

LANDSCAPE

PHOTOGRAPHS OF TIME AND PLACE



by Ferdinand Protzman



CHAPTER FIVE

BETWEEN GRIT AND GRACE

NOWHERE ARE THE EFFECTS OF MANKIND'S SHAPING OF THE LANDSCAPE MORE CONCENTRATED THAN in cities, where the natural terrain has been overlaid or obliterated by centuries of human habitation and endeavor.

Experienced live, the city landscape is imposing, changeable, and intemperate, moving between the extremes of appearance and reality, posing as a postcard skyline one moment and a shooting gallery full of human targets the next.

The city's shape-shifting presence has been a prime attraction for photographers since the medium was invented. In the 20th century, modernists such as Alfred Stieglitz were enchanted when weather or night-fall bathed New York City's streets and skyscrapers in grace. Brassai and Henri Cartier-Bresson and others were taken by Paris's effervescent life and its visual appeal.

Alluring as the city's physical appearance remains, contemporary photographic artists around the world are looking not just at its formal aesthetic qualities but at how it functions as a sociological and psychological space. Artists such as Alexey Titarenko depict the urban landscape as part of a complex social reality rather than a thing unto itself.

ALEXEY TITARENKO, "UNTITLED (CROWD 2)," FROM "CITY OF SHADOWS" SERIES, 1993
TITARENKO'S IMAGE OF ST. PETERSBURG PRESENTS THE COMPRESSED URBAN SPACE AS
ABOUNDING IN DICHOTOMIES AND GRAY AREAS. IN BIG CITIES, BEAUTY AND UGLINESS, WEALTH
AND POVERTY, EDUCATION AND IGNORANCE, VIOLENCE AND SERENITY ARE NEVER FAR APART.

In St. Petersburg, as seen in Titarenko's "Untitled (Crowd 2)" from his "City of Shadows" series, a crowd moves herdlike up one side of a set of steps. Why is unclear. The time exposure turns the people to dismembered wraiths flowing past in an almost amorphous mass. Their ghostliness highlights the anonymity and regimentation of city life and evokes the dead, the ever growing ranks of those who lived, died, and are still present as memories. This dark cloud of humanity, punctuated only by a few hands, feet, and blurred facial features, also calls to mind the grim photos of Jews being rounded up by the Nazis, as well as the irrational, morally indifferent masses that Elias Canetti identified as the seedbed of fascism in his masterwork, *Crowds and Power*.

The lighter tones of the building facades in the background, the geometry of their windows, and the bare trees provide a visual and emotional counterpoint, brightening the picture and its frame of reference. Perhaps this is just an audience leaving an open-air performance, or an artists' collective creating a live variation on Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." Focusing on the steps recalls André Kertész's 1927 photo "Montmartre, Paris" and the Odessa Steps scene from Sergey Eisenstein's film *The Battleship Potemkin*. Using traditional photographic methods, Titarenko, like a number of contemporary artists in various countries, mines such metaphorical and associa-

tive possibilities from the city's physical and psychological interstices.

Among the first to explore such spaces was Robert Frank, a Swiss-born photographer, whose photos of the United States in the 1950s presented cities and suburbs as a gritty mélange of blank walls, blank stares, and American flags. Influenced by Frank, many younger photographers, notably the "New Topographics," as Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, and others were labeled in the 1970s, took a cold-eyed bead on the urban landscape. Rather than Modernist romanticism, their photos were informed by conceptual and minimalist art, then the rage in Manhattan.

They caused a sea change. For the first time, leading East Coast galleries embraced photography, picking up many of the "New Topographic" artists. Since then, revenue from print sales has helped photographers such as Abelardo Morell pursue their individual visions and further expand the boundaries of urban landscape photography.

In Morell's "Camera Obscura Image of Boston's Old Customs House in Hotel Room, 1999," the city, usually depicted as outdoor space even though the cultural, social, political, and economic activities that distinguish its life occur indoors, is turned upside down. Morell connects the two realms, highlighting the indirect way many of us actually experience the landscape: as a photograph seen indoors. The lengthy exposure his technique requires also

dissolves the city's traffic, its inhabitants, and the hands of its clocks, turning the time-space continuum into a gray scale filling the space between appearance and reality, direct and indirect experience. As Jimi Hendrix sang in "Purple Haze," "Is it tomorrow, or just the end of time?"

The camera obscura yields different results in Vera Lutter's "333 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL: October 16, 2001." The people and traffic are also gone from Chicago's "Magnificent Mile." The viewer looks out at strangely incorporeal buildings that seem made of light. It's a spectral and beautiful image, haunting the mind with thoughts of what existed before Chicago was built and what it might be like without people.

Tropical heat has emptied the public thoroughfares except for a lone man striding down the deserted street in Luca Pagliari's "La Habana #14." The weathered buildings and blurry background give the impression of a city where nothing is new except the day melting away. Pagliari's picture is a meditation on time, physical decay, and the significance of an isolated individual in a mass society.

An air of detachment also permeates "Hanoi," by An-My Le. The white school looks new. The students congregate and wander off, just as they do everywhere. The anxiety and urgency that gripped this city when it was repeatedly bombed during the Vietnam War is long gone. But the elevated viewpoint suggests Le sees her native land with fondness but from an emotional dis-

tance. Her picture is a bittersweet reminder that photographing the landscape is an art of the in-between, which the space intervening between things separates the artist and the subject or the viewer and the subject, not only conducts but also generates meaning.

The swarms of people, vehicles, lights, and sounds in David Alan Harvey's "Via Toledo" show the other side of the city's intense side. The weight of the picture is reduced to a stone portal, possibly a church, in the upper right-hand corner. It is dark and dark in marked contrast to its well-lit neighbor, the café named Désirée, where even a saint might take an occasional coffee break.

Johannesburg, South Africa, as seen in Robert Hobbs's "Urban AntiNarrative #22," isn't built on order. It's a city in transition. The old system of apartheid that banned blacks from the urban center, has crumbled. The new Johannesburg is an African metropolis open to all. By zeroing in on places where the citizenry's behavior conflicts with civic social structure, Hobbs turns a crumbling wall into a metaphor for Johannesburg's and wrenching physical and social transformations.

Sebastião Salgado has been using photography to investigate social transformations for some time. Between 1994 and 2001 he produced his "Migrations"