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Wes Aelbrecht

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Detroit imagined: intertextuality and the photobook as urban history

Wes Aelbrecht 

Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, Cardiff, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

This article revisits *Detroit Images: Photographs of the Renaissance City* (1989), a photobook that challenges the dominant dichotomy in ruin photography between decline and resilience narratives. While much scholarship on Detroit's ruin photography focuses on aestheticized deindustrialization, this study argues that *Detroit Images* provides a critical alternative. It employs intertextuality, narrative sequencing, and juxtaposition to critique and reinterpret urban narratives, particularly through its portrayal of the Renaissance Center (RenCen). The RenCen emerges as a recurring symbol, embodying Detroit's contested renaissance rhetoric and highlighting tensions between economic opportunism and public belonging. The article positions photobooks like *Detroit Images* as expanding traditional urban pictorial histories. These works function not only as records of urban change but also as critical visual commentaries on broader socio-political dynamics. By advancing the concept of 'Intertextual Urban Photobooks', this study explores how photobooks draw on urban planning, art, media, and cultural history to critique dominant narratives and reframe urban imaginaries. Through a detailed intertextual analysis, the article demonstrates how photography actively shapes and participates in cultural discourses. It highlights photobooks as tools for challenging dominant planning visions, fostering alternative urban imaginaries, and offering innovative methodologies for understanding the intersections of visual storytelling, urban politics, and redevelopment.

KEYWORDS

Detroit; intertextuality; photobooks; intertextual urban photobooks; ruin photography; Renaissance City; visual storytelling

Introduction

When Camilo José Vergara published *The New American Ghetto* (1995) and provocatively proposed turning downtown Detroit into a 'skyscraper ruins park', he ignited outrage among Detroiters and city officials, who insisted the city was 'on the way up'.¹ Despite this backlash, Vergara's 'photographic archive of decline' inspired waves of ruin photography, spawning glossy photobooks often classified as part of the ruin genre.² These works fuelled debates about Detroit's image, dividing critics into 'lamenters', who focus on loss and decline, and 'utopians', who champion narratives of resilience and renewal.³ This binary framing, however, oversimplifies the role of photobooks in

CONTACT Wes Aelbrecht  aelbrechtw@cardiff.ac.uk

¹Vergara, *The New American Ghetto*.

²See for example Marchand and Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit*; Moore, *Detroit Disassembled*.

³Leary, "Detroitism."

shaping urban histories and limits their interpretive potential. The largely overlooked *Detroit Images: Photographs of the Renaissance City* (1989) challenges this dichotomy and the dominant reading of ruin imagery as mere aestheticized representations of deindustrial decline.⁴ Instead, through its intertextual use of photographs, narrative sequences, and juxtapositions, this article will argue that the photobook reconnects viewers to Detroit's urban fabric, writing people into place and history rather than erasing them. By revisiting this overlooked work, it demonstrates how photobooks like *Detroit Images* transcend aestheticized depictions of decline, instead serving as critical tools for urban discourse and planning knowledge. It advances debates on photobook taxonomies by proposing a new framework for understanding their intertextuality, redefines urban imaginaries through the lens of visual and textual critique, and emphasizes the role of storytelling in reshaping how we document and envision (historic) urban development.

Contemporary photobooks, such as *Detroit Images*, this article argues, need to be read as an expansion of traditional pictorial urban histories introduced by the historian Carol E. Hoffecker in the early 1980s rather than merely falling into the same category.⁵ I will argue that contemporary photobooks extend the concept of pictorial urban history by not only documenting changes in the urban environment but also providing critical reflections and counter-narratives. Unlike classic pictorial urban histories that often serve as records of the past, contemporary photobooks are more interpretive, using imagery to engage with present-day urban conditions and project potential futures. In this way, they shift from mere documentation to a form of visual commentary, grappling with urban politics, socio-economic issues, or environmental concerns. Their critical stance makes them an important development in the genre. Hence, I propose to refer to these books as intertextual urban photobooks because it emphasises how this photobook draws on and references other media (ads, historical imagery, urban plans) to create new, layered meanings and critique dominant urban narratives. It highlights the referential nature of the photobooks, as they are not isolated works but participate in a broader cultural dialogue about urban development.

Building on this premise, this article examines how the concept of intertextuality, as articulated by theorists like Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Mikhail Bakhtin, offers a critical lens for analysing the interplay between images, texts, and cultural contexts in photobooks. Intertextuality challenges the perceived neutrality of visual media, revealing how texts and visuals are shaped by preexisting cultural codes and discourses. By applying this lens to the case of ruin photography in Detroit, this study explores how photobooks transcend their status as standalone artistic objects, instead engaging with broader debates on urban planning, governance, and image campaigns in the city during the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing from media studies, communication, and semiotics, this article foregrounds how visual and textual strategies in photobooks critique dominant narratives, offering new perspectives on Detroit's urban imaginaries, and supporting the inclusion of photobooks as primary research material in historical studies of cities.

In recent years, photobooks have attracted significant attention in scholarly discourse, particularly within the fields of arts and cultural studies.⁶ This growing body of work emphasizes that photobooks transcend their documentary function, serving instead as active agents of meaning-making through the sequencing of images, their interplay with text, and the relationships between photographs. Despite this momentum, much of the existing scholarship focuses on aesthetic practices, often overlooking methodologies that foreground the social construction of visual meaning.

⁴Bukowczyk, Aikenhead, and Slavcheff, *Detroit Images*.

⁵Hoffecker, "The Emergence of a Genre."

⁶Parr and Badger, *The Photobook*; Di Bello, Wilson, and Zamir, *The Photobook*; Martins and Reverseau, *Paper Cities*; Allbeson, *Photography and the Cultural History of the Postwar European city*.

This article contributes to this expanding scholarship on photobooks by shifting the focus toward their potential as sources for urban history. While photobooks have played a key role in shaping how cities are perceived and understood – frequently spotlighting overlooked or marginalized urban areas – they remain underutilized as primary sources for analysing (historical) urban phenomena.⁷ This article examines photobooks as a site of resistance to dominant planning visions, particularly in the context of urban redevelopment projects.

This article builds on the methodologies of Norman Fairclough, Charles Bazerman, and John Fiske, who have developed frameworks for studying intertextuality in texts and images.⁸ They highlight both conscious and unconscious intertextuality, emphasizing that the reader does not need to be aware of specific references to interpret intertextually. Bazerman's flexible framework is utilized here to analyse photobooks, incorporating insights from Fiske's work on genre and Fairclough's influence on Bazerman's approach. The article identifies three intertextual strategies – recontextualizing, reworking, and reappropriating visuals – each of which overlaps with other techniques and proposes organizing them into broader categories to better capture these interconnections and the layered meaning in photobook analysis.

This article is structured to first provide a broader context for understanding how photography has been used in urban planning history. Here, the article explores how photographs have historically served as tools for documenting and analysing urban environments, positioning them as vital components in shaping urban narratives. Building on this foundation, the article then situates the book as an extension of the tradition of pictorial urban histories. The core analysis is presented in the section titled 'Documents of Resistance'. In this part, the article delves into the three intertextual techniques – recontextualizing, reworking, and reappropriating – highlighting how these strategies function within the book to critique urban transformation. The analysis also addresses the image branding campaigns and urban planning plans that have shaped Detroit's visual identity, situating the photobook as a critical response to these efforts and offering a counter-narrative to dominant urban renewal discourses.

Photography as a tool for urban inquiry

A growing body of work highlights the intersection of creative practice and urban research, where visual methodologies provide new perspectives on urban space and daily life. Mia A. Hunt, for instance, uses high-profile photographers like Stephen Shore to demonstrate how creative practices inform cultural geography.⁹ She seeks 'the more intangible aspects of urban space', embodying 'more-than-representational approaches'.¹⁰ Similarly, the cultural geographer Harriet Hawkins notes that geographers are becoming 'creators and collaborators' rather than just analysts. She advocates for a 'creative (re)turn', integrating creative practices into the active production of geographic knowledge.¹¹ In planning history, creative methodologies, including photography, could parallel cultural geography's turn towards more-than-representational approaches. By integrating visual and creative practices into planning research, scholars can not only document but also critically interrogate the processes and imaginaries shaping urban development.

This critical potential is particularly evident in photography's ability to challenge and reframe (historical) urban narratives, especially within discourses on urban decay and decline. Thora

⁷Martins and Reverseau, *Paper Cities*; Deriu and Maggi, "Picturing Cities."

⁸Bazerman, *Intertextuality*; Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*; Fiske, *Television Culture*.

⁹Hunt, "Urban Photography/Cultural Geography."

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Hawkins, "Geography's Creative (Re)turn," 963 and 79.

Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen suggest repositioning ruin photography as an ‘interactive performance’ that engages both physically and affectively with ruins.¹² Rather than a nostalgic act that uncritically celebrates ruins, this approach views photography as a means to interrogate how ruins shape narratives of the past, present, and future. Within this framework, the 1980s large scale photo-installation *Demolished by Neglect* in Detroit exemplify this shift from passive documentation to active intervention to create what Emma Fraser refers to as ‘counter-sites’ with the potential to challenge planning ideologies.¹³ Communication scholars Joshua Atkinson and Clayton Rosati highlight the DetroitYES! project, developed by artist Lowell Boileau in 1999, which revitalizes the decayed landscape through ongoing web-based discussions and visuals.¹⁴ This aligns with other similar projects that integrate visual imagery with oral history.¹⁵ More broadly, in visualizing the crisis of the post-industrial city, art historian Miriam Paeslack notes how attention to seemingly insignificant art practices in a city’s periphery contributes to a new urban imaginary, challenging the typical rust belt narrative of a glorious past and derelict present, which she terms the ‘urban ineffable’.¹⁶

Instead of being a distant trace of the past, as Roland Barthes’ ‘that-has-been’ suggests, these photographs and practices emphasize their performative context and indexicality, connecting the viewer to the event of their creation and the ongoing dialogue about urban decay and renewal. This perspective is further explored in *Detroit Images*, which demonstrates how urban imaginaries are constructed through layered visual and textual narratives.

Pictorial urban histories

Recently, there has been a growing scholarly focus on the photobook within the fields of arts and cultural studies, as highlighted by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger’s influential three-volume *The Photobook: A History* (2004, 2006, 2016); however, its role remains less explored in urban planning and urban history.¹⁷ Hoeffcker identifies the rise of what she calls pictorial urban histories in the 1960s and 1970s as a significant development in the evolution of urban visual storytelling. Produced by major academic publishing houses, these books and heritage magazines illustrate the developmental trajectories of cities, with some serving as what she describes as a ‘meeting ground between history, hucksterism, and civic consciousness’.¹⁸ Although the latter books are often dismissed as coffee-table books, Hoeffcker argues that their broad reach enables them to serve as rallying points for civic community consciousness, particularly in the field of historic preservation.¹⁹ This genre of pictorial urban histories emerged as a more sophisticated evolution of earlier, heavily commercialized illustrated histories – what she terms ‘public relations histories’.²⁰ These earlier works, often commissioned by local Boards of Trade or Chambers of Commerce between 1880 and 1920, functioned primarily as tools of boosterism.²¹ Because of these developments, Hoeffcker argues that by the mid-twentieth century photographs were gaining greater significance in urban studies, appearing not only in illustrated histories but also in scholarly work. Historians began to rely on

¹²Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Imaging Modern Decay,” 14.

¹³Fraser, “Unbecoming Place,” 441; Aelbrecht, “Detroit in Memoriam.”

¹⁴Atkinson and Rosati, “DetroitYES! and the Fabulous Ruins Virtual Tour.”

¹⁵High and Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland*; Zebracki, Doucet, and De Brant, “Beyond Picturesque Decay.”

¹⁶Paeslack, *Ineffably Urban*.

¹⁷Parr and Badger, *The Photobook*.

¹⁸Hoeffcker, “The Emergence of a Genre,” 41.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹See also Hales, *Silver Cities*.

photographs not just as decorative elements but as vital evidence to deepen and enhance urban narratives.²² This shift from the dominant focus on the ‘image’ of the city to the ‘imaged’ and ‘imagined’ city follows the cultural turn introduced to urban studies in the 1980s and corresponds with the making of photobooks like *Detroit Images*.

Most works in the arts and cultural studies that engage with photobooks examine themes such as memory, nostalgia, and national identity, positioning photobooks as vehicles for constructing and communicating shared experiences and identities.²³ They have shown that photobooks transcend their function as mere documentary tools; instead, they actively generate meaning through the unique qualities of their visual form. This meaning-making is achieved through the sequencing of images, their juxtaposition with text, and their relational interplay, enabling novel ways of reading and interpreting photographs. Despite these advances, much of the existing scholarship privileges aesthetic practice over methodologies that foreground the social construction of visual meaning. As Trachtenberg aptly argues, the value of photographs lies not just in ‘what they show or how they look’ but in ‘how they construct meaning’.²⁴ Understanding photobooks requires examining how they create effects and shape interpretations of place and context, moving beyond the question of their representational accuracy to appreciate their potential as active, meaning-making practices.²⁵

Photobooks also play a crucial role in shaping how we experience, understand, interpret, and promote cities, often drawing attention to overlooked, misunderstood, or neglected urban areas.²⁶ Historically, photobooks have served ideological and political purposes, such as advancing war propaganda, framing modernity in the early twentieth century, postwar reconstruction efforts, or shaping restoration narratives, eventually merging with the image-branding campaigns of the 1980s. Despite their significance, photobooks are rarely employed retrospectively as primary research sources for analysing (historical) interpretations of cities or investigating specific urban phenomena, as seen in Mary N. Wood and Hugh Campbell’s work.²⁷ Many photobooks adopt narrative strategies and structures borrowed from architecture, literature, the arts, and film, as demonstrated by these works. However, there is a lack of engagement with image theories or methodologies for studying photobooks within urban history. So, while there are discussions related to photography in the context of urban studies, the specific focus on art photobooks as a distinct category of visual culture appears to be underrepresented.²⁸ Hence, this article builds on Campbell’s approach, using photobooks as primary sources to investigate how a group of photographers engaged in dialogue with urban redevelopment projects.

Intertextual urban photobooks

Intertextuality operates on the premise that texts and visuals are neither self-contained nor neutral; instead, they are shaped by preexisting texts, visual elements, and cultural codes.²⁹

This article argues that the (un)conscious dialogue of images and words with their context, unsettles the perceived naturalness and transparency of photographic images – particularly in the case of ruin photography in Detroit, where such images are often accepted at face value. As

²²Crimmins, “Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words?” 86.

²³Di Bello, Wilson, and Zamir, *The Photobook*.

²⁴Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, xvi.

²⁵Di Bello, Wilson, and Zamir, *The Photobook*, 4.

²⁶Martins and Reverseau, *Paper Cities*; Deriu and Maggi, “Picturing Cities.”

²⁷Campbell, *Space Framed*; Woods, *Beyond the Architect’s Eye*.

²⁸See for example the work of Francesca Ammon in Ammon, “Picturing Preservation and Renewal.”

²⁹Gearhart et al., “Visual Intertextuality Theory,” 369.

literary theorist Graham Allen notes, intertextuality encourages a ‘rethinking of photography, often seen as a pure representation of reality’.³⁰ At first glance, the work may seem like just another coffee-table book (as some in Detroit suggested when the photobook was launched) focused on decay, ruins, and ruination. However, upon closer examination, it reveals a deliberate visual and textual strategy that offers readers tools to reinterpret the dominant renaissance discourse in Detroit. This aligns with how media and communication scholars adopted and employed the concept of intertextuality ‘to describe the way audiences read media texts within the larger web of media culture’ which in this case means the larger web of the 1980s renaissance culture in Detroit.³¹ The rhetoric scholar Bazerman refers to, in this context, a complex and often subtle ‘intertextual performance’.³² While Allen and other scholars in media studies and communication refer to intertextuality in the context of artistic practices, more recently some scholar introduced terms like intervisuality and visual intertextuality to emphasize the visual dynamics of these relationships.³³ This article continues to use the term *intertextuality* to avoid distinguishing or separating it from the well-established methodological frameworks in media studies, linguistics, and rhetoric.

When discussing intertextuality or intervisuality, one inevitably enters the realm of poststructuralism, engaging with debates about the ‘death of the author’, the agency of the reader, and the endless ambiguity of texts, which challenge the possibility of definitive meaning or absolute truth. Most scholarly work takes the writings of Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, and Michel Foucault as the foundational basis for intertextual theoretical and methodological frameworks. Since these interpretations heavily rely on these authors, there is relatively little divergence in how intertextuality is understood. Discussions on intertextuality also emerge as a crucial component of discourse analysis, as it ‘provides a way into the complexity of discursive events (realized in the heterogeneity of texts, in meaning, form, and style)’.³⁴ Furthermore, intertextuality is often incorporated into semiotic analysis, as outlined by Arthur Asa Berger, because it can uncover deep layers of cultural and social references.³⁵ Most of these studies focus on textual analysis within discourses or explore representations in news reporting, television, and film.

Studies of this device in the arts often focus on the work of artists in the 1980s, who, as Allen notes, engaged in ‘foregrounding various culturally encoded contexts and mixing codes from “high” art and popular or commercial contexts’.³⁶ Much of this work involves photocollages or murals that attempt to ‘demonstrate the ideological nature of communication modes, which dominant culture and state power often claim to be neutral, transparent, and even natural’.³⁷ Additionally, there are numerous instances in art historical studies where an intertextual approach is applied without explicitly referencing intertextuality. This is evident in the iconographical studies developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky, in linguistics when addressing concepts such as pastiche and parody, and in the notion of appropriation referenced by Douglas Crimp in the late 1970s – a practice that traces its lineage to the French Symbolists, Dada, and other radical collage movements of the early twentieth century.³⁸

³⁰Allen, *Intertextuality*, 172. See also Victor Burgin who theorized the photograph as a ‘site of a complex ‘intertextuality’, an overlapping series of previous texts’. Burgin, *Thinking photography*, 144.

³¹Ott and Walter, “Intertextuality,” 432.

³²For intertextual performance, see Bazerman, *Intertextuality*, 94.

³³Gearhart et al., “Exploring Political Communication and Visual Intertextuality through Meme Wars.”

³⁴Fairclough, “Intertextuality in Critical Discourse Analysis.”

³⁵Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*.

³⁶Allen, *Intertextuality*, 173.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Linden, “Reframing Pictures,” 42.

Table 1. Intertextual techniques for photobooks based on Bazerman’s techniques. Compiled by the author.

Bazerman’s intertextual strategies	Adapted for use in photobooks by author
1. Direct quotation	1. Direct Visual Quotation: Use of images directly borrowed or reproduced from other sources, like well-known photographs or iconic imagery, which reference specific historical or cultural contexts.
2. Indirect quotation (still incl. the referring or reference)	2. Indirect Visual Quotation: Incorporation of elements that reference other visual works without direct reproduction maintains a connection to the original source through style, subject, or theme. This approach evokes known images, styles, or subjects without outright replication, using a familiar visual language to signal certain themes or ideas indirectly – much like genre conventions in television establish recognizable moods. Indirect Visual Quotation focuses on thematic and conceptual homage, subtly alluding to broader ideas, styles, or subjects and leaving the connection open to interpretation.
3. Mentioning of a person, document, or statements. Mentioning a document or author relies on the reader’s familiarity with the original source and what it says	3. Mentioning a Photographer, Work, or Iconic Image: A visual or textual reference to a specific photographer, photo series, historical image, building, or urban planning campaign relies on the viewer’s familiarity with the original work and its significance. This explicit acknowledgment directly informs the viewer of the relationship.
4. Comment or evaluation on a statement, text, or otherwise invoked voice	4. Commentary or Evaluation Through Image Pairing or Sequencing, or composition of single images: Juxtaposing or sequencing images to critique, highlight, or reinterpret previous ideas or narratives established by prior images or series.
5. Using recognizable phrasing, terminology associated with specific people or groups of people or documents	5. Recognizable Stylistic Phrasing or Terminology: Using distinctive visual styles or techniques – such as specific colour palettes, lighting, or framing – associated with certain photographers, art movements, or photojournalistic practices. This approach relates closely to genre, as it establishes a consistent stylistic framework that viewers associate with photographers, movements, or techniques, guiding interpretation much like genre norms in television. The strategy emphasizes aesthetic and technical choices that align with or mimic distinctive styles.
6. Using language and forms that seem to echo certain ways of communicating, discussions among other people, types of documents. Genre, kinds of vocabulary (or register), stock phrases, patterns of expression may be of this sort.	6. Documentary Forms: Employing familiar visual tropes, genres, or documentary approaches that evoke specific narratives or social discussions, such as traditional photo essays, urban documentation, or protest photography. This may include patterns of photographic framing or the use of typical subject matter that resonate with established cultural or documentary traditions.

In the humanities and social sciences, three scholars – Fairclough, Bazerman, and Fiske – have developed methodological frameworks for studying intertextuality. What these scholars share is the idea of both conscious and unconscious intertextuality, or explicit and implicit references. In many cases, other scholars have adopted these methods, introducing slight variations to expand upon their approaches. For this article, I have further developed the method outlined by Bazerman, incorporating insights from Fiske’s work on genre and character. Fairclough’s influence is evident in Bazerman’s framework, suggesting that Bazerman may have drawn on Fairclough’s work in his own studies. Additionally, others have proposed specific lists of textual strategies, such as Frank J. D’Angelo, who identifies adaptation, retro, appropriation, parody, pastiche, and simulation, or Brian Ott and Cameron Walter, who outline parodic allusion, creative appropriation, and self-reflective references.³⁹

³⁹D’Angelo, “The Rhetoric of Intertextuality.”

To analyse the photobook's intertextual strategies, I have adapted the intertextual techniques outlined by Bazerman, tailoring them to the visual and narrative context of *Detroit Images* (see Table 1). The examples discussed in this article are certainly not the only ones to be identified or found in the book, but they are representative of the techniques at play. In most cases, the intertextual strategies from Bazerman's taxonomy that I have translated for analysing photobooks almost always display different techniques simultaneously. The deeper you study the work – moving from the book to the structure, and then to the individual series of images – the more layered it becomes, and the more techniques from Bazerman start to overlap. This overlap is crucial, which is why I suggest reworking the techniques into larger categories that both discuss and acknowledge these overlaps. I was able to come up with three intertextual strategies – recontextualizing, reworking, and reappropriating visuals.

Recontextualizing visuals corresponds to Bazerman's direct visual quotation, incorporating previously published or exhibited images, such as those from Detroit's public library photogallery, educational photography projects, and art activism initiatives like *Demolished by Neglect*. These direct visual quotations embed the photobook within established cultural and historical narratives. Reworking visuals aligns with indirect visual quotation by evoking iconic themes and styles without direct reproduction, transforming them into new forms that critique and reframe established narratives. For instance, by mimicking the visual strategies of urban walking and bus tours, the photobook indirectly references and reinterprets familiar tropes. This technique also connects to Bazerman's recognizable stylistic phrasing or terminology and commentary, employing aesthetic choices like compositional techniques and thematic evocation to align with or subtly critique visual traditions. Finally, reappropriating visuals leverages commentary through image pairing or sequencing, mentioning a work, or iconic image, recognisable stylistic phrasing and documentary forms. Through deliberate sequencing and reliance on documentary conventions, the photobook critiques redevelopment strategies while situating its narrative within established genres.

Documents of resistance: *Detroit Images* the Renaissance City

The photobook *Detroit Images* serves as a vivid document of Detroit's photographic community in the 1980s, reflecting a direct engagement with the city's invitation to 'take another look at Detroit', a slogan popularized by Mayor Coleman Young's 1973 advertising campaign.⁴⁰ The photobook also functions as a historical document, offering valuable insights into the changing urban landscape while reflecting how a group of local photographers interpreted the city and aligned their perspectives with what they believed to be those of its residents. In doing so, it becomes a crucial resource for urban history, shedding light on forms of resistance that arose, and the efforts undertaken to shape the city's urban plans and vision. Because it is a document of resistance, it is crucial to understand how it sought to construct this resistance: what intertextual techniques and performances did this photobook employ to challenge the dominant urban renaissance rhetoric and the urban planning ideologies of the 1980s?

Recontextualising visuals

One of the major and arguably most easily identifiable intertextual techniques listed by Bazerman is direct (visual) quotation. Through this technique, the photobook incorporates images previously

⁴⁰Detroit Renaissance, *Take Another Look at Detroit*.

exhibited or published in newspapers, journals, magazines, or used in exhibitions. This deliberate integration of pre-existing images and themes positioning *Detroit Images* within a broader visual and cultural dialogue that interrogates and reframes Detroit's urban narratives.

A key hub for emerging photographic talent during the 1970s and 1980s was the Detroit Public Library Photogallery.⁴¹ Curated by Dorothy Manty between 1968 and 1985, this space hosted 119 exhibitions, primarily featuring local photographers. All contributors to *Detroit Images* had exhibited their work at the Photogallery, which was renowned for its wooden display cabinets on the library's third floor. The series culminated in 1985 with photographer Diaz's *Unknown Landscapes*, echoing the book's thematic exploration.⁴² Unlike established institutions such as the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), the Photogallery uniquely offered local and emerging photographers a platform to reach broader audiences, solidifying its role as a critical site for nurturing and celebrating Detroit's photographic community.

Equally influential was the photographers' connection to the Center for Creative Studies (now the College for Creative Studies, CCS), which was also mentioned by Aikenhead in his introductory essay, where several contributors to the photobook either studied or worked in the mid-1980s. A significant influence on their trajectory and approach was the renowned street photographer Bill Rauhauser (1918–2017), who taught at the CCS. Between 1972 and 1984, Rauhauser collaborated with the Detroit Historical Museum to assign his students the task of documenting 'something outside in/ around Detroit'. Some of the outcomes of this assignment found their way into *Detroit Images*, underscoring the profound impact of Rauhauser's mentorship on shaping how Detroit was seen and represented during this era.⁴³ These exhibitions and mentors shaped how Detroit and similar urban landscapes were viewed, contributing to the significance of the *Detroit Images* photobook.

Two years before the book's publication, in 1987, Keith Piaseczny, one of the founders of Detroit's Urban Center for Photography (UCP), initiated the *Demolished by Neglect* photo-installation on the deteriorating façade of the National Theatre, highlighting the neglect of Detroit's architectural heritage. This installation was part of a broader guerrilla-style campaign across the city, featuring the work of UCP founders Piaseczny, Michelle Graznak, and Jessica Trevino, all of whom were also contributors to the *Detroit Images* photobook with similar or in some cases the same images (see names with * in Table 2). Some of these installations are preserved in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation, which occasionally captured art projects like those by Tom Frank while documenting significant buildings.⁴⁴

Both Piaseczny and Andonian had previously also published already a series of articles in newspapers and magazines where their images were used to prove what 'a decade of indifference' of all Detroiters (urban and suburban), and redlining of preservation and restoration projects by the banks of the city could do to Detroit's heritage.⁴⁵ These efforts reflected a collective desire to reframe Detroit's urban narrative and critique the city's neglectful development strategies.

The growing interest in photographing and exhibiting Detroit's urban and social landscape during this period was part of broader shifts in the photographic community. On the one hand, this was influenced by major exhibitions such as the 1975 *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* at the George Eastman House.⁴⁶ Catherine Opie reflects that this exhibition

⁴¹Manty, *Interview*.

⁴²Detroit Free Press, "Detroit Public Library."

⁴³This collection is called *Documenting Detroit photography series*.

⁴⁴See 'Tuller Hotel, 501-521 Park Boulevard, Detroit, Wayne County, MI.' Source: Historic American Buildings Survey, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁵Williams, "Detroit Loves a Good Demolition," 19; Lapointe and Andonian, "Requiem for a Changing City."

⁴⁶International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, *New Topographics*.

Table 2. Chapter structure and photographers featured in *Detroit Images*. Compiled by the author.

Order	Photographer	Project title	Numbers of images	Date(s)	Narrative structure	
1	Douglas Aikenhead*	Destruction/ Construction	13	1978–86	OPENING CHAPTER, SETS THE SCENE AND THEME: 'WHAT WILL REMAIN'	Lost communities
2	Gary Kasprzyk	Michigan Avenue: Community	11	1986	MIDDLE	Vanishing community; portrait of 'archetypal working-class Detroit'/community; placemaking and place attachment; sacrifice; a reference point.
3	Gary Kasprzyk	Michigan Avenue: Commercial	9	1980–1986		
4	Bruce Harkness	Poletown	13	1981		Rising community in between the rubble in a neighbourhood in transition
5	Douglas Aikenhead	Central Industrial Park	11			Resisting Community
6	Bruce Harkness	Cass Corridor	13	1976–78		Struggling community
7	Michael Sarnacki	Public Detroit I	7	1984–86		Public/future/searching communities
8	Michelle Graznak*	Religious Detroit	11	1986		Religious communities
9	Hugh Grannum	Near East Side	9	1972–80		Segregated communities
10	David Griffith	Political Detroit	9	1980–82		Media/political communities
11	David Griffith	Tiger Stadium	9	1984		Media communities
12	Eric R. Smith	Public Detroit II	7	1980–84		Challenging communities
13	Thomas Frank*	Northwest Detroit	9	1984–85		Fading communities
14	Tony Maid	Southeast Dearborn/ Immigrant Detroit	11	1983–84		Arab communities
15	Carla Anderson	Downriver	11	1983–85		Suburban communities
16	Douglas Aikenhead	Detroit Freeways	9	1984–86	CONCLUSION: (42) the photographs that follow suggest that the human scale and proportion of old Detroit has been dispensed with in designing the city's renaissance. Neighbourhoods continue to decline with little encouragement from city government or private investors.	Exurban communities (?)
17	Keith Joseph Piaseczny*	Yesterday's Theatres	9	1987		Lost communities
18	Michelle Andonian*	Detroit Closings	7	1983–86		Lost communities
19	Carlos Diaz*	Unknown Landmarks	13	1984–86	Epitaph	Past communities

'for the first time ... allowed the place of transformation, of indecision and of bad planning to begin to come in as a subject'.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the UCP's strategy to appropriate modes of address from media and advertisement places their work in the context of non-institutional forms of cultural engagement reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s New York art scene. Both shifts in photographic focus and application are evident here and contribute to the ways in which Detroit's

⁴⁷LACMA, *Tour New Topographics with Catherine Opie*.

urban landscape was depicted and interrogated, offering essential context for understanding *Detroit Images*.

In my conversation with the editors, both confirmed that the photographers played a limited role in shaping the final presentation of their work within the book. While the photographers submitted envelopes containing images and completed questionnaires, they were not involved in the selection of photographs or the sequencing of the series. Nor were they consulted regarding the editors' descriptions of their work or its relationship to the book's subject matter. This editorial approach reflects an effort by the editors to craft a cohesive narrative by curating a carefully selected series of pre-existing photographic works. In the book's preface, the editors state that their role was to 'rationalize and render more explicit the implicit themes embedded in many of the photographic studies and the viewpoints with which many of the photographers seem to have approached their work'.⁴⁸ This curatorial strategy positions the book as a unified commentary on Detroit's urban landscape, constructed through a lens that aligns with the editors' vision.

Reworking visuals

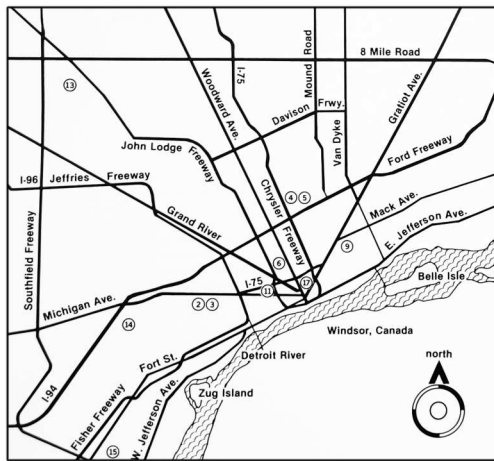
By evoking iconic visual themes, styles, or elements without directly reproducing them and using them in a recontextualized way, the photobook critiques past imagery while simultaneously adopting familiar visual tropes and genres that recall specific visual traditions. This nuanced critique is particularly evident when *Detroit Images* is positioned in relation to other photobooks about the city. For instance, *Detroit Images* stands in sharp contrast and direct dialogue with *Detroit: The Renaissance City*, a mid-1980s photobook by the well-known architectural photographer Balthazar Korab, which portrays the city as a 'rising city'.⁴⁹ Published one year before Bukowczyk invited Aikenhead to construct different images of the city in it Korab wraps a visual narrative around the Renaissance Center that embraces the newly emerging excitement akin to the former mayor Coleman Young's urban booster campaigns. Comparable narratives of optimism and renewal are evident in Young's commissioned advertisement campaigns, which I will examine in greater depth later. In comparison to *Detroit Images* Korab's title communicates that Detroit is indeed the Renaissance City, and hence there is no ambiguity here in the sense that Korab's photographs all communicate photography's indexicality or truth claims. *Detroit Images* on the other hand wants the reader to image Detroit. So aside from being about images of Detroit, as a verb and active process the idea to image affects the idea of what Detroit was, is and will be. The active form imaging turns this action into a continuous process of shaping Detroit, a (mental) process of ongoing imaging. In other words, there is a longing for the reader to construct a representation of Detroit via the sequence of photographs on the topic of the Renaissance City, that is the imaged city.

Detroit Images comprises nineteen stand-alone photo-essays created by fourteen photographers (see Table 2). Each photo-essay features a carefully curated selection of images by the respective photographer. With few exceptions, the photo-essays focus on specific locations, neighbourhoods, iconic buildings, or themes such as the city's renaissance and its religious, public, and political realms, all introduced alongside a map in the book's opening pages. Each chapter begins with a brief editor written description, contextualizing the significance of the photographic project within the book's overarching theme. In keeping with the tradition of many art photobooks, *Detroit Images* deliberately prioritizes visual elements over textual content. Beyond the vignettes preceding

⁴⁸Bukowczyk, Aikenhead, and Slavcheff, *Detroit Images*, 11.

⁴⁹Korab, *Detroit, The Renaissance City*.

DETROIT, MICHIGAN



Neighborhoods and areas are indicated on the map by number as follows, with photographers' names shown in parentheses. Asterisks indicate sections in which photographs were taken in various locations around the Detroit area.

- *1 Destruction/Construction (D. Aikenhead)
- 2 Michigan Avenue: Community (G. Kasprzyk)
- 3 Michigan Avenue: Commercial (G. Kasprzyk)
- 4 Polatown (B. Harkness)
- 5 Central Industrial Park (D. Aikenhead)
- 6 Cass Corridor (B. Harkness)
- *7 Public Detroit I (M. Sarnacki)
- *8 Religious Detroit (M. Graznak)
- 9 Near East Side (H. Grannum)
- *10 Political Detroit (D. Griffith)
- 11 Tiger Stadium (D. Griffith)
- *12 Public Detroit II (E. Smith)
- 13 Northwest Detroit (T. Frank)
- 14 Southeast Dearborn (T. Maine)
- 15 Downriver (C. Anderson)
- *16 Detroit Freeways (D. Aikenhead)
- 17 Yesterday's Theatres (K. Piaseczny)
- *18 Detroit Closings (M. Andoniam)
- *19 Unknown Landmarks (C. Diaz)

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Figure 1. Map Detroit location photographic projects *Detroit Images*. Source: Bukowczyk et al., *Detroit Images: Photographs of the Renaissance City*, 43.

each chapter and the captions accompanying the photographs, the book provides no additional textual explanations or contextual information, leaving interpretation largely to the reader.

The photobook adopts a classic three-part structural narrative – beginning, middle, and end – framed by a map introducing the photographic locations (see [Figure 1](#)). This framework, reminiscent of city tours or official reports, subverts their typical emphasis on urban renaissance success by presenting a broader, more critical perspective. Since the 1960s, tours showcasing ‘another Detroit’ have primarily focused on redevelopment zones marked in dark grey on the map below (see [Figure 2](#)). These bus tours or walks were tools to promote redevelopment, urging participants to ‘see for yourself’ and reinforcing a mantra of ‘seeing is believing’.⁵⁰ While city council tours and planning reports often highlight core redevelopment areas that align with the ‘reborn city’ narrative, the Detroit Alliance for a Rational Economy (DARE) collective’s tour guide *City Life in the 80s: Tour Guide Book* (1979) used tours to expose ‘relationships’ by unravelling and reviewing how political and economic power shaped the city. Focusing on patterns of investment and disinvestment, DARE revealed that Detroit’s ‘renaissance’ was creating a new type of city, one less concerned with manufacturing and the interests of poor and working-class people.⁵¹ Similarly, the photobook shifts focus to neglected spaces outside downtown encouraging readers to explore and make discoveries independently.

The book opens with the chapter *Destruction/Construction* (featuring photographs by Aikenhead) and closes with *Unknown Landscapes* (featuring photographs by Carlos Diaz). In between,

⁵⁰See for example: *[Bus] Touring the Redevelopment of Detroit's Inner City* (1964) produced by the Detroit Housing Commission; *A Walking Tour of Downtown Detroit* (1979), Department of Public Information and the Detroit Historical Museum.

⁵¹Detroit Alliance for a Rational Economy, *City Life in the 80s: Tour Guide Book*, Box 7, Folder 26-28, *City Life in the 80's conference*; tour, Sep 1979, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, *Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs*, Wayne State University.

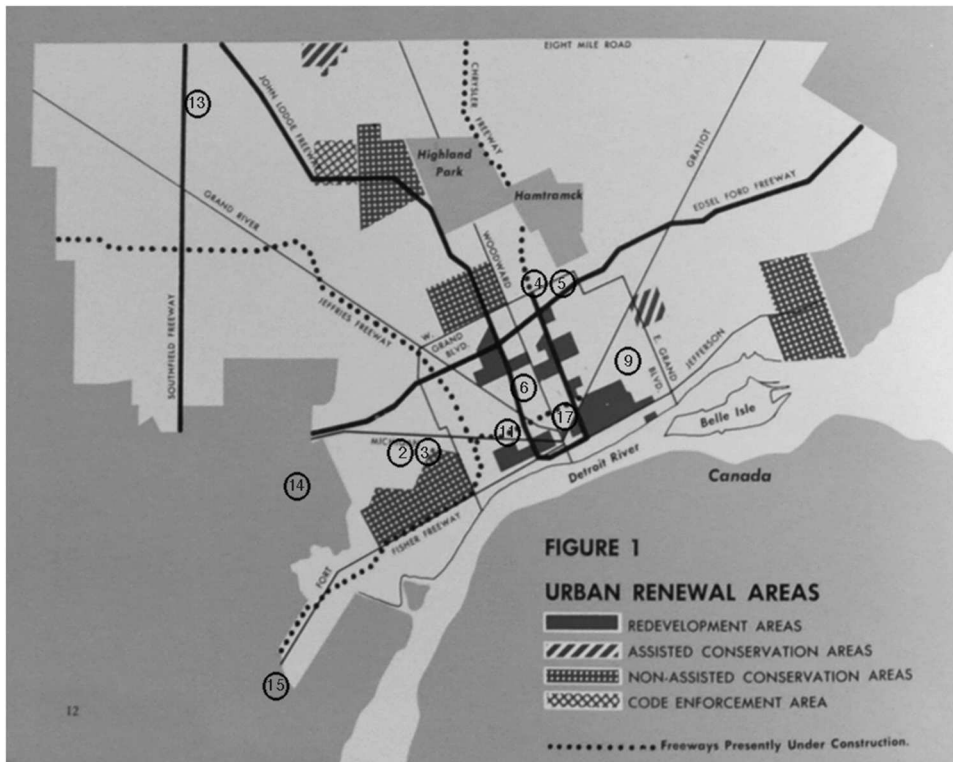


Figure 2. Map redevelopment project 1966 with location photographic projects Detroit Images. Produced by author using the booklet *The New Detroit* (1966) and *Detroit Images*.

the narrative shifts from portrayals of proud working-class communities to themes of displacement and resilience in Poletown and Del Ray, touching on religious sites, abandoned cars, highway construction, the demolition of architectural heritage, and leftover pieces of land and demolition sites. The middle section of the book, in particular, assembles fragmented, overlapping, and the more non-linear photojournalistic projects that invite alternative modes of reading, challenging the linear narrative structure found elsewhere. To reiterate the book's central question, in the final four chapters the editors explore *what will remain?* from different points of view. These include the rise of a new exurban community around highways (Aikenhead, chapter 16), the decaying and neglected theatres (Piaseczny, chapter 17), the closing of the Hudson Department Store through the images of Michelle Andonian in the chapter *Detroit Closing*, and finally, the contested sites in Diaz's *Unknown Landscapes*, the book's final chapter.

Reappropriating the RenCen

In this section, I will analyse how juxtapositions and sequencing are constructed, where images are arranged to evoke connections or contrasts with other works or styles, either directly or indirectly. I examine three representative examples of this technique, drawing on the works of Carlos Diaz and Aikenhead. First, I will analyse the cover image and specific juxtapositions in this image and refer to other images of series in the middle of the photobook. Second, I explore Aikenhead's use of the destruction and construction theme, focusing on how his framing of peripheral sites and symbolic

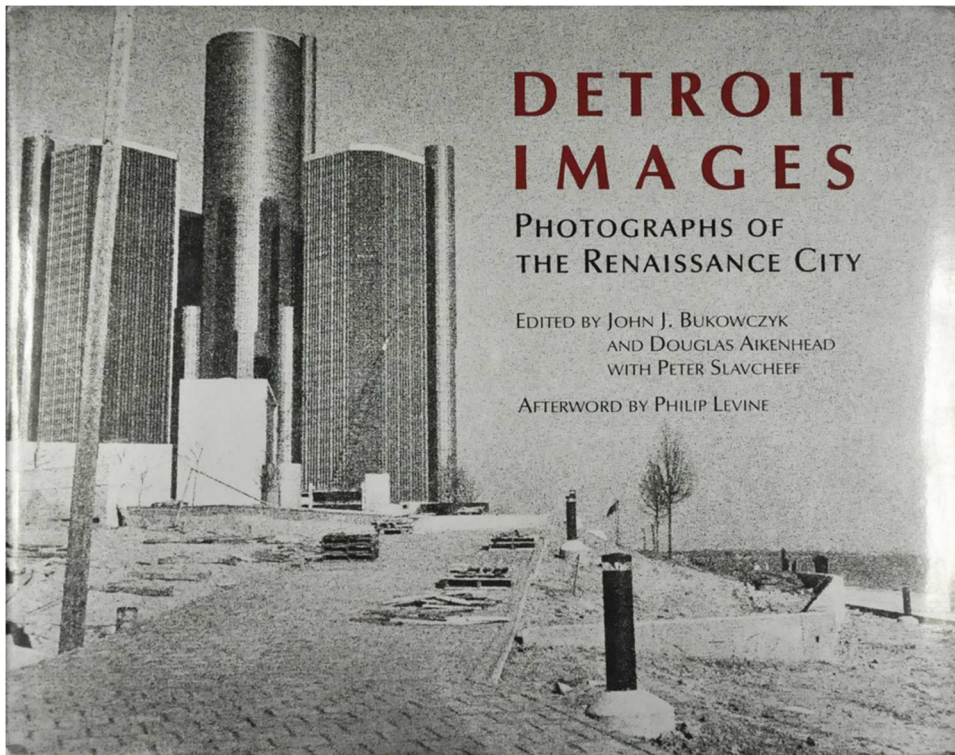


Figure 3. Front cover *Detroit Images*. Source: Courtesy of Aikenhead.

structures challenges the neutrality of documentary photography. Lastly, I discuss a representative image of Diaz's *Unknown Landmarks* series, highlighting how it draws attention to the overlooked wastelands and socio-economic inequalities left behind by redevelopment.

Evoking the RenCen: a symbol of urban rebirth

Building on the earlier discussion of how the book reworks themes and visual strategies reminiscent of earlier photobooks this first section examines the cover image of *Detroit Images* (Figure 3). Taken by Aikenhead, the cover photograph offers the viewer their initial encounter with the glimmering Renaissance Center tower on Detroit's riverfront, effectively framing it to reflect the intentions of the book's editors. The photograph positions the RenCen at a higher elevation, surrounded by unfinished pavement surfaces, piles of wooden debris, and leafless trees, creating an impression of inaccessibility and sterility – almost lifeless. The large-format, grainy quality of the image intensifies this desolate atmosphere.

The photobook also leverages its intertextual strategies by explicitly referencing photographers, works, and iconic images. The book's cover, titled 'Renaissance', situates it within the context of urban renewal campaigns. Additionally, the introduction contextualizes the book within the broader narrative of Detroit's deindustrialization and the image campaigns to rebrand the city, and the captions and vignettes at the beginning of each chapter highlight specific buildings, neighbourhoods, and communities. These symbolic references reinforce the photobook's engagement with larger themes of community and cultural identity.

It is fitting, then, that the Renaissance Center (RenCen) features prominently on the book's front cover and is used to communicate its overarching message (Figure 3). From the 1970s to the 1980s, most branding campaigns designed by the City's Department of Public Information (headed by Young) in cooperation with Detroit Renaissance, Inc. were spun around the RenCen.⁵² Whether it was a picture of a festival, a new residential neighbourhood or the city's newly built riverfront, the presence of the RenCen in all of these views was intended to radiate power and success, and hence highlight the RenCen's role as a catalyst to the city. From 1982 until 1988, for example, Formula One cars raced up to more than 100 mph on a 2.5-mile court between Cobo Hall and the RenCen (two of the flagship projects of the last two decades).⁵³ The coverage of the race cars around the Civic Center was intended 'to prove to the nation that Detroit is alive and kicking and, as a matter of fact, looks pretty good'.⁵⁴ In one of the early races, one of Spina's photographs of cars racing around the RenCen gained such popularity among the *Detroit Free Press* readers that the editors offered it for sale as 'prix mementos'.⁵⁵

In many ways, the architectural megastructure was the perfect type for use in these image campaigns. Its shape, size, and location lent itself perfectly for dissemination in magazines and on billboards where the photography enforced and supported the dominant renaissance rhetoric. In other words, the building's architectural features imposed specific viewpoints/locations on photographs: it was, for example, almost impossible to capture the Center from its immediate surroundings at street level. The placement of the much-criticized concrete berms in front of the complex further complicated matters. After all, how do you capture a monumental high-rise complex that does not really have any front façade to the city, let alone a main entrance? When I asked Tina Bassett, the PR campaign manager of the City of Detroit, whether in each campaign to promote Detroit there was a conscious choice to include the RenCen, she replied, 'I don't know how you just can miss it if you are shooting Detroit. It is always there You always catch it'.⁵⁶

The image campaigns built around the RenCen were not built around a larger vision or masterplan. They were based neither on a large planning promise like urban renewal nor on a campaign to clear the city of the endless slums and ghettos. Instead of being related to familiar and much criticized urban renewal schemes, they were linked more generically to Detroit's 'qualities of life'.⁵⁷ The focus on 'quality of life' was a classic PR stunt, as Bassett explained in my conversation with her. Instead of dealing directly with the building, she says, the campaigns needed 'to change the environment [around the RenCen]'.⁵⁸ In other words, they had to address and change the perception of the environment in order to make it possible for the 'detractor' to imagine that a new building like the RenCen could rise in Detroit; and that he or she could live, work and shop there.

This focus on 'quality of life' aligns with the broader trend of what Miriam Greenberg calls consumer-driven urban imaginaries, which prioritize marketable aesthetics to attract tourists, investors, and affluent residents.⁵⁹ Greenberg critiques this version of the urban imaginary, where symbols of community are shaped by market forces rather than reflecting the lived realities of marginalized populations. These representational spaces, branded as vibrant 'megaforums' often mimic

⁵²The Detroit Renaissance, Inc. was formed in 1970 as a specialized organization that focused on job creation and tax increase and was made up of the Detroit business elite.

⁵³Detroit Free Press, "Vroom"; Neill, "Lipstick on the Gorilla," 643.

⁵⁴Detroit Free Press.

⁵⁵Detroit Free Press, "Prix Mementos."

⁵⁶Bassett, Interview.

⁵⁷Detroit Renaissance, *Detroit Renaissance, 1973–76*, 14.

⁵⁸Bassett, For an initial list of the image campaigns, see Everett, "Selling a City: It Takes Cash."

⁵⁹Greenberg, "Branding Cities."

the City Beautiful movement's ideals, using monumental structures to project civic virtue and refine cultural values – while sidelining the complexities of local communities.⁶⁰

Criticism of RenCen's isolation, confusing interiors, and concrete berms, along with uncertainty about its role as a catalyst or insular centre, faded in the late 1970s due to its economic boost.⁶¹ However, criticism resurfaced in the early and mid-1980s, coinciding with the rise of Detroit's photographic community, as it became clear that many of RenCen's promises had failed. Young's efforts to save Detroit from bankruptcy in 1981 further fuelled detractors, while RenCen faced financial issues in 1983 and 1986.⁶² Remodelling efforts aimed to make it more accessible and inviting, but Young maintained in *Detroit Free Press* articles that RenCen was a 'catalytic force' driving downtown and riverfront development.⁶³

For those familiar with the riverfront developments, the front cover image's striking juxtaposition lies in the contrast between the monumental glass towers of the RenCen and the modest white cubes of the former Ford Auditorium at its base. While both structures share ties to the Ford dynasty, their meanings diverge significantly. Unlike the privately owned and managed RenCen, the Ford Auditorium – donated to the city by Henry and Edsel Ford – was widely regarded as a public asset. As Ruth Adler Schnee, a reader from Southfield, once remarked, it 'belongs to the people and must not be thrown away to the altar of economic opportunism'.⁶⁴ This tension between 'economic opportunism', symbolized by the RenCen, and the communal spirit represented by the Ford Auditorium serves as a compelling metaphor for the editors' broader message. The book invites readers to reflect on how Detroiters and the city itself were affected by the rhetoric and realities of the so-called renaissance.

The repetition of imagery featuring the Renaissance Center (RenCen) underscores the photo-book's critique, both as a symbol of progress and as an emblem of exclusionary urban planning. Four of the seven RenCen images are opening or closing images. In most of these photographs the outline of the RenCen towers is placed at the horizon of the photograph's viewing plane often clearly set apart from the historic Downtown high-rise landmarks. Its presence is only lightly felt. No radiating bright message or promise emanating from the towers reaches the buildings or grounds in these regions. In line with one of the dominant advertisement strategies above, the organization of the book and picture sequence adopted and appropriated the dominant strategy that to change the perception of a building or place you need to 'change the environment [around the RenCen]'.⁶⁵

This is in line with how Aikenhead speaks in one of the two introductory essays about photography's ability to go beyond the mere record, and hints to photographs' ability. In it, he refers to the photographs ability to 'analyse', 'acknowledge' [recognising], 'describe', 'reveal', 'raises questions', 'takes us inside neighbourhoods and homes', 'visual re-writes', 'chart the metropolitan growth', 'offer ... evidence'. References are made to Walker Evans' iconic photobook *American Photographs* and the way it contributed to 'a contemporary photographic aesthetic that both describes and critiques on the urban condition'.⁶⁵

⁶⁰Bennett, *Fragments of Cities*.

⁶¹Stroud, "Cities Rebirth Needs Much More." See also articles *The New York Times*, Stuart, "2-Year-Old Center Spurs Detroit Revival"; Stuart, "Detroit Takes Convention News as a Sign Renewal Is Succeeding."

⁶²Holusha, "Detroit Has Hard Times and One Man in Charge"; Knecht, "Renaissance Center," *ibid.*; Wilkerson, "Detroit's Symbol of Revival Now Epitomizes Its Problems."

⁶³Blossom and Ratliff, "RenCen at 10."

⁶⁴Detroit Free Press, "Ford Auditorium Can Still Be a Major Asset."

⁶⁵Aikenhead, "Picturing the City/ Photographing Detroit," 27.



Figure 4. Downtown People Mover construction with towers of Renaissance Center at right rear, Larner west of Woodward facing east, May 24, 1984, photographer Douglas Aikenhead. Source: Courtesy of Aikenhead

Aikenhead and destruction and construction

The concluding photograph, *Downtown People Mover* (Figure 4, 1984), of Aikenhead's series *Destruction/Construction* continues the tone set in the cover image. In it, Aikenhead depicted the ongoing construction works on the Detroit People Mover, an elevated automated people-mover system on a single-track encircling downtown Detroit (4.74 km). To take the photograph, Aikenhead stood next to One Woodward Avenue (Minoru Yamasaki, 1963) on West Larner Street, a back street to the much-publicized riverfront, and pointed his camera at a series of concrete cylindrical columns under construction adjacent to Young's Municipal Center (former City-County Building, 1954). The RenCen is framed in between Young's Center and One Woodward Avenue and placed behind a dense group of trees. Barely visible, the monument *The Spirit of Detroit* (1958) in front of Young's Municipal Center is entirely hidden behind a group of the trees. Neither the large bronze sculpture nor the RenCen take centre stage in this image. By turning a backstreet and insignificant construction site into a stage, the image asks us to move our attention away from the glitter and glamour of the RenCen to look at what happens at the periphery of the renaissance projects.

The opening image of *Destruction/Construction* contrasts sharply with the closing image, *Downtown People Mover*. Rather than showcasing construction, we see the demolition of key industrial landmarks like Uniroyal, Stroh Brewery, Crowley's warehouse, the Masonic Hall, Olympia Stadium, and a fire at the Old Briggs. Many of these buildings were tied to family histories and the city's growth. In some cases, closures have ravaged 'community self-esteem'.⁶⁶ This explains the selection of places 'people identified with' that Aikenhead sought out to photograph; places that contribute

⁶⁶Ratliff and Jackson, "Another Blow to the City's Pride."

to the creation of a ‘visual sense of place’.⁶⁷ This disjunction between demolition and construction underscores that both are integral to renaissance. The title *Destruction/Construction* reflects this tension, leaving the viewer to question whether the city is being built or torn down. In the series, destruction outweighs construction. New developments like the Millender Center (1985), Washington Boulevard Modernization (1987), Harbortown (1987), and the Detroit People Mover (1987) don’t heal past wounds but merely clean up parts of downtown. By examining both what is built and destroyed, we must consider how the past and future are interconnected.

Carlos Diaz and wastelands

Where Aikenhead’s use of the RenCen, the selection of sites, framing and narrative sequence lead us to question and reflect on the dual processes of destruction/construction in the renaissance developments, in the concluding series *Unknown Landmarks* by the photographer Diaz, a series of individual photographs is instead asking us to muse on the apparent insignificance of wastelands. Just like Aikenhead, Diaz went looking for the *other* spaces, the spaces behind the glittering façades of the RenCen. While Aikenhead tries to shift attention away to the process of demolition and deconstruction, the spaces sought by Diaz are those ‘in opposition to the landmarks the city offers to the public’.⁶⁸ Diaz appears to ask us to focus on the traces redevelopment leaves behind in the periphery of the celebrated renaissance or of renewal projects, thereby bringing into focus the real (unknown) landmarks. These spaces were ‘simple and insignificant’ while at the same time they ‘reflected something truthful, the reality that something was happening’.⁶⁹ The following intertextual analysis of the photograph *A Leveled Eastside Neighborhood Looking South* (Figure 5, 1984) demonstrate how the framing and captioning of vacant wasteland in photographs exposes the controversies around urban renewal developments.

A Leveled Eastside Neighborhood Looking South is a picture of the abandoned green field Forest Park near Eastern Market, located East of the Medical Center on the other side of the Chrysler Freeway (I-75). It was taken in East Canfield Street (between Russell and St. Aubin) looking southwards towards the Detroit River. In the photograph, the RenCen is in a light shadow pushed into the background on the right behind the boarded-up building in Forest Park; its monumentality and brightness do not stand out. The residential towers on the left of the RenCen are part of Mies van der Rohe’s Lafayette Park (1963).

Diaz’s photograph depicts not just some empty weed-overgrown plot of land, but rather, as the caption says, *A Leveled Eastside Neighborhood*. The combination of levelled and neighbourhood reminds viewers that the empty land we see in the photograph once housed a residential community. The deteriorating road infrastructure and empty land are evidence of the length of time this former community has been abandoned and cut off from any further services. The question ‘Why is all this empty land still sitting out there?’ asked in the late 1970s by a former resident of the Forest Park neighbourhood echoes in Diaz’ photograph.⁷⁰

Several years before Diaz set up his 4 × 5 view camera, the Forest Park neighbourhood was described as a ‘skeleton’ of empty lots, overgrown with weeds and filled with twisted metal and debris.⁷¹ Once ‘Detroit’s worst ghetto’, Forest Park’s deterioration followed its clearance in the early 1970s, displacing 7,000 residents with promises of new low-to-moderate income

⁶⁷Aikenhead, Interview.

⁶⁸Diaz, Interview.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Zucchini, “Forest Park Urban Renewal.”

⁷¹Ibid.



Figure 5. *A Leveled Eastside Neighborhood Looking South, Detroit, MI, 1984*, photographer Carlos Diaz. Source: Courtesy of Diaz.

housing.⁷² However, the demolition of ‘ramshackle homes’ did not allow former residents to return. Only three housing projects were built in the mid-1970s, leaving the area in limbo.⁷³ Diaz’s work confronts viewers with these unresolved issues through his images and words.

The contested nature of Forest Park and the relevance of Diaz’s *A Leveled Eastside Neighborhood Looking South* (1984) grew with the construction of a Pepsi-Cola Bottling plant in the early 1990s.⁷⁴ Despite being zoned for residential development, the city sold 38 acres of Forest Park to Pepsi-Cola in 1989, corresponding exactly to the desolate land Diaz portrayed. The company received a \$6 million tax abatement and built a nine-acre public park at Russell and Canfield, which Councilman Mel Ravitz called a ‘little sweetener’.⁷⁵ While Young saw the new plant as a ‘significant moment in the rebuilding of Detroit’, most workers were brought in from other facilities, leaving the community without jobs or housing.⁷⁶ Today, no memorial or reminder of the former Forest Park community exists at the Pepsi site. Diaz’s photograph remains relevant as a reminder of the erasure of communities and the dangers of ‘economic opportunism’.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Gallagher, “Pepsi Plant Job Seekers Overflow.”

⁷⁵Prater, “Council Accuses City of Giving Pepsi Land.”

⁷⁶Jones, “Pepsi to Build Detroit Bottling Plant,” *ibid.*; Gallagher, “Pepsi Plant Job Seekers Overflow.”

Conclusion: intertextual urban photobooks

In revisiting *Detroit Images: Photographs of the Renaissance City* (1989), this article has demonstrated how the photobook challenges the prevailing dichotomy between ruin and resilience that dominates the visual representations of Detroit and other places. By employing intertextuality, narrative sequencing, and juxtaposition, *Detroit Images* reframes Detroit's urban transformation, offering a critical counter-narrative to the prevailing image campaigns surrounding the city's Renaissance Center. Far from merely aestheticizing decay, the photobook critiques the rhetoric of economic renewal by foregrounding the tensions between commercial opportunism and public belonging.

The analysis has shown how photobooks like *Detroit Images* serve not only as historical records but also as critical tools for engaging with urban politics and history. By introducing the concept of 'Intertextual Urban Photobooks', this article positions these works as active agents in the cultural dialogue surrounding urban development, referencing and reworking materials from urban planning, advertising, and media to challenge dominant narratives. Through the detailed examination of the intertextual strategies of recontextualizing, reworking, and reappropriating visuals, we see how *Detroit Images* critiques the city's redevelopment discourse – particularly the visual branding of the RenCen as a symbol of Detroit's urban rebirth. This critique underscores the failure of these image campaigns to truly address the needs of the city's residents, instead promoting an idealized vision that overlooks the complexities of urban life.

Moreover, this study builds upon existing scholarship by addressing the gap in how photobooks are used within urban history and planning research. Photobooks, often dismissed as secondary sources, emerge as valuable primary research material that provide not only aesthetic reflections but also insightful commentary on urban governance, social issues, and the politics of image-making. By positioning *Detroit Images* as a tool of resistance, the article asserts the significance of photobooks as a platform for the creation of alternative urban imaginaries – an essential contribution to the field of urban history.

Finally, *Detroit Images* offers a broader lesson for how we understand the intersection of visual storytelling, urban politics, and redevelopment. It shifts the focus away from the traditional idea of urban planning as a top-down process dictated by economic forces and highlights the role of culture, representation, and public discourse in shaping urban identities. By foregrounding the role of photography in contesting the dominant planning narratives of Detroit's renaissance, the article calls for a deeper engagement with visual materials in urban studies, offering a methodology that integrates critical visual analysis with the study of urban planning and history. Through this lens, photobooks become not just passive records but active participants in the conversations that shape our cities.

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ORCID

Wes Aelbrecht  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5179-2990>

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