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Through the camera lens: the role of photography in shaping planning histories

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ABSTRACT

Over the past four decades, planning history has developed into a field that interrogates how cities are imagined, designed and remembered. This article celebrates this evolution by exploring an often overlooked but vital element: photography. Far from being a passive record, photography has actively constructed and critiqued planning histories. Drawing on Ariella Azoulay's view of photographs as civic events and Elizabeth Edwards's description of images as 'dynamic' and 'ambiguous,' the article examines how photographs can disrupt traditional narratives, challenge biases and shed light on untold histories. A survey of nearly 550 articles identifies four recurring analytical uses: reconstructing lost urban forms, rewriting planning histories, reframing spatial narratives and revealing the politics of representation. These approaches demonstrate photography's capacity to complicate official accounts and surface marginal stories of urban change. Yet they are often applied inconsistently and rarely grounded in sustained visual methodologies. This analysis also extends beyond journal articles to include influential planning history books to situate these findings within the discipline's broader historiographical development. By positioning photographs at the heart of planning historiography, the article argues for a more critical visual methodology that can democratize planning histories, broaden authorship and enable more inclusive urban narratives.

Introduction

The 40th anniversary of Planning Perspectives offers a timely opportunity to reflect on the evolution of planning history as a discipline, to assess its current state, and to consider its future directions. This article specifically explores the overlooked but vital role of photography in shaping planning history. While the discipline has traditionally examined how cities are imagined, designed and remembered, photographs offer a powerful yet underused tool for revealing alternative narratives. Drawing on scholars such as Ariella Azoulay (2008) and Elizabeth Edwards (2022),[1] this article argues that photographs can challenge dominant perspectives, disrupt conventional historiographies, and open the field to more inclusive and diverse urban histories.

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[1]Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*.

Through a survey of two of the most reputable academic journals on planning history – *Planning Perspectives* (Taylor & Francis, 1986-) based in the United Kingdom and *Journal of Planning History* (Sage, 2002-) based in the United States, this article assesses how photographs have been used across both journals from 2002–2025 to understand how visual sources have been addressed within the disciplines over the past two decades. The period of 2002–2025 was chosen to offer consistency between the two journals as *Journal of Planning History* was first published in 2002. Despite the critical potential of photography, a review of almost 550 articles from the two journals, reveals that photographs are overwhelmingly used in an illustrative, rather than analytical or theoretical, manner. In parallel, a survey of major planning history book publications reveals a similar pattern, with photographs largely relegated to illustrative roles rather than being engaged as primary evidence or methodological tools. Together, these analyses provide insight into the development of planning history, offer a critical assessment of current visual practices, and highlight the potential of alternative approaches to visual material.

This article will, therefore, begin by discussing the remit and results of the journal and book survey, then reflect on the disciplinary implications for the discipline's methodological assumptions and suggest proposals for the use of photographs moving forward. It concludes by offering recommendations on the future role of photographs with the discipline of planning history. In doing so, this article contributes to an emerging visual turn within planning history.

Remits and results of the survey

This study is based on a survey of 549 peer-reviewed articles published between 2002 and 2025 in two leading journals in the field of planning history: *Planning Perspectives* (414 articles) and *Journal of Planning History* (135 articles), identified through the search term 'photograph (Table 1).' These journals were selected for their disciplinary significance and distinct geographic orientations. *Planning Perspectives* is a UK-based journal with an international scope, often featuring European and Commonwealth contexts. *Journal of Planning History*,

Table 1. Survey results.

	Planning Perspectives (414)		Journal of Planning History (135)	
Analytical	19	4.59%	11	8.15%
Comparative	2	0.48%	1	0.74%
Evidentiary	2	0.48%	23	17.04%
Illustrative	246	59.42%	56	41.48%
Participatory	1	0.24%	0	0.00%
Rhetorical	0	0.00%	2	1.48%
Symbolic	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Illustrative/analytical	65	15.70%	14	10.37%
Illustrative/comparative	3	0.72%	1	0.74%
Illustrative/evidentiary	4	0.97%	0	0.00%
Comparative/evidentiary	0	0.00%	1	0.74%
Analytical/evidentiary	2	0.48%	0	0.00%
Analytical/rhetorical	1	0.24%	0	0.00%
Analytical/rhetorical/comparative	1	0.24%	0	0.00%
Symbolic/evidentiary	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
n/a	68	16.43%	26	19.26%

by contrast, is published in the United States and tends to focus on North American planning histories with an increasingly global agenda. This distinction allows for a comparative view of how photographs are used in planning historiography across two editorial cultures to assess whether different geographical contexts and research agendas impact on the use of visual material within the discipline.

All full-length research articles from the survey period were reviewed, excluding editorials, book reviews, and commentaries. Articles were included in the sample only if they featured one or more photographic images, reproduced in the body of the text or as figures or plates. Non-photographic visuals such as maps, plans, or tables were excluded. Each article was assessed using a two-part coding framework: the first focused on the function of photographs, while the second assessed whether a visual research methodology was made explicit by the author(s). All photographs in an article were considered in this process, regardless of whether they appeared in the main text, figure section, or appendix, and irrespective of whether they were explicitly discussed. The two authors each coded a distinct portion of the sample. While borderline cases were discussed, no formal recoding or cross-checking of coding was undertaken.

The first coding scheme categorised how photographs operated within the article, regardless of whether they were explicitly discussed in the text. Functions included: illustrative (images that visually supported or mirrored the text), evidentiary (used as historical documentation, especially of spatial conditions no longer present), analytical (images closely examined to extract spatial meaning or insights), rhetorical (used to provoke emotion or convey atmosphere), comparative (images juxtaposed to show change or contrast), symbolic (standing in for broader concepts), and participatory (produced collaboratively with subjects or stakeholders). When appropriate, images were coded with multiple functions (e.g. 'illustrative/analytical'). The second coding framework recorded whether authors described the use of photographs in methodological terms and only when explicitly acknowledged by the author(s). Visual research methods included, but were not limited to, photo elicitation, visual framing, semiotics, discourse analysis, intertextuality, compositional analysis, content analysis and visual ethnography.

Out of the 549 articles surveyed, 215 (39.2%) actually contained visual sources and were analysed in more detail: 146 articles (35.3%) in *Planning Perspectives* and 69 articles (51.1%) in *Journal of Planning History*. The most common use of photographs in both journals was illustrative. This applied to 246 instances (59.42%) in *Planning Perspectives* and 56 instances (41.48%) in *Journal of Planning History*. These images typically served as visual confirmation of material discussed in the text (e.g. buildings, streetscapes, landscapes), but were not subject to deeper visual or contextual analysis. Evidentiary uses were particularly pronounced in *Journal of Planning History*, appearing in 23 articles (17.04%), where photographs served as historical records of urban development or spatial change. In contrast, only 2 articles (0.48%) in *Planning Perspectives* employed photographs in this way. When comparing analytical engagement across the two journals, *Planning Perspectives* included both 65 articles (15.70%) coded as illustrative/analytical *and* 19 articles (4.59%) coded as purely analytical. In contrast, *Journal of Planning History* contained just 14 articles (10.37%) coded as illustrative/analytical and 11 (8.15%) as purely analytical. This broader inclusion of analytical categories in *Planning Perspectives* suggests a tendency to combine visual support with interpretive discussion, whereas *Journal of Planning History* shows fewer analytical integrations but a comparatively higher emphasis on evidentiary uses.

More complex or reflective uses of images, such as rhetorical, symbolic, participatory, or comparative, were rare in both journals. Only one article in *Journal of Planning History* used a

photograph rhetorically[2], to evoke emotion or atmosphere. No articles in either journal made use of photographs as symbolic or participatory devices, and comparative uses were extremely limited or used in conjunction with other functions e.g. evidentiary, analytical etc. Analytical use in isolation was somewhat more common in *Journal of Planning History* (8.15%) than in *Planning Perspectives* (4.59%), but both journals fell below 10% for this category. Articles referencing visual research methodologies were extremely rare across the dataset and only a small fraction explicitly described their visual approach in methodological terms. Instead, photographs tended to be treated as supplementary evidence rather than as primary material integrated into the article's conceptual or methodological framework. Overall, this survey highlights a discipline-wide tendency to rely on illustrative and evidentiary uses of photography, with minimal experimentation with visual practices common in other fields. While *Planning Perspectives* demonstrates the inclusion of more analytical or hybrid uses of photography, *Journal of Planning History* more frequently draws on photographic material as documentary evidence. In both cases, the photograph remains largely a supportive tool – suggesting that planning historiography has yet to fully embrace the possibilities of visual culture. These trends confirm that while photography has long accompanied planning history, its potential as a methodological and interpretive tool remains largely untapped.

To complement the quantitative overview of photographs in planning history journals, the following section examines how photographs have been used in practice. Through select examples, the varying purposes they serve are explored alongside how these uses have evolved across different themes and historical contexts.

Analysis of results

A closer comparison of the use of photographs across the two journals reveals a modest but noticeable shift toward more analytical and hybrid applications in both Planning Perspectives and Journal of Planning History after 2015. In Planning Perspectives, the proportion of articles coded as illustrative/analytical declined slightly from 16.4% before 2015–15.2% after 2015. However, new hybrid categories, such as analytical/rhetorical (combining spatial analysis with emotive appeal) and symbolic/evidentiary (using photographs both as conceptual symbols and historical records), appear only in the post-2015 period, indicating a small expansion in how photographs are being conceptualized. Although the percentage of purely analytical uses dropped from 7.6% to 2.5%, this shift may reflect a broader move toward integrated, rather than standalone, analytical approaches. Journal of Planning History shows a clearer trajectory, with analytical uses rising from 4.4% to 11.9%. Across both journals, however, photographs still most often function as illustrations, usually presented alongside the text with little guidance as to how the image should be interpreted or how the photograph contributes to the argument. This modest shift may also reflect broader disciplinary changes: since the early 2000s, planning history has increasingly attracted contributions from architectural historians, whose training and interests could influence both the kinds of visual sources mobilised and the ways they are analysed. Captions sometimes provide descriptive information, but authors rarely address the original context of the photograph – who took it, when, for whom, and for what purpose – which limits the reader's ability to interpret the image critically. This creates an impression of photographs as passive and neutral sources, a view which has been contested since the 1970s by scholars such as critical theorist John Tagg, cultural critic Susan Sontag, human geographer Gillian Rose, cultural theorist and comparative

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[2]See Macdonald, 'The Efficacy of Long-Range Physical Planning.'

literature scholar Ariella Azoulay, visual historian and anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards, and architectural historian and theorist Davide Deriu.[3] In a few cases, particularly when authors include their own photographs or compare multiple images, engagement with the visual material becomes more reflective, suggesting potential for deeper methodological integration. The survey results suggest that while Planning Perspectives has begun to diversify visual approaches, Journal of Planning History has more decisively embraced photography as a historical and analytical source. Yet, the persistence of largely illustrative or evidentiary uses, even in the post-2015 period, underlines the slow pace of change. The next section examines these patterns in more detail, whereby common themes such as; the use of photographs to depict sites that no longer exist, to document colonial and post-war contexts, or to convey social activity, reveal both the strengths and limitations of current visual practices in planning historiography.

Articles that use photographs analytically

The small number of articles in *Planning Perspectives* and *Journal of Planning History* that are employed analytically can be grouped into a small set of recurring modes of use: reconstructing lost urban forms, rewriting or expanding planning histories, reframing spatial narratives, and revealing the politics of representation. In the following section, these uses will be addressed in turn.

Some articles use photographs to recreate or visualise spaces that no longer exist, treating them as primary evidence for understanding urban form, street layouts, and architectural details. A good example is historian Patrice Bouche's IPHS section article on Patrick Geddes's 'utopian Belvedere' in southern France, which investigates the composition, spatial arrangement, and architectural detailing within historical photographs to reconstruct Geddes's design intentions.[4] This type of analysis also appears in two articles in *Planning Perspectives;* in architecture and urban planning scholar Gangyi Tan et al.'s article on the 'Third Front' constructions in China[5], the authors combine archival sources with their own field photographs, and architectural historian Florian Urban's 2015 article 'La Perla – 100 years of informal architecture in San Juan, Puerto Rico'[6], combines contemporary images with historic views for comparative before-and-after analysis. Similar approaches appear in studies of late colonial village housing in Ghana[7], where architecture scholars Iain Jackson and Rexford Assasie Oppong use photographs to document building types and settlement layouts now lost to redevelopment. In these cases, images are often taken at face value as factual records, with little critical reflection on their framing or production, leaving an analysis of photographs as constructed artefacts unexplored.

Another mode of use involves drawing on photographs in combination with media sources to expand, rewrite or complicate existing narratives of urban development. For example, architectural and urban historian Wes Aelbrecht's article 'Detroit imagined: intertextuality and the photobook as urban history'[8], reopens the narrative of Detroit's downtown renaissance by analysing contemporary photobooks not just as illustrations but as visual arguments, foregrounding the ways in which

[3]Sontag, *On Photography*; Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*; Tagg, *Grounds of Dispute*; Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame*; Rose, *Visual Methodologies*; Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*; Deriu and Kamvasinou (eds), *Emerging Landscapes*; Edwards, *Photographs and the Practice of History*; Deriu and Maggi (eds), *Picturing Cities*.
[4]Bouche, 'Patrick Geddes's (e)utopian Belvedere in Southern France.'
[5]Tan, et al., '"Third Front" Construction in China.'
[6]Urban, 'La Perla – 100 Years of Informal Architecture in San Juan, Puerto Rico.'
[7]Jackson and Oppong, 'The Planning of Late Colonial Village Housing in the Tropics.'
[8]Aelbrecht, 'Detroit Imagined.'

sequencing, framing, and intertextual references produce overlooked stories of local protest. By contrast, architecture scholar Yasser Elsheshtawy's article on the modernisation of Cairo, for example, incorporates photographs as part of a wider effort to reconstruct overlooked histories of how modernisation was perceived locally.[9] Similarly, urban planning historian Elise Avide's study of suburban Parisian train stations uses archival photographs from the railway trade press to reconstruct professional discourse around station design in the 1970s.[10] While these latter two examples broaden the evidentiary base, they tend to mobilise photographs primarily as supporting illustrations for historical arguments rather than subjecting the images themselves to systematic visual analysis.

In some cases, authors use photographs to interrogate how particular spaces are perceived, valued, or contested in order to reframe spatial narratives. This can involve attention to compositional choices, sequencing, temporality, or the aesthetics of the townscape movement, as seen in architecture scholar Erdem Erten's study of Gordon Cullen and Nikolaus Pevsner's photographic framing of specific sites,[11] or the visual ordering in Koenigsberger's planning archive by art historian Rhodri Windsor Liscombe.[12] These articles show how site selection, image sequence, and vantage point can construct persuasive visual arguments about urban form and design quality. In some cases, such framing is explicitly linked to visual traditions such as the picturesque.[13] These cases reveal the narrative power of framing but often stop short of embedding such observations in an explicit visual methodology, which limits the analytical depth of such reframings.

A recurring mode of use, particularly in colonial and post-colonial contexts, is examining how photographs construct, enforce, or challenge ideological narratives and thus reveal the politics of representation. For example, urban planning scholar Hilary Botein's (2015) *Journal of Planning History* article on St Francis Square addresses how press photographs misrepresented the project's racial integration, while historian Liora Bigon's 2005 analysis of colonial Lagos postcards highlights everyday acts of visual resistance.[14] Architect and urbanist Luce Beeckmans's 2013 article similarly identifies photographs alongside songs, advertisements, and other cultural materials as vehicles for understanding everyday life under colonial rule[15], although the images primarily serve a methodological framing role rather than being closely analysed. The variety of these topics underscores the political stakes of visual representation but evidence inconsistencies in the depth of photographic analysis.

In a smaller subset of articles, authors include their own photographs, often taken during fieldwork, which sometimes prompt deeper interpretive engagement. Examples include architecture and urban planning scholar Rachel Kallus's discussion of Artur Glikson's images of post-war Crete and Patrice Bouche's IPHS contribution on Mediterranean planning cultures in *Planning Perspectives*.[16] These cases illustrate how direct authorship can encourage reflection on the act of photographing, the conditions of image-making, and the relationship between observer and subject.

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[9]Elsheshtawy, 'City Interrupted.'
[10]Avide, 'The Birth of Mass Transit System or the Imperative of Technology.'
[11]Erten, 'Thomas Sharp's Collaboration with H. de C. Hastings.'
[12]Liscombe, 'In-dependence: Otto Koenigsberger and Modernist Urban Resettlement in India.'
[13]Pullan and Sternberg, 'The Making of Jerusalem's "Holy Basin".'
[14]Botein, 'Labor Unions and Race-conscious Housing in the Postwar Bay Area'; Bigon, 'Sanitation and Street Layout in Early Colonial Lagos.'
[15]Beeckmans, 'Editing the African City.'
[16]Kallus, 'The Crete Development Plan'; Bouche, 'Patrick Geddes's (e)utopian Belvedere in Southern France.'

The IPHS section, now called Connexions, has proven particularly supportive to analytical modes of use. Liora Bigon's contribution on Brazzaville, for instance, integrates photographs and maps into the argument in ways that reveal spatial and political dynamics, showing the potential of this format to foreground visual analysis.[17] This may in part be due to the section's more interdisciplinary nature, which encourages authors to experiment with source materials, integrate visual and textual evidence, and reflect on methodological approaches in ways that standard research articles less frequently promote.

Building on the reconstructing and reframing modes of use identified above, this section specifically explores examples from the post-war period as one of the more fertile contexts for the analytical use of photographs in planning history. This is due in part to the technological advancement and public dissemination of aerial photography during and after the Second World War, which offered unprecedented perspectives on cities. As urban planning scholar David Adams notes in his 2011 article on post-war planning in Birmingham, 'the aerial perspective afforded by the nature and location of the war-time bomb damage lent post-war planning an unprecedented grand sweep.'[18] Adams uses a select number of visual sources to demonstrate the contrast between the official visions that were being promoted by Birmingham Works Department and the reality of the post-war city. After 1945, there was also a general consensus by governments involved in rebuilding to democratise the planning process and so exhibitions, magazines and films were an integral part of creating new post-war identities and this has fed through into the discussion of this period by scholars. This is reflected in geographer and urban studies scholar Ian Cook's (2018) *Planning Perspectives* article on 'the ways in which Vällingby was "showcased" to planners and architects outside of Sweden during the 1950s and 1960s' and therefore includes discussion of the compositional attributes of photographs used in architectural reviews and hence illustrates how visual framing shaped the district's reception.[19] The integral role played by the dissemination of images in the post-war period mean that scholars within this field are, therefore, more likely to address the role of photographs and visual culture in an analytical way. Despite these examples, much of this engagement happens without accompanying analysis of visual sources. For example, in art historian Juhana Lahti's (2008) assessment of Aarne Ervi's planning of the post-war Helsinki Suburbs of Tapiola and Vantaanpuisto, the vast production of visual material to promote the districts is highlighted, and yet there is no analysis of these sources within the article.[20] This would undoubtedly alter the focus of the article, but it would be beneficial for the reader to understand how, to whom, and by whom the districts were being promoted through the framing and circulation of images. Lahti's example highlights the dominant illustrative mode that persists within the discipline, and reflects the survey results, that the analytical value inherent in such complex visual sources is unfortunately often overlooked.

In a select few instances, the historical figure and the subject of the discussion has taken some of the photographs included in the article. In these examples, there is a tendency to use the photographs to help suggest or corroborate a 'sense of place' and to highlight the interests and perspectives of the historical figure under discussion. For example, in Kallus's 2014 which examines architect-planner Artur Glikson's regional planning and tourism initiatives in post-war Crete, Kallus includes photographs taken by Glikson himself to support the claim that 'Glikson was fascinated

[17]Bigon, 'An Infrastructure of Light and Darkness.'
[18]Adams, 'Everyday Experiences of the Modern City.'
[19]Cook, 'Showcasing Vällingby to the World.'
[20]Lahti, 'The Helsinki Suburbs of Tapiola and Vantaanpuisto.'

by Crete and its people.'[21] A collection of four of Glikson's photographs show local people in rural settings, yet Kallus provides little analysis, aside from noting that the intention was to present 'the Lakhish region as a laboratory of successful implementation of a regional experiment.'[22] The connection, however, between the photographs and this wider planning narratives is underdeveloped and the photographs function more as illustration than as a focus of critical analysis. Kallus's use of Glikson's photographs illustrates a rare but promising approach in which visual material could contribute to a greater understanding of contemporaneous cultural encounters and interpretations within the remit of planning history, at the same time it also underscores how infrequently such interpretive engagement occurs. The post-war material thus demonstrates both the potential of photographs to reveal the politics of reconstruction and the persistent reluctance to fully integrate visual methodologies into historical analysis.

Colonial and post-colonial contexts likewise offer rich opportunities for analytical engagement with photographs, given their employment in representing colonised spaces, peoples, and planning ideologies. There are two instances in the *Journal of Planning History* where photographs are discussed as examples of racial integration. For example, in architectural historian Annie Schentag's article about Olmsted Jr.'s Use of Race-Restrictive Covenants, highlights that 'photographs of residents also depict only white residents in the pamphlets,' as a means for the developer to attract affluent white residents to the Cape Cod community.[23] Similarly, Botein's 2015 article on 'race-conscious housing' in San Francisco notes the role of newspapers in propagating inaccurate representations of St Francis Square with a 'resident complain[ing] that the photograph obfuscated the integrated nature of the project.'[24] In the articles surveyed within *Planning Perspectives*, there are also instances where photographs are used to demonstrate the view of the coloniser and how this view was disseminated beyond the bounds of the colonised country. For example, geographers Richard Harris and Alison Hay's (2007) contribution to *Planning Perspectives* assesses housing in urban Kenya and includes a 'carefully posed photograph' from 1946 showing the interior of a home designed for a colonial government housing project for local people 'intended for British consumption' to 'underline Kenya's new commitment to the housing of families.'[25]

Other articles note the vital role of visual sources to provide access to otherwise marginalized histories. Beeckmans, for example, does not include visual sources within her article on colonial planning in Africa for *IPHS Section* but she does note the role of photographs, alongside songs and advertisements as a way 'to construct the history of the black working-class that is so often overlooked.'[26] This further evidenced in Bigon's 2005 article discussing early colonial Lagos, within which, Bigon uses a postcard by French photographer Edmond Fortier's to show how the colonial 'order' was challenged by residents in their lack of conformity to building regulations and those pertaining to the enclosure of livestock.[27] Whilst, not the main driver for the article, the inclusion of this analysis exemplifies the potential of photographs to reveal everyday practices of resistance and contestation within colonial urban environments. These examples demonstrate how visual sources can extend historical inquiry by exposing tensions between official representations and lived realities, particularly in contexts where written records remain silent or one-sided. Yet, as with the post-war material, sustained methodological engagement is rare; visuals are typically

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[21]Kallus, 'The Crete Development Plan,' 350.
[22]*Ibid.* 344.
[23]Schentag, 'Designs for People Who Do Not Readily Intermingle'.'
[24]Botein, 'Labor Unions and Race-conscious Housing in the Postwar Bay Area.'
[25]Harris and Hay, 'New Plans for Housing in Urban Kenya.'
[26]Beeckmans, 'Editing the African City', 617.
[27]Bigon, 'Sanitation and Street Layout in Early Colonial Lagos', 257–8.

discussed for what they depict rather than analysed for how they construct meaning, which overlooks a key access point to more inclusive and representative urban planning histories.

Articles with explicit reference to visual research methodology

On the few occasions where the methodology is described within the surveyed articles, or when the research involves studying magazines and other publications, there is still little engagement with photographs themselves or their broader visual and publication context. In these instances, images are mostly used to extract a specific meaning related to the paper's subject, rather than being critically examined. Out of the full dataset, only three articles in *Planning Perspectives* explicitly identify a visual methodology; Elsheshtawy (2013) using visual ethnography, Bigon (2020) using content analysis and Aelbrecht (2025) using intertextual analysis.[28] In *Journal of Planning History*, no article names a visual method as a central research approach, although several allude to it without sustained application.

Considering the continual use of photographs within the two journals and the role of photographs within the discipline, it is perhaps surprising that *Gillian Rose's* 2001 book *Visual Methodologies* (now the essential guide to visual research and in its 5th edition (2022)) is mentioned in passing in only two articles in *Planning Perspectives*.[29] In geographers Hubbard, Faire and Lilley's (2003) examination of the post-war construction of Coventry, for example, the authors explore the 'contradictions and conflicts between the planners' vision of the future city and the appropriation and use of the resulting urban landscape by the city's inhabitants.'[30] To do this, Hubbard et al make the case for the use of various sources including oral histories, published and unpublished reports, and postcards, to come to a fuller understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of everyday life that move beyond official narratives. Rose's methodological textbook is highlighted as a source to explain 'how Foucauldian notions have informed deconstruction of visual images, including maps and photographs.'[31] Therefore, despite the focus of the article on a multiple-source approach to disrupt or contest official planning histories, and clear awareness of relevant literature, in-depth discussions of visual methodological approaches are limited to a footnote and the article stops short of applying Rose's analytical frameworks.

This pattern is visible elsewhere in the survey. For example, architecture scholar Erdem Erten's *Planning Perspectives* article acknowledges the deliberate use of photographers like Gordon Cullen and Nikolaus Pevsner to frame 'visual messages,' yet the reproduced images are left unexamined.[32] Similarly, architecture scholar David Rifkind's 2012 article on the use photomontages in fascist Italy notes their persuasive role in planning proposals but does not unpack compositional or rhetorical techniques.[33] Likewise, in *Journal of Planning History*, Bigon's discussion of colonial postcards gestures toward their ideological framing but remains at the level of description.[34] This limited engagement reflects a broader trend within the discipline and illustrates how visual research methods often remain peripheral, even when the subject matter would benefit from a fuller integration.

Planning historian Robert Freestone is one of the few scholars in the field to have suggested the need for a more strategic approach to visual sources within the discipline. In his 2015 article for the

[28]Elsheshtawy, 'City Interrupted,' 347–71; Bigon, 'An Infrastructure of Light and Darkness,' 549–60; Wes Aelbrecht, 'Detroit Imagined.'
[29]Hubbard et al., 'Contesting the Modern City'; Freestone, 'The Exhibition as a Lens for Planning History.'
[30]Hubbard et al., 'Contesting the Modern City,' 377.
[31]*Ibid.* 396.
[32]Erten, 'Thomas Sharp's Collaboration with H. de C. Hastings,' 29–49.
[33]Rifkind, 'Everything in The State, Nothing Against the State.'
[34]Bigon, 'Sanitation and Street Layout in Early Colonial Lagos', 247–69.

IPHS section, for example, Freestone devotes a paragraph to 'Capturing the visual in social sciences and the humanities,' and underscores that the study of planning exhibitions can be more meaningfully informed by the 'visual turn' in the humanities and social sciences.[35] Freestone notes how visual tools, such as Charles Booth's social cartography of London and Jacob Riis's photographic documentation of poverty in New York, played a pivotal role in revealing urban inequalities and shaping reform. Through this proposition, and citing Gillian Rose, Freestone asserts that closer engagement with visual methodologies would enrich analyses of planning exhibitions and their role in planning history. Despite his compelling proposition, it appears that few scholars have taken up Freestone's invitation.

Significantly, many of the contexts identified in the survey, post-war reconstruction, colonial and post-colonial planning, and media/exhibition cultures, already involve rich, ideologically loaded visual material. These are precisely the settings where applying Rose's compositional, social, and site-based modalities, or similar visual methodologies, would have transformed illustrative uses into analytical ones. This gap between potential and practice remains a defining feature of the current state of visual research in planning history. The tendency towards illustration and lack of methodological engagement highlighted throughout the survey results, raise important questions about the epistemological assumptions that underpin the discipline. The following section, therefore, reflects on these implications more fully, and considers how planning history might more critically engage with visual culture.

The discipline of planning history and implications

Modern urban planning and photography both emerged within the historical moment of the nineteenth century, shaped by industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, and a shared impulse to document, rationalise, and reform the modern city. While photography was formalised with the daguerreotype in 1839, planning took shape through interventions such as Haussmann's Paris and the Garden City Movement, both driven by a desire to impose order on seemingly 'chaotic' urban environments. From the outset, photography served as an instrument of planning: capturing slums, recording streetscapes, and documenting large-scale infrastructural works. Both disciplines initially claimed a scientific objectivity and forward-looking spirit, constructing visual and spatial narratives that legitimised urban interventions. Yet over time, planning history has distanced itself from photography, favouring textual and cartographic sources over visual ones.

This article questions the persistence of this boundary between source types. The discipline of planning history is inherently visual, relying heavily on materials such as maps, models, renderings, and photographs, both as sources of information and as tools for communicating spatial ideas and concepts. Despite this, a survey of scholarship in *Planning Perspectives* and *Journal of Planning History* reveals a striking lack of methodological reflection on the use of visual materials, particularly photographs. This absence fails to account for the politics of visual representation and dissemination and reinforces the misunderstanding that both space and photographs are neutral. Photography not only accompanied the birth of planning, but it also helped shape its gaze and so reintegrating photography into planning history is thus not an act of interdisciplinarity, but of disciplinary recovery.

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[35]Freestone, 'The Exhibition as a Lens for Planning History,' 436.

Reflections on the development of planning historiography

A defining characteristic of planning historiography since its inception in the 1970s has been its empirical, narrative-driven approach, favouring detailed case studies and archival research over theoretical innovation.[36] While this empiricism has contributed to planning history scholarship, it has also limited engagement with broader theory whereby, as the planning historian André Sorensen writes, theory from other disciplines is primary used to 'frame their planning histories' and hence to reinterpret historical records rather than developing new theories.[37] In response, scholars such as urban planner Leonie Sandercock (1998) have advocated for 'a corrective "insurgent" perspective' that reposition planning within wider community-building processes, explicitly integrating perspectives on race, gender, and class.[38] This critical turn challenges dominant top-down narratives and opens space for more inclusive, socially attuned global histories.

Methodologically, planning history integrates techniques from the social sciences and humanities, including archival research, biographical studies, spatial analysis, and discourse analysis and has long privileged textual, cartographic, and institutional sources (policy documents, plans, administrative records, etc.) to trace the development and transformation of built environments. Biographical methods, as Freestone argues, remain popular but risk 'the simplification and individualizing of history.'[39] A significant focus in planning history scholarship is on network studies, which explores how planning ideas and practices circulated transnationally, often shaped by colonial and postcolonial contexts.[40] The insurgent perspective advocated by Sandercock, noted above, builds on the insights of these network studies to redirect, as Hein's recent handbook suggests, planning history toward new 'global standpoints and approaches' that can transform its reliance on 'concentric models' into a 'reticular, polynuclear model that is truly international, with far broader possibilities'.[41] Here, photographs can be analysed not only as documentary evidence but as active agents in these diffusion networks, shaping transnational imaginaries and local appropriations of planning ideas.

Comparisons with other disciplines

Compared to adjacent fields such as cultural geography, architectural history, and urban history, planning history continues to neglect the visual dimension of urban planning. While urban historians have occasionally taken up the photograph as an object of analysis, as our analysis has shown, planning historians tend to treat photographs primarily as illustrative rather than interpretative or rhetorical devices. In adjacent disciplines, key figures such as Rose (geography), Beatriz Colomina (architectural history), and Peter Bacon Hales (urban history) have significantly shaped how visual culture, and photography in particular, is theorised and integrated into research and pedagogy. Numerous publications have also mapped the development of photography in relation to architecture and urban culture, such as those by former RIBA curator Robert Elwall.[42] These efforts have been supported by a series of special issues in disciplinary journals dedicated to visual and spatial

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[36]Sorensen, 'Global Suburbanization in Planning History,' 245–6.
[37]*Ibid.* 36.
[38]Sandercock (ed.), *Making the Invisible Visible* cited in Ward et al., 'Centenary Paper,' 247.
[39]Freestone, 'Biographical Method,' 60–1.
[40]Hein, 'The What, Why, and How of Planning History,' 3; Ward, 'Planning Diffusion,' 79; Wakeman, 'Rethinking Postwar Planning History,' 160.
[41]Ramos, 'Future Narratives for Planning History,' 487.
[42]Elwall, *Photography takes command*; Elwall, 'How to Like Everything'.

questions.[43] This disciplinary divergence also reflects differences in university curricula, as while geography curricula increasingly include visual research methods, planning history education remains oriented around archival research, textual analysis, and historical narrative.

While planning history has generally under-engaged with photographs as critical sources, there have been some notable efforts particularly in scholarship focused on mid-century U.S. urban renewal. These studies, often rooted in social reform and postwar development contexts, demonstrate how visual campaigns were central to shaping public support for planning initiatives. Scholars such as architectural and urban historian Andrew Shanken and historian Francesca Ammon have shown that government agencies and planners deployed visual media, especially photographs, diagrams, and promotional imagery, not merely as illustrations but as rhetorical tools to legitimize clearance and redevelopment.[44] This research highlights the use of a 'visual language' to represent blight and obsolescence, framing urban clearance as both necessary and progressive. While planning history minimally focuses on visual media, there are important studies that highlight how film, television, and exhibitions were used to communicate, contest, and popularize planning visions. Urban planning scholar Mark Tewdwr-Jones, for instance, explores how postwar British documentary films served both as propaganda and aesthetic education in support of urban reconstruction, while exhibitions, as Robert Freestone and Marco Amati argue, functioned as powerful public interfaces that fostered visual planning literacy.[45] We can also see that the cultural turn in urban studies has shifted attention from the physical 'image of the city' (as studied by Kevin Lynch) to the ways cities are continually 'imaged' and 'imagined' through media and visual representation.[46] Scholars like James Donald, Lawrence Vale, and Sam Warner have emphasized the importance of visual and symbolic narratives in shaping urban meaning, moving beyond material determinants to consider the cultural production of place.[47] However, such initiatives remain relatively isolated within the broader field of planning history, suggesting a need for more systematic and comparative inquiry into how photographs construct, mediate, or contest urban imaginaries across time and place.

Visual sources in planning history books

To better understand the limited role of photography in planning history scholarship, key texts in the field have been examined to ascertain how photographs have (or have not) been used as part of their analytical frameworks. By assessing a series of influential planning history books, we can trace how the marginal treatment of photographic material may have contributed to the broader absence of visual methodologies in the discipline. A total of sixteen volumes were surveyed, selected from an extensive list originally compiled by Freestone for the *Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, edited by Carola Hein.[48] From that list, all books published after 2000 were examined, and the sample was supplemented with a number of historically influential titles frequently cited by planning historians as foundational to the field.

In the following section we assessed how planning history books engage with photographs, a close reading of a series of volumes was conducted whereby we focused on elements such as the

[43]Carullo, 'Introduction'; Tommasini, 'Introduction: a photographer's sense of space.'
[44]Shanken, *194X: Architecture, Planning, and Consumer Culture*; Ammon, *Bulldozer*.
[45]Freestone and Amati, 'Town Planning Exhibitions'; Tewdwr-Jones, 'Oh, the planners did their best'.
[46]Vale and Warner, 'Cities, Media, and Imaging'; Gold and Ward, eds., *Place promotion*.
[47]Donald, *Imagining the Modern City*.
[48]Freestone, 'Writing Planning History.'

table of contents, preface and introduction, and methodology sections to identify any stated rationale for including visual material. Image captions and placement were assessed to determine whether photographs were used illustratively, evidentially, analytically, or rhetorically. Particular attention was paid to whether visual research methods were discussed and how images were integrated into the argument.

From this reading we can clearly see that the treatment of photographs in planning history books has been largely illustrative and documentary, mirroring the results of the journal survey. Even among influential figures like John Reps and Anthony Sutcliffe, both of whom used visual material extensively, photography is not approached as a subject of critical analysis. In *The Making of Urban America* (1965), Reps makes extensive use of aerial photographs to trace the morphological evolution of American cities and integrates them as evidentiary tools that support his analysis of spatial form and planning practice.[49] Yet despite their criticality to the narrative, the images are not examined beyond their documentary function. Similarly, in *Metropolis 1890–1940* (1983), Sutcliffe includes a rich selection of photographs (many taken by himself) to visually support the case study analysis.[50] Notably, Chapter 4 engages with the visual arts as a lens to understand urban modernity, and touches on painting, illustration, and film. However, photography is only implied, and no visual methodology or theoretical framing is applied. It can, therefore, be argued that these works helped normalise the inclusion of visual material in planning history, but they did so without positioning images as contested or constructed representations, leaving photography an underutilised critical lens in planning historiography.

The visual turn: new frameworks

To move beyond the dominant use of photographs as mere illustrations in planning history, this article suggests drawing on anthropologist and art historian Christopher Pinney's framework of four types of visual culture.[51] Pinney outlines four paradigms through which images operate: the visual as language, where images are treated as texts to be decoded; the visual as transcendent, where aesthetic qualities are prioritised over historical or social context; the visual in relation to power, which foregrounds how images construct authority and reproduce social hierarchies; and the visual as presence, which emphasises the embodied, material, and affective dimensions of images.[52] To fully engage with these categories, a better understanding of what visual culture means is required. As art historian W.J.T. Mitchell has argued, visual culture is not simply about images or media, but about the broader social practices of seeing, showing, and being seen.[53] It assumes that vision is not natural or universal, but culturally constructed and hence shaped by technologies, aesthetics, ideologies, and histories of display and spectatorship. In Mitchell's words, visual culture is 'the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision.'[54] Visual culture thus interrogates the symbolic, ideological, and performative roles that images play in everyday life, including the urban environment.

The last two paradigms in Pinney's framework are particularly relevant for planning historians as they resonate closely with more recent theories of photographic performativity, which states that

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[49]Reps, *The making of urban America.*
[50]Sutcliffe, *Metropolis, 1890–1940.*
[51]Pinney, 'Four Types of Visual Culture'
[52]Pinney, 'Four Types of Visual Culture,' 132–5.
[53]Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing,'166.
[54]*Ibid.* 170.

that images not only reflect but enact, shape, and intervene in the social world.[55] The 'visual as presence' overlaps with concepts of embodied visuality and the understanding that images active participants in meaning-making processes, in this case, within the planning process. The visual and material presence of images can assert social and emotional agency, shaped by their specific context and guided by the institutions and individuals involved in their production, circulation, and reception. The paradigm of 'visual in relation to power' similarly aligns with the idea that photographs can construct narratives, mediate authority, shape subjectivities, and ultimately shape how cities are imagined, governed, and transformed.

Geographer Gillian Rose offers a complementary but more urban or planning-focused framework that outlines three ways in which photographs engage the city: representing, evoking, and performing the urban.[56] While much of planning history falls into the first category where photographs are used to visually support textual claims, Rose and others have shown how photographs also evoke affective and sensory relationships with urban space, and perform the city through their circulation, inscription, and everyday use. This perspective moves closer to the notion of photographs as having a social life, highlighting their relationship with practices of urban seeing, documentation, resistance, and imagination. The ambiguity and social life of photographs, as Elizabeth Edwards reminds us, means that they must be understood as 'dynamic, difficult, slippery, ambiguous, incongruous, and contradictory', all qualities that challenge the search for fixed meaning and instead open multiple interpretive paths across archival, political, and emotional terrain.[57]

This rethinking of photographic agency aligns closely with Marcus Banks' approach in *Visual Methods in Social Research* (2001), which urges researchers to interrogate not just what an image depicts, but who made it, why, how it circulates, and how different audiences interpret and use it.[58] By framing photographs as complex social artefacts rather than transparent records, Banks shifts attention to the layered networks of production, reception, and meaning-making that underpin visual material. Rose further elaborates this line of inquiry in *Visual Methodologies*, identifying five key dimensions of how images work socially: their visual effects, their role in constructing social difference, the 'ways of seeing' they mobilise, their embeddedness in broader cultural contexts, and the specific sites and practices through which they are viewed.[59] Together, Rose and Banks reinforce the need to approach photographs not merely as evidence, but as actors within social processes that produce meaning, shape identities, and mediate relations of power.

More recent writing also amplifies this as advocated by thinkers such as Azoulay, who's scholarship offers a radical rethinking of photography as a civic and political act by arguing that photographs are events that involve the viewer in a relationship of civic responsibility that 'becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation.'[60] 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 its ongoing dialogue. As Azoulay states, photographs 'bear traces of a plurality of political relations that might be actualized by the act of watching, transforming and disseminating what is seen into claims that demand action.'[61] Through Pinney's typology, deepened by the contextual and critical emphases of Banks and Rose, and given an ethical dimension by Azoulay, this study

[55]Anderson, 'Cultural geography II.'
[56]Rose, 'Visual Culture, Photography and the Urban.'
[57]Edwards, *Photographs and the Practice of History,* 5.
[58]Banks and Zeitlyn, *Visual Methods in Social Research.*
[59]Rose, *Visual Methodologies.*
[60]Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography,* 14.
[61]*Ibid.* 23–4.

advocates for a more reflective, multi-layered approach to visual sources in planning historiography.

Taken together, these contributions from visual studies, anthropology, and critical theory underline the photograph's potential as more than mere illustration. They position it as an active participant in shaping urban knowledge, memory, and power. Yet, as the preceding survey analysis has shown, this potential has been only partially explored within planning history. By continuing to treat photographs as neutral records rather than as socially embedded, meaning-making artefacts, the discipline risks overlooking a rich source of historical interpretation and civic engagement. As planning history has gradually shifted toward more critical and inclusive narratives, incorporating visual analysis is a logical step in its trajectory, offering a means to 're-see' historical narratives and include perspectives long marginalized in textual records.

Conclusion: towards a more visually literate planning history

The patterns emerging from this survey are striking in their consistency; across more than two decades of publication in *Planning Perspectives* and *Journal of Planning History*, photographs are most often deployed as illustrative supplements rather than as objects of analysis in their own right. Analytical uses are rare, unevenly distributed, and seldom embedded in sustained visual methodologies, and this rarity is particularly visible given the historical relation between planning and photography. From the outset, when both modern urban planning and photography emerged in the nineteenth century, photography served as an instrument of planning and helped to shape the visual and spatial narratives that supported urban interventions. Yet over time, planning history has distanced itself from photography, favouring textual and cartographic sources over visual ones.

This imbalance reflects deeper disciplinary habits where planning history has inherited a strong textual bias, treating photographs as secondary to archival documents, maps, and plans. The absence of systematic training in visual methods further constrains how images are engaged, while the field has yet to fully embrace the methodological insights of visual culture studies. The result is a missed opportunity: photographs remain a largely unexplored resource for rethinking how urban pasts are constructed, contested, and narrated.

Addressing these gaps requires not only individual scholarly initiative but also structural change. This article proposes five discipline-wide recommendations. First, journals could adopt a 'Visual Methods' appendix for any analytical use of photographs, outlining source, context, interpretive approach, and ethical considerations. Second, planning history curricula should integrate visual methods training, from photographic archiving to semiotic analysis, equipping scholars with the tools to read images critically. Third, the discipline would benefit from a shared digital archive of planning-related photographs, encouraging open access and detailed metadata. Fourth, conferences and societies, particularly IPHS through its Connexions section, should facilitate interdisciplinary workshops that bring historians into dialogue with geographers, photographers, and archivists. Finally, visual engagement can be supported through adaptable author templates, prompting captions as arguments, archival/contemporary pairings, and reflexive notes on author-produced photography.

By embedding these practices, planning history can expand its evidentiary base and enrich its narratives. Indeed, photographs are not passive witnesses to urban change but active agents in shaping how such change is imagined, justified, and remembered. Treating them as such would not only sharpen our historiography but also open new avenues for public engagement with a more inclusive (and representative) urban past.

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