre-existing mass-media images, but they are far removed from their referent, as what they actually portray are the three-dimensional, life-sized models that Demand builds in his studio. At first sight the viewer typically 'trusts' Demand's photographs. This is because the familiarity of their composition suggests a "direct relation" to the subject of the mass-media images – but, upon careful observation, one can spot some mysterious and disturbing connotations (namely the lack of details) which suddenly destroy the illusion of reality and reveal a rather ghostly and artificial atmosphere.

ⁱⁱⁱ See: Bourdieu, P., L. Boltanski, R. Castel and J.C. Chamboredon, "Photography a Middle-brow Art", Cambridge: Polity, 1990.

^{iv} Trying to understand how people's relationship to the city is effected by "Imageability" – a term coined by urban planner/designer Kevin Lynch to describe the process by which we learn how to recognise and become familiar with our environmental surroundings and learn journeys.

^v There is something ironic about this overlaying technique, exposing a curious side effect of the way technology and mass media have impacted upon photography. In the early days of a model needed to stand still in front of the camera for a rather lengthy period of time, in order to allow for the plates, then far less sensitive to light, to record the image. This necessity to have long exposures implied that the final picture, whether a portrait or an urban scene was a sort of synthesis of expression (things which moved fast would have not be recorded) of a body or of the events happening in a place, in the same way in which the overlay of these instantaneous snapshots taken with digital cameras tends to synthesize the character of a place, as seen through the eyes of many eyes and cameras (who paradoxically tend to see the same thing) rather than those of a single author.

^{vi} Latour, B., *From the World of Science to the World of Research?*, in "Science, New Series, Vol. 280", No. 5361. (Apr. 10, 1998), p. 208.