– THE VISUAL RESEARCH –
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TO SITE AND PROGRAM

In the architectural design discourse, often various research methods are being used while their correct use, accuracy and the critical reflection on the research methods often is underestimated or regarded in limited ways. One or multiple research methods need to be clarified at an early stage, especially to avoid getting lost within the vast possibilities of methods that could be of help when analyzing and investigating the topic of study. In the architectural profession, the analysis of projects is often lacking consistent methods leading to a congruent architectural design. Methods are adapted at an aim-oriented basis throughout the project development, which not necessarily is false or limiting. It however, can disturb consistency in the design process.

Throughout the course of the lecture series, I personally gained awareness of the importance to understand various research methodological approaches towards architecture and its design discourse, in order to conduct successful and aim-oriented research for my own graduation project. The lecture by Klaske Havik on the investigation of spatial narratives in architecture and the power of subjective interpretation through description as an architectural research method made me reflect on my personal approaches within the design process. It became apparent to me that often the architectural profession is focusing on the visual image, rather than the literate description. Writing is essential for every architect and the ability to describe the design within a continuous storyline may be disregarded. [1] With my personal interest in the use of the image as method for conducting spatial and societal research within Antwerp the risk and difficulty to laps into using the visual as documentation methods became apparent to me. The subjective approach towards the image – I learnt – contributes to a discussion that is essential in the analysis of findings, under the condition that the researcher analyses the subjectivity in a photograph.

The subjective approach could be compared to a written personal experience of an architectural environment such as in an article by Klaske Havik on Acts of Symbiosis: *A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto.*[2] 'Literary description' is being used as method of 'architectural investigation' using the subjective experience of a space to create an architectural image, with the aim to '*bring to the surface some of the more ephemeral aspects of architecture*'.[3] Within this article Havik describes two buildings by Alvar Aalto based on the experience of her personal visits. The detailed description of surroundings, condition, landscape and materiality create a clear image in the reader's mind. If photographs were added next to the description (placed at the end), the subjective imagination would be replaced by the actual visible condition. This is the point, where my personal critical reflection regarding the use of visual research begins. Even though the subjective imagination is replaced by a photograph that seems to represent reality, one needs to be aware of the condition in which the photograph was taken, which aim it had and the user group it was aimed at. Was it taken to support exactly the description previously read or is it an unrelated, taken out of another context? In the course of the graduation research, with the aim to use visual research as a methodology, I aim to focus on the principles of documentation photography of social and spatial conditions, utilization of space through the user, architectural conditions and how the interpretation of an image changes when it is annotated or goes along with a subjective description. With the emergence of the vast availability of the image and thus its overuse in daily life, one however needs to be more critical towards its use within research.

RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

During the city visits to Paris and Vienna, conducted within the chair of Interiors, Buildings, Cities to analyze spatial intimate conditions within these cities, – later to be applied to Antwerp – the use of the image became a basis for the methodological research conducted. Primarily, photography was used as a documentation tool for materiality, user interaction in the space and spatial conditions. However, with more material gathered, the question arose, what information each image held. Throughout the excursions, I thus gradually lowered the amount of photography conducted with the personal task to annotate photographs I took with personal experiences. As a group we gathered the visual images annotated with our narrated experiences of Paris (Appendix 1) in order to create a coherent narrative. Cards (Appendix 2) created a visual index into an 'Intimate Encyclopedia on Vienna' (Appendix 3) holding architectural, historical, social and geographical information, maps, architectural plans or information on Viennese public figures, such as Otto Wagner, Sigmund Freud or Gustav Klimt within the scope of intimacy. The findings of this research enabled a platform of understanding the scope of intimacy that could be translated to the city of Antwerp at a later stage, where I continued to use the annotated visual image as research method.

In 2009 Selay Yurtkuran Tok conducted a research on the methodological use of photography within architecture education. Too often students use photography solemnly as a documentation tool and thus lack to reflect critically on the information the images hold on social conditions and the spaces.[1] The study participants were undergraduate architecture students from Uludag University, Bursa, Turkey.[4] Tok refers to the usage of photography as a widely used reflective tool in various fields of social science and research such as anthropology and psychology, where photography is often used within interviews for facilitation of narratives (photo-elicitation[5]). This highlights the difference to visual professions, such as architecture, where the image is less frequently used as a research method. The reason for this lies within the usage of the visual within those fields as a *'tool for optical realist recording as a means of documenting the immediate material environment.'*[6] However, the field of the architect is not only limited to the built environment, much more it creates the conditions for social interaction, spaces of habitation, places of communication. Social awareness and behavioral research is essential for user-oriented architecture and the use of photography is a fundamental aspect to support this research. In the described study, students were encouraged to 'read' images as part of an interpretive process, where various layers of the image were to be analyzed, described and annotated with personal experiences, thoughts or memories of '*the material, the social, behavioral, temporal, and cultural*'.[7] Regarding the outcome of the study it became apparent, that all students not only analyzed the images in depth, '*uncovering multiple layers of meaning in the sites*' but also focused on various aspects of a photograph, the materiality, referring to colors, decay, sensory experiences or human presence. Reading a number of observers comments, it becomes apparent how different a photograph can be interpreted and simultaneously how much power the combination of the various interpretation adds to the photograph. Tok especially emphasizes the effect of the students political and cultural awareness on the complexity of their critical reflection.[8] Similarly, Gillian Rose also highlights that ways of seeing are to a great extent influenced by '*historical, geographical and social*' understandings and are thus by nature subjective.[9] Concluding, Tok highlights the difference between the intuitive photograph in contrast to a traditional approach of sketching. The sketch is a deliberate choice of drawing, where the author decides what becomes

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[1] They were asked to intuitively capture momentary situations in the studio's project neighborhood Karaköy in Istanbul in the course of one day. One photograph of each student was then annotated with their personal narrative in response to the tasks *'Read this photo and tell us about it'* and *'Why do you think the photographer chose this photo to present among the other photos'*. The photograph without narrative, was then passed on to all other participating students (20) with the task to answer the same questions on every photograph, without any prior knowledge on the image, except for having studied the same neighborhood.[1] In order to facilitate the evaluation, the students were given a set of keywords per image which they were asked to rank by priority (Appendix 4+5).

visible of the seen and what remains undocumented. In contrary a 'snapshot' photograph shows the actual situation. Besides the insight for the conductor of the research, it can also help the student to form an area of interest for a possible brief, using the social awareness created through the analysis.[10] The study highlights the possibilities, thorough analysis of visual images can offer within the scope of architecture.

RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Before Photography existed in its wider use, architects such as Friedrich Schinkel[11] or Otto Wagner[12] used accurate hand drawings and extensive descriptions to showcase their research. Study trips to architectural metropolises were conducted with focus on drawings to understand the architectural profession. Within the last 100 years' photography has evolved from a profession to a documentation medium for the widest public. Its use as a research method especially emerged within social research projects, psychology and anthropology. Photovoice, a term introduced in 1992[13], describes a research methodology which is mainly used as a qualitative method within the social research projects and participatory processes.[14] Individuals or groups are asked to use visual documentation to represent their perspective on a certain condition. The method lies thus not solemnly within the act of taking the picture but in its analysis and subjective description. The way a condition is seen by an individual becomes visible by the perspective in which each individual chose to present a certain condition. Also the discussion of taken images then gives emotional subjective insight into understandings of conditions.

In contrast, today the visual image in the architecture field often focuses on the documentation. The challenge, thus lies within understanding the photographer and his intent in documentation. At first glance a sketch or drawing, holds possibilities for various personal interpretation, whereas a photograph seems to give an accurate image with little space for personal interpretation. However, as seen in the previously discussed study, using photography as a method to analyse a certain condition, site, area, spatial or social condition, it is very important to analyse the possible conditions in which the photograph was taken and which aim the photographer might have had in mind. As protagonist of the international modern architecture, the art historian Sigfried Giedion used photography together with detailed literary narratives as essential parts within his publications. In a letter to Walter Gropius he described his choice to conduct all visual documentation personally in order to avoid subjectively conducted documentation that would ask for extensive narratives in addition to the photograph.[15] This shows the scope of interpretation an image can have, similarly to the study previously described.

How valuable are visual approaches as a qualitative tool? In the field of social sciences, Mannay highlights the importance to embed the visual *'creative'* within a *'narrative'* framework in order to avoid loss of information.[16] The images that found the interest of research are always set within a storyline, that might not be known to the observer but is essential for the understanding of the visual. '*The visual has to be embedded in the narratives of its inception, reception, interpretation and impact.*' As pictures are *'constantly subject to interpretation and re-interpretation'* an initial narrative can be helpful in order to explain the image and its aim.[17] The critical questioning of the image seen today and its information given should not fall into the background: When was it taken? Did the photographer choose the perspective deliberately? What was the photographers focus? For who or what was the photograph intended: publication – documentation – personal use? An example highlighting these critical questions can be found within Gillian Rose book on Visual Methodologies. A black and white photograph[18] from 1948, taken from within a shop window, observing two people looking into the window display of the shop is described objectively. The people are seemingly unaware of the photographer. When however, Rose further elaborates on the photographer, Robert Doisneau,

known for his art of staging spontaneous situations and the economic intention of the photograph, the interpretation is shaped by this knowledge.[19] Taking up the sociological, anthropological approach of using the image as subjective information gathering tool, I annotated my images of the neighbourhood Het Eilandje in Antwerp with personal reflections. Additionally, with the use of a single use camera I asked by-passers to take an image and give short verbal reflections on their personal choice. Through the information gathered I was able to perceive the neighbourhood of interest in various alternative ways, strongly differing from my personal architectural viewpoint.

POSITIONING

Architectural research does not necessarily have to start from a brief or a site. Much more, it should derive from described human conditions and their situation within the environment they find themselves in. In order to create architecture for the user we need to understand their needs. The architect needs to begin research at the potential user of the building. The task lies then within finding a program that reflects the societal conditions and requirements. As architects, we thus need to primarily conduct research on the basis of human conditions and human characters that we aim to 'build' an environment for. A suitable research method in order to reach findings is thus the use of visual images and subjective narration. When photography or the visual research is used as a research method, it is important that it is decided from which perspective the photographs are taken or analyzed. Looking at Kenneth Pike's definitions of *etic* and *emic* research as two contrary approaches to analysis, it becomes clear that especially in architectural photography and the visual research the distinction needs to be highlighted beforehand. The *emic* perspective lets the researcher observe and analyze from within a condition, site or social construct, whereas the *etic* research is produced from a distance, without subjective influence to the outcome of the research.[20] Lucas highlights within his introduction to architectural research, that '*multiple or divided research methodologies*' can lead to distraction and 'inconsistencies'.[21] I believe, that even though one research methodology should be the main focus, the combination of approaches – such as *emic* and *etic* – in a consecutive order is essential when analyzing a neighborhood, potential site and a suitable program for the chosen site through a visual approach.

When beginning with the local research in Antwerp, I firstly began by observing the neighborhood Het Eilandje from a distance, trying to get an overall image, photographing the possible site – independent of their potential use – from different perspectives and viewpoints in order to see the area within its greater construct of the city. The *etic* perspective thus gave the general distanced non-subjective understanding of the area. It gives specific information on sizes, building typologies and distant appearance, however not about usage, the distinction between public and private or the social interaction of people within the spaces. It could thus be seen as the architecture without the people. At a later point within the research, the *emic* approach thus is essential, as it gives the researcher a better understanding of the invisible connections, the societal conditions and the immediate relationship of an area or its users with the surrounding. With a potential site of interest in the southern part of the neighborhood, I shifted my research towards an emic approach, looking at the areas' spatial and social context. What institutions are available in the vicinity, what does the neighbourhood offer and what seems to be lacking? As an architect, the understanding of society, the necessity to understand sociological approaches and with the aim to build for the user, an emic approach is essential for a final well embedded architectural result. Including the potential user within these questions, this could in reality be through extensive participatory processes – which I focused on within the history thesis – or in the case of the graduation project through the inclusive process of actively engaging with the local community by letting people visually document and describe focal points within a setting. Concluding from the research conducted, I believe visual research in the focus of social contexts, in combination with literary analyses should be an essential aspect of an

architectural design process. Initial doubts with the approach to use visual research have helped me to understand the importance to be aware of the challenges the visual research can hold. Especially in its definition of subjectivity versus objectivity and the accurate and conscious use are essential for their correct implementation in the research process. Furthermore, it is essential to design critically, with reflection on the impact on the user, their need and their necessity. An understanding of the user and a research into societal constructs of the neighborhood is thus an essential aspect of architectural research. Through conversation and insight from local potential future users and the understanding of their perspectives, a combination of aesthetical <u>and</u> social architecture can be achieved.

1   Juhani Pallasmaa, foreword to Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture*. (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2014),6: *'In the modern era, architectural design has been self-evidently regarded as a discipline of the eye and the visual media.'*

2   Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto.* (Montreal: Montreal Architectural Review 4, 2017).

3   Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto.* (Montreal: Montreal Architectural Review 4, 2017), 41.

4   Selay Yurtkuran Tok, Ian Kaplan, and Yavuz Taneli. "Photography in Architectural Education: A Tool for Assessing Social Aspects of the Built Environment." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 2583-588, 2583.

5   Harper, Douglas. "Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation." *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 13-26, 13.

6   Selay Yurtkuran Tok, Ian Kaplan, and Yavuz Taneli. "Photography in Architectural Education: A Tool for Assessing Social Aspects of the Built Environment." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 2583-588, 2584.

7   Selay Yurtkuran Tok, Ian Kaplan, and Yavuz Taneli. "Photography in Architectural Education: A Tool for Assessing Social Aspects of the Built Environment." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 2583-588, 2584.

8   Selay Yurtkuran Tok, Ian Kaplan, and Yavuz Taneli. "Photography in Architectural Education: A Tool for Assessing Social Aspects of the Built Environment." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 2583-588, 2587. *'The more knowledge one has of the cultural contexts surrounding a photo, the more complex a 'reading' of that image may be'.*

9   Gillian Rose, *Visual methodologies.* (London: Sage, 2001), 16.

10   Selay Yurtkuran Tok, Ian Kaplan, and Yavuz Taneli. "Photography in Architectural Education: A Tool for Assessing Social Aspects of the Built Environment." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 2583-588, 2588.
     'Photography coupled with a process of interpretation can be a useful tool in nurturing a new generation of architects to be both materially and socially engaged.'

11   Georg Friedrich Koch. *Karl Friedrich Schinkel Und Die Architektur Des Mittelalters. Die Studien Auf Der Ersten Italienreise Und Ihre Auswirkungen*. S.l.: S.n., 1966, 187-188.

12   Otto Wagner. *Wagnerschule, 1902-03 Und 1903-04: Projekte, Studien Und Skizzen Aus Der Spezialschule Fur Architektur*. Leipzig: Baumgartners Buchhandlung, 1905, 18-19.

13   John Collier Jr, *Photography in anthropology: a report on two experiments* (*American Anthropologist* 59:843–859, 1957).

14   Marilys Guillemin, and Sarah Drew. "Questions of Process in Participant-generated Visual Methodologies." *Visual Studies* 25, no. 2 (2010): 175-88.

15   Sigfried Giedion, Werner Oechslin, and Gregor Harbusch, *Sigfried Giedion Und Die Fotografie: Bildinszenierungen Der Moderne*. (Zürich: GTA Verlag, 2010),

16   Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*. (New York: Routledge,2015),1.

17   Dawn Mannay, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*. (New York: Routledge,2015),1.

18   Gillian Rose, *Visual methodologies.* (London: Sage, 2001), 18.

19   Gillian Rose, *Visual methodologies.* (London: Sage, 2001), 19-23.

20   Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016),10.

21   Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016),11.

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Wagner, Otto. *Wagnerschule, 1902-03 Und 1903-04: Projekte, Studien Und Skizzen Aus Der Spezialschule Für Architektur.* (Leipzig: Baumgartners Buchhandlung, 1905).

Appendix

Appendix 1: Photographs of Paris - annotation of visual documentation with interpretations or narration of personal experiences
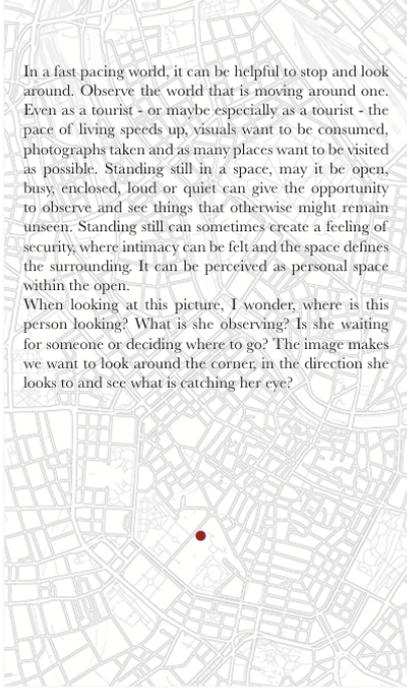
Appendix 2: Example of Visual Research Cards of Vienna creating the Index for an Intimate Encyclopedia

HOFBURG

[CHAPTER 01]
The flaneuse of a fast pacing world

Front: Image with title and related chapter indication

In a fast pacing world, it can be helpful to stop and look around. Observe the world that is moving around one. Even as a tourist - or maybe especially as a tourist - the pace of living speeds up, visuals want to be consumed, photographs taken and as many places want to be visited as possible. Standing still in a space, may it be open, busy, enclosed, loud or quiet can give the opportunity to observe and see things that otherwise might remain unseen. Standing still can sometimes create a feeling of security, where intimacy can be felt and the space defines the surrounding. It can be perceived as personal space within the open.

When looking at this picture, I wonder, where is this person looking? What is she observing? Is she waiting for someone or deciding where to go? The image makes we want to look around the corner, in the direction she looks to and see what is catching her eye?
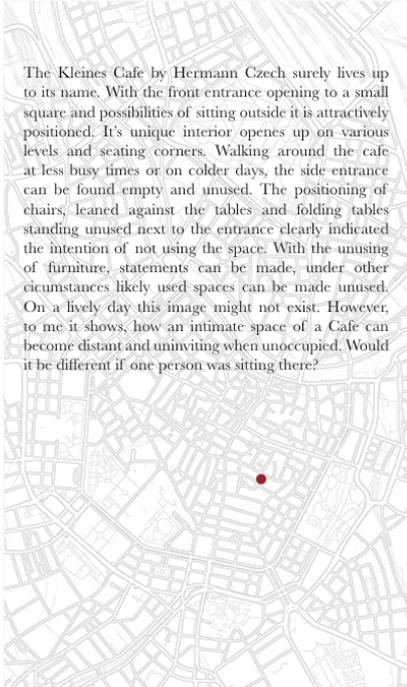
Back: Personal narrative relating to the image

KLEINES CAFE

[CHAPTER 07]
Please sit

Front: Image with title and related chapter indication

The Kleines Cafe by Hermann Czech surely lives up to its name. With the front entrance opening to a small square and possibilities of sitting outside it is attractively positioned. It's unique interior openes up on various levels and seating corners. Walking around the cafe at less busy times or on colder days, the side entrance can be found empty and unused. The positioning of chairs, leaned against the tables and folding tables standing unused next to the entrance clearly indicated the intention of not using the space. With the unusing of furniture, statements can be made, under other cicumstances likely used spaces can be made unused. On a lively day this image might not exist. However, to me it shows, how an intimate space of a Cafe can become distant and uninviting when unoccupied. Would it be different if one person was sitting there?

Back: Personal narrative relating to the image

Appendix 3: Intimate Encyclopedia of Vienna (l.) with Visual Index Cards (r.)

Appendix 4: '*Visual description of the photo evaluation process as it applies to architectural education*'
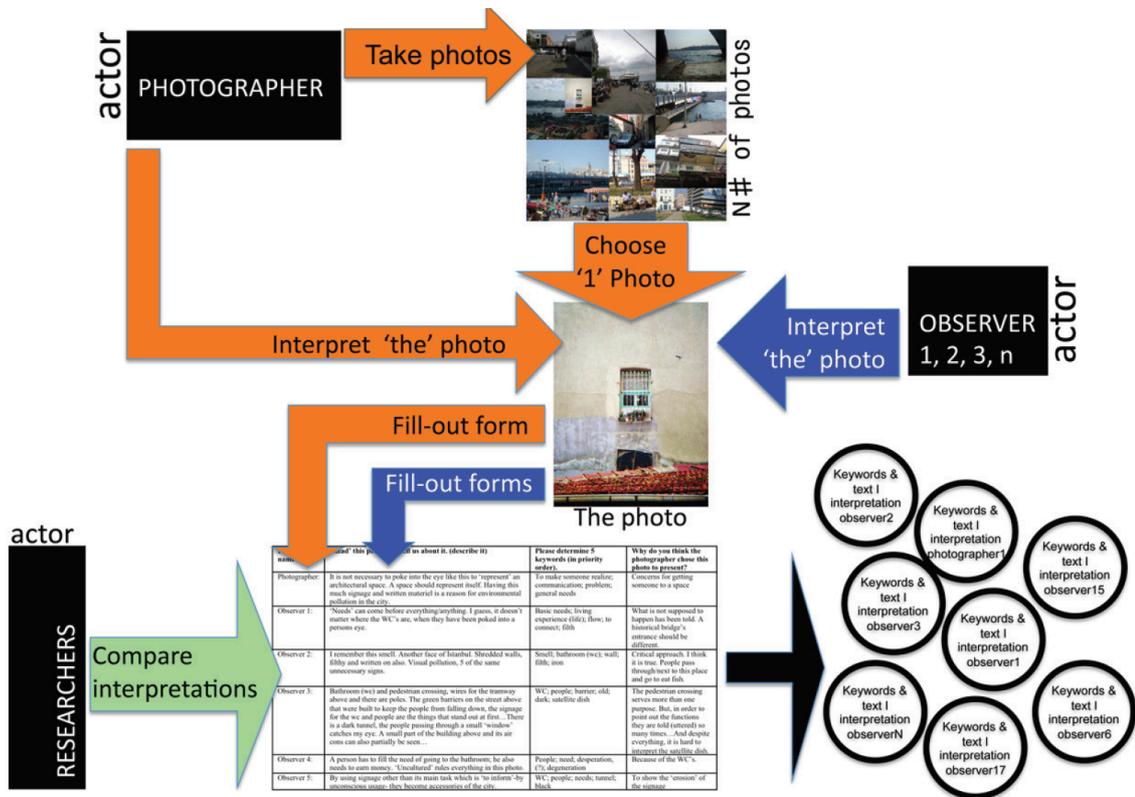
Selay Yurtkuran Tok, Ian Kaplan, and Yavuz Taneli. "*Photography in Architectural Education: A Tool for Assessing Social Aspects of the Built Environment*." Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 2, no. 2 (2010): 2583-588, 2585.

Appendix 5: '*Photo taken by a participant photographer / observer in the Karaköy area*' with a table showing a selection of interpretations.

Figure 2. Photo 1 taken by a participant photographer / observer in the Karaköy area.

Table 1. Interpretation of Photo 1 by photographer and observer participants.

Interpreter	Written interpretations provided as a response to the question: '-Read- this photo and tell us about it'.	Keywords provided by the interpreter in order of importance.	Answers provided as a response to the question: 'Why do you think the photographer chose this photo to present among the other photos?'
Photographer	*It is not necessary to "poke into the eye" like this to 'represent' an architectural space. A space should represent itself. Having this much signage, and written material are reasons for environmental pollution.*	*Make someone aware, communication problem, general needs*	*Concerns for getting someone to a space*
Observer 1	*'Needs' can come before everything/anything. I guess, it doesn't matter where the WC's are, when they have been poked into a person's eye.*	*Basic needs, living experience (life), flow, to connect, filth*	*What is not supposed to happen has been told? A historical bridge's vicinity should be different.*
Observer 2	*I remember this smell. Another face of Istanbul. Crumbled walls, filthy and written on, as well. Visual pollution, five same unnecessary signs.*	*Smell, bathroom (WC), wall, filth, iron (as material)*	*Critical approach. I think it is true. People pass through/by this place and go eat fish.*
Observer 3	*Bathroom (WC) and pedestrian crossing, wires for the tramway above and there are poles. The green barriers on the above street that were built to keep the people from falling down, the signage for the WC and people are the things that stand out at first…There is a dark tunnel, people passing through a small 'window' catch my eye…*	*WC-people-barrier-old-dark-satellite dish*	*The pedestrian crossing serves more than one purpose. But, in order to point out the functions they are told (uttered) so many times…And despite everything, it is hard to interpret the satellite dish.*
Observer 4	*A person has to fulfil the need to go to the bathroom; he also needs to earn money. 'Non-culture' is dominant in everything in the photo.*	*People, desperation, degeneration*	*Because of the WC's.*
Observer 5	*By using signage other than its main task which is 'to inform'-by unconscious usage-they became the accessories of the city.*	*WC, people, needs, tunnel, black*	*To show the 'erosion' of the signage..*

Selay Yurtkuran Tok, Ian Kaplan, and Yavuz Taneli. "*Photography in Architectural Education: A Tool for Assessing Social Aspects of the Built Environment.*" Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 2, no. 2 (2010): 2583-588, 2586.