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# Framing Urbanities: Invisible/Visible Urban Assemblages

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## ABSTRACT

*This visual essay provides a reflective journey through the complexities of urban places. Drawing on curated juxtapositions of photographs from different places, I explore the transformations of public spaces and their role in shaping urban environments. The included frames offer a critical perspective on themes such as urban informality, affordance, temporality, urban transformation, mobility, visibility, performance, and public space. Informed by the theoretical frameworks of assemblage thinking and comparative urbanism, this visual essay enables a more sophisticated exploration of the relations between various elements across different scales and contexts. It cuts across geographical boundaries and highlights the evolving nature of urban places as they are continuously being made, unmade, and remade over time. I delve into the complexities of urban transformation and questions of urban inequalities, while also shedding light on the dynamics of visibility and the politics of public space. This visual essay highlights the capacities of urban photography to facilitate critical reflections on urban environments and the dynamic processes that shape them.*

## INTRODUCTION

This visual essay reflects upon an urban photography project that represents the culmination of several years of work exhibited in 2023. The exhibition presented a visual exploration of how urban places are being made, unmade, and remade in a global context. It featured a curated collection of black and white photographs I captured as part of my storytelling urban photography project, exploring forms of urbanity in global North and South cities. In this essay, I primarily focus on ten curated frames, each juxtaposing two photographs from different places, communicating narratives about the shaping of place and public space in a global context.

Assemblage thinking and comparative urbanism were critical in shaping the design of each frame and the included juxtapositions. My interpretation of assemblage thinking is primarily inspired by the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Dovey (2010). One key theme linking the included figures to each other is the shift from entity-focused to relations-focused explorations. The curated frames explore various twofold concepts such as informal/formal, sociality/spatiality, materiality/expression, and smooth/straited. Multiscale thinking has also played a key role in the process of designing the included frames. My reading of the comparative urbanism framework is closely aligned with the idea of considering cities as “ordinary” (Robinson, 2006) and the emerging thinking concerning how this can be approached through comparative urban explorations (Robinson, 2022). These theoretical frameworks have offered insights into exploring how places and public spaces work across different scales and contexts.

## JUXTAPOSING URBAN PLACES: TEN FRAMES

Figure 1 portrays the dynamics of informal street vending in public spaces, where vendors endeavour to sustain their livelihoods in relation to formal businesses, creating a complex relationship between the formal and informal economies. Drawing on Dovey (2019) and Roy (2015), I engage with exploring urban informality as a mode of space production and governance (Kamalipour, 2024). The juxtaposed

images capture how public spaces work at the intersections of local and global flows and highlight the importance of public space in sustaining livelihoods and micro-economies. This figure illustrates the complex relationships between local and global trading networks, representing the coexistence of permanent temporalities in public spaces.

Figure 2 provides a visual narrative that explores several aspects of urban life. It captures the spatial and social affordances of public spaces, shedding light on the complex relationships between shaping a place and enabling public life. The juxtaposed images highlight the importance of public spaces as settings for social interactions. The expressive aspects of public space come to the fore as the figure portrays the distinctive characters of different urban places. This figure offers insights into the dynamics of urban life in public spaces, where transitory and stationary activities coexist.



FIGURE 1. Framing Istanbul (top) and Bangkok (bottom). Photos: Author.





Figure 2. Framing Melbourne (top) and Quito (bottom).  
Photos: Author.

Figure 3 delves into the complexities of urban images, exploring how our perceptions of the cityscape are being shaped and transformed over time. The competing skylines shown in the juxtaposed photographs contribute to the shaping of the collective urban images over time. The city becomes a dynamic spectacle offered to the gaze of individuals, enabling critical reflections on the overlapping experiences of seeing the city and being seen within it. This figure provokes questions about the power structures at play in shaping urban places, and for whom these places are being made. Exploring the relationship between what is being revealed and what is being concealed sheds light on the complexities of individual experiences and highlights the dynamics and politics of visibility.



FIGURE 3. Framing London (top) and Istanbul (bottom).  
Photos: Author.

Figure 4 puts forward a visual narrative that frames urban histories and futures by creating a juxtaposition that enables a critical engagement with the dynamic interactions between the past and what lies ahead. It explores the dynamics of visibility, where the contrasts between what is revealed and concealed highlight the multifaceted narratives of urban transformation. When it comes to investigating place memories, histories, and identities, as discussed by King (2024), research becomes a reading exercise through which places can be explored as texts. The juxtaposition of history and the future, as shown in this figure, can frame the relations between what can be considered the foreground and background of everyday place explorations.

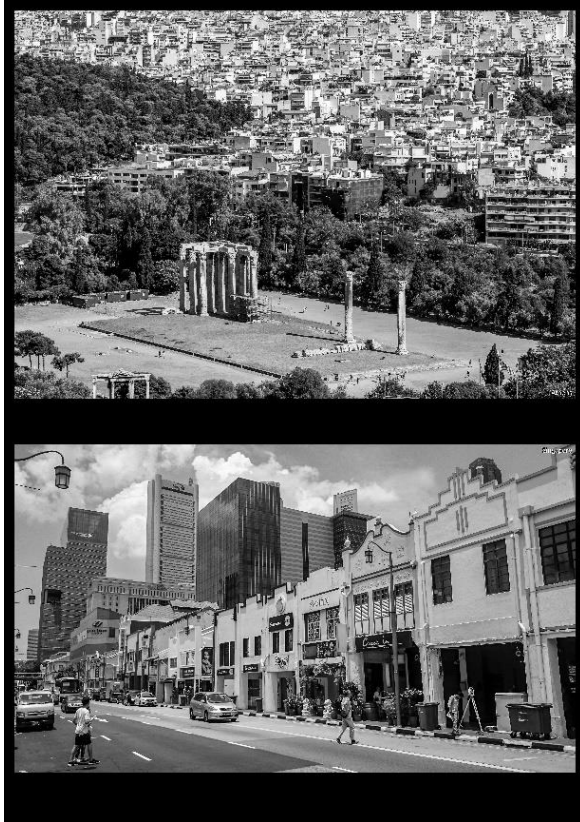


FIGURE 4. Framing Athens (top) and Singapore (bottom). Photos: Author.

Figure 5 explores places in transition, shedding light on the challenging process of transforming car-dependent metropolises into more sustainable and equitable places. It provides a representation of urban inequalities that persist and become visible in public spaces, raising questions about how and the extent to which urban justice can become materialised in reality. The appropriation of public space and the dynamics of visibility also become evident in the juxtaposed images, where diverse groups seek to assert their presence and rights within cities and urban spaces. The intersecting flows of people, desires, and fears illustrate the complexities that shape contemporary cities. This figure offers a window into the dynamics of urban transformation and the quest for more inclusive and just cities.



FIGURE 5. Framing Melbourne (top and bottom). Photos: Author.

Figure 6 highlights the dynamic competitions for view and visibility in the context of emerging cityscapes. It explores the shaping of viewsheds and viewpoints, reflecting how urban escalations and the quest for visual supremacy impact the shaping of urban environments and experiences. The everyday transformation of a railway into a temporary public space can be considered a depiction of emerging urban adaptability. Such temporary appropriations materialise the idea of sharing public space and highlight the ephemeral yet vital existence of provisional public spaces in our cities (Kamalipour, 2023). This figure shows how serial visions and landmarks become realised across various contexts, where different processes of urban development intersect in a visual narrative.





FIGURE 6. Framing Istanbul (top) and Bangkok (bottom). Photos: Author.

Figure 7 offers a multifaceted narrative that delves into the complexities of urban mobility, highlighting the evolving and intersecting flows of movement that shape contemporary urban places. It indicates how different forms of mobility play out in cities and sheds light on the appropriation of public space, raising questions about who has rights to not only access but also appropriate public space and to what extent such rights can be exercised and tolerated across different contexts. The juxtaposition of informal and formal transport also offers insights into the city's informal economy associated with urban mobilities (Peimani & Dovey, 2018). This figure portrays the coexistence of various mobility networks and structures, highlighting the synergies and contradictions related to spatial and temporal competitions among different modes of transport.



FIGURE 7. Framing Amsterdam (top) and Bangkok (bottom). Photos: Author.

Figure 8 unfolds a critical exploration of the dynamics of visibility, shedding light on the multifaceted ways in which places are shaped through different processes of development. It explores the complexities of revealing and concealing, highlighting the dynamics and politics of visibility (Kamalipour & Dovey, 2019). The juxtaposed photographs delve into the politics of urban development and visibility in public space, exposing certain ways of authorising the shaping of place and revealing the expressive aspects of public space in relation to power. This figure focuses on the role of image and visibility in shaping perceptions of urban places, exploring the complexities of visual dynamics and the relations between power, place, and perception.



FIGURE 8. Framing Caracas (top and bottom). Photos: Author.

Figure 9 shows how forms of performance and appropriation play out in public space, illustrating how urban places become a stage for forms of appropriation and expression. The juxtaposed images illustrate the appropriation of public space for different purposes, reflecting the intersecting flows of desire in relation to the dynamics of visibility and exploring the complex relations between seeing and being seen. They also subtly represent urban inequalities within the public space, raising critical questions about just cities. The composition of this frame enables a layered experience, encouraging different encounters with the same place simultaneously. This figure explores the dynamics of public spaces along with the intersecting flows that shape them.



FIGURE 9. Framing Melbourne (top and bottom). Photos: Author.

Figure 10 shows how public spaces are being used and managed as forums for interaction, negotiation, and expression. One of the juxtaposed images portrays the arcade as a quasi-public space, a semi-enclosed urban place that enhances permeability and enables social interactions. The other juxtaposed image shows how the visible edges of public space become appropriated for urban advertisements and raises a critical question regarding the formalisation of pedestrian flows. This figure highlights the dynamics of access, control, and management in indoor and outdoor public spaces, indicating how they enable or constrain social life and public activities. It also shows how the relationships between urban density and intensity play out across different urban environments.





FIGURE 10. Framing Cardiff (top) and Tokyo (bottom).  
Photos: Author.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this visual essay, I discussed a reflective journey through the complex and multifaceted dynamics of urban places. Through the curated juxtaposition of photographs from different places, I explored the evolving nature of public spaces and their key role in shaping our urban environments. Each of the included figures offered a critical lens for exploring the themes of urban informality, affordance, temporality, urban transformation, mobility, visibility, performance, and public space, among others. The theoretical underpinnings of assemblage thinking and comparative urbanism have informed the conception and development of these frames, encouraging an informed exploration beyond a simple focus on entities and to explore the relationships between various elements within urban places. This approach has provided a more sophisticated understanding of the relations between informality and formality, the affordances of public spaces, the significance of temporal dimensions, and the complexities of urban

transformation and development processes. In what follows, I outline some of the key themes discussed in relation to the included figures.

One of the central themes is the evolving and fluid nature of urban places as they are being made, unmade, and remade over time. The juxtaposition of photographs from different places has highlighted the ongoing processes of urban transformation and the role of public spaces as arenas for appropriation, negotiation, and contestation. The frames examining the relationships between past and future have challenged us to reflect on how place histories, memories, and identities can be approached in urban studies. I have also explored the complexities of urban development, illustrating how places transform and adapt over time. By juxtaposing photographs of metropolises transitioning into more/less sustainable and equitable places, I have drawn attention to urban inequalities and raised important questions in this regard. The frames exploring urban mobility and the competition for views and visibility have highlighted the complex relations between different modes of transport. The focus on the dynamics of visibility, the politics of urban transformation, and the expressive aspects of public space has also unravelled the relationships between power, place, and perception. The juxtaposition of photographs depicting forms of performance and appropriation in public spaces has shown the intersecting flows of desire and raised critical questions about equitable cities and socio-spatial justice. The last frame has delved into the control and management of public spaces, revealing how they enable or constrain social life and public activities.

My attempt here has been to explore the complexities of urban places, cutting across geographical boundaries and challenging preconceived notions of place and public space. This visual essay sheds light on the capacity of urban photography to foster critical engagement with urban places and the dynamic processes that shape them. By encouraging reflection on the intersections of urban assemblages, this reflective photo essay ultimately contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how places work across different scales and contexts.



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