

“Changing New York”

The photographic cultural expression of a developing urban ideology by Berenice Abbott.

"TRANSFORMANDO NUEVA YORK". LA EXPRESIÓN CULTURAL FOTOGRÁFICA DE UNA IDEOLOGÍA URBANA EN DESARROLLO POR BERENICE ABBOTT

Panagiotis GOULIARIS* ; Dimitris GIOUZEPAS* ; Giannis TSARAS*

Fecha de recepción: 2014.04.20 • Fecha aceptación: 2014.06.05

PÁGINAS 195-207

KEYWORDS

Cityscape, New York, photography, modern, documentary

Introduction

The contribution of Berenice Abbott in the photographic reconstitution of the urban environment is very important and can be summarized in two main parameters. The first is the preservation of a large part of the work of Eugene Atget and its spread in America. Her sustained efforts contributed in a decisive manner to the international recognition of this great creator (Sullivan, 2006). The second parameter is her own work. Intensively influenced by the extent and the importance of Atget's task, she traveled from Paris to New York to find a publisher for his photos. At the same time, however, she realized that this city encompassed endless possibilities of photographic exploration and decided to abandon Paris and stay there permanently. The

♣ Department of Architecture, Democritus University of Thrace. 50, Alon Street, Glyfada, Athens, 16674, Greece. 00306937455406, p.gouliaris@gmail.com

♦ Department of Architecture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. 9, Delmouzou Street, Thessaloniki, 54635, Greece. 00306936299789, dgiozepas@gmail.com

♣ Department of Architecture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. 7, G Kypriou Street Thessaloniki, 54621, Greece. 00306939123653, giantzar@gmail.com

contrasts of a changed and changing city convinced her that a comprehensive portrait of New York was very interesting. She was particularly interested in the physical changes that the city had undergone, its changing neighborhoods with huge skyscrapers replacing older low-rise buildings (Mc Caulin, 1973).

She works in the traces of Atget for six years without any public support. In 1935 she is hired by Federal Art Project (FAP) as a supervisor for her "*Changing New York*" project which captured a modern vision of Manhattan and its surrounding boroughs in the 1930s. (Levere; Yochelson, 2005). This project is considered as one of the greatest treasures of New York's Photographic Collection. Beginning in 1935, Abbott photographed over three hundred urban scenes which were the subject of two exhibitions at the museum, in 1937 and 1998. They remain among the most consulted and admired works in the collection, deeply evocative of their period and offering a brilliant melding of art and historical documentation. (*Ibid.*). One critic called her accomplishment "*the finest record ever made of an American city.*" (Sullivan, 2006). When Abbott took her photos, New York was emerging from possibly its most intense period of transformation. Over the course of some four decades, the skyscraper had transformed the city's skyline and the "new" immigration had transformed the city's culture. One of the most important things that this project reveals is that what the city is and what we see today is part of a spectrum of change and continuity that stretches back across decades and, perhaps reassuringly, reaches forward into the years yet to come (*Ibid.*).



Image 1: *Berenice Abbott, Under the El at the Battery, New York, 1936*

The transition from the “paleotecnich” to the “neotechnic” era.

Abbott participated in the “straight photography” movement, which claimed that subject matter and developing processes should not be manipulated. She did not like being called artistic and resented everything that would qualify as emotional, sneaky or deceiving. She never used any kind of trick to add effect, be it specific angles, soft lighting or oversimplification. That was “straight photography” in her book. (Mc Causland, 1973) Eager to see the truth in things, she turned to the city focusing on skyscrapers, little shops and markets, Greenwich village residences and Lower East Side immigrant districts. (Sullivan, 2006).

Through her photography, Abbott gradually revealed urban New York.

She saw the camera as a “modern invention” that could be rightfully used to document the 20th century, a tool like no other in presenting city aspects that usually fail to meet the eye. American urban culture was greatly impacted by her work. Abott is among those remarkable Americans who found new ways of combining photography and urban architecture. It is generally acknowledged that she opened up new perspectives in her own distinctive way. In fact, the New York Times gave her the title “*a pioneer of modern American photography.*” (Sullivan, 2006)

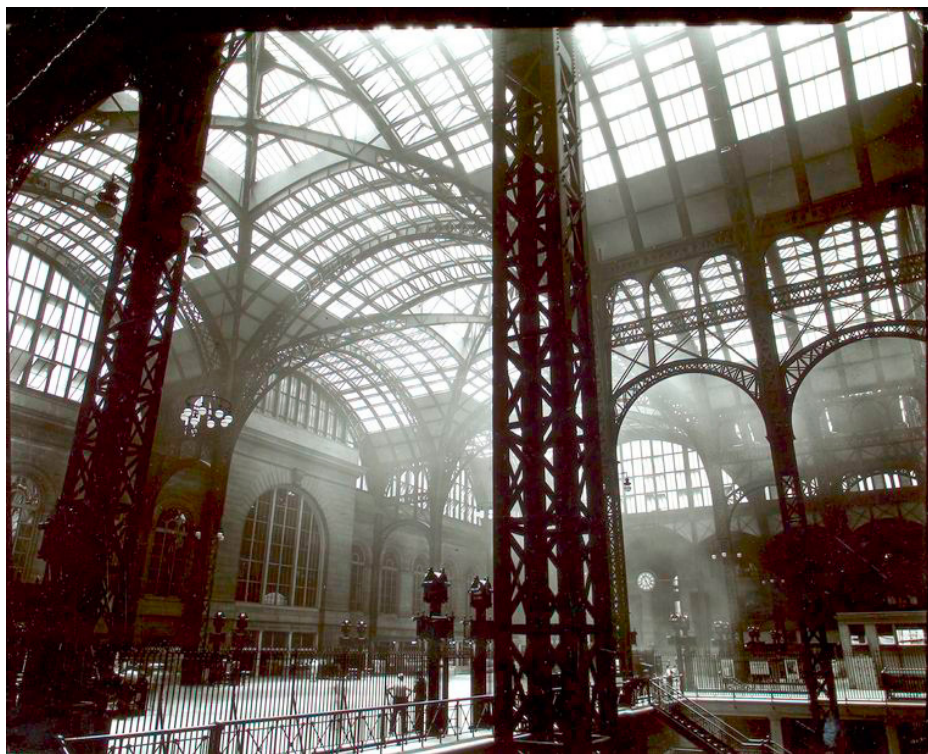


Image 2: Berenice Abbott, *Pennsylvania Station Interior, Manhattan, 1935*

She claimed that the times she lived in presented a huge challenge to photographers, who were thrust into an age of reality, and that photography was the perfect tool to present in a creative manner a world confronted

with reality like never before. Perhaps this was her way of stating how objective representation can affect people's actions, how realistic images of great moments in history will push people towards change. On the other hand it might be that she considered the present as a historical problem and wished to recast history as a dilemma of representation. To see history itself through realism, as problem of realism. The way she perceives realism boils down to creating a space of communicate interaction, namely a space where the image, the photographer and the viewer all engage to uncover the social context from which photographs emerge. Photography aspires to attain a more substantial and profound level of comprehension of how people's lives are shaped. (Weissman, 2011)

Abbott's ideas about New York were greatly affected by historian Lewis Mumford who divided American history into specific technological eras. She adopted his critical stasis to America's "paleotechnic era", namely the era after the American Civil War that was called by other historians as the Second Industrial Revolution. They wished for New York urban planning to develop and with the support by her project to free the city from paleotechnic forces, leading to a more humane and human-scaled "neotechnic era". (*ibid.*) Abbott's photos of paleotechnic buildings constructed before urban planning came to be are perfect examples of Mumford's influence. In the majority of these photos, buildings seem to be a product of image composition, positively menacing.



Image 3: *Berenice Abbott, Pike and Henry Street, New York, 1936*

Her own version of Realism

Abbott first became acquainted with the work of Eugene Atget while working in Man Ray's Parisian studio. Man Ray and the surrealists appreciated Atget's work on the grounds of the marvelous and the uncanny—the elements which broke the conventional norm of faithful visual representation. Abbott, however, saw in it a free-spirited realism to which she was instantly attracted—she felt an artistic affiliation with Atget, whom she came to think of as a predecessor. (Yochelson, 1999)

Abbott became attracted to realism at almost the same time—roughly around the 1920s and 1930s—when photography started to move away from beauty and ideals and closer to art objects and unremarkable routine motifs and scenes. Within her realist agenda, which carried a meaningful vision and

was quite political as well, she managed to materialize her decades of historical experience so that, when it comes to her own work, realism –even in the form of documentary- is not considered the mere representation of true facts, but a purposeful artistic effect.- (Weissman, *op. cit.*) Abbott threw a spotlight on the melancholy of daily life; taking one step further, she was able to uncover a common ground outside exhibition spaces, where the artist could freely and directly communicate with a more responsive audience.

She thought that our own eyes may scan certain things without really realizing the specific visual stimulus, while the vigilant eye of the lens is there to record these very things we inadvertently ignore. She claimed that straight photography is “*precision in the rendering and definition of detail and materials, surfaces and textures; instantaneity of observation; acute and faithful presentation of what has actually existed in the external world at a particular time and place*” (Mc Causland, 1973) What the lens sees is a single image at the instant the shutter is released. The moment the picture is taken, the visual record kept is that of the specific single instant, which actually synthesizes the ability of the lens to single it out without taking into consideration whatever comes before and after –quite unlike the human eye. This isolation may be enslaving the stimulus to one purpose, but it also manages to keep its meaning intact; since time and space are no longer perceived as continua, the singled-out instant becomes an autonomous, true fact. Abbott takes this to be entirely out of context and, therefore, unable to bring out the real.

To Abbott, photography was related to democracy and populism. She considered photography the “*great democratic medium*”, and supported the notion that “*photography is made by the many and for the many*”. (Yochelson, *op. cit.*) It is quite telling that a medium should be described in words so similar to those used in the past for the American Constitution. The implication there might be that the artists and audience involved in creating and appreciating photography could exist as a separate fragment of society, freed from obsolete conventions regarding the exchange between them, to the point that history would be represented in radically new ways, subsequently causing new reactions. The artist figure promoted by Abbott is rooted in history and materializes refined concepts in a straightforward aesthetic fashion. Throughout her oeuvre, she attaches importance to several aspects of her artistic medium, mostly its ongoing dialogue with democracy and the public through multiple possible interpretations, as well as its fundamental function as mediator between image and truth –ultimately a sociopolitical function

which slowly takes place before, and finally relies upon, the audience itself.

Approaching society with a critical mind is more important to realism—at least in photography—than producing accurate images of reality. The educational importance of a snapshot lies in its power to steer the viewer towards reconstructing, through reflection and imagination, the background that generated the printed result at hand. To the end of facilitating this procedure as part of a larger quest for truth, Abbott created a model of photography which is not restricted to the visible contents of the frame. Instead of regarding realism and documentary as the mere representation of an always-existing, static slice of reality subject to sheepish repetition, she reinvented them as the result of the creative procedure in the artist's hands. (*ibid.*)

Photography is nothing but a constant tug-of-war: the finished print-outs fight the covert procedure of artistic creation, the ever-present historical background fights the flat representation of itself, and the paper world fights the remains of its real, buzzing version. (Weissman, *op. cit.*) Abbott's photography craves to shake a settled and certain audience, thrusting it into a chaotic stance which calls for involvement with, and reflection on, the visual stimulus, which in turn carries along its own inadequate nature and can only be complete if seen as part of a greater historical continuum.

Photography requires three sides to be engaged: the artist, the audience and the urban space pictured each time. According to this semiotic model, the print as a physical object is the point where the three sides meet and a dialogue among them is made possible. This means that it is impossible to perceive the image as the isolated remnant of some strictly defined past; on the contrary, it is rather the starting point for an ongoing dialogue, whose terms are subject to constant change and redefinition. Here, the significance of the photographer does not lie exclusively in the choice of the frame, but also in her actual existence—no matter how distant her echo—as an educator offering guidance to the audience. A photograph is never a random framed scene, but an artistic action always requiring some kind of counteraction to be taken, even to the unsuspecting or inattentive viewer. (Weissman, *op. cit.*)



Image 4: *Berenice Abbott, Abraham De Peyster in Patsas, Manhattan, 1939*



Image 5: Berenice Abbott, *Seventh Avenue looking south from 35th Street, Manhattan, 1935*

Abbott's intention was for her material to exist worldwide, functioning as food for socially-oriented thought, maintaining its objectivity and being in a constant dialogue with audience, society, and history. (Yochelson, *op. cit*) These very specific requirements were not, of course, meant as mere content guidelines or general instructions for her art; the vision they create resulted from Abbott's utter objective for her oeuvre to be part of a greater public concern and awareness. To her, incorporating her work into an open, socially-minded space meant putting matters up for discussion and subsequent action –of whatever type this might be. There is no telling what happens in the aftermath of the work leaving the artist's studio and interacting with the spectator. In the end, a very diverse host of unforeseeable interpretations is bound to occur, further causing a subsequent plethora of possible reactions.

Reconfiguring urban spaces

Within the spectrum of American photography, Abbott is certainly an extraordinary case. She was a historically minded, conceptually sophisticated, and aesthetically straightforward artist. Her work highlights photography's democratic potential, communicative promise, and open multiplicity and also the fact that the photographic document functions in dialectic between representation and reality, which is a social and political process and a matter of gradual unfolding contingent upon the spectator.

Abbott aspired to include diverse elements in her images, presenting skyscrapers side-to-side with the lesser structures which existed in the cityscape before them. She craved to capture the atmosphere of a city that moved ever so fast, buzzing with traffic and watching the battle between old and new. During an administrative review following the beginning of the project, Abbott had the chance to define what she intended to achieve.

Changing New York gives an account of how the city moved from low nineteenth-century standards to being the modern metropolis it is today. As urban development went on and corporate power emerged, Abbott documented the effect of this shift on the citizens' independence and autonomy, as well as its cost for family-run businesses respectively, by photographing abandoned buildings, purpose-built tenements, homeless people, street vendors, and city crowds. (Mc Causland, *op. cit*). New models of ownership, replacing private property and a whole network of simpler economic exchanges, are

one of Abbott's recurring themes. In producing photographs of modern technological marvels –such as soaring skyscrapers, colossal bridges etc.- she also manifested the newly-acquired gift of technological progress and its promise of a better tomorrow. This discrepancy lies in the very core of the concept behind *Changing New York*, which seems to discuss what one can tell about American culture in the 1930s –concerning notions of history, legends, and perceptions- by looking at the façade of the newly modernized city. From a more general viewpoint, however, *Changing New York* explores how space is rethought and reconfigured in the modern urban environments which have started to emerge around the world.

Abbott's aspirations for an art form open to constant dialogue and comprehensively targeting the society forced her to reinvent photographic realism and move away from the traditional commands of modernism, which called for the author to be explicitly present. What is clearly pointed out throughout the project is a radical transformation at the dual plane of urban landscape and society (*ibid.*). It documents the disappearance of outdated items–be it large-scale ones, such as buildings, or smaller everyday objects-and also draws the focus on the forces which dictate social change, namely the ever-changing relationships within the community. Finally, the material is presented in such a manner as to accentuate the irrational nature of these forces.

Abbott's project presents the theoretically unlimited potential lying in reconfiguring the urban landscape, emphasizing the historically undisputable changes such transformations have brought about, while some of her photographs show how modern societies have failed to make the most of this potential, which is anyway inherent to the urban landscape itself. (Weissman, *op. cit.*). The artist is enthusiastic towards new construction and end engineering; to her, old buildings are an inconspicuous, though vast architectural playground for innovative action. New meaning and life can be given to what remains of the past, as an alternative to the common practice of evacuating and buying the old and small, to demolish and replace by a modern massive structure. New York is a melting pot of different styles –originating from the city's rich history- as well as a city ruled by a real-estate need to maximize useable space; Abbott's work manages to demonstrate the protean nature of this ever-changing urban landscape. The way she practices her own version of realism ensures that life is not presented as a still moment in strictly-defined time and space, but revisited as always being fluid and dynamic.

References

- LEVERE, Douglas; YOCHELSON, bonnie (2005) *New York Changing: Revisiting Berenice Abbott's New York*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- MC CAUSLAND Elizabeth (1973) *New York in the Thirties*. New York: Dover Publications.
- SULLIVAN, George. (2006) *Berenice Abbott, Photographer: An Independent Vision*. New York: Clarion Books.
- WEISSMAN, Terri (2011) *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- YOCHELSON, Bonnie (1999) *Berenice Abbott, Changing New York*. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel.