

Jonas Bendiksen: Curiosity in Practice

5. The Places We Live

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Scenes from Kibera, Africa's largest slum, where almost one million people live on less than a square mile. Nairobi, Kenya. 2005.



A man navigates the garbage-strewn alleyways of Kibera. Nairobi, Kenya. 2005.

The Project

The year 2008 witnessed a major shift in the way people across the world live: for the first time in human history more people lived in cities than in rural areas. This triumph of the urban, however, does not entirely represent progress, as the number of people living in urban slums—often in abject conditions—is today estimated to have exceeded one billion.

From 2005 to 2007—before this tipping point was reached—Bendiksen documented life in the slums of four different cities: Nairobi, Kenya; Mumbai, India; Jakarta, Indonesia; and Caracas, Venezuela. His lyrical images capture the diversity of personal histories and outlooks found in these dense neighborhoods. In spite of enormous challenges, such as the lack of health care, sanitation, and electricity that residents of these areas face, Bendiksen's work challenged commonly held assumptions that they are simply places of poverty and misery. This work became the book *The Places We Live*.

Photographic reconstruction
of the Dirango household.
From left to right: Andrew,
Ann, Eunice. Nairobi, Kenya.
2005.



Experimentation

“I never started out that process by saying: ‘You know, I’m really interested in 360 degree photography’ or ‘I want to make super panoramas’ and things like that. That was never interesting for me. What was interesting for me is [finding] a way where I can explore these domestic universes: How could I do that?”

Having begun by documenting the many challenges that these environments presented—population density, poverty, crime and other social issues—but feeling as though he was making work reinforcing “more of the same stereotypes” that he had seen before, Bendiksen questioned how he could approach the project differently. Thinking of new ways to look at the subject matter, he employed an experimental approach: a “pre-technological” 360 degree photographic view of interior spaces. These panoramic views present the “whole domestic universe” of these inhabitants’ homes - resulting in a panoramic strip of images that contain all of the small details: decorations, knick knacks, and belongings, all of which offer clues as to who these occupants are.

The lesson here is that it is always healthy to question your approach, even after you’ve started down a path. Try to experiment with new ways of looking at your subject. It’s easy to continue on in a fashion that is ‘safe’ or ‘conventional’ but if you don’t challenge yourself in the same way Bendiksen did in *The Places We Live*, you may not discover an approach that elevates the work above the norm.

A girl walks along a water pipe in the Industrial Area of Dharavi. Although it functions as a thoroughfare through this area of the slum, the water in the pipes is headed for the more affluent southern areas of the city.

Dharavi is one of Mumbai's biggest and longest standing slums. Home to somewhere between 600 000 and one million people, it is a beehive of recycling and manufacturing industries. However, Dharavi sits on prime real estate right in the heart of the booming megapolis, and is in close vicinity to the new Bandra-Kurla Complex, a new financial hub. Dharavi is now scheduled for redevelopment, meaning everything in the slum, for good and bad, is set to be demolished. Mumbai, India. 2006.



Photographic reconstruction
of Shuresh Chandra's house.
From left to right: Shubash,
Shuresh, Ramjeet, Suraj.
Mumbai, India. 2006.



A little girl playing in Laxmi Chawl, a neighborhood of Dharavi. The little lightbulbs are put out for an upcoming neighborhood wedding. Mumbai, India. 2006.





From the edge of New Dharavi, children play by the shanties, with the new Bandra-Kurla Complex shining in the background. The BKC houses multinational companies and upscale offices, and is a high-profile project in Mumbai as the city reaches for a modern identity. Dharavi has become such a contentious issue in Mumbai politics partially because it is one of the few areas bordering the new complex. In between BKC and Dharavi is a mangrove swap and the Mithi River. Mumbai, India. 2006.

Beyond Photographs

While making *The Places We Live*, Bendiksen's goal was to immerse himself as deeply as he could in the environment. He lived for extended periods of time in each slum, and went about meeting the local inhabitants. A key aspect of his work was recording the oral histories of residents, using an audio recorder. He didn't complicate it, or do lengthy interviews, he simply asked the same question each time: "Tell me about life here." This resulted in a wide range of stories and reflections; some would talk about the problems they faced living in their environment, others would talk about their dreams or ambitions for life. Bendiksen reflects fondly on the experiences he had meeting people in these areas, and how one encounter would often lead to another.

"I wanted to be immersed in that environment when I was working on this project. And the recording of these stories was almost equally important to the pictures. it was a very collaborative way to work."

When working on a project, consider if gathering other materials such as interviews or recordings could benefit the story you are looking to tell. Treat these interactions as a collaboration, and see where they take you.

Photographic reconstruction
of Asanah's house. From left
to right: Hari, Sartini, Hasan,
Meliani, Asanah. Jakarta.
Indonesia. 2007.



Kids playing on top of water mains, outside their neighborhood of Karet Tensin. Jakarta. Indonesia. 2007.





The hillside barrio of El Valle. Caracas is a shaped like a bowl, with poorer barrios circling the affluent and commercial areas, which lie at the valley floor. Caracas. Venezuela. 2005.

New squatter settlements
on a hillside in north Caracas,
Venezuela. 2007.



Photographic reconstruction
of the Fernandez household.
From left to right: Veronica,
Carlos. Caracas, Venezuela.
2006.



Presentation

In *The Places We Live*, Bendiksen presents twenty double-gatefold images; each representing an individual home and its denizen's story. Learn more about this innovative design and experiential approach in Lesson 17: Photobooks.



For exhibitions of this work, Bendiksen produces immersive installations, inviting audiences to enter life sized 'rooms' with individual photographs back-projected, replicating the individual walls. This allows viewers to effectively stand in the center of each home at a similar scale to that originally experienced by the photographer. Alongside the images, Bendiksen will often play the audio recordings of those he met.





The facade of an apartment building in Barrio 23 de Enero. The areas apartment blocks have been home to communities of squatters since the late 1950s, and the area has played important role in social and political events in the country. Caracas, Venezuela. 2006.



A collection of photographs taken of Bendiksen working in the field, as featured throughout this lesson. Images courtesy of Laara Matsen.

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