

Picturing Play:

Examining childhood amusement and public space through images of New York City and Mexico City in the 1940s

In the 1940s Helen Levitt set out to capture the public urban life of New York City and Mexico City. Her photographs center on the streets, particularly in lower class neighborhoods. Children constitute a large number of her subjects. Although children also make up a large portion of society in general, they infrequently assume a primary role in its formation. Rarely do they hold any clout in political decisions or social constructions. Most of their time is occupied by play and amusement, seemingly insignificant in the scope of urban life. They principally function in the private, domestic and familial context. In some ways children are not yet citizens and do not have full access to the public sphere. Yet, in urban spaces, particularly poorer neighborhoods, small and dank private spaces drove children into the only available fresh air, the city streets. It is through their presence on the streets that they begin to participate in public life. Paradoxically, images of children in New York and Mexico City participating in the insignificant act of amusement on the street provide significant insight into the dynamics of public space in the urban setting.

When examining this small collection of photographs, the viewer must remember that the images do not simply depict reality; they omit reality as well, and project themes and perspectives authored by the photographer. In addition, the communication of meaning and the creation of meaning exceed a private relationship between the photographer and her subject. The images engage the viewer in a public discourse. Helen Liggett describes this visual language, stating: "The space these photographs make is between what they show and what we see. This

complex relationship among the photographer, the photograph, and the viewer constructs a form of public space” (125). It is this new public space of visual and symbolic meaning that we must navigate to better understand the public space of the urban street.

Levitt’s images of children at play in the New York City streets are full of visual meaning, conveying imagination and community. Leggitt also directly addresses Levitt’s work in suggesting that “*their meaning is generated in the relationships they capture and the connections between those relationships and the street*” (124). The validity of Leggitt’s assessment, particularly in presenting meaning of the public/private divide, appears quite clear in just the few images assembled here. One image presents two girls playing with a long ribbon streamer on the sidewalk (Figure 4). The girl on the left sits on the stairway banister, practically in the doorway connected to a specific private space. Her smile and interaction with the second girl indicate a relationship of intimacy between the two generated by private contexts. They are not strangers encountered in a public context, but friends, or perhaps family. The visual thread of the ribbon links the first girl to the second and the stoop of a private dwelling with the public space of the sidewalk. Although the ribbon physically connects the girls, the image provides another layer of symbolic meaning. The frame of the photograph cuts off the end of the ribbon, allowing it to extend beyond the space of the image. *The private relationship of the girls and the private space of the building are visually linked to someone or something in the public street. Regardless of the relationship, the next link in question remains a stranger to the viewer.*

Although the above described photograph suggests a relationship with an unknown (a defining characteristic of public space), the images of New York City convey a theme of community, familiarity, and security in the public sphere. The photographs present children playing in the midst of a community context. People of various ages and races fill the streets

(Figure 3). In contrast with the noticeable emptiness we will later see in the streets of the Mexico City images, the photographs of New York City are full of people and action. Even in the two images that depict only two girls playing together (Figures 2 & 4), their bodies dominate the space and the presence of men in the corner or glimpses of legs indicate that the children are part of a larger social space. Trucks, pedestrians, and open shop windows communicate vibrant life in the streets.

In the case of Mexico City the children are not depicted competing for the public space of the streets. No car or pedestrian traffic interrupts their play. Alone or in small groups, recycling discarded objects, the children appear to be somehow left behind, abandoned at least for the moment. A boy stands alone with his ball glove and a child pushes a hoop across an empty street. Neither appears to have play companions for their games (Figures 7 & 8). The hustle and bustle of city markets is absent from the images, suggesting that economic activity has adjourned to another place. Those who have work to do or places to be must pass through these public streets, but do not seem to stay. The dominance of children and a few loitering adults in the images of Mexico City's poor barrios indicate a marginalized space, democratic in its availability yet discarded in its undesirability by upper classes.

*time of day
as a factor?*

One particular image of Mexico City depicts a young boy in an old and desolate plaza (Figure 5). Within the frame of the photograph, it is not completely clear exactly what the boy is doing crouched in the street, but his posture and facial expression suggest he is engaged in some sort of childhood leisure. It appears that he might be playing some sort of game or perhaps whistling to summon a dog. The boy remains the primary focus in the foreground of the photograph, but Levitt also includes two other individuals. These two men are not only notable because of their presence in the image, but even more significantly they contribute to a certain

preference in the photograph. The men, who appear to have little or nothing to do with the boy, are included while the person, animal, or object that draws the attention of the boy remains a mystery outside the frame of the image. Both men are propped up against peeling walls alongside shut and locked doors and windows. One man appears to be sleeping. The size of the men, their distance from the boy, and lack of interaction convey a mood of isolation. The crumbling textures of the negative space allow them to blend into anonymity and, in a passing glance, even invisibility.

This theme of the anonymous or the unknown in public space provides an interesting point of contrast between the images of New York and Mexico City. The two images examined in depth above (Figures 4 & 5) are fundamentally similar but generate different meaning. Both present a noticeable absence through the suggestion of a relationship that extends beyond the frame. They trigger visual connections to the unknown. Graham Clarke speaks to the problem of the disunity and ambiguity, explaining that “The camera can only photograph a series of disparate elements, details which hint at a larger unity but remain as fragments of an indefinable process” (97). It is this undefined and unknown that characterizes the public space and begs the viewer to question the subject’s relationship to it. In the photograph taken in New York City, the connection to the unknown public space seems fluid and unthreatening. The public continues to maintain the security of the private sphere by constructing community and connections. On the other hand, the Mexico City images portray the unknown as empty and isolating.

One of Levitt’s photographs of New York City presents an interesting and, as demonstrated through other photos, repetitive theme of exercising public space. The image captures two young girls creating chalk drawings on the sidewalk (Figure 2). ~~This~~ The children are not simply occupying public space or passing through it, they are exercising it, controlling a

part of it as they use the street as a plaything. As Andrew Brown-May describes the use of public space in Melbourne, he comments that street vendors were specifically exercising public space by using the street as an instrument for business. The vendors did not occupy the street solely as a place to carry out their sales, but appropriated the space as an integral and necessary tool of their economic endeavors. In a like fashion, the girls in Levitt's photograph are not simply playing *in* the street; they are playing *with* the street.

good point

Similarly, through the exercising of public space as an object and context of amusement, the children are redefining the space for their own purposes. Margaret Crawford, in her article "Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life," describes how women in Los Angeles have begun to claim abandoned lots, driveways, and public curbsides to spill their domestic work into the public sphere. They redefine the public space by utilizing it for establishing contact with customers and selling their merchandise (30, 34). But in contrast to the women selling in public lots and streets in L.A., these children playing in the public streets do not arrest or disrupt the other functions of the space in which they act. In addition to the space of the street, the children also redefine interactions with people and objects in the public sphere. The sidewalk becomes drawing paper, a table turns into a fortress, and the street cleaner simulates a tropical storm (Figures 2 & 3). Through these *imaginative transformations* the children are not recreating any of the objects or situations; they are simply redefining them on their own terms. The truck remains a truck and continues to fulfill its original duty of cleaning the streets while at the same time serving the undesignated role of amusement.

Other endless themes can continue to be explored as the triangle of photographer's authorship, image, and viewer engage in discourse. Yet, ultimately much will remain unknown and undefined, just at the public space the images themselves attempt to depict. As Anthony Lee

writes in his attempt to reconstruct Chinatown, "the accumulation of pictures presents us with street life that exceeds the camera's ability to capture it" (114). This insight is interesting in examining a few individual images but also serves as an important reminder in compiling a general or holistic image of street life in a particular city. The further we dig in a search for visual meaning and understanding through photographs, the problem of public space becomes no less complex. Yet, that complexity presents an interesting and valuable challenge. And as the images of Helen Levitt demonstrate, even the niche of the smallest piece, whether a child or a snapshot, generates meaning for the dynamics of urban public space.

Excellent essay. This is a thoroughgoing comparison that latches on to a couple of key themes and really explores them deeply and effectively. The strategy of following a single photographer into two locales also aided in the discussion of authorship and made the comparison of the two cities very compelling. Very good use of a variety of course readings to set up angles into the discussion. Very fine work.

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