



Feeling through Images: Architectural Histories after the Emotional Turn

Miriam Paeslack, University at Buffalo, the State University of New York, paeslack@buffalo.edu

Ines Tolic, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, ines.tolic@unibo.it

Elif Kaymaz, Middle East Technical University, ekaymaz@metu.edu.tr

Davide Deriu, University of Westminster, d.dერიu@westminster.ac.uk

Dorothy Barencott, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, dorothy.barencott@kpu.ca

This set of Field Notes explores the emerging topic of urban emotions by foregrounding the critical role of images in mediating how built environments are experienced, interpreted, and imagined. While social histories have increasingly engaged with the ‘emotional turn,’ the spatial and visual implications of this shift remain underexplored. We argue that both still and moving images – whether artistic, journalistic, documentary, or otherwise – operate as powerful modes of representation that not only depict urban realities but also actively construct them. Their rhetorical and affective force offers a critical lens for understanding the entanglements between emotions and the built environment. Drawing insights from the 2024 workshop of the EAHN’s Urban Representations Interest Group, we outline diverse case studies that reveal how emotions such as anticipation, anxiety, outrage, longing, and detachment circulate through images and shape urban imaginaries. These contributions argue that emotional responses mediated through visual culture are integral to interpreting the built environment. By situating images at the centre of scholarly enquiries, we call for a broader methodological engagement with emotions within architectural and urban scholarship. The emotional life of images, we contend, not only enriches historical and critical analysis but also illuminates the dynamic processes through which cities are produced and reproduced.

Keywords: Anticipation, anxiety, detachment, image, longing, nostalgia, outrage, visual representation, urban emotions, architectural and urban humanities



Introduction

Miriam Paeslack and Ines Tolic

What do we mean by ‘urban emotions’, and why should anybody care about them? What do emotions have to do with urban representations, and how can they be detected? Can the intersection of emotions, cities, and images open up new avenues of research, and if so, what insights can be gained from their interplay?

Architectural and urban theories and histories have embraced the emotional turn, drawing on insights from expression theory, sensory physiology, and social psychology, among others. The city in particular—conceived as a nexus of social, cultural, political, and economic forces—has offered a particularly fertile ground for examining the complex entanglements between emotions and the built environment. And indeed, publications over the last ten years or so theorize the relationship between city and emotions, including Margrit Pernau’s ‘Space and Emotion: Building to Feel’ (2014) and Katie Barclay and Jane Riddle’s *Urban Emotions and the Making of the City* (2021). The latter argue that ‘emotions do significant “work” in producing cities’ and that attending to emotions ‘adds an important dimension’ to accounts of ‘the relationship between people and the urban condition’ (2021:14).

However, while scholars have begun to examine emotions and their urban entanglements, the visual, artistic, and conceptual dimensions of this relationship remain noticeably underexplored and undertheorized. Artistic, journalistic, documentary, and popular still and moving images offer a way into examining these dimensions, as they continuously shape and reshape narratives about our cities. They provide a second system of representation, what Stuart Hall calls ‘a language of meaning making’ (1997:28). *Visual* forms of representation are sophisticated rhetorical constructs that—whether implicitly or explicitly—leverage emotion to convey information (Freedberg 1989). Precisely because they do not provide objective representations, images of buildings and cities call on us to examine them in relation to both the emotional states that inform their creation and those they generate. Images and their impact on human subjectivity sensitize us to the shifting relationship between medium and observer. This relationship is not a constant, but in flux, as new technologies produce and communicate the world through images (Crary 1990). Incorporating images with explicit intention into the discourse on cities and emotions provides a crucial means of exploring architectural and urban space from a new perspective.

In 2024, a multidisciplinary group of scholars participated in a workshop titled ‘Capturing Urban Emotions’ at the eighth European Architectural History Network’s biennial meeting. Organized by the Urban Representations Interest Group—a collective

committed to ‘exploring, interrogating, contextualizing, theorizing, and pursuing insights prompted by images of urban spaces’ according to its mission statement (see <https://eahn.org/groups/urban-representations>)—the workshop introduced emotions and their entanglement with images as an interpretive lens for understanding the complex relationship between people and the urban condition. The presentations addressed the historical significance of emotional responses through their analysis of visual materials ranging from wartime imagery of Istanbul in the printed press to images in an architectural history book that bridges postwar Japanese production with contemporary Bologna, contemporary video work prompted by the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the lingering presence of Berlin’s demolished and replaced Palace of the Republic in 16mm color film, and the effects of global mediatization on Vancouver through both touristic and artistic photography.

These and other case studies that were presented during the workshop revealed that images don’t just represent urban realities but also create new ones, affecting how cities can be perceived and reconstituted. The interplay between cities and emotions such as anticipation, anxiety, outrage, longing, and detachment in images suggests they are integral to our understanding of the built environment, which in turn indicates the advantages of pushing the disciplinary boundaries of historical and critical studies toward the emerging field of urban emotions.

Prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on cities, the Urban Representations Interest Group turned its attention in 2021 to urban experience and the role of emotions in its visual representation. Across a series of meetings and workshops, we examined the relationship between affect and spatial density, how temporal shifts affect the perception of cities in times of crisis and transformation, and, ultimately, the ways emotions are made visible. These discussions prompted us to reflect on the role of emotion in historical and critical analysis and to consider in particular the stakes of the study of emotions for our disciplines, our cities, and the broader cultural contexts we inhabit.

The Athens workshop confirmed the importance of engaging with the interconnection between emotions, cities, and images, and encouraged us to share more broadly the insights that emerged during the workshop. The individual reflections that follow represent an attempt to frame this theme in a way that clarifies both the questions we are pursuing and their broader relevance for anyone concerned with disentangling the dynamics of urban life and the complex processes through which the built environment is designed, interpreted, legitimized, or contested. As the following reflections aim to show, emotions and their considerations as methodological and theoretical entities deeply matter and thus deserve our attention.

Framing Anticipation

Elif Kaymaz

In the course of writing my dissertation on how the expectation of a global conflict affected spatial discourses and practices in Turkey in the late 1930s and 1940s, I found myself returning again and again to a particular set of illustrations: Istanbul under air raids. Resonating with the transnational ‘air war prophecy’ of interwar years (Saint-Amour 2005), these black and white watercolour urban representations by Ercüment Kalmık operated in the future tense, attempting to express, shape, and trigger collective emotions about what had not yet happened but could (see **Figure 1**). This archival encounter was the seed of my dissertation’s argument: I began to understand anticipation not just as a historical condition but as an emotion that can serve as an analytical historical framework, one that orients perception and planning toward imagined futures through visual, architectural, and urban cues.

In architectural historiography, scholars have long challenged traditional emphases on formalism, authorship, and ends and have focused instead on actors, processes, and the everyday contingencies that get overlooked in approaches that fixate on the final product. Treating anticipation as an emotion and placing it within a critical framework that takes what individuals feel, imagine, and speculate about into account opened a way for me into the lived experience of urban environments under the looming threat of war, offering me a new way to interpret how meaning was assigned to space. The question ‘What would happen if ...?’ took root in the public imagination, prompting a spatial survey. ‘What about Hagia Sophia?’ ‘What about all the neighborhoods with buildings made of wood?’ Anticipation in this moment materialized not only in thought but in action, revealing itself in newspaper illustrations, political speeches, and visual depictions of a city in peril.

Anticipation refers to a cognitive and affective orientation toward conditions or events that are imagined but that have not happened. Drawing on psychologist Robert Plutchik’s theory of basic emotions, sociologist Warren D. TenHouten (2009: 24–49) identifies anticipation as one of eight primary emotions, paired with surprise as its opposite, alongside acceptance/disgust, joy/sadness, and anger/fear. He links anticipation to territoriality, a universal impulse across species and societies (2009: 17). Territory, in his account, includes physical objects such as homes and possessions as well as symbolic elements like social standing and environments like familiar settings where individuals or groups feel secure. Maintaining territorial control depends on exploration, which in turn requires the capacity to monitor and plan: in

short, the ability to anticipate. When that fails and boundaries are breached, surprise replaces anticipation, and spatial order collapses into uncertainty. The association of anticipation with territoriality gives it a distinctly spatial character. It is a way of organizing and interpreting space through planning, visualizing, and imagining potential futures. This spatial dimension makes anticipation particularly relevant to architectural and urban history, given that space in it is often configured in relation to imagined futures. In his pioneering work on anticipatory systems theory, Mihai Nadin (2010: 57, 108) repeatedly cites Heinz von Foerster's provocation that 'the cause lies in the future'. This inversion of causality captures the feedback logic of anticipation, which draws on the past but uses the future to organize the present.

Further expanding on this idea, in her account of 'cultures of anticipation' historian Roxanne Panchasi (2009: 1, 7) treats the future not as an abstraction but as a category of historical analysis, an active, structuring force within the present. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's (2002: 127) distinction between the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation', I argue that anticipation is an emotional force and a temporal structure that organizes perception, action, and imagination. In this sense, the future is not what follows the present but what animates it. Anticipation, then, is a method of living and planning under conditions of uncertainty by which we render space intelligible, considering what might come based on what is and what was.

The illustrations of Ercüment Kalmık have stayed with me for several reasons. They not only represented Istanbul under air raids but also signaled the emergence of a specific 'emotional regime' (Reddy 2001: 63). Within the space of a single week, the newspaper published four watercolor illustrations by Ercüment. They all freeze a moment of an air raid and poison gas attack on a well-known landmark in İstanbul, bringing abstract future threats into emotional and spatial proximity. They were part of a 1935 donation campaign to expand the air fleet launched by Prime Minister İsmet İnönü (1935: 22) who had acknowledged the threat, but who implored the Turkish people to not give up hope. The press, acting as public educator, developed powerful visual lexicon aerial and poison gas threats that would reverberate throughout the decade. Relying on iconic urban forms, these representations spatialized fear and mapped danger onto the city's symbolic core by depicting bombs falling over Hagia Sophia, suffocation in Beyazıt Square, and *ahşap mahalleler* (literally, 'wooden neighborhoods', neighborhoods whose structures were made of wood) in smoke. In doing so, they transformed anticipation into a shared emotional orientation that anchored anxiety and urgency to familiar spatial imaginaries.

This campaign exemplified what TenHouten (2018: 321) describes as the exploration of the environment necessary for territorial control. Anticipation in this context functioned both as foresight and emotional governance. Building on historian of emotions Joanna Bourke's discussion on fear and anxiety (2003), I suggest that anticipation can induce paralysis when mixed with fear or incite action when paired with trust. The air fleet campaign was an instance of the latter; the prime minister implored the public to not despair but instead contribute to readiness by donating to the campaign. Urban representations, along with various textual narratives, became a publicized strategic medium via newspapers through which catastrophe was imagined, emotional response was shaped, and collective action was summoned.

This process reflects a broader conceptual trajectory that I call 'architectures of anticipation': spatial policies, practices, discourses, and representations that prepare the built environment for imagined (and sometimes unimaginable) futures (2025). In wartime contexts, an architecture of anticipation includes not only physical reconstruction but also media campaigns, regulatory proposals, spatial reprogramming, and public exercises. These architectures define what should be preserved or mobilized. Architectures of anticipation are both precautionary systems that are formulated in advance of a crisis and a new way of relating to the built environment. In wartime Turkey, anticipation was often a reactionary mode of endurance, a response to looming threats posed by the country's 'active neutral' stance that was sustained through media and policy as a temporal structure through which crisis could be rehearsed, deferred, and negotiated. Even when fragmented or shaped by ideology, these preemptive gestures, precautions, simulations, and mobilizations can be read as forms of anticipatory urbanism: efforts to assess risk, orient publics, and construct collective preparedness.

A different kind of archival attention and a different definition of architecture that attends to the agency of emotions both in making and writing architectural histories is needed for us to analyze approaches to catastrophe like Ercüment's watercolors that momentarily position us as eyewitnesses to the chaos unleashed by an air raid, deploying spatial forms to visualize fear, foster emotional governance, and provoke speculative engagement with the environment. It invites us to read history not only for what happened, but for what people thought might happen, and to consider how they organized space in response along with the meanings embedded in those choices. What emerges is not only a richer emotional vocabulary for architectural history, but a methodological reorientation that positions emotions as active forces in both the making and the writing of architectural histories.

Anxious Images

Ines Tolic

Given the scale of change and the number of destabilizing events we have witnessed in our lifetimes, it is perhaps unsurprising that anxiety has emerged in recent decades as a dominant affect in architectural discourse—both as a historical condition and as a critical lens through which to examine space (Vidler 2000), objects and buildings (Schuldenfrei 2012), and design practices (Goldhagen and Legault 2002). Focusing on this specific emotional state and on designers' responses to it, scholars have reinterpreted a range of case studies not as 'disparate, fleeting moments of passionate intensity leading to no lasting, significant architectural influence' (Goldhagen and Legault 2002: 11), but as part of a broader effort to confront change, complexity and unease. Treating anxiety as a central interpretive framework may thus open new avenues for engaging with architectural and urban history while also underscoring the crucial role of images and image making in architectural practice, helping to surface lesser-known historical narratives and to forge unexpected connections across time and space.

Postwar Italy and Japan, though geographically distant, were bound by comparable anxieties about modernization and identity, concerns that found a belated resonance in the figure and transnational trajectory of Kenzō Tange. A pivotal moment in this history is the publication of Manfredo Tafuri's *L'architettura moderna in Giappone* (1964; 2022), the first Italian survey of contemporary Japanese architecture. Unable to speak Japanese and with no firsthand experience of the country until 1980, Tafuri's understanding of Japan at the time drew largely on translated secondary sources and, most significantly, on images. Images, understood here as both drawings and photographs, led Tafuri to discern an underlying anxiety among Japanese planners. This symptomatic framing may provide a distinctive basis for interpreting how emotions, images, and cities intersect in Tange's subsequent Italian projects, including those developed for Bologna.

Among the illustrations reproduced in *L'architettura moderna in Giappone*, the image of Tange's Kurashiki's city hall stands out (**Figure 2**). The representation of the building in the urban context conveys perhaps even more forcefully than the building itself 'the absolute incompatibility of modern democratic life with the ancient political and social structures embodied by the tradition-bound fabric all around it—a densely woven tissue of small single-family houses' (Tafuri 2022: 113). Far from offering a neutral depiction of an architectural object in context, the image functions as a carefully constructed visual artifact, designed not only to communicate meaning but also to elicit emotion. The 'expressive anxiety' Tafuri attributes to the building is thus embedded within the

image itself, and, in Tafuri's reading, it speaks to the transformations of postwar Japan that reshaped both city and society with equal intensity (1964: 78).



Figure 2: Kurashiki's city hall, designed by Tange Kenzō, as illustrated in *L'architettura moderna in Giappone* (1964).

Tafuri observes that Tange and Japanese planners saw images 'as a primary tool of knowledge and communication' and as 'often symbolic', serving as 'a means of reconnecting with an experience of the past that is replete with constructive potential for the present' (2022: 197–98). They thus regarded images as having an operative role, engaging audiences on an emotional level, steering desire, and prompting action. In this context, Japanese projects may be understood as images functioning as symbolic mediations through which anxieties are confronted and desires rendered explicit. A case in point is the Tokyo Bay project, a proposal for Tokyo's future that condensed Tange's 'anxious search' (Tafuri 1964: 149) into a visionary design responding to the city's most pressing challenges: exponential population growth, acute housing shortages, limited buildable land, and increasingly paralyzing traffic congestion.

As Tafuri notes, Tange himself acknowledged that the project could not be ‘implemented within the framework of the current political system’ (2022: 191). Although never realized, the image of the Tokyo Bay project circulated widely throughout the 1960s, calling for action, exposing the limits of the present, and articulating a desire for a radically restructured urban future. Here, the image functions as both a visual representation and a transferential object that is charged with affect, suspended between anxiety and desire, and capable of staging a symbolic confrontation with the impossibility of political realisation: ‘We believe that people of all classes and callings must grapple aggressively and constructively with the problem of recreating Tokyo. We pray the plan we have put forward may do something to increase the interest of people at large in Tokyo’s future’ (Tange Team 1961: 38).

In 1967, just a few years after the publication of *L’architettura moderna in Giappone*, Tange was invited to design his first project in Italy, a country that, like Japan, was ‘grappling with the same fundamental problems of modernity, which touched all aspects of society, of government, and of the economy’ (Oshima 2022: 249). Tange’s northward expansion of Bologna, known as *Bologna 84*, marked a clear departure from the historic city, projecting a vision of the future aligned with the ambitions of the Tokyo Bay Project. Eventually, however, only the Fiera District, a hub for the tertiary sector, was completed. Here, Tange reinterpreted historically resonant urban elements such as porticoes, towers, and a cobblestone piazza. The resulting coexistence of history and future, reassurance and desire, stood in contrast to the more anxious affective charge of the Kurashiki city hall’s image. While the latter staged a stark confrontation between past and future, the Fiera District mobilized familiar elements as instruments of historical continuity and emotional anchoring. Rather than provoking anxiety, it offered a sense of belonging—one that resonated with the Italian public, circulated beyond Bologna, and positioned Tange as a prominent figure within the Italian architectural landscape. In the following years, he received further commissions in Catania, San Donato Milanese, Naples, Rome, Sesto San Giovanni, Trieste, and Jesolo (Bettinotti 1996), extending his influence over Italian cities through the images and affects they generated, an influence that remains worthy of further exploration.

Once ‘the craze’ for the sort of ‘large-scale interventions’ exemplified by *Bologna 84* and the Fiera District had subsided (Tafuri 2002 [1982]: 99), a certain type of image of Bologna began to be reproduced again and again, one that put emphasis on the tradition-bound fabric of the historic city centre and that only showed the Fiera District from a distance (**Figure 3**). The emotional meaning of these images and ones like them diverges significantly from that of images of both the Kurashiki city hall building and the Tokyo Bay project. Rather than embracing transformation, these images reaffirm

the stabilising continuity of the past. Indeed, the piazza of the Fiera District remains largely unused, the towers are partially vacant, and Tange's porticoes were notably excluded from Bologna's recent application to have its porticoes designated a UNESCO world heritage site. At this point, one might ask whether these images validate Tange's reassuring approach or instead signal a resistance to the disruptive potential of his vision. Do they reflect a desire whose focus has shifted since the 1960s, or do they instead reveal a new set of anxieties? And finally, where should one locate the origin of the affect that informs these images: in Tange's project, or in the city that receives and inhabits it?



Figure 3: View of Bologna with the Fiera district in the background. Photo by Clodette662000, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SCORCI_DI_BOLOGNA_da_san_petronio.jpg. Shared under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike International 4.0 license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Over the course of the decades since Tange first developed his vision for the city, Bologna—like many other cities—has been transformed by the rapid evolution of information technologies, the relentless rise of global consumer culture, and the growing pressures of mass tourism and urban commodification. These shifts are inscribed in images that do not just reflect reality but actively participate in its construction, providing emotional frameworks through which the built environment is interpreted, legitimised, or contested. The question, then, is no longer whether our cities are shaped by images and emotions but how critically prepared we are to engage with both: to trace the roots of our most recent anxieties and to uncover the visions that our desires sustain—or obscure.

Picturing Outrage

Davide Deriu

Our era is marked by the social and spatial injustices wreaked by the climate crisis, genocidal wars, and mass displacement; but also by critical forms of resistance, such as French veteran diplomat and concentration camp survivor Stéphane Hessel's 2010 best-selling manifesto *Indignez-vous!* (translated as *Time for Outrage!*). In his book, Hessel acknowledges the complexity of political struggles in an interconnected world yet insists on preserving what he identifies as 'one of the essentials of being human: the capacity and the freedom to feel outraged' (2011: 18).

Such outrage drives artworks exposing the inequalities of urban life, including British artist and director Steve McQueen's art installation comprising video taken from a helicopter in December 2017 of London's Grenfell Tower, which had caught on fire in June of that year, leaving 72 dead (**Figure 4**). The high-rise block sits in the Lancaster West Estate, a social housing complex in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea — known for its extreme disparities in wealth and living conditions — that was planned in the 1960s and completed in the early 1970s as part of a 'slum clearance' scheme. During the 2016 refurbishment, highly flammable cladding panels were installed to improve insulation and, ostensibly, enhance the building's appearance. Public outrage was ignited by the combination of greed, corruption, and incompetence that allowed a fire to devastate the building the following year despite numerous warnings.



Figure 4: This is the only still from McQueen's film *Grenfell* released for publication and does not show Grenfell Tower for reasons of sensitivity. It was taken from a helicopter approaching London from the northwest. *Grenfell*, 2019 [still]. Colour video, sound, 24 minutes, 2 seconds. © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist.

McQueen's installation, first screened at the Serpentine Gallery in 2023, captured the structure just as it was being wrapped in protective sheeting 'before it faded from the public's memory' (McQueen 2023: n.p.). The hovering camera that turns repeatedly around the charred tower enacts what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls 'persistent looking' (2019), compelling us to bear witness to a scene of devastation from a position that is usually associated with power and surveillance. It is a poignant example of how images can open new ways of seeing the built environment and its histories.

McQueen's *Grenfell* can be compared to Picasso's *Guernica*, even though their contents and approaches are utterly distinct. While *Guernica* is a graphic rendering of destruction, where broken bodies merge with broken buildings, *Grenfell* conveys carnage through the sombre contemplation of its aftermath. Their subject and scale are different: yet both works show how representations of urban trauma can attain monumental force by channelling outrage, an emotional reaction of shock, anger, or indignation.

Although these emotions overlap, outrage carries a specific moral weight. According to anthropologist Ward Goodenough, it is anger that feels 'justifiable' (1997: 7). While anger is well represented in histories of emotion, outrage has received less focused attention. The term is often reserved for responses to large-scale violations such as mass atrocities and other glaring injustices. According to Ken Oatley, on a modern view that he contrasts to ancient stoicism, 'to fail to be compassionately angry about such outrages as the Holocaust, or even an injustice at work or in one's community' makes 'one a lesser human being' (2004: 55). Oatley's claim reminds us that the noun 'outrage' can not only denote a moral emotion but also the incident which causes that feeling. To call an event an outrage—from Old French 'ou(l)trage' based on the Latin 'ultra'—is to say it exceeds what we consider tolerable. That the word sounds like a combination of 'out' and 'rage' in English may further contribute to its emotional charge.

How has outrage figured in architectural discourse? In the 20th century, the term was notably mobilised by *The Architectural Review*, which published a landmark special issue titled 'Outrage' in June 1955. Edited by a young Ian Nairn, this 'bombshell of architectural criticism' (Parnell 2014) launched a recurring feature that spotlighted abuses of the built environment from the soulless monotony of suburban sprawl (which Nairn dubbed 'subtopia') to the erosion of public space. In recent years, the journal has revived its 'Outrage' section, addressing themes such as the decline of public space and the failure of sustainability standards. Whether in the face of construction or destruction, architecture has long been a medium through which moral emotions—and outrage in particular—are expressed, and images have played a central role in shaping these responses.

The recent ‘emotional turn’ in historical research (Boddice 2018) invites further exploration of such themes. Scholars are increasingly studying emotions not just as biological responses but also as culturally defined experiences. While emotions are felt individually, they are also formed collectively, shaped by history and implicated in social relations. As Oatley notes, ‘By exploring our past, we can reach a deeper understanding of our emotions in the present’ (2004: x). This approach opens new avenues for understanding how built environments embody emotional life and how visual representations of those environments mediate it.

Hessel himself identified social justice, human rights and environmental protection as the main challenges of our time. He cited the plight of Palestinians as the cause of his ‘strongest feeling of indignation’ (2011: 18), voicing a widespread sentiment that has been magnified across the world by Israel’s military invasion and bombing of the Gaza Strip since October 2023. Significantly, in an age saturated with images, this campaign of systematic dehumanisation has largely occurred beyond the public eye. Despite limited mainstream media coverage, however, photographs and videos of large-scale destruction circulating on social media have generated widespread public outrage. Their visibility has revived debates about whether images of urban devastation can meaningfully shape political sentiment or mobilise response. Even before this conflict, wars in Syria and Ukraine had prompted calls to recognise *domicide* —the systematic destruction of people’s homes and lived environments—as a violation of human rights constituting a war crime. The imagery emerging from Gaza, including aerial footage that captures the extensive ruination, intensifies discussions about accountability, ethics, and the consequences of military action. Meanwhile, speculative renderings of a proposed coastal ‘Riviera’ released amid ongoing destruction have further amplified global indignation.

These provisional reflections may raise questions for scholars of architecture and urbanism. How has outrage manifested in the history of cities? How do images participate in articulating this moral emotion? Can historical research provoke indignation in response to injustices that are embedded in the built environment? One caution is worth emphasising here: ‘The ability of an image to produce outrage is one thing, to sustain it is another’ (Lennard 2019: 117). In a hypermediated and fast-changing world where visual spectacles proliferate and attention fragments, the lasting resonance of artworks becomes all the more critical. From *Guernica* to *Grenfell*, artists compel us to consider the role of images in expressing emotion, in preserving memory, and in shaping collective imaginaries.

(Be)Longing in the City

Miriam Paeslack

Today's cities are sites where loss often powerfully manifests in different dimensions—demographic, environmental, infrastructural, economic (Reckwitz) but also personal. Loss and longing are two intertwined concepts, often linked by grief.¹ Understanding their respective breadth of meaning and interpretation as generative, directive, instructional can help answer questions about the relevance of longing—and belonging—for understanding cities and their visual representations. In a succession of brief considerations, I pursue these questions by turning to the story of Berlin's embattled and now removed Palast der Republik and one artist's take on it.

Longing can be defined as 'a strong desire for something or someone', a 'yearning', or a 'strong desire especially for something unattainable'. In relation to the built environment, the notion of longing is tied to the concept of home. In the words of the cultural critic Christian Schüle, 'Home aches, once you've lost it. Home aches, when you have to give it up. Home aches when you are randomly exposed to it. Home aches because it might be a chimera, because home might not actually exist, even though everybody believes to have one' (Schüle 13, my translation).² Longing, then, is a central circumstance of physical and emotional displacement felt by migrants and refugees in exile and in the diaspora, but also by Germans in their former East German home. This spatial dimension of longing ties it to belonging. Both terms originate in the old English 'langian', meaning 'to pertain to, to go along with (to belong), and to suit or to prolong, to yearn after (to long)' ([etymonline.com](https://www.etymonline.com)). The original meaning of 'belonging' has evolved over time, and now also connotes 'to be the property of' and 'to fit in'.

Berlin has been the site of intense debates about civic participation and belonging that go back at least to the 18th century (Kyriakopoulos 2015). The city's post-World War Two division and reunification created deep cultural divides leading for many who had lived in the city's Eastern part to feel increasingly foreign in their own city. Longing for their East German ways of life and a sense of nostalgia formed and forms these East Berliners' emotions.

An emblematic site of identification in former East Berlin is the Socialist modernist Palast der Republik. Erected between 1973 and 1976, the palace functioned as the assembly place for East Germany's parliament and as a place of leisure and entertainment. The palace was designed to be a symbolic successor to Berlin's 18th-century imperial castle, the bombed-out remnants of which the young 'real-socialist' government had demolished in the 1950s in an effort to erase traces of an undesirable past and make the GDR's political position clear to the world.

After Germany's reunification, a prolonged ideological battle erupted over the fate of the palace. A group of former West Germans began to lobby for a reconstruction of the historical Hohenzollern complex, while others – former East Germans and critics from both East and West – sought to preserve the palace. Asbestos was found in the palace's insulation, which would have to be removed. As this removal process dragged on and it became clear that the building would have to be stripped down to its steel frame and glass façade, calls for its demolition grew louder. Eventually, the Bundestag was swayed and voted for the palace's demolition, and for its replacement with a near 1:1 reconstruction of the castle's facade. This was completed in 2020. During the early 2000s, as the Palace was in a state of existential limbo, a number of artists and curators developed an interest in the palace because of its central role in German discourses of remembering and forgetting, of obsolescence and of 'Ostalgie' (a combination of 'Ost' (east) and 'Nostalgie' (Enns 2007)).

The palace was also the focus in the early 2000s of British artist Tacita Dean, who had come to Berlin on an artist fellowship in 2000 and then stayed. She captured the building in her 2004 piece *Palast*, a 10-minute, 30-second, 16-millimeter color film with optical sound (Figure 5). For Dean, the palace was originally 'just another abandoned building of the former East' that 'beguiled' her 'despite its apparent ugliness', as she put it (interview, March 22, 2013). As a newcomer in town and perhaps also because of her uninhibited curiosity, Dean was, unlike the locals, 'attracted to the Palast not for its symbolic relevance but for aesthetic reasons'. Dean was fascinated by the spatial and



Figure 5: Tacita Dean, *Palast*, 2004, still. Courtesy the artist; Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris/Los Angeles.

abstract qualities of the palace's surface, most of all perhaps by the 'rich and enormous amount of color of the palace within the gray center of Berlin' (interview). She never attempts to penetrate the palace's reflective surface. She instead dwells exclusively on the outside, although not on a single exterior view of the abandoned building but on fragmentary reflections of its surroundings in the mirrored façade. Dean's decision to shoot forty-one still images for a few seconds at a time shifts this project into a space between the cinematographic and still photographic modes. The stills have a strange, slow, narrative quality that elicits focused attention.

Despite Dean's emotionally detached approach in *Palast*, her work and the fashion in which she ended up capturing the site, nevertheless presents a position that opens opportunities for questions about loss, longing, home and East German identity. For Dean, the rebuilding of the historic castle was neither an act of memory nor of memorialization but of nostalgia, because the goal was to reconstruct an allegedly better past. Her work, she points out, is the opposite of nostalgic; it is rather about 'the reality of the present' (interview). She clarifies this point further by saying that there is a fine line between nostalgia and obsolescence: 'Obsolescence brings longing. ... This is an emotional feeling that is not nostalgic because it does not look for a better past. It is also a non-intellectual notion' (interview; Boym 2007). Unlike what Svetlana Boym would call 'restorative nostalgia', which stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home, Dean's longing more closely resembles what Boym calls 'reflective nostalgia'. This form of nostalgia 'thrives on algia (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately' (2006: 13).

Dean does not strive to satisfy the longing to be transported back to the physical and material reality of the Palast der Republik or the time that provided the conditions for its meaning making. But the hypnotic slow pace and the real-time soundtrack of traffic and pedestrian chatter of the film allows the viewer to experience a number of strong emotions. Longing is perhaps the strongest of them, and one that is felt not only by those who have a relationship to the palace but by anybody who watches the film. Dean's use of 16-millimeter film and her deliberate use of its grainy materiality sensitizes the viewer to passage of time and draws attention to the idea that everything is in a steady, slow paced process of change.

Palast also raises the question of how to deal with loss, loss of home, loss of a sense of social and cultural belonging, etc., which is a precondition for longing. Her film resonates with the German sociologist and cultural theorist Andreas Reckwitz's observation about the productive potential of dealing with loss. He writes 'To face truth with open eyes, to accept fragility and to incorporate loss into the democratic imagination could, in fact, be the precondition of its vitality. If we once dreamed of

abolishing loss, we must now learn how to live with it. Should we succeed, it would mark a step toward maturity. And that could become a deeper form of progress' (Reckwitz 2025). Dean's particular artistic framing of the loss of the palace and its unsentimental, reflective nostalgia, suggest some of this maturity and thus the possibility of new kind of progress. Similarly, the function of longing can also be understood as productive rather than static: according to a team of developmental psychologists, the role of longing may be 'to help to cope with one's own incompleteness, losses and the lesser-than-perfect life' and even to 'give life a direction' (Scheibe, Freund, Baltes 2007). What could be a better place to complicate our understanding of cities and the emotion of longing and belonging than an artist's patient interpretation of a site that has been erased? Dean offers a pragmatic, unsentimental take on the world that firmly situates her work in our era of social dislocation and geographic and psychological unsettlement.

No Fun City

Dorothy Barenscott

Vancouver's nickname 'No Fun City' often comes as a complete surprise to outsiders. Growing up as one of the rare Vancouverites born and raised in one of the most beautiful and livable cities in the world, I can attest to the emotionally detached state that many residents understand and probably feel more than they can articulate typified by a lack of connectivity, loneliness, and superficial interactions. Some people blame the economic conditions of a city ranked third in the world for unaffordability. Others point to the diverse multicultural demographics of a city less than 150 years old where 43% of the population is foreign born. But the no-fun city moniker may ultimately derive from the city's unique architecture, which in turn is a product of the urban planning philosophy of the city itself. Termed 'Vancouverism', this philosophy has, according to political scientist Serena Kataoka, 'actualized the livable city paradox—one part rural romance of living close to nature, and one part romance of diversity and complexity' (2009: 42).

In this way, Vancouver and its aesthetic beauty coupled with its emotionally detached urban character is profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, it is a city that Los Angeles promotes as 'Hollywood North', casting Vancouver as the picture-perfect setting for countless films, television shows, advertisements, and other cities past, present, and future. On the other hand, it is a city rarely starring and showing up as its authentic self, ironically mirroring the politics of everyday life in the city as a spatial and representational problem—one that exists within a paradigm of what is concealed

and what is revealed and set against a backdrop of technological speed and global media spectacle. Simply put, the city of Vancouver cannot live up to its fantastical projection any more than its many inhabitants and tourists who channel their experience of the city into carefully edited photographs produced for social media posts seeking maximum clicks and likes.

This is where I begin my intervention and pose the question around how ‘seeing’—and more specifically, photographic and technologically mediated seeing collapsing traditional hierarchies of high and low art—is critical to unpacking the emotional resonance and distinctive character of urban spaces, pointing historians and researchers towards a better understanding of the representational crisis, identity, and lived experience that emerge under the conditions of neoliberalism. When philosopher and political activist Susan Sontag (1977) first drew attention and called for critical reflection via the photograph in the 1970s, it was a salvo in the early stages of conceptualism in late 20th-century art history, a moment when a new generation of artists and art historians began orienting themselves to the task of exposing the perceived neutrality of photographs and, by extension, traces of their subverted emotional expression. Conceptual art not only called into question the means of representation but also drew attention to the emotional states the encounter between late capitalism and postcolonialism produced.

In my city, what came to be designated the Vancouver School of photoconceptualism challenged the prevailing rhetoric of Vancouverism couched within Canadian multiculturalism and the photographic ‘Beautiful British Columbia’ economic branding tied to the city. Artists such as Jeff Wall (**Figure 6**) experimented with multiple and overlapping forms of image-based technologies. Inspired by popular serial and documentary photography, cinema, postcards, commercial advertising, and more experimental forms such as performance, video, and installation art, members of the Vancouver School carefully used photography in their projects to represent complex visual and spatial cityscapes as ‘idea-works, and their sites, as language games and thematic inventories, and as a reflective investigation of the social and architectural landscape’ (Wallace 1990: 96–97). Other formal features like the deployment of large-scale images to evoke the semiotic power of history paintings, the use of backlit light boxes, and the use of commercial aesthetics reinforced connections between their conceptual and ‘high’ art projects and globalized business, tourism, and advertising visual vocabularies.

Critically, a range of complex and conflicted emotions tied to profound spatial dislocation, histories of race and class violence, environmental degradation, and the experience of emotional disconnection within urban spaces are revealed in these



Figure 6: Jeff Wall, *A View from an Apartment*, 2004–2005, transparency in lightbox, 167.0 x 244.0 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

artworks. They also question beauty in art and the way it can seductively appeal to individuated emotion, nostalgia and sentimentality and foreground a more nuanced and materially based understanding of the mechanisms of emotion and expressionism. Importantly, what we learn from these contemporary works is that technologically mediated images are able to lure viewers through both their conceptual and contingent nature and their appeal to populism. Photographs exist somewhere between indexes, icons, and symbols and stand as potent reflections of an unfolding set of social, economic, and political conditions that are not yet understood.

Here, my argument turns on the idea that visual representations of cities, particularly those that are technologically mediated—and their accompanying affect—writ large, have historically traded in something more understandable today as the ‘experience economy’, an economic model that has resulted in a range of conflicted emotional identities for these cities that have deep-seated connection to the rising tide of neoliberalism and consumer marketing tactics as they developed and emerged alongside contemporary art practices of the recent past. In turn, many contemporary artists worldwide have sought to expose the emotionally blunted visual vocabulary

of the picturesque, superficial, and nostalgic of past art traditions and to interrogate commercial and popular photographic representations that picture the land and cityscape in a similarly limited and disconnected emotional way.

Importantly, today's experience economy operates primarily on social media as an advanced form of technologically and publicly mediated seeing, trading on strategic performative emotion tied to values associated with unfettered free market competition. Images from the world of entertainment, news media, our family and friends, advertisers, and the world of art co-mingle visual environments. The resulting multiplication and proliferation of photographic images overrides the capacity for critical reflection, exacerbating the disconnection, loneliness, and superficial interactions many people experience in today's city spaces. And with artificial intelligence and deep fake technology on our collective doorstep, photographic seeing is about to become further unmoored from lived experience, displacing the nuance and range of human emotional expression.

While the emotional impacts of global capital transformation and the limited range of feelings that can be expressed and represented in a deregulated visual marketplace that values influence, clicks, and likes are significant, I want to stress here that this phenomenon is not at all new and so it is important for scholars to develop methodologies and undertake projects aimed at mining other historic moments of emotional detachment that have occurred hand in hand with new technologies of seeing utilized to represent city building, urban transformation, and material culture. There is much to be gained by turning to the visual culture, art, and technological histories of the past to unpack key moments of crisis intersecting the lived experience and emotional worlds of cities and their inhabitants with their varied, imperfect, and unruly representations.

Notes

- ¹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's curve documenting the five stages of grief is well known; see <https://www.ekrfoundation.org/5-stages-of-grief/change-curve>.
- ² 'Heimat schmerzt, wenn man sie verloren hat. Heimat schmerzt, wenn man sie aufgeben muss. Heimat schmerzt, wenn man ihr wahllos ausgesetzt ist. Heimat schmerzt, weil sie womöglich eine Chimäre ist, weil es Heimat vielleicht gar nicht wirklich gibt, obwohl jeder eine eigene zu haben glaubt. Der Zusammenhang zwischen Heimat' (Schüle, *Heimat*, 17).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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