Collective Impression of London's Royal Albert Hall
This image is a combination of the first hundred images gathered after conducting a Google keyword search for 'Royal Albert Hall', DSDHA

dsdha's grounded research agenda: collective impressions

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When architects give lectures about their work they tend to show a series of photographs of their completed buildings: striking images (often devoid of human presence) taken by third-party professional photographers, which suggest a totally unproblematic relationship between design practice, physical artefacts and their photographic representations. But this is clearly not the case. Arguably indeed architects do not make buildings; they rather craft the instructions and oversee the processes that eventually lead to their completion; processes over which they have no monopoly –as they often take place even without the architects' mediation and always involve many other 'actors'. So why do architects insist on showing photographs of buildings? This paper will first unpack the complex nature of the relationship between architecture, buildings and photography, to then introduce the way in which DSDHA, as research-oriented architects, experiment with the photographic medium; using it to portray the 'differential' in value that we bring to our projects, and treating it as a design tool that contributes to, and speaks of, our approach –rather than simply fixing on glossy images the final outcomes of our endeavours. The focus will be on DSDHA's research techniques that use photography as their starting point to investigate latent concerns, aspirations and trends of the many individuals which inhabit our sites –all aspects that often remain hidden to the generic gaze of statistics and evade the canonical artifact-focused photographic representations of architecture. The images we manufacture by means of these techniques are our starting point to map what we call 'personal landscapes', and understand how individual narratives relate to the urban morphology as well as to the history of a place. It is from this vantage point that we then proceed to speculate on possible future scenarios.

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architects do not make buildings

At architecture school pupils do not learn to physically produce buildings, but rather to craft the instructions to eventually bring them to life. Architectural education, and consequently the profession, are often divorced from the materiality of the built environment they study and help to mould.

This has been true since Leon Battista Alberti formulated the concept of *design* and formalised architecture as we know it today[1]. To address the social and economical crisis that was hitting 15th century Florence and was making the realisation of large public works almost impossible, Alberti elaborated a new strategy for the organisation of the building site. He postulated that a building had to be composed in the mind first, then its idea translated into a standard graphic code –plans, elevations and sections. The product of this operation he defined as *design,* which was to be transmitted to someone else (the builders) to be mechanically executed, in strict conformity to the drawings. This procedure ensured that the architect was the only one responsible for the *design,* its only author.

To impose this new method, Renaissance architects had to struggle against a building industry dominated by very different social and technological conventions. In the Middle Ages guild system, buildings were never designed beforehand. The moments of ideation and construction were not separated, and the building process was a collective effort in which every workman applied the secret knowledge he possessed as a member of the guild.

Since Alberti the architect emerged as he/she who authors a building, by providing notations in scale to be executed as identical as possible to his/her original conceptions. Buildings are therefore instances of the artist's authorship without being directly crafted by him/her. From that moment on, builders were no longer autonomous fabricators who possessed both the idea and the craft, but simply executors of other people's *designs*. Alberti was so adamant about the distance between *design* and *building* that he recommended architects not to even enter the building site.

If architects do not make buildings (nor their *designs* are always a prerogative for the building process)[2], why do they insist on using photographs of completed buildings in order to describe their own work? Would it not be more pertinent to focus on the processes required to craft the notations and instructions for their execution? What is it that makes buildings' photographs so crucial to architectural discourse?

photography and architecture

There is a fundamental difference between the discipline of architecture and that of, let's say, engineering, law or economics, whose knowledge typically consists of a body of theory which you learn and then apply. A structural engineer could give you a clear theoretical explanation of what a door or a window is and the way it functions, but with architecture things are a bit more complicated, since the discipline's knowledge tends to reside in the object itself. As an architect, to know what a window is, you need to look at many of them, observe the relationship between the walls and their openings, the views they offer from within and without, the quality and quantity of light and air they let in, and so on. This is not to say that there can be no body of theory associated with architecture, but rather that this typically follows the study of that which is already there. As such it is part of the architect's training to acquire a series of *techniques* to extrapolate the knowledge embedded in the built environment and put it to use, particularly as buildings and cities are not straightforward objects to read: they do not give away their knowledge easily (not to mention that it takes a certain amount of effort and money to travel from one to the next).

Architects thus do not make buildings, yet the knowledge they need as practitioners is embedded in them. Since its introduction at the end of the 19th Century, photography has helped them coming to terms with the paradoxical nature of their discipline. Due to its capacity to vividly portray reality, the photographic medium has indeed allowed to capture architectural knowledge, in a way 'separating' it from the artifact in which it is entrenched, whilst keeping a semblance of objectivity (something that a sketch cannot achieve for instance).

It is no coincidence indeed that architectural history is usually presented and studied as a vast archive of photographic images (typically black and white) arranged in chronological order –from the Pyramids to Zaha Hadid. The history teacher is typically 'armed' with slides and books that show a series of photographs acting as a surrogate of the buildings they portray. Unlike the originals though these pictures are portable, collectable, easy to compare as well as to publicise and circulate. In his 1947 book *Le Musée imaginaire* (Museum without Walls), French novelist and politician André Malraux even postulated that art history, and the history of architecture by extension, had become "the history of that which can be photographed": no longer describing and dealing with actual works, but rather with the archives of photographic reproductions; essentially shaping the disciplinary discourse whilst being divorced from material reality.

Another paradox is that the value and strength of an architect's *Design* is not evaluated *per se* –as a set of more or less well crafted instructions–, but rather on the basis of the building it produces, or, to be more precise, of its photographs. In analysing the way in which the awards system as well as the procurement system operate (the systems through which architects get recognition for their work or source new projects), it is clear that judging panels and new potential clients are mainly interested in seeing photographs of finished buildings, as proofs of the quality of an architect's work.

Photography has somewhat amplified and distorted that distance between *design* and *building* that Alberti had set as premise to the architectural profession. It made it somewhat superfluous to 'encounter' and study the object to extrapolate architectural knowledge, whilst also making the photographic gaze essential to the system of evaluation of architecture and, more in general, of the city. But what are the wider consequences of this phenomenon for the way we, as architects as well as citizens, inhabit the built environment?

people, buildings and photographs

While teaching History of Architecture at the Architectural Association (AA) in London, I have noticed that architectural students are generally rather reluctant to leave their place of study to go out and look at anything, despite our city being reasonably well-stocked in terms of architectural examples and case-studies. If asked to write an essay on standardisation, for instance, they would typically approach the topic via books or photographic representations (preferably digital rather than in print), instead of taking a walk or a bus-ride to see some examples of Victorian or council housing in London. It is as if there was a sort of 'terror' of encountering the actual artefact and interrogate what is there. The photographic surrogate seems easier to engage with and make sense of.

This 'fear of the object' is not limited to the architectural students' community. When visiting a renowned site or building indeed, we curiously all tend to take pictures from a number of finite angles and locations. Instead of wandering freely and record our own subjective impressions, we often end up replicating the views we have already seen in print or on the Internet. Of course some angles of a building might be more photogenic

than others, proving more popular among people, but what underlies this phenomenon is perhaps the rather unsettling nature of the first-hand encounter with the physical artefact. Reality doesn't often match expectations. The information we gathered beforehand haunts our experience, making us insecure as to whether we will be able to recognise the building's highly celebrated traits and 'extrapolate' its fiercely entrenched knowledge. This is why we typically wander around a site until we finally recognise those familiar views and photograph them to 'manufacture' some sort of 'proof' of our experience. The question remains open though as to whether we are portraying the building in front of us or rather the pictures that already exists in our mind[3].

The Getty Centre in Los Angeles even goes one step further and clearly indicates which are the best spots from which visitors should take their pictures, with posters marking the building's most photogenic and widely photographed vistas; thus making those familiar/canonical views easier to find.

Pierre Bourdieu's work provides some interesting insights into this phenomenon[4]. He analyses the everyday practice of photography by a number of amateur photographers –looking at the family snapshots, wedding portraits, the holiday prints, etc.. His work exposes the twofold nature of this medium, both objective and subjective, and shows that, although photography may seem a spontaneous and highly personal activity, its social use is instead rigidly structured and systematic, driven by a set of implicit canons and norms that define the occasions and its subjects.

There are indeed a number of socially determined attitudes towards the photographic image: for some social groups, photography is primarily a means of preserving the present and reproducing the moments of collective celebration, whereas for other groups it is the occasion of an aesthetic judgement, in which photos are endowed with the dignity of works of art. Bourdieu argues that photography can be analysed as a faithful indicator of the taste and the way of seeing of a particular social class. He suggests that the objectivity of an image doesn't lie in its agreement with the very reality of things but rather in the conformity with superimposed but implicit rules (pose, angle, technical treatment, framing, lay-out, use of colours, etc.) that define the aesthetic canons of a particular social class and determine its aesthetic expectations.

The practice of photography thus often brings to light a 'collective' rather than 'personal' impression of a place. Besides the social implications of this phenomenon, how can we, as architects, put this awareness to work? Can it help us spot the traces of those practices and bodies that inhabit and modify the urban spaces we are working on?

dsdha's ethos and methods

As research-oriented architects, at DSDHA we constantly question the nature/specificity of our practice and how to best represent it. To this end we experiment with the photographic medium as a design tool contributing to, and speaking of, our approach, rather than simply fixing on glossy images the final outcomes of our endeavours.

We believe that our interventions bring 'added value' to the building processes. They are particularly valuable when a project has to negotiate complex conditions –take for instance Conservation Areas, or socially/politically contested sites– requiring an in-depth reading of the context to formulate effective hypothesis about its development. But do we as architects interrogate a site to extrapolate such knowledge? How can we track down the different identities –distracted tourists, commuters, occasional visitors, etc.– who inhabit such spaces in different successions? How can we decipher the traces they leave behind, and sample them to make sense of the urban phenomena that shape our cities? And How can all this be communicated?

In the first instance we try to evade the tendency to portray our buildings in a sort 'eternal present': the perfect moment between their completion and subsequent inhabitation; before there are 'tainted' by the personal tastes of the final users and the passage of time. We are instead interested in portraying the whole story –from the initial conceptual stages, the context analysis, the consultation events, through to its construction, and transfiguration the artifact goes through once it is in use (or misuse). To represent our projects on our website for instance we make use of a variegated array of material, comprising drawings, sketches, maps, pictures of models or mock-ups, snaps of design or construction processes, 3D views, videos, as well as text and professional photographs.

This paper though will focus the studies we undertake to develop a design approach; specifically concentrating on those very techniques of 'grounded research' which make use of the photographic medium in order to 'get under the skin' of a site, i.e. to identify those subtle influences or latent constraints/opportunities that exist beneath the surface.

When undertaking a project we typically embed ourselves in the site, to observe the way individuals behave. We typically interview a number of passersby, record their movements at different times of the day and across the seasons; we research the way people employ technology –particularly wearable and handheld devices– as a tool to navigate their surrounding as well as to record and share their personal experience of the environment. We consider the digital traces they leave behind, either knowingly or unwittingly; we look at the density of twitter and Instagram feeds and Internet usage to see what is really happening on the ground, even analysing the viewpoints from which popular parts of the city are recurrently photographed and posted on social media. After compiling these data, we use the information to create our 'collective impressions' of the public spaces we are working on.

These representations we manufacture evoke a multifaceted reality: a complex landscape which reflects concerns, aspirations and trends of many different individuals. All aspects that may often remain hidden to the generic gaze of statistics and evade the canonical and object-focused photographic representations of architecture.

These images are our starting point to map what we call 'personal landscapes', and understand how individual narratives relate to the urban morphology as well as to the history of a place –an exercise that is positioned between creating and recording the city; looking for the 'subjective' in the 'collective' and vice versa. From this vantage point we then proceed to speculate on possible future scenarios.

collective impressions

The first step is always a map of movement and views through and around our site. To produce this we typically observe and record the density of pedestrian and vehicular flow, considering the frequency and speed at which cars, cyclists and passersby tend to navigate that portion of the city. We test the information gathered through observation on the ground against geotagged maps (Twitter, Instagram or Facebook maps), which visualise the density of feeds in the area (the frequency with which people tend to use they smartphone devices to share their experiences on social media), delineating an image of the urban environment based on its occupation across a consistent period of time.

Then we try to determine what elements of the landscape are responsible for the modality and pace at which people engage with the city –asking how monuments, landmarks, visual clutter, edges, paths, etc. affect our movements, perception and use of the space[5]. Certain landmarks (whether of historical/touristic importance or not) for instance are essential for orientation, they facilitate the movement of car-drivers who can spot them from afar; others are touristic attractions and often cause large stationary crowds to gather in front of them in contemplation.

f1_View and Movement Study of the Albertopolis
a collective impression of the area around London's Royal Albert Hall and Albert Memorial –for which DSDHA is currently carrying on public realm improvements. This map tracks pedestrians' and cars' movement across the area to determine which views are of fundamental importance to allow orientation in space, DSDHA

This exercise allows us to create a 'taxonomy of a site's key views' and establish their relationship to urban flow. We then apply a series of techniques to determine how we can intervene on these views in order to enhance urban experience. For instance to understand where to position a new landmark in the landscape, in order to modify existing fluxes and allow for new uses/activities to flourish. Or to 'craft' the views to and from a new building, stimulating a dialogue between the activities within and the external environment, for instance to boost or activate the life of a street.

What follows is a description of the different techniques that we use in order to study the key views of an area.

barrier Analysis

Inspired by Baldessari's works of subtraction –erasing a portion of the picture to disturb the hierarchy of vision– we edit out the urban elements which, in our key views, create either physical or visual obstacles to particular important landmarks or places of interest, diminishing the urban experience. These barriers are typically vehicular traffic

f2_Analysis of visual and physical barriers
obstructing the movement and view towards the Albert Memorial, in the Albertopolis, DSDHA

(particularly buses), signage, surfaces, fences and steps. By 'erasing' them, it becomes evident to what extent they halt our appreciation of the environment, by taking away portions of our vistas towards a particular landmark or key access.

urban proportions studies

These analytical diagrams abstract and dissect a perspective view in order to highlight the compositional features of an existing streetscape and determine how our new proposals can insert themselves in the urban scene, harmonising, or even correcting, the proportions of the existing neighbouring buildings, without for this directly copying any of them.
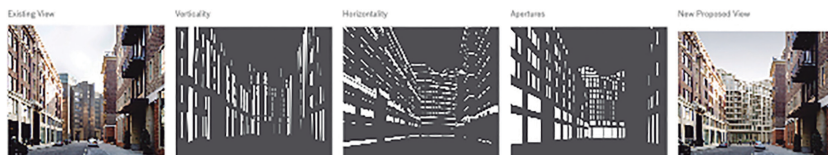
f3_Analytical diagrams highlighting the composition and articulation
of the existing streetscape and testing how the new proposal (on the far right) relates to the compositional themes and urban morphology of the neighbouring buildings, DSDHA

historical Overlay

The image below is a combination of photographs of the same prominent urban landmark, taken by different photographers (professional or not), from the same viewpoint and in different epochs. These images are sourced and then overlaid respecting their chronological order. We use this technique to study the 'permanencies' in the urban landscape: to spot which elements have remained unchanged through time, influencing the morphology of the urban landscape as well as the life and memory of its inhabitants; as opposed instead to what has undergone many iterations.

This allows us to determine what is worthy preservation and which aspects of our design proposals can instead be more daring. We also derive suggestions as to how to 'touch' buildings of historical importance, determining the sort of relationship –in terms of proportions, materiality etc.– a new proposal should entertain with them. This technique is particularly helpful when we have to confront old and new preconceptions of local

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f4_Historical Overlay of the view towards St John's Gate London
showing that there have always been imposing masses on its right hand side.
This allowed us to make the case for a proposal of similar proportions adjacent to the monument, DSDHA

stakeholders and design officers about what should remain unchanged in our cities. We typically use it to demonstrate how a new proposal relates to the history of a site, perhaps reinstating old morphologies and proportions which were transfigured by subsequent interventions.

google images overlay

After conducting an online keyword search and sifting through photo sharing sites, DSDHA have carefully layered hundreds of images on top of one another, creating a single image of the Albert Memorial: a 'collective impression' which brings strangers together into a shadowy dialogue across time and space[6]. This image proves that this prominent London landmark is almost always photographed from the same location and viewpoint. Interrogating the relationship between tourism and mass media, this layering technique exposes a tenet set by the 'image generation' –namely that images are always citations and that within every picture is another picture.

f5_Collective Impression of London's Albert Memorial
This image is a combination of the first hundred images gathered after conducting a Google keyword search for 'Albert Memorial', DSDHA

DSDHA have used this technique to understand where people tend to gather, either alone or in crowds, where they stand still to take pictures, etc., thus exploring the connection between these behaviours and the visual qualities of a site. A 'desired line' typically has a physical connotation: it is intended as social trail created as a consequence of erosion caused by human or animal foot-fall or traffic, and it is something that, designers tend to incorporate in their projects. With this overlay technique we have tried to expand the concept of a 'desired line' to encompass, along with the physical, the idea of a visual interaction with the environment –something less tangible perhaps but equally important to understand people's behaviours– and used these insights to develop a public realm strategy that will improve the visitors' experience in the area.

CCTV overlay

The 'collective impression' above resulted from overlaying the stills captured over 24 hours by a CCTV camera monitoring one of the sites we have worked on. We used this technique to understand the density of occupation of the public space in question (in this case a Privately Owned Public Space) over a consistent period of time. We established that people were actually using it pretty badly –with crowds of pub goers typically gathering on the north east side of the circle. Our design strategy aimed at disrupting these modes of occupation, softening the space and making it more welcoming, particularly to women, dispersing the crowd and inviting it to occupy the whole circle.

### the view from the road... and the view from the screen

Another element we take into account when analysing our sites is the perspectival shift determined by the diffusion of handheld devices and the technologies associated with them. This phenomenon has imposed a relatively new problem for architecture: the idea of the view from above being another relevant address from which to encounter a project, one demanding attention on the part of the architect. The roof of a building for instance –usually a leftover space reserved for plant or lift overruns– has become a new fifth elevation: the first aspect one appreciates when navigating the city via the mapping technologies and satellite views available on our phones.

f6_Collective Impression of the Circle in Broadgate, London
This image is a combination of the stills captured by a CCTV camera over 24 hours, DSDHA

But our smartphones are not just navigation tools that help us orientate through the urban environment; de facto they augment the city, condensing on their screens streams of data and the reality before our eyes, often projecting onto the latter those 'collective impressions' (those pre-existing images in our head) which often precede our physical experience a place. How do these new ways of navigating the city under the guide of these devices and technologies affect our perception and appreciation of space? How do they impact on the emergence of desired lines (whether visual or physical) and how can design act upon them? For instance how can our methodologies take into account the new ways of exploring the city which a viral augmented reality videogame like PokemonGo has engendered?
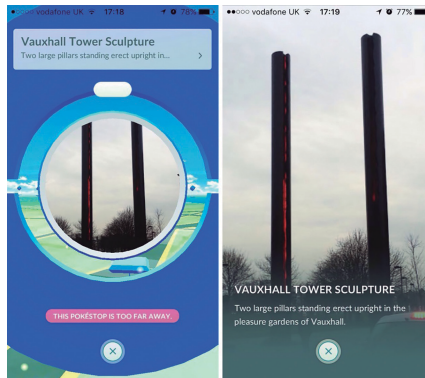
f7_Screenshots of the PokenmonGo App
One of our projects, the entrance to the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, is a PokeStop: a location marked in the augmented reality video game PokemonGo as a place that allows you to collect items such as eggs and more Poke Balls to capture more Pokemons

are these methods scientific?

Arguably in the last years there has been a transition from the 'culture of science' towards that of 'research'. "Science is supposed to be cold, straight, and detached; conversely research is warm, involving, and risky. Science puts an end to the vagaries of human disputes; research creates controversies. Science produces objectivity by escaping as much as possible from the shackles of ideology, passions, and emotions; research feeds on all of those to render objects of inquiry familiar"[7]. Bruno Latour suggests that the formidable energy of most scientists came from this conviction that they were marching toward a modernity that set the archaic past apart from the enlightened future. Reality however proved quite different. Years of modernisations and we are now more 'entangled' than ever. At this point we no longer expect science to enter a chaotic society to put order into it, making controversies die away (take for instance the environmental crisis, we have given up on the idea of solving it: the word 'resilience' has substituted 'sustainability'). We rather expect research to multiply the number of entities with which we have to deal in our collective life, making us more aware of the 'ingredients' which make up the world around us, more equipped to recognise its dangers and exploit its opportunities.

In the same way our methodologies are tools to raise questions, unveil the complexity of a urban environment. Perhaps they do not share the same scientific, mathematically verifiable qualities of the so called 'Big Data', but clearly they help us make better project and in a way, if not totally resolve, at least come to terms with the paradoxical relationship of our profession: split between the materiality of the physical artefacts and their ephemeral nature of their photographic representations.

endnotes

1. See Mario Carpo, *Architecture in the Age of Printing: Orality, Writing, Typography, and Printed Images in the History of Architectural Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

2. Indeed the vast majority of the artifacts which make-up our built environment have not been conceived by architects. Not only architects do not make buildings, but are not even always involved in their conception. This is mainly because architecture is not what we might call a 'dominant profession', i.e. a successful profession in economical terms. It has thus failed to establish a legitimate monopoly over a certain practice or body of knowledge. For example lawyers hold that they alone have the competence, and the legal right to provide assistance in divorce. Morticians have the power to have the police stop your burial if you are not embalmed and boxed by them. The medicalisation of pregnancy and childhood implied that figures such as that of the midwife were drifted out, so that pregnancies can only be treated by the doctor. Conversely it remains difficult to clearly distinguish the domain of an architect, from that of a civil engineer or a draftsman.

3. Thomas Demand's work investigates and exposes this curious phenomenon underpinning our relationship to photographs, namely the fact that every picture contains many other ones. His approach indeed centres on "found" images that relate to scenes of cultural or political relevance, which have come to our attention through the mass media. After gathering a large number of these photographs the artist starts reconstructing the spaces they portray. He does so by means of a cardboard 1:1 model that he personally builds in his studio. Then he captures the scene again, photographically, from a particular angle and with a certain light.

The photographs are the end product of Demand's work, they resemble the pre-existing mass-media images, but they are far removed from their referent, as what they actually portray are the three-dimensional, life-sized models that Demand builds in his studio. At first sight the viewer typically 'trusts' Demand's photographs. This is because the familiarity of their composition suggests a "direct relation" to the subject of the mass-media images –but, upon careful observation, one can spot some mysterious and disturbing connotations (namely the lack of details) which suddenly destroy the illusion of reality and reveal a rather ghostly and artificial atmosphere.

4. See Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel and Jean Claude Chamboredon, *Photography a Middle-brow Art* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

5. Trying to understand how people's relationship to the city is effected by "Imageability" –a term coined by urban planner/designer Kevin Lynch to describe the process by which we learn how to recognise and become familiar with our environmental surroundings and learn journeys.

6. There is something ironic about this overlaying technique, exposing a curious side effect of the way technology and mass media have impacted upon photography. In the early days of a model needed to stand still in front of the camera for a rather lengthy period of time, in order to allow for the plates, then far less sensitive to light, to record the image. This necessity to have long exposures implied that the final picture, whether a portrait or an urban scene was a sort of synthesis of expression (things which moved fast would have not be recorded) of a body or of the events happening in a place, in the same way in which the overlay of these instantaneous snapshots taken with digital cameras tends to sysnthetise the character of a place, as seen through the eyes of many eyes and cameras (who paradoxically tend to see the same thing) rather than those of a single author.

7. Bruno Latour, "From the World of Science to the World of Research?", in *Science, New Series,* Vol. 280 5361 (Apr. 10, 1998): 208.

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CV

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