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Abstract

This photo essay places into dialogue practices of photographing urban space and the market research practices of the U.K. outdoor advertising industry. It explores photography as a method for accessing understandings of cities, and it examines ways of analyzing the interplay between photographic practices and data gathered through ethnography. Through personal reflections on the research process, the essay considers the spatial practices of the outdoor advertising industry and how its billboards and panels act to space out cities and city imaginaries.

Keywords

advertising, photography, cities, urban space, method, market research, experience

How we see city spaces—and how this shapes understandings of those spaces—has long been the focus of academic research. But commerce’s interest in people’s visual experience of the urban environment is equally intense. The project described here analyzed the practices of the U.K. outdoor advertising industry and the visual impact of advertising on urban spaces.¹ In the process, I recognized the interweaving of commercial understandings with the phenomenological experience of researching cities through the lens of a camera.

The text and images below are in dialogue. Their juxtapositions aim to explore how my experience of researching urban space through the camera was a process, a process set out here as a form of narrative. My photographic practices came to be folded together with my understandings of how the industry researches and sells urban spaces. This is a reflection on method and on ways of seeing that is inevitably personal and situated. But it also speaks to the framing of urban experience as commercial with all the complexities and hesitations that this implies.

My camera pulls me into places. It sharpens my sense of urban temporalities, framing the rhythms of building and unbuilding in Manchester’s center. This is capital on the march, and nothing new (see Figures 1 and 2).

In the mid-19th century, Friedrich Engels (1845/1982) wrote of Manchester as the center of the industrial revolution, a city crammed with immense warehouses, factories, gin palaces, hotels, beerhouses, shops, and slums. He described the building processes and layout of the city as having no apparent logic, while managing to hide the shockingly dilapidated working-class areas from the sensibilities of the bourgeoisie.

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Figure 1. Building Manchester

I have never seen so systematic a shutting out of the working-class from the thoroughfares, so tender a concealment of everything which might affront the eye and nerves of the bourgeoisie, as in Manchester. And yet, in other respects, Manchester is less built according to a plan, after official regulations, is more an outgrowth of accident, than any other city. (Engels, 1845/1982, p. 80)

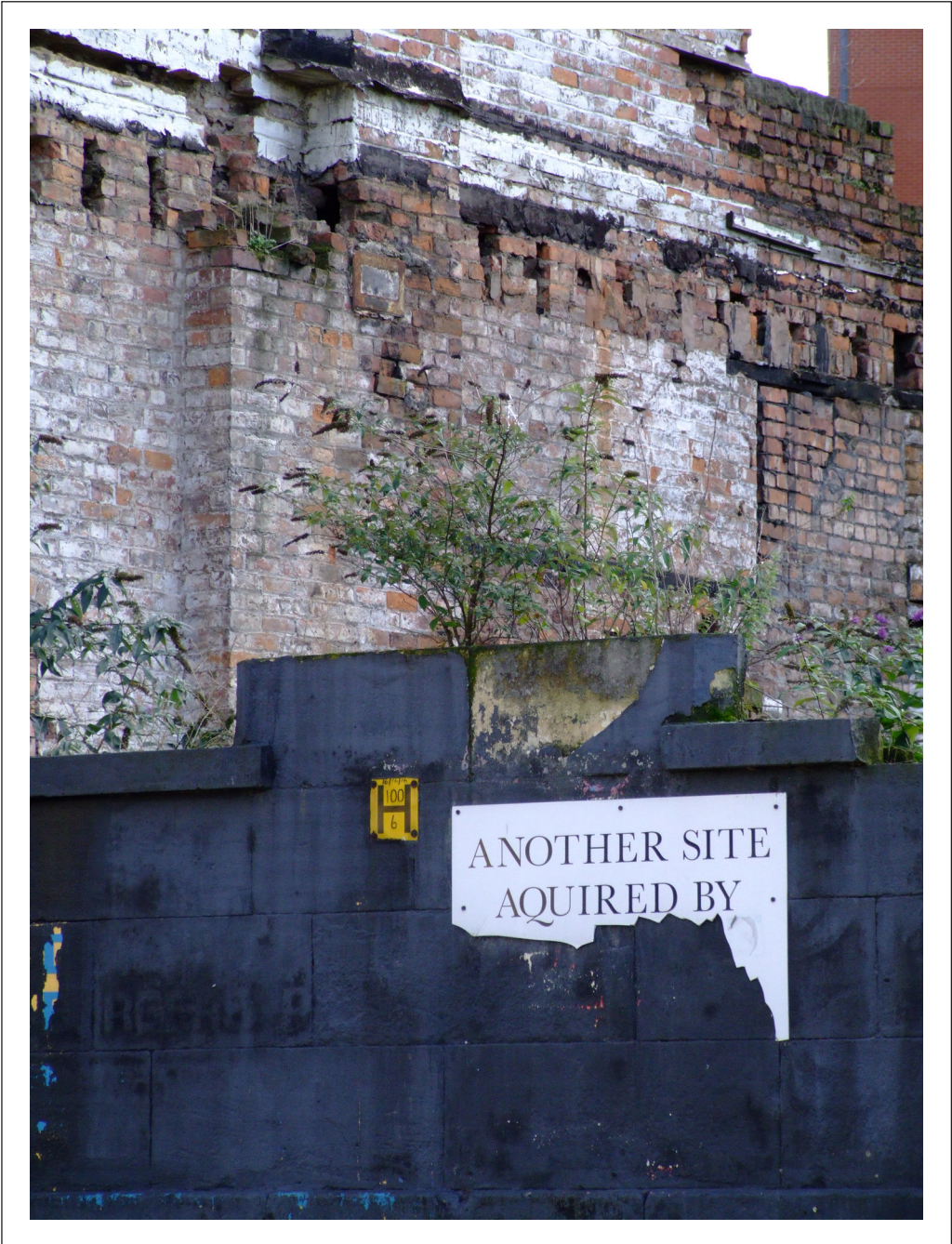


Figure 2. Site acquired by

Today this is the entrepreneurial city, building on credit and constantly shifting. It's the neo-liberal backdrop against which the advertising industry operates. I wonder what it reveals and what it conceals.



Figure 3. Seeing through spaces

Setting off with my camera, I aim to document advertising in the outdoor spaces of Manchester: billboards alongside arterial roads, panels in pedestrian zones, “mega wraps” on scaffolding. I intend to plot out these spaces through photographs—this here; that there. I imagine that this will be a useful mapping of location and type of advertising structure that will complement the ethnographic data I have already gathered from media-owning companies.

I should be focusing on advertising. But as I walk, photograph, and map, I become aware that I am learning to see other spaces. The camera as technology of knowing has been much discussed, as have photographs’ temporal and spatial qualities. In her work on cities, Liggett (2003, p. xiv) remarks that photographs and text combine to produce “cultural spaces,” and the making of images bears witness not only to the city but to people’s role as producers of space. And Edensor (2005, p. 15) uses his camera to examine the “sensual immanence” of the experience of moving through urban spaces. Although I know the theories, I’m still surprised by my own practice and by what I see while I should be focusing on billboards. The practice of photographing these commercial, officially sanctioned structures and sites seems to license me to see other spaces. Flicking through them later, these other photos seem to comment on my own, shifting ways of seeing. The photos seem to present a kind of research diary—unintended, yet detailed and suggestive—and to offer a methodological commentary on seeing, knowing, and researching with a camera. Some appear to be questions about *how* I am seeing urban spaces and about *what* can be seen (see Figure 3).

Some of these “seen spaces” are city-specific. I see Manchester’s music scene in ‘album covers’ shots I take. I don’t know if the composition is remembered or imagined, but it seems to capture my impression of Manchester in the 1980s and early 1990s (see Figure 4).

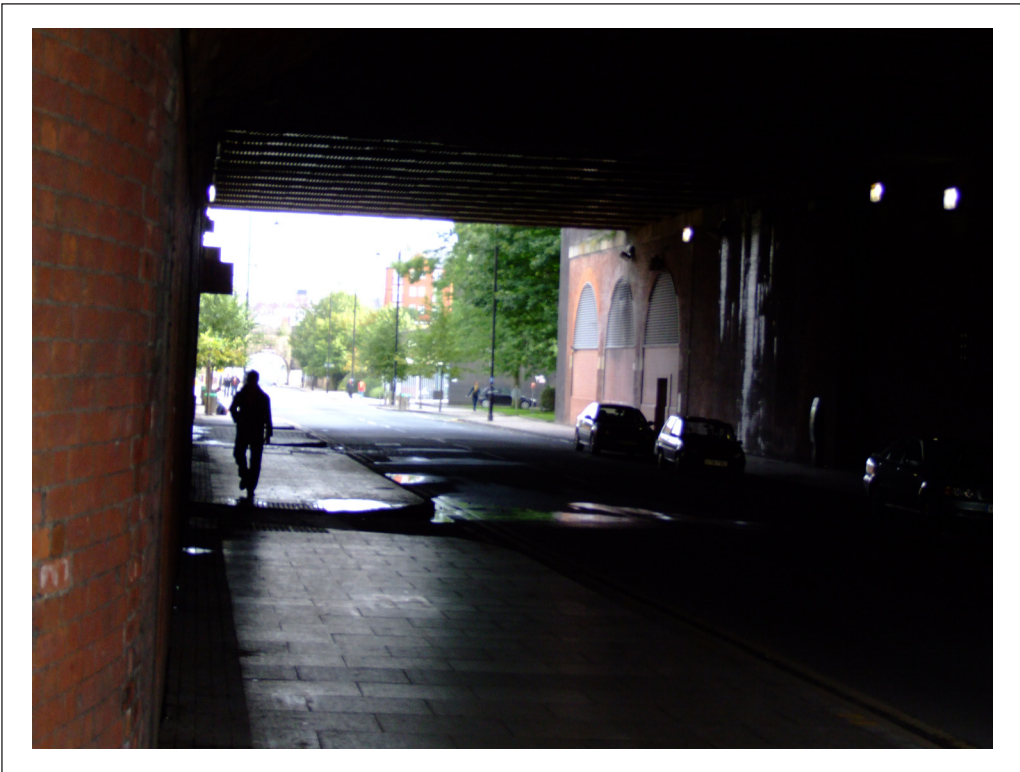


Figure 4. Manchester as album cover

I'm seeing these framed perceptions and urban processes because the ads I should be focusing on can't be separated from their material surroundings or from my academic and cultural knowledge of them. But "context" hardly seems to cover it. I see conversations between ad texts, ad structures such as billboards, and the textures of city spaces (see Figures 5 and 6).

And I become aware that I'm seeing these conversations through a back catalogue of urban writers. Walter Benjamin's seductive aphorisms sit comfortably alongside the ads' snappy straplines. But for him, the ads' true significance was not to be found in their signs and text; instead, it lay in "the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt" (Benjamin, 1979, p. 90).

If not their textual messages, then, what of the ads' physical form? The heft and solidity of industrial architectural heritage sits alongside the more flimsy ad panels—wooden structures showing their disintegration, the ads on their street-facing planes changing constantly (see Figure 7).

I learnt in my ethnographic work how media-owning companies research urban space and people, counting numbers of "hits" an advert may achieve. I start seeing urban spaces in ways framed by the industry's own practices—how many cars pass this site in an hour? Calculated as "eyes on panel," quantification is the currency of the industry. Their research practices identify which spaces offer most visual impact, which routes offer up the richest consumers. The industry learns to see urban spaces as moments of visual contact between the consumer and an advert. I notice that the interview, observation, and documentary data I gathered in the industry are now informing my photos. I'm seeing commercially; the metrics of the industry research practices are in dialogue with my photographic practices.



Figure 5. Railing



Figure 6. Texture



Figure 7. Structure and form

The industry attempts many dialogues. It asks questions of people moving around urban space and sells the answers to companies buying advertising space on billboards and panels.

Thinking of all the places you see advertising outdoors, can you tell me in general how often you notice the following?

- Banners on buildings/scaffolding
- Billboards/large roadside posters
- Small posters on bus shelters and on the street
- Posters on the outside of buses
- Posters on the inside of buses
- Posters on the outside of taxis
- Posters on the inside of taxis
- Posters in the underground and on the tube
- Posters at railways stations
- Posters outside supermarkets
- Posters in leisure centers/gyms
- Posters in pubs/bars
- Posters in cinema foyers
- Posters in airports²

The industry's capacity to classify and tabulate is striking. Percec (1999) wonders at how "there is something at once uplifting and terrifying about the idea that nothing in the world is so unique

that it can't be entered on a list" (p. 198). This listing and calculation creates a strange geography that's not about unique topographical features but the gathering and selling of data ("eyes on panel") that might persuade potential clients to advertise. We "editorialize" spaces, industry practitioners tell me. We tell stories about numbers of potential consumers, potential sales, linked to people's movements past ad panels that they may not even notice.

But the industry also considers feelings, thoughts, and habits.

How did you feel between 6.30 a.m. and 7 a.m.?

Mood scale on a slider:
Bad mood ← → Good mood³

It makes promises to companies who might advertise on its billboards. And these companies want such reassurances. Selling is so unpredictable, consumers so flighty.

National tracking across the major U.K. conurbations
Get under the skin of a key audience living and travelling around the capital
Unveil a typical day in the life and week in the life of a "typical" family
Provides statistical data to justify recommendations
The car has replaced the lounge as the new venue for family interaction
ROADS' Town Optimiser allows us to drill down to town level to establish optimum weights at a local level
Normative data are available⁴

Is this evidence of advertising's power and reach? Certainly, advertising wants to sell. But its success is hard to evaluate and the industry knows it. Numbers of eyes on panel don't translate directly into sales. Adverts may seem to be ubiquitous, but "ad avoidance" is a recognized trait of the (recalcitrant) consumer. Unofficial ads pop up everywhere like weeds. I photograph these nonindustry ads too (see Figure 8).

Billposters may well be prosecuted, but first you have to catch them. Many have helped us think about how spaces slip away from the regulatory impulse, offering counternormative possibilities. Resistance can piggy-back on corporate power, and the everydayness of urban space can trump commercial intentions (see Figure 9).

Advertising's power may well lie elsewhere. I notice that the industry's research practices relentlessly produce more and more figures, more claims, and new angles to speak to consumers. These circulate, attempt to persuade potential clients, compete with rival media companies, and are recycled. But margins are tight, campaigns fail, and ads are often unnoticed. What are the effects of all this data production? Thrift (2006) argues that the metrics produced by practices of measuring and calculating may not be the enemy of creativity, evacuating life; they may be viewed "as simply other ways of spacing out the world" and may add "fertile sources of conflict" (p. 140).

Commercial calculation, commercial intention, and the resistances they shape have long been in articulation. But I also notice that they influence how I see spaces with my camera. More specifically, they inform how I *ask questions* of space with my camera. I think this is one of the ambiguous powers of the advertising industry and its products: the capacity to open up questions about our lives, social practices, and social ideals. The outdoor industry and its billboards throw into play questions about how we live spatially, what cities are to us (see Figure 10).

These questions are folded back into the practices of the industry and have material effects—they influence where billboards are placed, what product type is advertised, where and at what time of day. They become part of the making of places. This is the "throwntogetherness" of places that Massey (2005, p. 140) describes as a negotiation of a here-and-now, a negotiation that

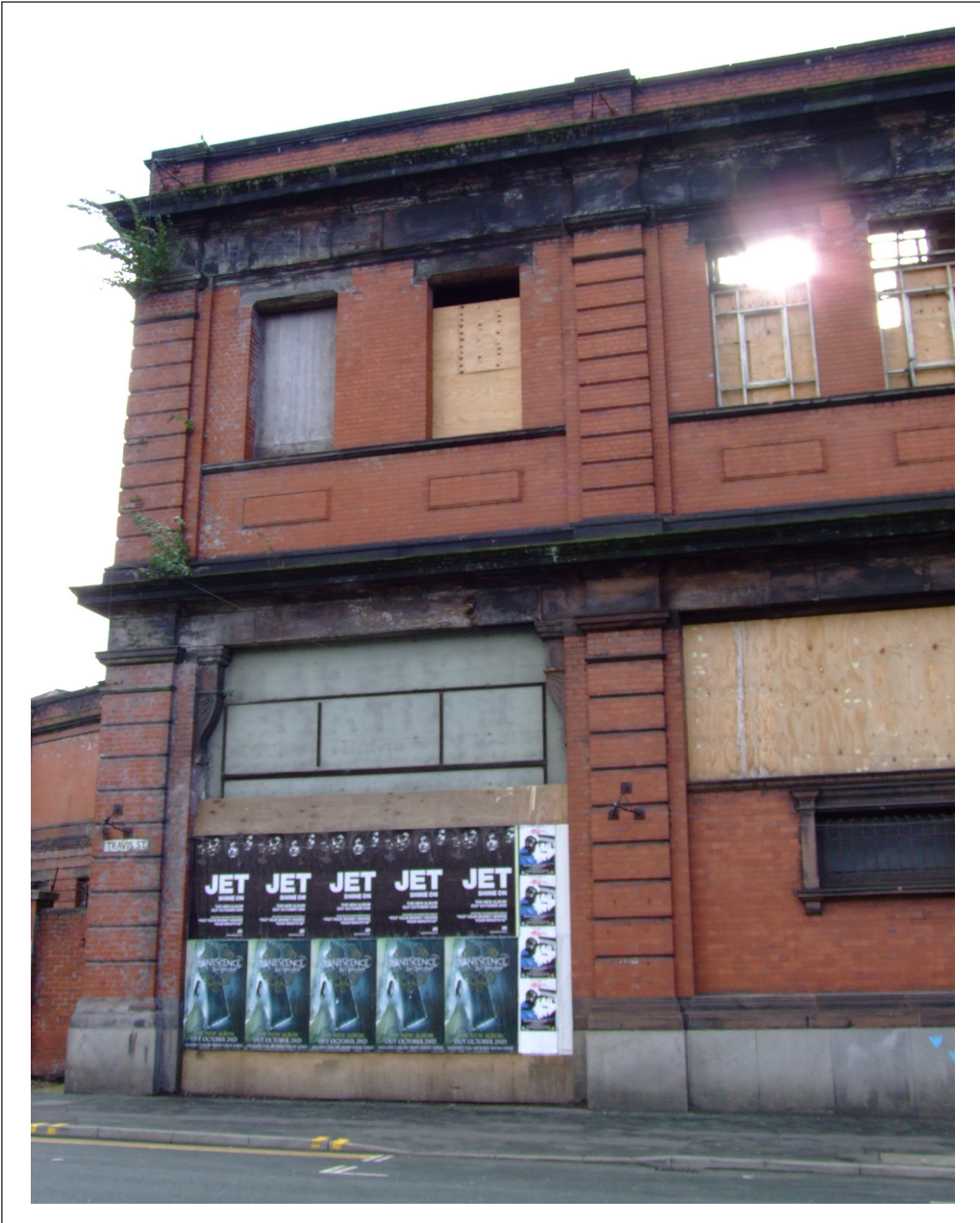


Figure 8. Billposters will be prosecuted

includes humans and nonhumans. The industry's interest in people's phenomenological experience of cities (suitably quantified) takes material, spatialized form in its billboards and panels. In this abstracted form, people have become indirect and perhaps unwilling participants in making commercial places.

Like Liggett (2003), I bear witness with my camera to these places and to people's role as producers of space. But here, people's role in the production of spaces is formed through the industry's practices of calculation and materialization. My photographic practices make this



Figure 9. Scrap cars wanted

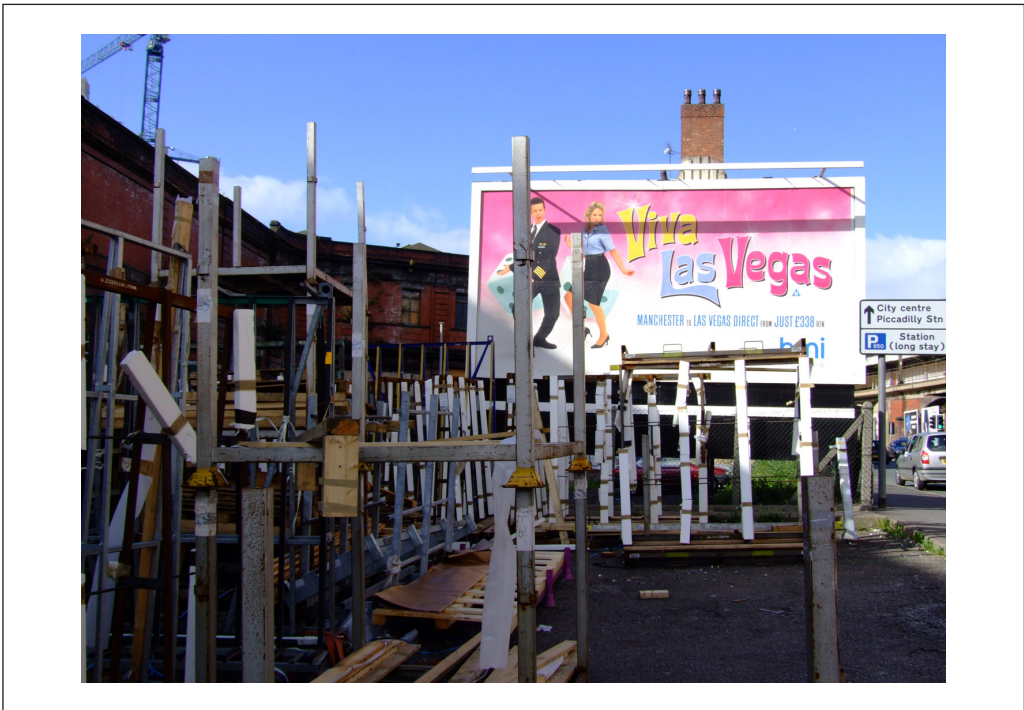


Figure 10. Throwtogetherness

manifest for me in ways that are more than visual. Reflecting on the photographs—as an oblique sort of research diary—I realize that my experience of seeing the spaces was shaped by what I knew of the industry’s practices, but also that the process of taking photos shaped my own analysis of the industry and urban spaces.

How, then, to think about outdoor advertising? Its panels, practices, and ads can ask questions about what cities are to us and how we space out the world. And when such questions are asked, they can open up the field of possibilities in unexpected ways—indeed, in ways that may run counter to commercial intentions. They may create other ways of seeing.

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Note

1. For a full account of the project, see Cronin (2008, 2010). The project involved interviews with practitioners in a range of media-owning companies, media agencies, specialist poster agencies, trade associations, research companies, and one client company. From these companies, I collected data such as client briefs, research questionnaires, research project results, and PowerPoint presentations. The project also involved ethnographic work at one media owner’s office including observation of directors’ meetings, brainstorming and creative sessions, construction and presentations of pitches, visits to clients and media agencies, staff training, and a range of in-depth interviews with staff. The second part of the project involved a case study of the visual impact of outdoor advertising in Manchester.
2. Excerpt from market research report on consumers and city space commissioned by a media-owning company.
3. Excerpt from research diary used by market researchers for the outdoor advertising industry.
4. Composite of promotional materials produced by media-owning companies.

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Bio

Anne M. Cronin is a senior lecturer in the Sociology Department at Lancaster University, U.K. She has published *Advertising, Commercial Spaces and the Urban* (2010), *Consuming the Entrepreneurial City* (coeditor K. Hetherington; 2008), *Advertising Myths* (2004), *Advertising and Consumer Citizenship* (2000), and a special issue of *Feminist Review* on “Urban Spaces” (2010, Vol. 96, No. 1; coeditor E. Oakley-Brown). She is currently working on a project on friendship and urbanism.