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VISUAL ESSAY

Co-producing place narratives: participatory visual storytelling through the lens of youth

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This visual essay embarks on a reflective exploration of participatory, place-based storytelling through urban photography. Drawing on a curated collection of photos captured by young people from the Grangetown community in Cardiff during their place-based photo walks, we explore how urban places are constantly being made, unmade, and remade, with a particular focus on youth perspectives. The photographs provide a powerful lens through which we investigate themes such as sonder, layered place identities, urban transformation, youthful nostalgia, collective memory, spaces of belonging, adaptable and creative places, cultural vibrancy, corridors of nature, and the rhythms of the city. In this visual essay, we delve into the narratives shared by the youth to reveal the dynamic processes that shape and transform these urban landscapes. We further explore how participatory storytelling can serve as both a method of critical urban analysis and a platform for youth empowerment. The project positions young people not merely as subjects, but as co-creators of urban narratives, contributing to deeper community engagement and place-based agency. Situated within the broader field of participatory visual research, this essay also reflects on the capacity of using photography as a critical, inclusive urban research and engagement method.

INTRODUCTION

Urban places are dynamic, constantly shaped by the entangled interactions of people, environments, and

histories. Understanding these shifting dynamics, alliances, and transformations often requires creative and inclusive approaches. Urban photography has emerged as a potent method for exploring and communicating place-based narratives. Urban thinkers such as Jane Jacobs (1961) have long emphasised the value of observing everyday urban life to understand how people engage with their environments, while Doreen Massey (2005) highlights the multiplicity and interconnectivity of place identities. Building on these foundations and drawing on Kim Dovey's (2009) conceptualisation of 'place as assemblage', we position participatory urban photography as a critical method – one that bridges academic inquiry and community engagement, allowing individuals, especially youth, to narrate their lived experiences of place.

Drawing on participatory visual methods, particularly the photovoice tradition (Wang and Burris 1997), we adopt urban photography not merely as a form of documentation but as a mode of narrative-rich, interpretative storytelling that enables the expression of both personal and collective experiences of urban space. Kamalipour (2024) sheds light on the potential of urban photography to prompt critical reflection on urban spaces and the dynamic processes that impact their development. Pink (2007) further argues that the ways photographs are presented, organised, and discussed can serve as analytical and representational tool – pairing

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imagery with narrative to communicate participants' self-representations. Pink's attention to the sensory and effective dimensions of visual methods highlights the transformative potential of participatory storytelling, where participants become co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects of research. Gubrium and Harper (2013) similarly argue for the value of visual storytelling in producing more inclusive, bottom-up forms of knowledge, particularly when participants are given control over the lens and narrative.

In cities, young people often remain underrepresented in how urban transformation is imagined, recorded, and narrated. This visual essay explores the co-production of place narratives through youth-led, participatory storytelling using urban photography. Our work focuses on Grangetown, a highly diverse inner-city neighbourhood in Cardiff marked by overlapping histories of migration, multilingualism, deindustrialisation, and recent regeneration. These socio-spatial shifts have notably impacted Grangetown's physical fabric – through streetscape improvements, public realm upgrades, and community-led housing initiatives – as well as its evolving economic base. While official redevelopment plans often frame the area's transformation, the lived and visual narratives of Grangetown's youth remain relatively undocumented in academic literature.

The photographs presented in this essay are drawn from a series of guided, place-based photo walks conducted by young people in Grangetown. Through their lenses, participants document and reflect on themes such as cultural vibrancy, spaces of belonging, urban transformation, and environmental neglect, offering fresh perspectives on how urban places are continually made, unmade, and remade. They were then supported in writing accompanying reflections, with the process co-curated through iterative dialogue. Participants selected which photos to share and how to narrate them, creating a layered, dialogic account of place that positions youth as both observers and narrators of urban change. Drawing on Carmona (2021) and Dovey (2016), Kamalipour, Aelbrecht, and Peimani (2023) define urban design as the products and processes of shaping public space across contexts and scales, while raising critical questions around *agency*, *affordance*, *place*, *informality*, and *performance*. In our work, participatory photography enables a deeper sense of *agency* among youth, encouraging them to view their neighbourhoods as sites of meaning and possibility rather than mere backdrops to their lives. As David Harvey (1996) suggests, the 'right to the city' encompasses the ability to reshape urban spaces through collective action and imagination. By equipping young people with tools to document and narrate their environments, we aim to enable this process, opening avenues for more inclusive urban futures.

In what follows, we present a curated collection of photographs and youth reflections that illustrate the layered identities of Grangetown. These images serve as visual and narrative interventions, illuminating the rhythms, memories, absences, and everyday encounters that shape urban spaces in this neighbourhood. To safeguard the anonymity of the project participants and uphold ethical research standards, individual narratives and photographs are attributed using non-identifiable labels such as 'Participant 1', 'Participant 2', and so forth. Our aim is to highlight the potential of participatory, place-based storytelling as a critical tool for understanding the dynamics of cities and empowering those often excluded from shaping them.

PARTICIPATORY, PLACE-BASED STORYTELLING THROUGH URBAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Urban photography as a participatory medium, provides a platform for young people to express their nuanced experiences of place. In Figure 1, the image moves beyond observation to evoke a contemplative stillness, capturing the anonymity and quiet coexistence of urban life. Participant 1's invocation of 'sonder' gestures toward the unnoticed multiplicity of lives within shared spaces – a theme central to everyday urbanism and the relational nature of place.

They stand still, stuck in place. Naked branches, stationary in the cloudy winter sky. Every detail tells its own story. The streamline clouds from the planes, where could they be going? The terrace along the back, who knows what adventures are taking place inside? The lone lady strolling, what could be going on in her mind? This photo tells a million stories in one, it captures an almost surreal moment where all these stories stop in place. This photo will forever remind me to sonder, remind me that everyone and everything in our community has its own remarkable and unique story. (Participant 1)

Figure 2, photographed by Participant 2, shows a vibrant corner shop, adorned with striking graffiti, standing as a portal to the past for Participant 2 – where personal memory intersects with collective identity. The visual juxtaposition of informal street art and everyday commerce highlights how local aesthetics function as markers of belonging, anchoring individual experience within the layered temporalities of place.

I chose to photograph this place because it reminds me of my childhood. This corner shop has been there for as long as I can remember, and



FIGURE 1. A silent moment. Photo by Participant 1.

the landscapes are forever changing. Some of my fondest memories of the place are going there as a child and with my older cousins and them buying me sweets. My favourite element of this landmark is the graffiti on the side of the building. I feel like the graffiti really emphasises

the culture and vibrancy that Grangetown has to offer, as well as showcasing local talent.
(Participant 2)

Participant 3's photograph in [Figure 3](#) is rich in visual contrast, juxtaposing ornate Victorian brickwork with



FIGURE 2. A trip down memory lane. Photo by Participant 2.



FIGURE 3. Past meets present: the contrast of tradition & progress in Grangetown. Photo by Participant 3.

stark, minimal contemporary architecture. This composition articulates a visual narrative of transition, where the built environment becomes a metaphor for broader urban tensions between preservation and progress, identity and transformation.

As society transitions toward a more modern, fast-paced, and urban lifestyle, the infrastructure of communities like Grangetown, begin to reflect this change. This photo captures the stark contrast between two architectural eras: on the right-hand side, the ornate brickwork of the Victorian-style terrace speaks to the rich history of Cardiff, whilst on the left, stands a bold and minimalistic apartment block, representing the rapid urban development that has become crucial in our growing cities.

Grangetown's evolving identity is shaped not only by its people, but by the spaces we inhabit. Although the contemporary apartment buildings reflect efficiency and modern design, members of the community may feel a sense of loss for the intricate craftsmanship and character of older homes. I chose to capture this scene, to serve as a reminder that whilst progress is necessary, this striking contrast sparks dialogue about preserving heritage that makes a place like Grangetown special. (Participant 3)

In Figure 4, Participant 3's framing draws attention to both care and neglect – contrasting the serenity of natural elements with the visible signs of litter. The

image subtly critiques environmental inequality, resonating with broader discourses on spatial justice and the uneven distribution of urban investment.

I captured the riverside in Grangetown, which offers a rare escape to nature, with reeds and water providing a tranquil view. However, the visible rubbish along the banks reflects a growing problem. Grangetown has limited natural spaces compared to other areas in Wales, and litter is tarnishing this precious landscape. This spot is a reminder of how important it is to protect what little green space we have, to preserve it for everyone to enjoy. (Participant 3)

In Figure 5, Participant 3's photograph offers a visual critique of urban design failure, framing play as a lost right. The empty playground becomes a powerful symbol, implicitly engaging with Harvey's (1996) notion of the 'right to the city', where the absence of people becomes the subject itself.

This playground is a nostalgic spot, holding memories of childhood laughter and carefree days. Yet, as I look beyond to the modern buildings juxtaposed with older structures, I see how Grangetown has evolved. The empty park space reflects a missed opportunity for the council to create more engaging, usable spaces for young people. It's a reminder that while some things change, others, like the need for well-designed community areas, remain crucial for future generations. (Participant 3)

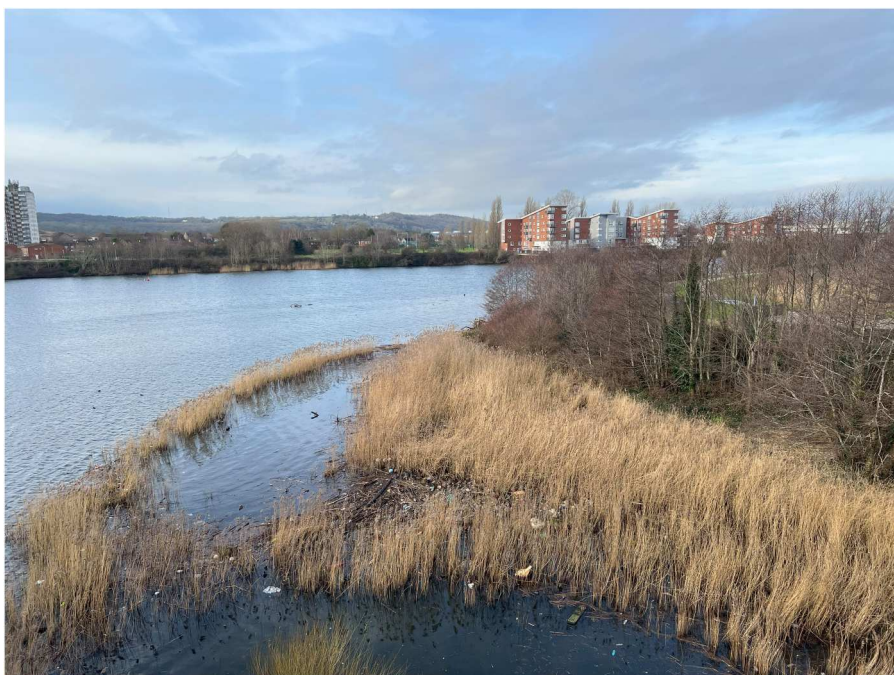


FIGURE 4. A Fragile Oasis: Grangetown's Riverside. Photo by Participant 3.



FIGURE 5. Playground of past and present. Photo by Participant 3.

In [Figure 6](#), Participant 3's reflection on Holmesdale Street evokes a deep sense of attachment to the quiet, lived-in rhythms of everyday life in Grangetown. The worn aesthetic and muted tones shift focus away from the iconic toward the ordinary, framing the street not as



FIGURE 6. Holmesdale Street. Photo by Participant 3.

spectacle but as crucial infrastructure for memory and community.

Holmesdale Street holds a more nostalgic place in my heart, and although it has a tired and worn appearance, it's a daily life path for many. Closely packed houses line the road, and the practicality of the street with amenities and a local school nearby, make this street quite busy. The overcast sky and bare branches in this photo reflect the worn-out energy of the street, when compared to the other more vibrant parts of Grangetown. It feels like an essential part of life in Grangetown but also illustrates the wear and tear that comes with time and frequent use. Although Holmesdale Street may not be the most picturesque, it is a street full of stories and rhythms. (Participant 3)

In [Figure 7](#), Participant 3's photograph frames the Grange Pavilion as more than just a building – it becomes a symbol. The rust-coloured surface appears almost sculptural, imbued with affect and memory. For many young people, this space embodies collective hope and belonging, illustrating how the built environment can serve as a vessel for community strength and unity.

I captured the entrance to Grange Pavilion, a rust-coloured metal structure that symbolises resilience and renewal. To me, this space is a hub for community in Grangetown—rich with promise for a vibrant future, while also a reminder of Grangetown's rugged, layered



FIGURE 7. Grange Pavilion. Photo by Participant 3.

history. The pavilion represents the spirit of inclusivity and progress, fostering a sense of belonging for all who gather here. (Participant 3)

In Figure 8, Participant 4's photograph – centrally framed – captures the civic formality of Grange Gardens



FIGURE 8. Grange Gardens Bandstand. Photo by Participant 4.

as a space of public gathering. The image links cultural diversity with spatial inclusion, illustrating how places like the Gardens and the Grange Pavilion anchor Grangetown's multicultural narrative and serve as vital stages for everyday storytelling.

Grangetown is known for its multicultural population, which can make it a rich place for storytelling through photography. Grange Gardens is a well-loved green space that might show the peaceful, community-centred side of Grangetown. The Grange Pavilion is significant in our composition, as they're gathering places with historical and social importance. (Participant 4)

In Figure 9, Participant 5's photograph captures a striking visual duality – where layers of history are embedded in the built environment and streetscape. Through careful composition, the image reflects Grangetown's ongoing transformation while holding space for its historical depth and continuity.

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FIGURE 9. Two sides of the same coin. Photo by Participant 5.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Co-producing place narratives through urban photography has emerged as a powerful method for empowering young people and foregrounding their lived experiences of urban space. This visual essay has explored the dynamic and evolving relationship between youth, place, and identity in the Grangetown community of Cardiff, explored through participatory, place-based storytelling. The photographs shared by local youth provide not only a window into their lived experiences but also a means to understand how urban places are continuously shaped and reshaped over time. By capturing their environments and sharing their stories, participants articulate a sense of belonging and agency within places that are often framed through top-down redevelopment narratives. By focusing on youth perspectives, this visual essay offers a deeper exploration of how public spaces are lived in, contested, and reimagined through everyday encounters, capturing the subtle dynamics of a place at a critical moment in its becoming. Through this exploration, we also emphasise how individual stories of place are inherently interconnected with broader processes of urban transformation.

The reflections of the youth participants offer a wealth of stories, insights, and memories about the places they inhabit. From the everyday rhythms of Holmesdale Street to the striking graffiti on a familiar corner shop, and vibrant atmosphere of Grange Pavilion, the photos highlight the diverse ways in which young people experience and relate to their urban surroundings. What resonates throughout is the

recognition of spaces as more than just physical locations; they are living archives of collective memories, identities, and emotions. The photographs and accompanying narratives indicate that even as urban places transform, they remain central to the sense of belonging and community for their inhabitants. Each photograph offers a moment of pause and reflection, where the fluidity of urban life is crystallised, yet also speaks to the untold stories that continue to unfold in these places. Such places are being shaped often through the hands and voices of the people who call them home.

This visual essay explores the potential of participatory, place-based storytelling to foster greater community engagement, deeper connections to place, and a more inclusive vision for urban futures. By empowering youth to document, reflect on, and narrate their own lived experiences, we can open up spaces for more meaningful conversations about how cities might evolve in ways that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of their inhabitants. While a visual essay in itself may not be sufficient to transform communities or participants' lived conditions, it can serve as a catalyst for broader dialogue and awareness. As participants claim their right to see, speak, and be seen in their neighbourhood, they contribute to a shift in urban narratives – toward ones that are more locally rooted, dialogic, and equitable. We argue that through urban photography, young people not only capture the world around them but also begin to engage with shaping the narratives that define their communities. Future iterations of such projects might benefit from

more sustained involvement, feedback loops, and/or integration into wider community engagement and planning initiatives to deepen impact.

The images and reflections shared throughout this project also outline the importance of agency in shaping the urban environments. Through the act of photographing and narrating their experiences, participants are not positioned as passive observers, but as active co-creators of the place-based stories that defined their neighbourhood. This participatory approach can empower youth to engage critically with their surroundings, enabling them to reclaim their right to the city and assert their vision for its future. By enabling young people to capture and share their perspectives, this project highlights the potential of participatory storytelling to foster deeper connections to place and greater community engagement.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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