Re-framing the Past: Using Film and Cinema to Write Architectural History

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Abstract

Along with other archival material such as drawings, sketch books and written correspondence, images such as official publicity shots, construction photographs, newspaper reports, magazine features, demolition captures and even tourist snapshots have all been employed as documentary evidence to understand the development and transformation of the built environment over time, thereby allowing architectural historians to tell their stories. Even though moving images - film and cinema - can be equally documentative, they have been much less utilized for this purpose than their static, still-image counterparts. This essay argues that moving images from fiction and documentary films can inform architectural and urban historians about the built history of a particular place just as easily - if not better - than still images. Using a series of case studies from various film genres, this essay aims to highlight cinema as a viable and vital resource for writing architectural history.

Keywords: Architecture History, Cinema, Film, Photography

Introduction

Since its invention in the 19th century, photography has long been utilized by architectural historians to aid in the writing of architectural history. Along with other archival material such as drawings, sketch books and written correspondence, images such as official publicity shots, construction photographs, newspaper reports, magazine features, demolition captures and even tourist snapshots have all been employed as documentary evidence to understand the development and change of the built environment over time, thereby allowing architectural historians to tell their stories. From the travel photography of exotic places by Francis Frith to the back streets of Paris by Eugene Atget, from the Modernist masterpieces of Ezra Stoller and Julius Shulman to the contemporary digital documentation of Iwan Baan, photography has played a major role in the writing of architectural history.

Even though moving images - film and cinema - can be equally documentative, they have been much less utilized for this purpose than their static, still-image counterparts. This could be due to the fleeting existence of cinema, a lack of easy access to films, or the belief that such material was not "scholarly enough." Whatever the reason, the lack of cinema as archival evidence in architectural history writing is stark. This presentation argues that moving images from fiction and documentary films can inform architectural and urban historians about the built history of a particular place just as easily - if not better - than still images. Utilizing a simple "before buildings," "during buildings" and "after buildings" organization, the presentation aims to highlight cinema as a viable, and even vital, resource for writing architectural history.

Before Buildings: Istanbul, Turkey

Many areas around the world were developed after the invention of cinema at the end of the 19th century and those that appear in films have been documented as such. In the 1960s, Istanbul - the largest city in Turkey, as well as its financial- and cultural-center, was a thriving Post-WW2 metropolis. In 1966, the year of *Oh, Beautiful Istanbul* (Atıf Yılmaz, dir.), the population of Istanbul was around two million inhabitants. Today, however, the estimated population of the city is around 16 million. The historic areas of Sultanahmet and Beyoğlu - with multiple Ottoman mosques and palaces - have remained relatively unchanged, but the skyline and transportation networks of Istanbul have been radically overhauled. In *Oh, Beautiful Istanbul*, the principal method of transportation to cross between European and Asian Istanbul was by boat, a condition that continued until 1973 when the first bridge across the Bosphorus Strait was completed. A second Bosphorus crossing, the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, was completed in 1988 and a third, the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, in 2016. In addition to these landmarks spanning the Bosphorus Strait, it is also possible to travel under the water via the Marmaray Metro tunnel, completed in 2013, and the Eurasia Vehicle Tunnel, completed in 2016. Ferry boats still ply the waters of the Bosphorus and are used by many Istanbulites, but they are no longer the only way to cross and are often used for both daily commuting and recreational purposes.

Another difference between the Istanbul of 1966 and the Istanbul of today is the eruption of tall buildings. Like many metropolises around the world, the arrival of skyscrapers to Istanbul has changed the city's skyline. As mentioned before, the historic areas of Istanbul have remained relatively unchanged, but parts outside of these areas have literally "grown up."

Today, the city is home to about 50 skyscrapers,[1] mostly on its European side, as well as hundreds of high-rise buildings.[2] The areas of Levent, Maslak and Ataşehir have been the most affected, looking today like a miniature New York. There are no tall buildings to be seen in *Oh, Beautiful Istanbul*, since the first one taller than 100m (330ft) - the Akmerkez Shopping Center in Etiler - was not completed until 1993. The film director Atıf Yılmaz shows the audience this long-lost version of the centuries-old city, and the life in it, through hundreds of urban images.

Before Buildings: Venice, California, USA

The Venice Beach area of Los Angeles is known today for its lively seaside atmosphere, a beach promenade with street performers, the Muscle Beach Gym, one of the first concrete skateboarding parks in the world, a fishing pier jutting out into the Pacific Ocean, and the human-made canals that give the area its name. However, this identity did not develop until the late 1970s. Before then, Venice was a sleepy tourist destination that paradoxically contained oil wells alongside single-storey wooden cottages. Petroleum was discovered in the area in 1929 and within two years it is estimated that there were around 450 functioning wells. By the 1960s, these wells were running out of oil and were slowly capped off. However, functioning wells and a very sparse urban landscape can be seen in the 1968 film *Modelshop* (Jacques Demy, dir.). The main character of this film is a recently-graduated architect who, rather than look for a job, drives around the city as a *flaneur*, visiting friends to borrow money from. He lives with his girlfriend in her lonely Venice Beach cottage, which is in stark contrast to the highly built-up concrete jungle of Los Angeles that can be seen in the rest of the film. In this way, the film allows architectural historians to understand that while Venice Beach today may be the location of action and excitement, it was once a sleepy corner of Greater Los Angeles. Its architecture and life have dramatically transformed over the course of the 20th century.

Before Buildings: Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, Germany

Mostly due to its central location, Berlin's Potsdamer Platz has historical significance for both the city of Berlin and the nation of Germany. Once the busiest crossroads in Europe, the area was severely damaged from World War II bombing. Later, during the years of Divided Germany, the area suffered from neglect because it was located immediately next to the Berlin Wall. By the late 1980s, it was a surreal wasteland at the edge of both East and West Berlin. Following the fall of the Wall in 1989, Potsdamer Platz became a busy, over-scaled construction site. It became a gold mine for developers and contractors who turned the area into a generic Western 'downtown' or city center. It is the neglected and undeveloped time of the 1980s, when the Berlin Wall was still standing and Germany was still divided, that can be seen in the 1987 film *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, dir.). Angels who watch over the city and its people are able to pass between the two Berlins, whilst of course its human inhabitants cannot. One particularly poignant scene in the film is where the elderly Homer wanders around the area, unable to find the Potsdamer Platz of his youth. While immediately next to the Berlin Wall, Homer recounts tales of coffee shops, cigar sellers, department stores, traffic jams and other bustling activity, then begins to comment on how "the flags started to appear and the police were no longer friendly" (a reference to the rise of the Nazis). Eventually, he settles down on an abandoned sofa in the middle of the weeds and states "I will not give up as

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[1] A skyscraper is defined by the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH) as being at least 150 m [490 ft] tall. See https://www.ctbuh.org (Last accessed 10 December 2024).
[2] A high-rise building is defined by the CTBUH as being between 100-150 m [330-490 ft] tall.

long as I have not found Potsdamer Platz." The architectural historian is able to use this and other Berlin films, such as *Tugboat M17* (1933) and *Berlin Babylon* (2001), as snapshots of the in-between state that was Potsdamer Platz between its 1920s heyday and the development of the 1990s.

During Buildings - "City Symphonies"

Speaking of "heydey," the second use of film and cinema by the architectural historian is the documentation of cities and individual buildings during their prime. In the 1920s, a genre of film developed that would become called "City Symphonies," primarily because of the subtitle of the 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, dir.). This film follows "a day in the life" of Berlin as inhabitants awake, get ready for their day, commute to their factory or office work, toil away at their jobs, have lunch, return back to work, then either go home or go out on the town. *Berlin Symphony* is buzzing with every type of vehicle, every type of food, and every type of drink - a testament to a golden age of Berlin of the 1920s that was one of the most exciting metropolises on the European continent. As previously mentioned, Potsdamer Platz features prominently in this story because it was the crossroads of the city where the architectural historian can actually see the coffee shops, cigar sellers, department stores, and busy traffic referred to by the character Homer in *Wings of Desire*.

There were more than a dozen "City Symphony" films made throughout the 1920s, from New York to Paris, from Montreal to Sao Paulo.[3] Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand shot *Manhatta* in 1921, a homage to Manhattan in New York City, highlighting the many skyscrapers under construction at that time. Alberto Cavalcanti created *Nothing but Time* in 1926, a day-in-the-life of Paris full of new experimental filmmaking techniques. Dziga Vertov created *Man with a Movie Camera* in 1929 which, set in Kyiv, is even more experimental than *Nothing but Time*, utilizing innovative techniques such as montage, collage, self-reflexive visuals, tracking shots, multiple exposures, dissolves, fast motion, slow motion, freeze frames, match cuts, jump cuts, split screens, Dutch angles, extreme close-ups, and reversed footage. Regardless of any trickery, these films are invaluable to architectural historians because they are literal snapshots of that particular city at that particular time. They are documentary evidence of each city as it was, which can be contrasted to how each city is today.

During Buildings: The World Trade Center Twin Towers, New York, USA

The World Trade Center in New York City designed by Minoru Yamasaki (1973), also known as the "Twin Towers," was famously destroyed on September 11, 2001 by terrorists who had hijacked airplanes to deliberately crash into the structures. Since these buildings were icons of New York - like Big Ben for London or the Eiffel Tower for Paris - most films shot between 1973 and 2001 have a view of the World Trade Center, either a brief glimpse or a starring role. The buildings were so tall, they just frequently appear in the background of street shots, such as when the main character of Mary Harron's 2000 *American Psycho* is simply crossing the street.

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[3] Other "City Symphonies" include *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1927) filmed in New York, *Moscow* (Mikhail Kaufman, 1927), *Studies on Paris* (André Sauvage, 1928), *High Street* (Andor von Barsy, 1929) filmed in Rotterdam, *Rain* (Joris Ivens, 1929) filmed in Amsterdam, *São Paulo, Symphony of the Metropolis* (Adalberto Kemeny, 1929), *About Nice* (Jean Vigo and Boris Kaufman, 1930), *Images of Oostende* (Henri Storck, 1930), *Labor on the Douro River* (Manoel de Oliveira, 1931) and *Rhapsody in Two Languages* (Gordon Sparling, 1934) filmed in Montreal.

Only one year after the completion of the Twin Towers, tightrope walker Philippe Petit illegally performed a high-wire routine between the two buildings, as documented in *Man on Wire* (Marsh, 2008). In this documentary, architectural historians can plainly experience the freshly-completed structures and their dominance over Lower Manhattan as Petit makes his way on the wire from one building to another. In Sydney Pollack's 1975 political thriller *Three Days of the Condor*, the protagonist, desperately trying to understand why his CIA-colleagues were all murdered, visits the head of his department inside the World Trade Center. Not only does an establishing shot for this scene indicate the dominance of the Twin Towers over Lower Manhattan, but an interior scene indicating the view out of the building over the Brooklyn Bridge does so as well.

The opening credits of John Badham's 1977 *Saturday Night Fever* acts as a series of establishing shots, informing the audience that this film will take place in New York, and more specifically in Brooklyn. As such, the film begins with a general shot of Lower Manhattan from Brooklyn, and includes two of the architectural icons of the city: the Brooklyn Bridge and the World Trade Center Towers, which are so tall that they do not even fit into the frame of the shot. From the perspective of non-Manhattan [looking towards the city of skyscrapers], the message is clear: this film takes place nearby, but not in the action of downtown New York. Although John Landis' 1983 film *Trading Places* primarily takes place in Philadelphia, the final scenes occur in New York where the two main characters carry out their revenge by bankrupting the wealthy brothers who conducted the social experiment to have them trade places. While walking to the New York Stock Exchange, they discuss their plans crossing the vast street level plaza of the Twin Towers, again indicating the vastness of the structures. In one final example, the protagonist in Spike Jonze's 1999 *Being John Malkovich* discovers a portal into the mind of actor John Malkovich on the 7-1/2 floor of a New York skyscraper. Upon entering, he experiences life from Malkovich's point of view. After fifteen minutes, the main character is expelled from Malkovich's mind and lands at the side of the New Jersey Turnpike, across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Looking over to the city, he sees the Twin Towers dominating the skyline, even though they are about 2 miles [3.2km] away.

After Buildings: Rubble Films

The afterlives of buildings are not only captured in Hollywood movies. Following the extreme devastation of German cities during World War II, a particular genre of film called *Trümmerfilme,* meaning "Rubble Films," emerged. Such films took place amongst the ruins of German cities and highlighted, almost in a documentary way, the everyday struggles of ordinary people striving to survive by any means necessary. For the architectural historian, these films are a testament to the vast destruction of entire swaths of urban fabric that had occurred in order to win/end a war. The devastation documented in these films is enormous and almost beyond belief. However, the ruins in these films are real and, because filmed, ever-present.

In Roberto Rossellini's 1948 *Germany, Year Zero*, the ruins of Berlin are a playground for the main character, twelve-year-old Edmund, as he navigates his way not only through the devastation but also towards adulthood by financially providing for his bedridden father and two adult siblings. He walks through the rubble-strewn streets as if they were normal, occasionally pausing to kick a football with friends. He also regularly converses with people in half-bombed out apartment buildings from the street. A particularly poignant scene takes place in Hitler's ruined New Reich Chancellery, where Edmund attempts to sell a recording of

the Fuhrer's to an American soldier. As the voice of the dictator echoes throughout the abandoned structure, the audience understands - by means of the ruined architecture - that the Nazis are no longer in power.

In 1952, seven years after the end of World War II, ruins still occupied the landscape of Berlin, and Frantisek Cáp's thriller *Adventure in Berlin* (also known as *All Clues Lead to Berlin*) takes place amongst those ruins. An American lawyer, seeking the inheritor(s) of a pre-war German immigrant to the United States, arrives in the city and quickly falls into the grip of a post-war counterfeit gang. The climax of the film occurs when this lawyer, together with the daughter-inheritor of his client, flees the gang via the ruined shell of the German Reichstag Building. Climbing through, under, and over the ruins, they eventually escape to safety. The Reichstag was originally built in the 19th century to house the parliament of the "Second German Reich" (1871-1819). Following World War One, it served as the parliament building of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), but was mysteriously vandalized, presumably by the Nazis, in 1933 and would stay in ruins throughout both the post-War and "division years." This monumental building currently serves the parliament of reunified Germany, but would not be fully renovated and supplemented with a new glass dome until the 1990s by the British architect Sir Norman Foster. The renovation started after artist duo Cristo and Jean Claud "wrapped," and somewhat cleansed, the whole building with colossal pieces of locally-manufactured silver fabric.

A final rubble film that documents the vast destruction of Berlin during World War II is Robert Aldrich's 1959 *Ten Seconds to Hell,* which follows the exploits of six German bomb-diffusers as they work to make the city safe from unexploded ordnance found throughout the rubble. Not only is the entire film full of ruins, but as the film progresses, there are also buildings that collapse, adding to the ruined state of the city. Bombs in the process of being diffused explode and four of the six protagonists eventually lose their lives. The finale of the film involves the two lone survivors as they attempt to diffuse a particularly complex British 1000-pound bomb that contains not one, but two fuses. For the architectural historian, these ruined landscapes of Berlin provide documentary evidence of vast urban destruction and provide a background to the development that occurred after the war, as much as 50 years later - since the division of Germany was not resolved until 1990, proving that urban change can be a constant, and its (audio-visual) documentation can reveal itself in the medium of film.

After Buildings: Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong

Similar to buildings and large structures, neighborhoods are born, live and sometimes perish. Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, captured by many photographers including Greg Girard and Nick Danziger in the 1980s and 1990s is one of those neighborhoods that did not survive the millennium. As it is widely known, "the Walled City" in Kowloon was one of the most interesting urban villages and high-density living experiences in Asia. It was built as a military fort during the Song dynasty and was improved in 1847. In time it turned into a densely populated neighborhood housing the poor and the illegal. Before being demolished in 1993/1994 - to turn into a park with just few remains of its past - this urban conflagration was a lively landscape of gang activity, drug usage, and gambling as well as a home for refugees.

The Walled City has partly survived in the form of moving imagery. A widely-known documentary, *Baraka* (Fricke, 1992), has managed to capture Kowloon in detail before its demolition through its poetic non-verbal imagery. The film documents the city as "one way of

living" on Earth. *Crime Story* (Wong & Chan, 1993) released the next year is filmed in the at-the-time-abandoned Walled City, contrasting the poor living conditions of this urban village with the lavish life of gangsters in Hong Kong. The film starring Jackie Chan includes several explosions and demolitions in Kowloon that remind the audience of the soon death of the Walled City. There are also action films set and made in Kowloon Walled City before the 1990s. These include *Brothers from the Walled City* (Lam, 1982) and *Long Arm of the Law* (Mak, 1984), both gangster stories. Among these 1980s films, *Bloodsport* (Arnold, 1988) starring Jean-Claude Van Damme is internationally known. In this martial arts film, an ex-military American goes to the Walled City to participate in a deadly tournament.

Though the architectural historian can use these films as audio-visual documents, it can be argued that not much was filmed in the Walled City during its prime time in the second half of the 20th century. In this context, the "filmic regeneration" of the city could be a powerful tool, maybe not to document the city but to understand its lived spaces. The 2024 action film *Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In* (Soi Cheang, dir.) shows the lost city of Kowloon in utmost detail through its life size digital replica with partial physical sets. The art directors and production designers studied the Walled City via archival material like an architectural historian would before building their version of Kowloon. With its makeshift structures, exposed cables, weathered surfaces and wet floors, the city in the film buzzes with action and production, suffering and excitement, day and night. The Walled City is the real protagonist of *Twilight of the Warriors*.

Conclusion

The writing of architectural history involves tapping into many different aspects of a culture and the situation of its built environment - from political circumstances to social norms, from legal requirements to aesthetic preferences, and from technological advances to functional requirements. Each of these are documented in their own way and serve to help with writing this history. It is the opinion of the presenters that film and cinema are a vital and viable resource to aid in the writing of architectural history because they provide documentary evidence that is visual, verbal and textual to understand the "who," "what," "where," "why," and "how" that buildings of the past and present look the way that they do, which is after all, the duty of the architectural historian to explain.

This presentation has consisted of still images from films, however the real value of cinema to writing architectural history is that it provides moving, living, breathing sequences of experiencing architecture in real time. Existing buildings can be virtually experienced and studied through film but more importantly, historians can review audio-visual documentations of lost spaces and places. Going back to our cases, we can [vicariously] take a ferry across the Bosphorus in 1960s Istanbul, drive around 1960s Los Angeles, walk through the ruins of Potsdamer Platz in 1980s Berlin, experience sunrise-to-sunset in any of the "City Symphony" cities, view the Twin Towers from near and far, circulate amongst the ruins of post-war Berlin, and experience the intensely dense phenomenon that once was Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong.

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