

# A web overlay on the City

## A new level of urban representation and visual experience

UNA SUPERPOSICIÓN DE LA WEB EN LA CIUDAD. UN NUEVO NIVEL DE REPRESENTACIÓN URBANA Y EXPERIENCIA VISUAL

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## Introduction

The informational overload is not just new in our era. Since the 1980's it has been forecast that information would have been not only a renewable material, but even a self-generating resource, in which the risk was drowning (Naisbitt, 1982). After more than 30 years we can say that such a prediction was correct or even underestimated. The terms “data mining” (Cabena et al., 1997) or “big data” (Mayer-Schönberger; Cukier, 2013) are nowadays part of our vocabulary and not only inside the academic environment. Inside this panorama the web-based turn of informational technology has a main role in implementing the amount of texts, notices, news, numbers, literatures, reports, narratives and so on. If we look at this process from the internet audience point of view we can detect important outcomes such as a widespread multimedia loudness as a permanent soundtrack of our lives. This pervasive influence of the techno-media could have deep effects on human psychology (De Kerckhove, 2000) which are still to be discussed. But among these complex sets of phenomena what is interesting, in the field of urban studies, is the overabundance of images and in particular of city images which are available

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in an incomparable dimension until short time ago. Showing an overlook of this new dimension of a visual-urban performance is just the aim of this paper.

## Abstract

Starting from the above-stated general consideration about the spread of the media contents on the web it is clear to claim a request for analysis into a possible digital urban imagery on cities. This that can be detected in a virtual field research on the internet working inside the technological perspective of the postmodern city. So around the visual matters left on the connected space it was possible to collect and to explore several episodes of urban representations on sites, blogs, official and amateur initiatives, more complex digital platforms and so on. The result is an exploration of a group of both bottom-up and top-down productions that can outline a sort of urban virtual atlas of building, places, panoramas, spaces overlapping on the real city. The case study of Milan can offer a lot of examples which drove to define a new experiential dimension of the urban environment. All these elements allow to argue that urban contexts are now non more restricted only to real physical borders, tangible products or daily fruition but must be extended also to invisible frameworks, virtual experiences and multimedia contents.

## Context of research

The undeniable background on which to build any inquiry into the city is the Lynch's (1960) search for a "vivid image" of urban environments. This assumption must be obviously reformulated after the digital divide that created a new communication territory for the image itself but it is beyond all doubt a central issue even in modern citizenship. Although in fact the perception of urban space in the sixties was strictly connected with mental maps of wayfinding the lynchian concept of "imageability" is still a powerful tool to understand the place identity (Abbe et al., 1983) and the attachment (Altman; Low, 1992) only overcoming the traditional formulation by Relph of the sameness of place as made up by social, physical and symbolic components. These three main sides of locality can no more be seen in the same univocal way as in the past. If Relph (1976) in fact could forecast a slow process of erosion of places due to the technological progress till the dimension of "placelessness", on the contrary Dorin Massey (1994), even before the spread of the web era, tried

to predict a “new global sense of place” that could be adequate to an era of time-space compression. And more recently she started to wish for an idea of an essentially multiple space accepting “coevalness” and dissonance (Massey, 2005). It is clear so that, from a visual point of view, on the world wide web even antinomic places can co-exist in a globalized dimension by virtue of the technical digitalization of their iconic appearance which can resume also physical and social sides into symbolic.

From this point of view it is probably no more enough to combine social settings or people’s behaviors with their environment as ecological psychology claims (Barker, 1968) to have a proper portrait of this new complex relationship between space and man as now the virtual space started to have an increasing role on human life. The new frontiers of environmental psychology are in fact facing this new dimension (Levy; Kocher, 1999) but probably the discipline of visual sociology (Harper, 1988) can better support research in a specific inquiry.

The sociology on images can so analyze visions bringing them back to their symbolic values but moreover, in recent times, scholars started to focus on new challenges (Vergani, 2009) considering how the impact of digital technology has driven an increasing number of people to acquire familiarity with technological devices and fruition of digital products. When W.T.J Mitchell has thought of images as living elements with a proper history and destiny (Mitchell, 1986) probably he did not think that this could be more and more true in the web circulation and diffusion of pictures as nowadays we can detect. In other words the request of a set of significant images for the citizenship must now avoid dated assumptions trying to face the multiple dimension granted by new technological supports stretching time and space. Place identity can so stay side by side with global interactions and new form of virtual sociality or usage and the symbolic values of pictures can get an even stronger pervasive autonomy just due to the web and their users how we are going to see.

## Case study

All these previous suggestions must be turned into urban studies through a meaningful objects of analysis. Many urban environments can be studied about the imagery they reflect on the web and several cases are taken into account: a city like Milan is one of the main focus but also other urban centers

with particular examples could be quoted.

First of all this phenomenon can be very hardly surveyed for the continuous changing of its composition, for number, qualities or consistency and so the monitoring activity involved less social media such as facebook, pinterrest, instagram and so on than ordinary web sites, blogs and forums.

The first kind of web phenomena offers in fact often extemporary layouts that can be encouraged by the frame itself of these platforms. On the contrary a more specific and durable presence on the web is probably fostered by the second one.

Sites of photo contests, of city museums, free and open source databases, forum communities or even professional sites and so on are part of this set. Around eighty sites or virtual databases have been collected and scanned with their implications about urban views.

Although the following considerations concern a work in progress this can already be considered a good amount of data which can offer a first sight on a growing dimension of urban representation.

## Approach

Exploring the visual components of the different kinds of web sites talking about urban images various sides are important to register among which the pregnancy of photos, the unknown aspects of the city, the rarity of pictures or a meaningful process of development of the image. Anyway a form of classification was required not to get lost in this panorama just to focus better the specific imagery every group of sites or family of images can convey.

A first frame can be found in the images timeline the different sites show off. A distinction can in fact be found in those sites that show the image of the city in the past, those others which focus their attention on present or future urban transformations and finally those ones that try to illustrate neighborhood and daily citizen's life. The first group seems to look for the continuity of a history of place through the impermanence of the events in a process that Hobsbawm (1972) had already pointed out, the second one is depicting the oncoming new face of physical city as urbanization and the third one seems more to register urbanism in the meaning of Wirth (1938).

Another frame can be the subdivision between grassroots products and formally planned products. The first ones can be ascribed to the bottom-up way to conceive the construction of knowledge while the second ones are more typical of institutional sites. From the research point of view probably the opportunity to discover new ways to represent the city identity by common web users without hierarchical stake can look more interesting in comparison with a potentially static reproposal of sometimes well known pattern. But actually this divide is not very wide as the moving of images on the internet can jump one side to another. A professional image can so be included in a community as well as an official call for a photo contest can collect material from users but many other examples could be done.

According to what stated above it so evident that all these categories cannot be considered as strictly formalized and clearly distinct the ones from the others: superimpositions and contamination among them are common but a mainframe is still useful in orientating our watch.

## Outcomes

A complete outline of all the opportunities to show urban images on the web is practically impossible. Anyway the outcome of a first attempt of classification can be described by some examples.

One of the most meaningful and quite well known site that can explain the process of grassroots collection of images is “wikipedia” but now regarded in its visual expansion, “wikimedia commons”<sup>1</sup>, a branch devoted to multimedia information. In this free media repository, a parallel dimension of the famous free encyclopedia, a lot of materials can be collected with the help of volunteers.

If we take for example the case of Milan many among the most well known monuments of the city are quoted with images and photo.

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1 Wikimedia, n.d. Available from: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pagina\\_principale](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pagina_principale) [Last access: December 2015]



**Figure 1:** *The Neo-Romanesque facade of San Celso church in Milan.  
Picture by Giovanni Dall’Orto, from Wikimedia Commons.*

It is quite interesting to note some characteristics about this process of mapping of urban sites by the users. First of all the main monuments are also the most successful ones, the most quoted, photographed and commented (the main churches and palaces for examples). This feature is shared not only with other web user created databases, such as “virtualtourist”<sup>2</sup>, which collect impressions and tips from tourists who visited cities they like and want to share their opinions, but also with institutional sites, such as the project of Milan City Council named “Luci & colori”<sup>3</sup>, created with the purpose to

<sup>2</sup> Virtual Tourist, n.d. Available from: <http://www.virtualtourist.com/> [Last access: December 2015]

<sup>3</sup> “Luci e colori”, in La Rete Civica di Milano. N.d. Available from: <http://www.retecivica.milano.it/luciecolori/palazzi.htm> [Last access: December 2015]

improve the image of the city by some aesthetic intervention on the main historical buildings.



**Figure 2:** Historical Photo of Via Spallanzani in Milan with the old railways bridge, now no more existing.

On this footprint of the quest for an urban identity we can find a great interest for the old city, nowadays no more existing, erased in the complex economical development and war events. The most significant site, on this purpose, is a section of another very famous family of urban forums “Skyscrapercity” given to the rescue of old images of the Italian cities which changed most in the last century: Milan and Turin above all. If we consider the case of “Milano sparita”<sup>4</sup>, for example, we can find a lot of urban mappers who search, rescue, make public and comment images of urban environments

<sup>4</sup> Skyscraper: Milano. n.d. Available from: <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=1232367> [Last access: December 2015]



more or less deeply transformed from now.

In this case the web tool works in a different way from the previous one when the effect was an implementation of meaning for the already well known monuments and symbolic places. On the contrary now there are urban panoramas that are hidden in the historical documentation, unknown in their original appearance and sometimes unidentified and very difficult to locate for most of people in the contemporary city. This way of web communication, including of course other sites<sup>5</sup>, is so the only way these pictures can be shown again and got back to public debate.

Anyway many of the comments about these images, so full of iconic power, could be referred to a sort of nostalgia for the past values and formal coherence of the historical city. They seem almost to represent a way to overcome the contradictions and the problems of contemporary life and of the development of postmodern city.

The opposite side of the question can be found in other forums of “Skyscrapercity” which focus their attention on present urban transformation and try to envision the new look of the future Milan.

This is another form of urban utopia. No more an old-time utopian but a view of a technological, cutting edge, always self renovating city. A city that finds its role in the global competition with far and middle east rising capitals with newer and newer building and stylish architecture. From this point of view the daily attention for construction sites is paradigmatic: productivism, quick and fast building performances, big dimension and capital-intensive interventions are the main issue.

There are many other web addresses to point out the re-discovery of urban views from different sides. One of the most interesting is certainly a website containing a group of cinema forum and other features about movies which, at a first sight, could look a little bit like parodistic and not too serious. But actually the site “il Davinotti”<sup>6</sup> is a real goldmine for all those who want to know the proper locations of many movies depicting urban environments.

Thanks to the comments and the contribute of the users it is possible to

5 See for example: Vecchia Milano [Blog]. Available from: <http://vecchiamilano.wordpress.com/> [Last access: December 2015]

6 Il Davinotti. Available from: <http://www.davinotti.com/> [Last access: December 2015]



analyze shot by shot movies and to link them to real places. This is not an easy process because, especially for old movies, the corresponding contemporary urban landscapes are very different.



**Figure 3:** *Construction site of one of the new development projects in Milan.*

But moreover the way to use the city is changed, the atmosphere and the social environment the movies describe are something buried in the films themselves and now, fortunately, they can be brought back to life and spread on the web. This possibility of re-establish the human dimension of places can so give new meaning and new evidence to phenomena such as the living of the immigrants in the social housing blocks of the sixties or seventies, the so called Italian “economic miracle” and so on.



**Figure 4:** Screenshots from the movie “Romanazo popolare” by Mario Monicelli, 1974. Clockwise: Facade and view of a Building on construction in Sesto S. Giovanni (Milan), urban landscape in Quarto Oggiaro (Milan), inner courtyard in via dei Transiti (Milan).

Another frontier of this large overlay of images on our cities is probably the customization of the images. For example “Bing”<sup>7</sup>, a search engine in competition with Google offers the possibility to visualize images of urban sites by entering the address with the possibility to filter the images by dimension, color, type, layout or even limiting only to people. This is actually a dimension of the pictures fruition which is becoming more and more fluid.

A good example of this new metamorphic and slippery dimension of images in the global and interconnected virtual space could be the history and the up-and-downs of pictures from the real world to the internet flow.

7 Bing search engine. Available from: <https://www.bing.com/> [Last access: December 2015]



**Figure 5:** Venice, San Giorgio Island. XIX century photo, artificially colored after taking, now in digital format. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Photochrom Collection. The original is colored.

A photo can be taken in black and white in the nineteenth century, then colored in a second time, again scanned after the digital revolution, so placed in a database archive and finally made of public domain and diffused on the web as the case, for example, of the photos of the Library of Congress of Washington. Without going on too long it is evident that just these few sample cases can give an idea of the variety, difference, contradictions, depth, width and pervasiveness of the phenomenon of the life of urban images on the web.

### Possible interpretations

Of course it is hard to hazard a guess about such an heterogeneous amount of images or group of images. It is anyway clear that they form a new territory on the city itself. A territory extended not only in space but also in

time and containing possibilities of multiples paths. It is also clear that urban images can no more be reduced only to street photography (Scott, 2007) or to social landscape photography (Gleason, 2008) to depict a valid portrait of our contemporary cities. Along with the request for sets of images with poetic or artistic demands, such as the great masters of photography have displayed since now, a process of research, analysis, sharing of urban documentation through visualization is increasing. This phenomenon has a very strong bottom-up distinguish feature which offers two main sides to the researchers attention. First of all there is an interest in the environment regained to the possession of citizens just through visualization and web communication. This way of customizing places through images and loading them with more or less symbolic, social or historical meanings could be seen both as a new way of expression created by the web tools as well as the only channel that can offer a possibility to express freely wishes and expectation on the city bypassing traditional ways of spaces appropriation which post modernity, and perhaps also recent crisis events, have more and more undermined.

The second aspect of the question is the possibility that such a modality of approach to the city could foster the view of it as a fragmented space, with few or any possibility to be recomposed if not on a virtual layer which does not oppose the same problems as real world. The fruition of images is in fact definitely easier than the space itself for its different level of engagement, social and personal investment and, sometimes, possible critical implications.

## Conclusions

After these above considerations it is clear now that the visual and media dimension of watching and perceiving the city can no more be underestimated. Now, although the mapping of this web overlay on the city should go ahead for new elements of analysis, there are open questions which ask to be debated. What is, for example, the role of the city as a common good or the meaning of the public realm according to this optic? Of course the communities of practice (Pasqui, 2007) are a great interpretation frame to understand contemporary citizenship but is there still a place for ideology and imagery at the side of people's behavior? And how the portraits of the city supported by the media communications can orientate this overview? Probably it is not possible to give a proper answer because of the multi-factors on the ground but anyway what is certain is the necessity to rescue, in research and in plan-

ning, a more strict relationship and consideration for the visual dimension of communication and for the people who rely their expectations about the city on it.

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