



## **Youth geographies of everyday life. Methodological notes from a project of photographic storytelling in Fez**

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### **Abstract**

The paper presents some methodological notes on a fieldwork in Fez, Morocco. The research involved a group of pupils from two schools belonging to different districts and culminated in the realization of two workshops of “photographic storytelling”. The aim was to verify if and how the everyday lives of the “pupil-inhabitants” had been affected by the urban projects underway in the neighbourhoods. The images and tales by the young students bring to light hidden and invisible geographies which go beyond the simple documentation of the uses, representations or emotions that link young people and space, and reveal a much more significant upshot on the political nature of socio-spatial organization and of urban transformations.

**Keywords:** Everyday Space, Fez, Photographic Storytelling, Youth Geographies

### **1. Introduction: the politics of youth geographies**

This work presents some methodological notes on a field research project performed during spring 2015 in Fez, Morocco. The survey, carried out by a mixed team of four geographers and a photographer<sup>1</sup>, is part of a

broader research path and reflection on topics of urban geography and social marginality, in light of the tension between spatial justice and

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<sup>1</sup> The team involved in the field research consisted of M’Hammed Idrissi-Janati and Lamiae Lachakar (Université de Rabat Mohammed V), Raffaele Cattedra (University of Cagliari), Matteo Puttilli (at

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the time University of Cagliari, now University of Florence), and photographer Rosi Giua (Cagliari). The field investigation was carried out in the period from 26 March to 8 April 2015. A previous preparatory mission was carried out by Carlo Perelli (University of Cagliari), and a return mission, with the presentation of a photographic exhibition in one of the two schools taking part in the project, was carried out at the end of September 2016.

injustice in various Mediter-ranean contexts (Cagliari, Tunis, Marseilles and, of course, Fez).

One of the main pillars of the research was to investigate the representations and narratives of the inhabitants of neighbourhoods commonly considered as “marginal” and, at the same time, to promote an action/reaction process among researchers (each time with the participation of professional photographers) and inhabitants, with the goal of producing new forms of space narrative, in particular concerning the use of visual and multimedia tools in geographical research and fieldwork<sup>2</sup>.

In the specific case of Fez (1,150,000 inhabitants in 2014), the research was performed by involving a group of pupils from two *collèges* (middle schools) in the city and culminated in the realization of two visual self-narrative workshops at these institutes<sup>3</sup>. The schools involved in the project belong to very different urban contexts. The first (Collège Allal Ben Abdallah) is situated in the area of Oued Zhoun, in the north-eastern corner of the Medina of Fez, one of the most important and largest old pedestrianized city centres in the world, honoured by UNESCO as Heritage of Humanity in 1981. In the immediate vicinity of the school are the Chouara tanneries – among the city’s main tourist attractions – and Place Lalla Yaddouna, a crossroads traditionally featuring the presence of cottage industries linked to brass and copper working. The second (Collège M. Belarbi El Alaoui) is located at the gates of the outlying neighbourhood of Ain Nokbi, a semi-rural and marginal context with a production-artisan tradition, featuring a severely degraded

infrastructural fabric and precarious forms of inhabitation, amongst which a shantytown. The two neighbourhoods are linked together by the “Artisanat et Medina de Fez” project, funded under an agreement between the Kingdom of Morocco and the United States of America (Millennium Challenge Compact). The goal of the project, currently underway, is to regenerate the urban space and revive the area of Place Lalla Yaddouna, also through the forced displacement of some of the artisan activities (in particular the most polluting ones, such as the metal industries) towards a specially designated area created in Ain Nokbi. Evidently, one of the main social impacts of the project, which involves over one thousand artisans – employees, apprentices and masters – is the far-reaching change (which has not been without its conflicts and tensions) imposed on the families in the two neighbourhoods affected by the relocation of the cottage industries.

In this dual context, the goal of the research was to investigate how a group of young inhabitants perceived the urban transformations underway in the areas around them and how these may have influenced their everyday lives, habits, representations and emotions. The logic at the basis of the research links expressly to the debate on the so-called “geographies of children and youth”, which were at length underrepresented in geographical and social research (James, 1990; Philo and Smith, 2003) but, in the last fifteen years, have recorded growing interest (Aitken et al., 2007; Evans, 2008), also in Italy (Giorda, 2014; Malatesta, 2015)<sup>4</sup>.

The renewed interest in these geographies stems from progressive recognition of the fact that children and young people perceive and practise space in a totally different way to adults

<sup>2</sup> The research activity in Fez falls under the projects: “Giustizia spaziale e sistemi territoriali mediterranei. Politiche urbane, pratiche sociali, mobilità”, funded by Autonomous Region of Sardinia Law no. 7 and coordinated by Maurizio Memoli, and “Marges et villes entre exclusion et integration. Cas Méditerranéennes”, funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (France, coordinated by Nora Semmoud, (UMR CITERES-EMAM CNRS and Université de Tours). In the same vein, a previous multimedia research experience can be noted on public spaces in Tunis after the 2011 revolution (webdoc.unica.it, 2013), which saw the participation of the Italian team involved in this project.

<sup>3</sup> The research involved a total of 24 students, aged between 12 and 15.

<sup>4</sup> This revival of interest is also indicated by the emergence of books and journals expressly dedicated to the topic. In particular, the *Children’s Geographies* journal dedicated to research on the relationship between space and childhood/adolescence. As far as aspects connected to geographical education in schools are concerned, the *Primary Geography* journal expressly focuses on geography teaching in nursery schools, while the *Teaching Geography* and *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* journals, as well as *JReading – Journal of Education and Didactics in Geography*, cover a wider age range.

(Matthews and Limb, 1999; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Hence, they deserve to form an autonomous field of research (Barker and Weller, 2003), within which they must be considered to all effects active and participative subjects in the processes producing spatial and territorial knowledge.

Such an approach not only aims to listen to and document the uses, representations or emotions that link young people and space, but it also has a much more significant direct upshot on the political nature of the socio-spatial organization (Kallio and Hakli, 2011). All geography of children and youth is indeed “political geography” in the sense that it can produce knowledge on how the world and space influence subjects (Holt, 2013). Furthermore, at the same time, it enables action to be performed on the situation in order to transform it, through the expression of an original and informed point of view, and a “voice” with regard to the policies and processes concerning a particular region (Skelton, 2010; Burke et al., 2016).

## **2. Between image and storytelling: a hybrid methodology**

Against these premises, one of the research requirements was to identify a work method able to “capacitate”, involve and put the students in the position to express themselves suitably and produce knowledge on the space and its transformations. To this end, a research approach was used inspired on one hand by visual research techniques and on the other hand by self-narrative and autobiographical storytelling. In particular, the methodology was set out around the concept of “photographic storytelling”, namely proposing an individual narrative – first of all as a text and then “translated” into images – on the spaces of their everyday lives. This had the dual goal of verifying if and how the lives of the “pupil-inhabitants” taking part had been affected by the transformations underway in the neighbourhoods around the two schools, but above all the differences, similarities, and the ways of living and practising the space of the pupils in the two different urban contexts subject to the study.

The research consisted of a long preliminary phase mainly carried out on site by the researchers resident in Fez. This phase involved getting in contact with the heads of the two schools, who were illustrated the project<sup>5</sup>, and the selection – by the respective teachers – of the pupils taking part, belonging to different classes in the two institutes. A further preliminary activity, performed first of all at a distance, was to devise what activities would be performed in the classes and in particular to prepare a specific training programme on the meaning of the photographic image – and in particular narrative through the photographic image – and a work protocol for the young people taking part in the workshops. A particularly important aspect of this phase was the discussions within the teams on how to adapt the contents of the project to the specific circumstances of the young local students while avoiding – for example – using images as examples that were unsuitable for the local cultural and social context, characterized by Islam (the dominant religion in Morocco) and often precarious family conditions<sup>6</sup>.

Once on site, the workshops in the two selected institutes commenced. Each workshop involved team activities, carried out in the classroom and dedicated to training and group work, and individual activities, carried out both in class and – above all – outside school. For each institute, the class activity was organized into four meetings lasting around two hours.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to point out that in Morocco this type of initiative is subject to official authorizations from the local and ministerial authorities, a procedure which takes time. Hence, the colleagues’ preparatory work and the help from the head teachers of the two schools were fundamental in carrying through the project.

<sup>6</sup> The Moroccan colleagues’ contribution was also fundamental in terms of language and communication. While all the pupils taking part spoke almost exclusively Arabic (with a handful it was possible to understand each other partially in French), only one of the Italian members of the research team was able to understand and speak Arabic. This linguistic imbalance required great efforts in understanding, but also an equally as intense willingness to listen and get to know each other, as well as throwing up situations of pleasant misunderstanding, laughter and fun.

The first meeting involved a general presentation of the project and the illustration of curricular links between the workshop activities and the geography study programme (Figure 1). Particular emphasis was given to how images can help to get to know both familiar and distant places. Later, all the pupils were asked to think of and share, first in writing and then orally, a story from their everyday lives (Figure 2). In other words, they had to come up with a short



Figure 1. Some moments from the workshops. Photo by the Authors, 2015.

themed storyline and personal narrative of situations, moments and events considered important in their day-to-day lives, with specific stress on describing the spaces where these moments take place, as well as the journeys, meetings, activities and people that are part of their everyday lives.

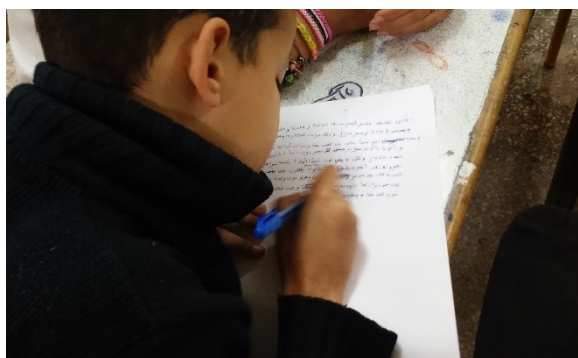


Figure 2. Some moments from the workshops. Photo by the Authors, 2015.

The second meeting focused on the concept of “photographic storytelling” and aimed at educating students about the interpretation of images and photographs. In the first part, various examples – as simple as possible – were presented on how to transpose a personal story into images and how to describe a place or a space through photography, while also pointing out the symbolic and evocative dimension of the shot. In the second part, the pupils went on to individually draw up their own tales.

The third meeting performed a technical function. Each student was given a digital camera and they were shown some basic skills in using it correctly<sup>7</sup>. After that, the various individual stories were shared with the class and the researchers and then simplified more so that they could be effectively translated into images (Figure 3).

<sup>7</sup> It was clarified to the participants that the work goal was not to obtain ‘beautiful’ images in aesthetic terms or ‘correct’ images in technical terms, but photographs able to document and above all express and report on their lives and the everyday living spaces they deemed most important.

This made some topics emerge: the question of the transformations underway in the two different neighbourhoods; their circumstances of hardship and precariousness, pollution and environmental degradation; the conditions and processes of the artisan work (from metal processing to the tanneries, from slipper manufacture to pottery); but also the beauty of the architectural heritage, and the savoir-faire involved in the manual skills required by the cottage industries.



Figure 3. Technical training on the use of digital cameras. Photo by the Authors, 2015.



At the end of the meeting, every student was given the task – over the next two days – of reproducing their autobiographical account through a series of around fifty photos.

Once the cameras were returned, the images of the individual “reportages” were handed in and then selected by the research team as the first phase of collecting the work done<sup>8</sup>. So, for every single workshop, the team photographer put together a first presentation, which included an individual selection, to produce a “photo story” of each pupil’s reportage with the sequence of images. These tales were then put into a second general visual report for each work team, comprising a further selection of images. The intention of this was to foster the collective sense of the work, and express a meaningful pathway accounting for the multiple practices, places and episodes linked to the living spaces captured in the photographs. The presentations were given back to the students during a fourth and final meeting, during which the students offered very positive feedback.

Subsequently, after lengthy re-elaboration work in summer 2016, a further visual product was made which promoted the idea of a collective story, proposing a (comparative) sequence of photo stories from the pupils of the two schools, organized according to the main topics that emerged (mentioned above). Then a video was put together from the sounds and voices recorded in some videos by the pupils and the sound recordings that had been made by the researchers during the workshops<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. Storylines of everyday spaces

In the literature, by now it is accepted that usage of the language of images, storytelling, narrative and methodologies based on discussion and participation provides new spaces of involvement and expression and enables young people – especially those who are usually underrepresented, stigmatized, censured or who

belong to minorities or marginalized communities – to express themselves using their own language and experiences (Piper and Frankham, 2007; Griebing et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2015). As a pedagogical tool in geography, photography can stimulate self-reflection on one’s living spaces and the sense of places (Wee et al., 2013), at the same time favouring active involvement, observation and creativity applied to geographical space. Stimulating pupils to look and analyse the image, as well as their imagination and spatial creativity skills is, moreover, a clear goal of geographical education.

In the case of Fez, the photo story tool enabled the pupils in the schools involved to display and reveal – from different angles to what other investigative tools could have offered – their everyday geographies, bringing to light different layers of meaning and awareness about their subjective relationship with the space. Using the words shared by Chaimae (aged 14), taking photographs let them “see things with different eyes”, with a fresh, engaging and emotional gaze.

In the Ain Nokbi school, which – as already said – is situated in a seriously degraded urban and built-up context, the gaze mainly looked at the intimate and family sphere of domestic spaces and their parents’ workplaces. The stories told dwell – in an extremely detailed manner – on the various phases in the making and hand-decorating of the pottery, brass and copper (Figure 4a).

<sup>8</sup> Overall, 1,478 photographs were taken and collected (an average of 60 per person), plus 28 videos. Needing to cut down on length, a selection was made of the 12-15 photos that best fitted the bottom line of the story.

<sup>9</sup> The full video is available at the following link:  
<http://marges.hypotheses.org/videos>.



Figure 4a, 4b, 4c. Examples of photographs taken by the pupils in Ain Nokbi. Photo by the the students, 2015.

The shots of the gestures and decorations manage to grasp and express a grace and artistic beauty (Figure 4b) which is in clear contrast with the unhealthy and unsafe work environments where the jobs are done (Figure 4c).

On the contrary, the outside environment and public spaces, perceived of as unsafe and degraded, never appear, except in tales that denounce the constant presence of waste in the streets and homes of the neighbourhood.

In the school at Oued Zhoun, the stories tended to be more diversified and the topics and

settings more complex. There are still the images linked to the parents' skills, though they are mainly of the open spaces in the Chouara tanneries, where a lot of the pupils' fathers work (Figure 5a). Here, more conventional images of the place (taken "from above" like the ones by the tourists who cram onto the balconies above the tannery) alternate with shots taken "from the interior" and "from below", in hidden spaces concealed from the visitors' sight.

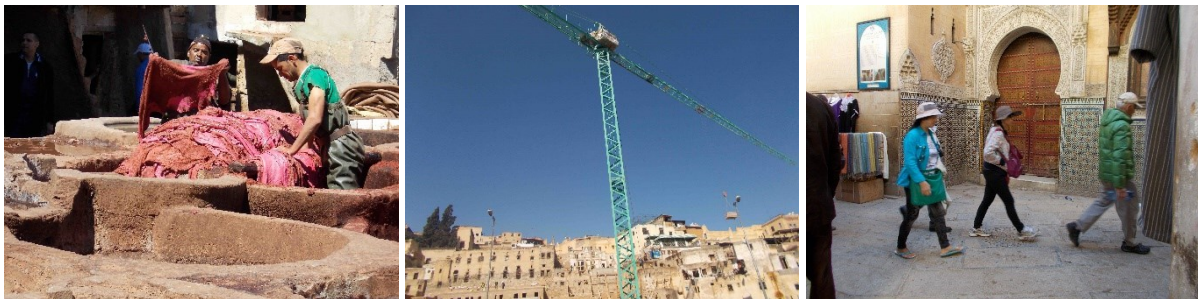


Figure 5a, 5b, 5c. Examples of photographs taken by the pupils in Oued Zhoun. Photo by the students, 2015.

They give a fresh and unusual image of one of the most visited attractions of the city, confirming the idea that visual tools enable researchers to get different access to the relationship between the subjects and the places under investigation (Miles and Kaplan, 2005). Then, compared to the images taken at Ain Nokbi, the students of the

Oued Zhoun neighbourhood showed greater awareness of the processes and transformations affecting the Medina: some stories centred around the building sites in Place Lalla Yaddouna (Figure 5b), or filmed foreign tourists going along the streets of the old town (Figure 5c).



Figure 5d, 5e, 5f. Examples of photographs taken by the pupils in Ain Nokbi. Photo by the students, 2015.

In these cases, the photographs were used consciously as a means to express their points of view, worries and the historic city's contrasts: for example, Niad (aged 13) photographed the building sites and workers at work, sceptically wondering "why is this work being done?"; Zineb (aged 13) and Mohammed (aged 14) compared images of houses and dangerous and degraded buildings with the Ryad and the monuments restored for the tourists (Figure 5d and 5e); Soukaina (aged 13) captured the environmental decay caused by the abandonment of urban waste in the streets (Figure 5f).

#### 4. Conclusions

Even though brief, the notes above enable some conclusions to be drawn that we deem relevant in the field of international reflection on youth geographies and on visual methodologies.

The project showed how, once involved, the young students actually replaced the researchers, carrying out the research themselves. All the research team did was create the conditions, by indicating some possible pathways and lines along which to reflect on and explore the everyday spaces, so that the participants could work independently. The rest of the work was done by the young pupils, who showed remarkable creative and critical capacities – as well as aesthetic skills in a large part of the cases – in expressing their relationship with the everyday spaces. What emerged was a gaze that seems surprisingly aware of the conditions and contradictions present in their local area (such as the degradation of some living and work environments or the imbalance between the residents' living spaces and those set aside – and

reserved – for the tourists), but which is also able to grasp its worth, identity and the beauty preserved in the practices, the know-how and the jobs of the people who live and work there, as well as in the private spaces that can only be known and recognized "from the inside".

As such, the images and tales reveal hidden and invisible "everyday" geographies which would have been complex – if not impossible – to investigate using more conventional and "cold" social investigation techniques. Instead, the poetic, artistic code of storytelling and images created a common language, a meeting point for the young people and the researchers, enabling mutual understanding and not necessarily verbal exchanges.

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