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Beyond Picturesque Decay: Detroit and the Photographic Sites of Confrontation Between Media and Residents

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Abstract

This article contributes to scholarship on urban visual culture by advancing understandings of how visual imageries may become (online and off-line) sites of confrontation between dominant media perspectives and the lived experiences of urban citizens. Based on participatory photography amongst local residents in Detroit, this article provides transformative insights by contrasting sense makings of Detroiters with dominant media portrayals of a "decaying" city. Residents were asked what images they would use to "see" and represent the city. Photo elicitation interviews revealed interlaced lived experienced and narrated reminiscences of local life and the material urban fabric beyond the prevailing narratives of mere neglect and abandonment. This study develops further knowledge of how photography can simultaneously operate as a critical socio-spatial research subject and an empowering tool for research participants. Through shifting the hegemonic locus of media agents toward residents' positionalities, findings indicated potentials for redressing the misunderstood spaces of the everyday life of ordinary people.

Keywords

Detroit, ruins, residents, media, sites of confrontation, participatory photography

Rationale

Contemporary society reveals an infatuation with depicting and celebrating "modern ruins" (Hell & Schönle, 2010), where print and online media disseminate a plethora of striking examples of abandoned places. For example, works by Happer (2015), Marchand and Meffre (2011), A. Moore (2010),[1] and Vergara (1999) show how newspapers, magazines, websites, and glossy photo books ambiguously celebrate the beauty and ugliness of ruins and deserted city spaces reclaimed by nature. Moreover, in Detroit, tour buses and guides take visitors on site-seeing trips to witness, and photograph, urban decay firsthand.[2]

While unique neither in its ruins nor in the ways in which they are portrayed, Detroit, Michigan, has received significant attention from the media, photographers, bloggers, and urban explorers. At its height in the early 20th century, the city was one of the wealthiest cities in the world and was known as the Paris of the Midwest. The birthplace of the modern automotive industry created a boomtown that produced buildings of outstanding architectural beauty and grandeur. This boom was relatively short-lived (Galster, 2012), and a protracted decline began in earnest in the 1950s (Sugrue, 2013). The population of Detroit reached its zenith of 1.8 million in 1950, falling to under 700,000 today.[3]

For much of the past 50 years, Detroit has been commonly (and rather negatively) associated with ruins, abandonment, economic collapse, racial divisions, bankruptcy, and violence, as well as a total failure of the neoliberal economy (Akers, 2013b; Galster, 2012; Steinmetz, 2009; Sugrue, 2013). The city's built environment has become infamous through globally circulating photographs of its forsaken automotive plants, desolate streets, and crumbling infrastructure (Akers, 2013b; Galster, 2012; Steinmetz, 2009; Sugrue, 2013), in other words a so-called picturesque decay (see Millington, 2013). International attention toward these images mushroomed in the years between the 2008 global recession and the city's decline into bankruptcy in 2013. The exploitative photo genre often (provocatively) referred to in this context is *ruin pornography* (shortened to "ruin porn", see Gansky, 2014; Millington, 2013). Detroit's emptiness has been described in terms such as ghost town and

urban prairie, and its perceived ugliness and "deadness" connote for some a monstrosity (Draus & Roddy, 2016).

The repetitive use of ruin photographs throughout various forms of media has engendered dominant, overly one-dimensional outlooks on the city (Darroch, 2015; Ren, 2014), in which Detroit became a metonym for urban failure (Doucet, 2017). Through this lens, Detroit becomes an empty city, devoid of people, life, or hope. Such a perspective ignores the voices, visions, and experiences of Detroiters. Media stories, and, to a lesser extent, academic scholarship, have paid far less attention to particular processes of empowerment through daily experiences of living through these landscapes. We redress this by interrogating what images everyday residents would select, or create, to ambivalently reinforce and counteract reductive urban outlooks. In this article, we critically question what images of ruin, abandonment, and decay mean to Detroiters. Moreover, we probe into how Detroit residents choose to visually represent *their* lived city through photographs and narrated memories.

The article proceeds as follows: We first interrogate photographic sites of confrontation along the conceptual nexus of people, imagery/photography, and the postindustrial urban environment, followed by a discussion of the study's provenance and methodological framework. We then critically and interrelatedly attend to local experiences of Detroit's ruin photography, alternative imaginations of the urban environment, and the extent to which visual materials, as created by research participants, countered hegemonic imageries. Last, we discuss the implications of this research for scholarship on critical mediations of the spatial through the visual.

Photographic Sites of Confrontation

Ordinary People, Media, and Picturing Everyday Life

Many scholars have addressed how hegemonic media outlets produce homogenous urban narratives and images, which might be in bold contrast with the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens and users of urban public space (Boyer & Hannerz, 2006; Margolis, 1999; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Popular perspectives of cities are strongly informed by the mediasphere, for example, by what is seen on television, read in magazines and newspapers, and shared online. Negative values are especially stigmatized along mediated images of run-

down areas and encounters with social deprivation (Avraham, 2000; Boland, 2008). Scholarship remains remiss in addressing how residents themselves react to the overly negative dominant visual representations of their cities. This article, therefore, critiques visual hegemony by dealing with (as well as empowering) the production of bottom-up visual alternatives. The latter may provide transformative experiences of the everyday urban condition beyond dominant communications and conventional discursive narration alone.

Scholars with a multidisciplinary interest in social spatialization have increasingly incorporated photographs as instruments into their research practice, as well as illustrations into write-ups, as modes for engaging with sites of cultural production, social interactions, and the experiences of both creators and consumers (Banks, 2001; Hallman & Benbow, 2007; Leddy-Owen, 2014; Pink, 2001; Rose, 2012; D. Schwartz, 1989; Sonn, Quayle, & Kasat, 2015). Such a hands-on approach applies a careful process of empirically situating how images are created, circulated and appropriated. Millington (2013), in reference to Rose (2003), phrased the purpose of this commitment to . . .

> [get] past easy interpretations of visual images in favor of more nuanced understandings of the openness of visual culture within particular regimes of meaning. (p. 288)

The visual's regime of meaning imports a power-laden social process (Banks, 2001), uncovering sites of confrontation through the dynamism of subjectivities, negotiations, renegotiations, and contestations. In line with Haraway's (1991) situated knowledges, Rose (2003, p. 213) argued, "Particular visualities structure certain kinds of geographical knowledges—and thus visualities—that are always saturated with power relations" (p. 213). In other words, visualities ensue from in-situ embodied practices and hence reveal partial real-world perspectives (Crang, 1997; Rose, 1997).

So it is important to ask through whose agency visuals are created and how, and where, they are rendered and potentially challenged by (both intended and unintentional) audiences. Accordingly, the sites of confrontation revolving around the visual comprise multiple, coexisting, and contesting experiences of the everyday life. This consequently implies an analytical commitment to engaging with how visualities may produce, reinforce,

or critically deconstruct principles and conducts of perceived relevance. Taking us to the level of the photograph, the work by Sontag (1977) reminds us of the ethical struggle over the experienced values of visual representations:

> In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. (Sontag, 1977, p. 3)

The mass production and consumption of images, in off-line, online, and hybrid physical-virtual contexts of television, cinema, magazines, newspapers, and so on have proliferated their geographical ubiquity (R. Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015; Zimmermann, 2007) as well as everyday immersive experiences of them (Andrejevic, 2002; Margolis, 1999). Margolis (1999) especially put in a caveat against practices on the Web, arguing that the Internet has taken on the form of a single archive of collections of images that may falsely define communal memory. An overreliance on such images might entail a slippery ground of awareness of "What has been forgotten? What survives in unconscious or unexamined form? What is myth, what is reality?" (Margolis, 1999, p. 9).

In present-day contexts of rising populism, visual media have gained importance in reinforcing hegemonic ambits of politics, business, and journalism (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). In recalling Moyers and Pellett (1990), images can serve as "powerful tools of fiction that both please and deceive . . . influencing our very notions of beauty and truth." In such an image-centered environment, where media and consumer cultures are merged (Jansson, 2002, p. 11), facts and imaginations coexist (Kellner, 2005), as if it were a third space, in the phraseology of Soja (1996). Following nonrepresentation theory (see Anderson & Harrison, 2012), we therefore take images as real-imagined assemblages, windows through which place associations are made and "lived through" by our multiple senses. On a communal level, Donald (1999) perceived of urban imaginary, consisting of mediated representations as well people's own self-generated images, as "the archive city," embodied by urban citizens at large.

Relatedly, Hariman and Lucaites (2003) argued that "the daily stream of photojournalistic images, while merely supplemental to the task of reporting the news,

defines the public through an act of common spectatorship" (p. 36). Some of these images can become both iconic images and politicized messages, such as the Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), representing the height of the Great Depression, and the *Napalm Girl* (1972) by Nick Ut, which represents the horror of the Vietnam War. Grand matters such as poverty, violence, trauma, and memory are strategically remembered or forgotten in rhetorical culture revolving around photographic iconography (see Muzaini, 2015). In this regard, Avraham (2000) suggested a differentiation to be made between "rich" and "one-dimensional" images:

> Places with a rich image in the news media are places that receive coverage for a wide variety of subjects and events that occur in them, such as politics, economics, social events and cultural developments. Places with a one-dimensional image are those that only receive coverage when events of certain nature take place within them, such as crime or disasters. (p. 364)

We nevertheless feel that this dualistic conception does not justify the ambiguous and ambivalent values of images. Also, it offers a too-reductive framework for considering the dynamic, transient character of images, as values may change over time and so does the "richness" of engagement with those images. Referring back to Donald (1999), Cronin (2010) conveyed,

> Influenced by people's experience of urban spaces, the representations that constitute the archive city will shift over time and vary according to the specificities of place. In turn, the archive city will shape people's experience of urban spaces and temporalities. (p. 93)

Some imageries are highly influential and conjuring in this regard, where Cronin (2010) added, "Media representations may be at odds with people's everyday experiences of their own cities" (p. 93). Urban scholars have consistently acknowledged that visuals of iconic architectural landmarks and public artworks are frequently used, or exploited, in place of promotional activities, while some visual coverage makes a solid attempt to reflect urban

realities as experienced by diverse everyday end users (Lynch, 1960; Madanipour, Knierbein, & Degros, 2013).

Dominant media agents are extremely powerful in that they might seek to address or efface the multifacetedness of the urban social and material fabric. Indeed, strongly one-dimensional place images could be reinforced when, as put by Avraham (2000), "a city becomes a symbol of those events when the media labels it as being a place in which only a certain type of activities and events occur" (p. 365). Although we recognize that homogenous labeling may result in (well-trodden) stereotypes, which need to be problematized, we equally vent criticism on labeling media agents collectively as "the media."

Datta (2012) argued that hegemonic ways of uniformly visualizing cities often result in the "museumification" of urban spaces, where the observer-photographer is removed from the frame. She conveyed that "this approach tends to produce a view of the city that is voyeuristic, disembodied and distanced" p. 1727). Oversimplified imagery can be challenged by shifting attention to subcultural practices that subvert hegemonic representations, and (re)claim authentic realities and alternatives instead. The latter should still be read and filtered in an alliance with coexisting media apparatuses: "The media is not something separable from society but actively constructs meanings about people and places" (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p. 561).

Moving beyond mass-mediated photojournalism toward the mundane level, people's very own family photographs, holiday snapshots, and the like are simultaneously important in eliciting memories, writing histories, providing self-actualizations, and, therefore, shaping real-world encounters (Hallman & Benbow, 2007; Rose, 2010). In people's everyday photographies, dominated by ordinary snapshots, the camera can be contemplated as a way to display success, unity, and love, as well as their flip sides. In this sense, photography produces a small, personalized world of what Harrison (2004) called emotionally charged extra-ordinaries.

As methodological implication accordingly, Pink (2001) argued, "The key to successful photographic research is an understanding of the social relations and subjective agendas through which they are produced and the discourses through which they are made" (p. 96). Everyday user-created images could be examined as add-ons to the built environment,

operating as devices to incite dialogues with and critically mediate this environment through alternative and renewed reflections (Mitchell, 2005; Rose, 2012). That is to say, what is "worthy" of being photographed, displayed, stored, and exchanged in the spaces of the mundane (Sontag, 1977) reveals ontological choices confirming or challenging principles, social relationships, and identities (Harrison, 2004). Mediated images may therefore cultivate the pedagogical potential to "act as teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs . . . for providing ways for interpreting the world whether or not the [creators] are conscious of this intent" (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992, p. 374).

Everyday images signify social memories that are constituted through dynamic and multiscalar social relationships and civic structures. As argued by Lewicka (2008), "Social memories may concern events that happened during our life or that took place before we were born and therefore belong to the history of the family, ethnic group, state, or the world" (p. 212). Place memories and attachments from everyday residents, so from within places, may import sites of confrontation with the views of those who are frequently (yet not always appropriately) deemed as voyeuristic "outsiders," often called tourists (see Minca & Oakes, 2006).

Such outsiders without any, or merely a weakly, acknowledged relationship with the place concerned usually come to visit places other than their own to experience "authenticity." However, such experiences might be inflicted by urban-entrepreneurial forces that attempt to *stage* or produce that sense of place (Minca & Oakes, 2006). In this context, we need to be wary of the imposed resident-outsider dichotomy. For example, Kraftl (2009) suggested how ordinary people's residence might become alienating to them when it turns into a tourist attraction (and when residents resultantly feel an outsider in their own home). Moreover, following De Certeau (1984), residents who are unfamiliar with certain urban places might wander the city as a voyeur or tourist too, writing themselves into the city through unique encounters with people, place, and matter.

Context and Methodology

We share an initial curiosity for the "Detroit Ruin City" that stemmed from portrayals that had been circulating, and encountered by us, in European media since 2008. Rendering such portrayals as overly one-dimensional, Doucet led four field trips to Detroit for European

students between 2013 and 2016, provided in the urban geography master's program at Utrecht University, and at Erasmus University College in the Netherlands (for a field trip report, see Doucet, 2013). In 2013, De Brant was a graduate student on this visit. The purpose of these visits was to contextualize and critique dominant narratives of Detroit, as a ruined and failed city. The trip's challenge, analogous to this article's aim, was to place such narratives within wider settings of cities facing postindustrial socioeconomic change. As these trips took place at a time when Detroit was both going through a process of bankruptcy and emerging as a "comeback city" (see Ager, 2015), special attention was paid to the emerging discourses and geographies of Detroit's contemporary "renaissance." To deconstruct the one-dimensional narratives of both failure and renewal, the trips sought to engage with a variety of Detroiters involved in struggles with economic, social, and racial justice, as well as scholars, activists, and entrepreneurs who were all in tune with the wider political economy of Detroit's condition. These field trips to Detroit eventually culminated in Doucet's (2017) edited book *Why Detroit Matters*, which features contributions from many of the Detroiters who met with Doucet and students such as de Brant over the years.

De Brant followed up on her participation in the field trip by embarking on a master's study on the topic of visual urban representations of Detroit as produced by media agents and residents (see De Brant, 2014). This research was supervised by Doucet (Utrecht) and line-mentored (particularly for topic development and qualitative and visual research design) by Zebracki (based in Leeds, formerly in Utrecht). Zebracki harbors a deep interest in urban visual culture and public art's socially inclusive impacts on the everyday life within urban regeneration schemes (e.g., Zebracki, 2017a, 2017b). Under Zebracki's aegis, De Brant provided a presentation about the value of visual and photographic ethnographic methods at the "Performance, Place, Possibility Symposium: Performance in Contemporary Urban Contexts," convened by Joslin McKinney and Zebracki at the University of Leeds in April 2014. De Brant's presentation attended to prior photography-based undergraduate research in Marseille, which informed the Detroit-based fieldwork underpinning this article (for a tentative photo essay on Detroit's picturesque decay, see De Brant, 2015).

The postanalysis presented in this article, which was led by Zebracki, builds on our previous work and activities to meet the concerted purpose to develop and deepen a conceptual critique of "photographic sites of confrontation." This is done by triangulating

between insights gained from engaging with emerging studies on the fall and rise of Detroit, methodological literature on photographic ethnography, and the struggles and experiences as highlighted by a variety of Detroiters.

Hence, in querying our insider-outsider positionalities, we feel that our continuing investment, as non-Detroit residents, in learning about Detroit through in-depth engagement with appropriate scholarship, methodological approaches, and empirical knowledges, renders us as vicarious "indwellers": researchers with a developing, (self-)attributed relationship with a place. As argued by Zebracki (2012), "Indwellers" are those "'beings-in-the-world' [in reference to Heidegger, 1927/1962], [who] are inherently using, presenting/representing, present in or related to the site at issue in any acknowledged way" (p. 740).

In our capacity as indwellers, we pursued a case study design (Yin, 2014) to heighten comparative understandings of mediated and self-portrayed images of Detroit. Draus and Roddy (2016) argued that "the dual identification of Detroit with urban corruption and primeval demonology makes for a potent cocktail that writers have difficulty putting down" (p. 69). Rather than a textual focus alone, this article therefore aims to pay closer attention to images and how they are experienced by everyday publics. As such, we speak a genuine endeavor to gain clearer insights into the everyday complex and ambiguous nonrepresentational, lived realities of the city. That said, we are considerate that we, in our role as indwellers, and peers alike, may benefit from researching and publishing about "ruin porn" in a similar way that (professional) photographers do in (re)producing, and potentially reinforcing, the controversial ruin image culture about Detroit.

Data collection primarily took place in 2014 and was conducted by De Brant. The empirical data collection involved media content analysis on visual-centered print and online documents (see Bell, 2001; Rose, 2012), which guided observational and participatory fieldwork (see De Walt & De Walt, 2002) conducted by De Brant in Detroit over a period of 6 weeks in April and May 2014. Empirical off- and online work involved bodily inscription into the urban landscape by exploration on foot, by bicycle, by public transport, and/or by the ethnographic use of online resources including Google street view. Everyday community events were attended as well, including guided walks, sports activities, and civil services.

This (auto-)ethnographic grounding, overseen by Doucet and Zebracki, informed 13 in-depth semistructured interviews (see Seidman, 2013), which De Brant conducted with Detroit residents in the same period. Participants were recruited through purposive snowball sampling (De Walt & De Walt, 2002), where empirical data collection ended at a naturally occurring data saturation point (Bryman, 2012). The snowballing method started through the local network of the personal host, who was not formally interviewed beyond valuable informal conversations. The first interview participants sampled through the hosts' network were Ashley and Lisa (pseudonyms), whose voices will be heard in the empirical analysis in this article.

The qualitative research sample soundly reflected the composition of the local population. Eight participants were of African American, four of Caucasian, and one of Hispanic descent,[4] all around or below the median household income of about $26,000.[5] Considering the research context of this diverse micro community of Detroit residents, we need to emphasize that qualitative reflexivity, rather than quantitative representativeness, comprised the methodical tenet. That is to say, the qualitative sample was relatively modest in number but significant in meaning where the aim was to reveal empirical details of how the relations between mediated formal images of Detroit and locally embedded, personally inflected images evolved, converged, conflicted, compromised, and so on. Interestingly, the interviews also relayed experiences amongst the authors of those populations, in particular poor and disadvantaged African Americans residents, who were difficult to access. The interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of mutual rapport through partaking in the hospitality of respondents in the mixture of go-along interviews (see Kusenbach, 2003; Zebracki, 2017b) and home-based interviews, which appeared highly conducive to acquiring lived experiences.

This study's visual purview implicated a photo elicitation–based interview technique (G. Moore et al., 2008; Rose, 2012; D. Schwartz, 1989). Respondents were confronted with dominant images, mostly portraying urban ruins, resulting from our media content analysis. This technique was accompanied with collaborative participatory photography (Davies, 2013; Wang, 2006). Davies (2013) described this method as an activating tool "to think reflexively and critically about the visual images we make and interpret" (p. 117).

Research participants were invited to take and use their own photographs and narrate them through everyday experiences and vernacular place memories (see Osborne, 2002). So they were asked to show pictures of the city in the way they wanted to present it. Most participants brought pictures that were taken by them or created by others (long) before they were approached by the researcher to participate in the interview. Two pictures, Figure 3 and Figure 4 in this article, have been solely reproduced in this article with participants' consent. The interviews were supported by various secondhand photographs and images taken by the field-worker, including Figure 1 and Figure 2, which are reproduced specially for this article. Additional Detroit images taken by the field-worker can be retrieved from De Brant (2015).

Figure 1. European students taking photos of the fenced-off Michigan Central Station, 2014. *Source*. De Brant.

Participatory photography has gained currency as powerful research tool in socio-spatial scholarship to challenge and reconstruct repetitive and iconic images (which often produce normative conceptions of people and place; Arreola & Burkhart, 2010; Hariman & Lucaites 2003; Rose, 2012). We critically juxtaposed participants' photovoices (McIntyre, 2003; Wang, 2006) with prevailing media portrayals of assumed social and spatial identities

of Detroit. Accordingly, we addressed, inspired by Datta (2012), "the need to develop more locally and materially grounded understandings" (p. 1727) of what we phrase as the *photographic sites of confrontation*.

Following Rose (2012), we attended to three sites of sense makings of photographs: the site of the production of the image, the site of the image itself, and the site of the viewer/audience. This involved a thick description of an equivocal mixture of internal and external perspectives of photographs (see Banks, 2001), where we triangulated findings by contrasting media images with participant-generated, visual-based data and narratives. For example, where internal narratives consisted of the story in the picture (e.g., two persons holding hands in front of an abandoned house), external narratives consisted of the historical and social circumstances in which the photograph is embedded (e.g., a story of loss of a family home turns into a renewed life in the city).

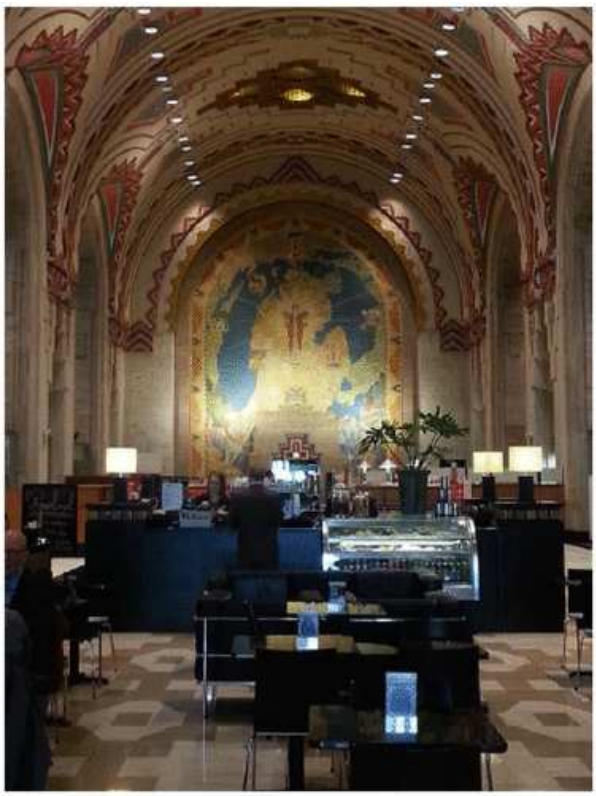

Figure 2. Inside the Guardian Building, 2014. *Source*. De Brant.

Detroit: One City, Multiple Vignettes

The remainder of this article discusses the main threads of our findings by following the ways in which Detroiters responded, and related to, specific features of the city's visual landscape. First, we examined portrayals of two iconic structures, the Michigan Central Station (MCS) and the Guardian Building, which recurrently appeared to serve as windows for research participants to reflect on how city places were lived by them. Then, we take into nuanced consideration how mediated images of ruin photography "confronted" Detroiters and how our participants portrayed their city in self-taken photographs. These contrasting and conflicting images of Detroit helped unravel alternative narratives of the city's ruins that focused on active rather than passive forms of blight and abandonment (see Akers, 2017). The latter included deliberate neglect by owners of abandoned buildings, ignorance, and capital disinvestment.

Vignette 1: Michigan Central Station

MCS was designed by Reed and Stern, the same firm that worked on Grand Central Station in New York City, and was completed in 1914. Professional photographs and everyday snapshots of MCS have come to play a distinctive role in the creation of dominant visualizations of Detroit, and the structure is an apt metaphor for the city's rise and fall. When it opened, it saw more than 200 trains a day; its peak was during World War II when it was the gateway for tens of thousands of migrants moving to Detroit to work in the city's factories. As Detroit suburbanized in the postwar years, and the car, and later the plane, dominated inter-city passenger transport, the station declined. Being situated 2 kilometers west of downtown made it an inconvenient transport hub, particularly after the last streetcars left Detroit in 1955. Despite some modest renovations in the 1970s, MCS closed in 1988 and the building has remained empty ever since (Figure 1).

Today, MCS is the most symbolic ruin in Detroit. Notably, it featured as cover image on Marchand and Meffre's (2011) urban decay photographic work, *The Ruins of Detroit*, which was shown to participants in the photo elicitation interviews.[6] Even if a report has little or nothing to do with the building, it is used to illustrate Detroit's decline, decay, and abandonment (e.g., Heling, 2014), therefore reinforcing the failed-city analogy (Doucet, 2017). In the way that the Napalm girl constructs the idea of the Vietnam War for many

(Hariman & Lucaites, 2003), MCS constructs dominant imageries about Detroit, somehow even epitomizing the failure of the American Dream (Leary, 2011).

According to a local journalist, Dan Austin (2014), "No other building exemplifies just how much the automobile gave to the city of Detroit, and how much it took away" (p. 101). However, dominant media portrayals of the station do not profoundly discuss either the ownership of this building or how politics of the everyday life have contributed to the images as widely circulated and known today (see Akers, 2013b).

Dramatic linguistic expressions of decline and abandonment are continuously reconstructed and reinforced in visual manifestations of the MCS. That said, there are increasingly more attempts to beautify the place in front of the building and the building itself; for example, all new windows were installed in 2015, and the building's owner spent approximately $12 million on windows, electricity, and elevator shafts (Thibodeau, 2016).[7] Nevertheless, the empirical research as presented in this article was conducted in 2014, when the building was still devoid of windows and beautification attempts were extremely minimal (Figure 1).

The systematic and overly repetitive use of images is part and parcel of the condition of "the iconic city" (Datta, 2012). We realize that the mediation of an attitude that internalizes residents' narratives into ruin photography would shorten the distance between the photographic site and the site of lived experience, thereby moving towards a fuller human "photogeography." Predominant imageries are often blasé to the city's inhabitants, as aptly expressed by one of the research participants:

> I probably feel the same way as people in Paris taking pictures of the Eiffel Tower. I would be like "Wow now you took a picture of the Eiffel Tower, there are 900 billion pictures of the Eiffel tower." Add one more picture to the pile! (Ethan,[8] 35 years, African American)

With the analogy with the Eiffel Tower in Paris, we would describe MCS as a *networked monument*, an iconic building connected to widely mediated depictions of Detroit. The hegemonic narrative in this case, as seen in the iconic photography series by Marchand and Meffre (2011), is one of abandonment and emotional detachment, whereas lived experiences

amalgamated it with more affective socio-historically situated understandings. For example, during a photo elicitation interview, a respondent conveyed,

> That [train station] used to be a beautiful building. One of those pictures [of the abandoned station] that you were showing tells the *deterioration* of the city. When I see them I feel *sad* . . . I remember leaving that train station to go to Chicago. The building was absolutely beautiful on the inside and it's a *shame* that we couldn't find some way to reuse it before it got *ruined*. (John, 74 years, Caucasian) [italics added]

In this quote, we italicized emotionally charged words that characterized place attachments. This response also resonates with what another participant imparted, where we have applied italics for the same reason:

> My mother tells me stories about when she first came to Detroit; she came in that train station . . . By hearing those stories and hearing that there was *life* in that building at one point in time . . . [I knew that] she was a part of it . . . And then not having it anymore . . . It is a *waste*. (Adelae, 32 years, African American) [italics added]

Above excerpts show how respondents, thus, recollected and navigated the site of MCS through life courses, family reminiscences, and, overall, a strongly nostalgic approach to this landmark.

Vignette 2: Guardian Building

In participatory photo elicitation interviews, Detroit residents furthermore harbored the memorial importance of another landmark, the Guardian Building (Figure 2), which is currently home to Wayne County offices. Considering that this building is still occupied, unlike MCS, it is far less known outside Detroit. Consequently, it does not appear in books and websites solely depicting the city's ruins.

This skyscraper, nicknamed the Cathedral of Finance, was completed in 1929 and represented a bold example of art deco architecture at that time. Sharoff and Zbaren (2005) described the building as indicative of "the high-water mark of 1920s ebullience in Detroit

with a floor plan resembling that of a medieval cathedral and a colour palette like no other in the city" (p. 57). One of the research participants expressed his fascination with this "Cathedral" when showing several pictures he had taken when going around downtown: "If there is anywhere where more photos could be taken of, it is the Guardian Building," Owen (23 years, Caucasian) said. Another participant expressed her amazement about the visual attraction of this building, too: "I love looking at the buildings down there, it is just phenomenal. The Guardian Building, I love the Guardian Building. Love it!" (Ashley, 51 years, Caucasian).

Contrary to the *iconic ruin* of MCS, the Guardian Building can be rendered as *iconic pride* of Detroit through the eyes of residents. Based on photo elicitations, we have come to learn about the Guardian Building as a window of opportunity for imagining the city through positive values, as well as a socio-material site of resistance to hegemonic imageries of decay. In contesting the pejorative saying of "Detroit Ruin City" as widely circulated through popular media, Christopher (23 years, African American) chose to show and explain photographs that were invested with profound meanings of the architectural beauty of the buildings and the streetscapes of downtown Detroit. He also explicitly expressed appreciation of positive and hopeful community development initiatives.

Thus, the photography of iconic buildings may play an ambiguous, dialectical role in producing and reproducing fixed and homogeneous as well as lived and situated knowledges about places. Similar to other participants, Christopher produced visually prompted counternarratives. In lieu of seeing Detroit through the aggregation of associations with material decline, this respondent took the interviewer metaphorically by the hand in his story to feel, through the ordinary people, the meanings that underpin the everyday urban life and how people try to find a sense of home in this city.

"The Picture Is Like the Front Door, There Is a Story"

A common theme among our research participants was one of frustration toward the dominant narratives of emptiness and decay that ruin photographs communicate, as well as a lack of explanation and accountability in these stories. They conveyed that these images ignored the complex and ambiguous historical and social processes that underlie this decay. To counter that, research participants presented photos of "their Detroit," which depicted

ordinary life, hope amongst the ruins, or a deeper engagement with the abandoned landscape around them (e.g., attempting to maintain an abandoned building near their home). While several different perspectives and examples are presented in this section, collectively they present a contrasting narrative of Detroit than is largely featured in the "ruin porn" imagery.

Dave (50 years, African American) arrestingly formulated his thoughts by the language that we have adopted as section title. He conveyed that there is an overfixation on *aesthetics*, in particular on how photos impart the perceived "ugliness" of the city. He made a plea for deeper engagement with as well as stronger public awareness of *ethics* that are less visible. Dave was particularly alluding to the moral consequences of the history of property abandonment and the various wrongdoings, including unpaid taxes, by corporations and companies, many of which are foreign to Detroit, as he expressed in a go-along interview:

> All these empty buildings that you see [pointing to several multistory buildings across the street] . . . Nobody is paying taxes. That is why they are empty. And then they call that ruin porn, but then they are not telling the [real] story . . . You say you don't want to see . . . that there is something bad about ruin porn . . . no . . . there is something bad about abandoning property! That is the porn, the ugly shouldn't be . . . the fact that you can just abandon property . . . [sigh] (Dave, 50 years, African American)

Moreover, participants drove at prevailing racial stereotypes and prejudice in how popular media agents portray the social life of Detroit. The charged term *ghetto people*, referring to poor African American Detroiters, was repeatedly dragged up in interviews. Some respondents criticized the unjust association that "they" would allegedly own most of the ruined apartment blocks, which is turning reality upside-down according to them. A mushrooming property auction market of speculators and developers seeks to capitalize on Detroit's cheap property by purchasing foreclosed buildings at very low prices, sometimes with residents still living in them (Akers, 2017; Gross, 2015).[9] In this context, a participant expressed her feelings of both structural and intentional disinvestments as follows:

> There is no regard for history and the real causes are never being addressed and that allows for people to come in and have a dictatorship . . . There was very specific destruction in some neighborhoods, in a very real way. There has been super systematic detachment and to then just talk about the result and blame the victim . . . that's always fun. (Naida, 32 years, African American)

Ruin photographs were helpful to research participants in recollecting daily occurrences, which were often larded with adverse emotion. They considered abandonment as omen for future blight and feared an increase in problems such as arson and higher drug-related crimes. Some participants were also anxious for some city initiatives such as the Motor City Blight Busters and the Detroit Future City plans to tear down abandoned properties in order to "green" the city and release new development potential that may work against them.

Marly (34 years, African American) showed a photo of her street where, a day before the interview took place, she witnessed the demolishment of a house while standing on the shoulders of the homeowner. Marly's story uncovered angst that this would happen to properties of other Detroiters too, including her own. To counter blight and criminality, a number of participants experienced how do-it-your-self tactics (see Iveson, 2013; Kinder, 2017) were carried out to stage an occupied house—that is, to make an abandoned house look occupied (not only in low-income neighborhoods where abandonment is commonplace but also in middle-class areas around Midtown). This was, for example, done by cutting grass, cleaning porches, shoveling snow, and leaving porch lights on to prevent a deteriorated or abandoned house from falling prey to gangs, drug dealers, arson attacks, and so on. Community aid was sometimes in one's own interest. For instance, a respondent told that he inevitably needed to cut down trees at the neighboring abandoned property, because they risked falling on his own house.

Participants also showed photographs that they took to highlight their positive encounters with the city in everyday life. Photos ranged from depicting favorite places to go for a drink, night out, stroll, or bike ride to photographs of their family and friends at home, downtown, or people helping each other out in the neighborhood. For example, Jane (26 years, Caucasian) presented her photo of people gathering together on a street corner for what seems to be a wedding, based on the look of their clothes (Figure 3). "I think it is a

good taste of Detroit," she said. For Jane, the photo sent a hopeful message about people who see a future in this city. She emphasized the importance of the Dequindre Cut, a recently developed recreational pathway along a former railway line, and the location shown in Figure 3, as a symbol of Detroit's rebirth and one that reconnects divided neighborhoods.

Figure 3. A wedding party at the entrance to the Dequindre Cut. *Note*. With participant's permission.

Research participants frequently showed photos to explain their own life course and how it was related to broader urban life. An interesting example was how various respondents happened to illustrate how they were engaged in community mural painting programs across neighborhoods. Ashley (51 years, Caucasian), moreover, showed a photo taken at a favorite spot near the riverfront, capturing the moment that she and her husband decided to move to Detroit to reunite with family. Although the photo reminded her that the move was a difficult time in her life, being able to look at this picture, imbued with good memories, gave her strength and hope for her future living in the city.

Lisa (25 years, Caucasian) presented a picture that she took during a vote about the widening of the freeways. If the vote had gone through, it would have led to the demolishment of a school some friends of hers were working at. Owen (23 years, Caucasian),

furthermore, displayed photos to show how concerted efforts vouched for "the good of the neighborhood" by cleaning up various abandoned properties for rehabilitation (Figure 4). The internal narrative of this picture shows two of his friends with dust masks, dressed in white protective jumpsuits holding a garbage bag in their hands. Interestingly, although the picture was taken inside the building, it may be ambiguously construed as ruin photography.

Figure 4. Cleaning up abandoned property for rehabilitation. *Note*. With participant's permission.

By emphasizing active local involvement in the city, research participants like Lisa and Owen countered values of voyeurism and objectification as often attributed to media's photographic urban gaze (e.g., Pink, 2001). The respondents' photovoices manifested sites of confrontation. They did not just let pass the reality of decay as portrayed in mainstream journalism. Instead, they actively participated in their own ways and on their own terms to resist against the demolition of the school and house, respectively. Here, the photo elicitation interviews proved to be conducive to participants for evoking their firsthand, as well as vicarious, experiences of suchlike endeavors, which constructively induced positive urban imaginations.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study demonstrated the profound potential of photo elicitation interviews for gaining insight into dynamic and multisited everyday experiences that starkly contrast with dominant media renditions of a place. With its powerful imagery of ruins and abandonment, Detroit has gained an international reputation as a one-dimensional city of decay and hopelessness (e.g., Draus & Roddy, 2016; Doucet, 2017). The photovoices of ordinary residents served as a device for empowering *their* view of Detroit and provided them with a sense of ownership of their everyday lived spaces, which were imbued with socially and spatially dissipated memories, stories, and social relationships. Actually lived experiences might get lost in translation through photovoices. Nevertheless, the study has sought for a shared verisimilitude (i.e., believability) amongst its research participants, all Detroiters, about how they, in social relations, sense their spaces of the everyday life, as often misunderstood by prevailing media portrayals of Detroit.

We pursued this study, thus, as an opportunity for transferring agency to participants to deconstruct and reconstruct the city on their own terms (see Datta, 2012; D. Schwartz, 1989). Accordingly, our study developed the argument of the geography of confrontation by attending to locals' photo-elicited grounded experiences of the city and how they live through the images and imageries as imposed on them. The aim was not to grasp "the daily life" in Detroit as such. Based on the tenet of reflexive rigor in analyzing perspectives expressed in our diverse micro community of Detroit residents, we gained deeper idiosyncratic understandings of collaborating with and empowering research participants in drawing senses of belonging through matter, space, and narrative.

When respondents showed their pictures in interviews, the interviewer's aim was to understand how urban matter of so-called decay was lived by them. Accordingly, this guided the identification of reoccurring themes and topics for the ensuing interview process. The themes concurrently signaled emotionally complex place narratives offsetting against the more hegemonic characterizations of ruin porn. Hence, (in)direct modes of empowerment stemmed from a genuine commitment to do research *with* participants by a shared motivation to show and feel through the city in a personalized, constructive way to elicit particular memories and doings on the part of both the researcher and the researched.

Participants especially highlighted iconic buildings and their perceived (foregone) architectural beauty. Notwithstanding, ultimate ruins such as MCS have become a faulty metaphor for the city's rise and fall, forgetting both the ways in which ruins are produced and the ways in which these structures are enclosed in ordinary people's lives. Our observations pointed to everyday alternative narratives that counter ignorance of the underlying social and historical developments which produces such "reductive" landscapes.

Hence, the photographs employed in this research pointed to a far more complex picture of the city than is portrayed in either the narrative of ruins and abandonment, or the new narrative that is emerging about a comeback city. These narratives, which have become the dominant "outsider" perception of Detroit neglect to take into account the contradictions, complexities, and realities of the city, particularly for its residents. This in turn shapes the way in which the city is engaged, particularly by "outsiders," with people seeing it as a blank canvas or area where they can come and project their visions without asking what activities may already be present (Doucet & Philp, 2016; Philp, 2017; Putnam, Rosman, & Teachworth, 2017). As "outsiders" seeking to learn lessons and insights from Detroit's experience, we need to engage with people and learn from them in the role of acknowledged "indwellers" (see Zebracki, 2012), rather than just glean images of the city, whether they be positive, negative, or indifferent.

Akers (2013a, 2013b, 2017) asserted that blight is actively produced, rather than abandonment being a passive process. Our findings revealed that Detroiters also see and experience the ruins as a vigorously rather than compliantly produced process. By enclosing ruin photographs into interviews with residents, "empty" ruin photographs became filled with personal and emotional memories and meanings about space and society. They were interlaced with interpretations of how ruins are produced, and many participants were able to connect their daily environments to wider structural, political, and capital transformations. Additionally, the "more-than-just ruins" appeared to be lived through the body: Participants revealed exchanging experiences of how ruins were tied up with both individual and collective recollections of daily events.

Participants illustrated events along venues that were "worth photographing" (Sontag, 1977). The embodied, situated knowledges (see Haraway, 1991) divulged visual narratives of the city that were primarily based on social relationships, not on material decay. Positive

feelings of such extra-ordinaries (Harrison, 2004) clearly contrasted with the phantasmagoria of Detroit's ruinscapes, which has accelerated since the city's downward trajectory.

That said, the dominant narrative of Detroit as urban failure has been challenged in recent years by a new narrative focusing on the city's "comeback" (Austin, 2014; Gallagher, 2010; Redgrave, 2013). *National Geographic* ran a story that described Detroit as "cool again" (Ager, 2015). Citing the arrival of a creative class downtown, Richard Florida (2013) has been one of the most enthusiastic champions of Detroit's contemporary "renaissance." However, just as the narrative of an abandoned city was one-dimensional and incomplete, so too is today's new narrative of the comeback city. The latter is primarily confined to the Greater Downtown Area (Kreichauf, 2017), which is predominantly populated by Caucasian/White, middle-class people and largely excludes Detroit's poor, African American "resident majority" (Williams, 2017).

We also argue that the narrative of celebration ascribed to Detroit's renaissance masks the different nuanced realities of the city in the same way the narratives of abandonment and decay have ignored many lived experiences of Detroit, as has been critically addressed in this study. We therefore make a plea for further critical research into such adversarial mechanisms of urban visual culture. Also, we particularly wish to embolden the power of creative interactive methods, including participatory photography as employed in our research, as a hands-on approach to question and subvert hegemonic media portrayals of the urban landscape through the lens of everyday socially and spatially situated practices.

Authors' Note

The three authors contributed to the publication of this article as follows. Martin Zebracki is a cultural geographer with expertise in urban public art and visual methodologies, who line mentored Toha De Brant and led and penned the majority of this article. Brian Doucet is an expert on Detroit, contributed text related to the geography of Detroit, and was the master's supervisor of Toha De Brant, who conducted the fieldwork for this research as part of her master's thesis, successfully completed at Utrecht University in fall 2014. A photo essay by Toha De Brant in 2015 also uses this article's main title "Beyond Picturesque Decay."

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Notes

1. See also Gansky (2014) in response to A. Moore's (2010) Detroit photography classified by critics as "ruin porn."

2. For example, Motor City Photography Workshop (http://motorcityphotoworkshops.com/MCPW) and Detroit Urbex (http://www.detroiturbex.com) both run urban exploration tours through Detroit's "ruinscapes." Charleroi Adventure (http://www.charleroiadventure.com/en/) operates trips in and around former industrial sites in Charleroi, Belgium.

3. See chart "Detroit's Growth and Decline" (based on U.S. Census data), published in *The Detroit News*, May 19, 2016, available at http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2016/05/19/detroit-population-rank-lowest-since/84574198/.

4. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 82.7% of the population of Detroit was categorized as Black or African American, 10.6% as Caucasian/White, and 6.8% as Hispanic or Latino (https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF).

5. See 2011-2015 median household income (in 2015 dollars) at https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan/RHI225216#viewtop.

6. Marchand and Meffre's (2011) iconic cover image of Michigan Central Station (MCS), which was used in photo elicitation interviews, can be directly retrieved from http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/2.

7. While beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that the recent beautification of MCS is partly tied up to the politics of a new Detroit River crossing to Canada. The building's owner, Matthew (Matty) Moroun owns the MCS, as well as the nearby Ambassador Bridge, and has vehemently opposed the construction of a new, publically financed bridge to Canada (see Akers, 2013b).

8. For confidentiality reasons, pseudonyms are used for research participants throughout the article.

9. See also the Property Praxis website listed under Online Resources.

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Online Resources

3 Acres in Detroit, directed/produced by Nora Mandray, is a Web documentary that tells a story about how "facing a brutal Detroit winter, a willful urban farmer sets out to transform an abandoned house into a greenhouse" (http://www.nora-mandray.com/3acresindetroit/), which is part of a DIY Manifesto trilogy: http://www.diy-manifesto.com.

Doucet's Web page http://www.detroit-matters.com provides further info about his edited volume *Why Detroit Matters: Decline, Renewal and Hope in a Divided City* (Policy Press, 2017) with further pertinent links, resources, and urban photographs.

Leary (2011) followed up with an op-ed titled "Can't Forget the People of the Motor City" (Guernica, April 6: https://www.guernicamag.com/john_patrick_leary/).

Property Praxis (http://blog.propertypraxis.org): This website maps and tracks all properties in the city of Detroit held by speculators. The interactive map, with data from 2015, is searchable by plot or owner; 20% of properties within the City of Detroit are owned by speculators.

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