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Images of the City Photographic Observation, Analysis, and Projection of Urban Qualities

Michael Wagner

Today photography is a ubiquitous means of communication, both in everyday life and in urban design practice. This medium influences our perception and thus our design of urban spaces. A deliberate and systematic use of photography therefore offers great opportunities for urban analysis. Carefully produced images are not only representations of reality but can also reveal our cities' unexploited potential.

Images in general and photographs in particular are today an established component of everyday communication. All of us are able not only to use images but also to produce them without any special prior knowledge. In the world of science they have become an indispensable instrument of insight and, as in all cultural disciplines, in urban design great quantities of photographic images are produced and used in practice. Mastery of this medium should therefore be a fundamental skill in everyday working life. In addition to its targeted production and use for professional communication within planning processes, photography is also able to make a valuable contribution to the analysis of urban spaces. Similarly to ethnographic or sociological analyses, it can help planners achieve a better understanding of (urban) spaces. It ought to be seen as part of a whole series of different methods for reaching a comprehensive understanding of spatial situations. While film focuses more acutely on movement and action, photographs have the opportunity of being observed in peace. Unlike maps, plans, texts, or diagrams, photography is able to reproduce atmospheres, seemingly unimportant details, or contexts. By shifting conventional perspectives, a photograph can also be successful in revealing the latent potential of urban situations, thus making resources in the urban realm visible, resources that hardly, or else only intuitively, enter the design process. In this sense the future of our cities can already be mapped out in photographs. New qualities can be developed in urban space out of unnoticed everyday activities, uses, and habits.

Flashbacks

Urban scenes were the very first motifs in photography. The reason for this was simple, namely that the first practical but complex photographic procedure, announced by Louis Daguerre in 1839 and which became internationally widespread within a few months, required that a silver iodide coated plate be exposed for several minutes. 1 This meant that the depiction of moving objects was not possible and the view of the city streets from the photographer's studio was an obvious motif. Fig. 1 The tech-

gins of photography see also Baier, Wolfgang, p. 47-119

Fig. 1 Daguerre, Louis: Boulevard du Temple, Paris, 1838–1839. Two people are visible at the front left of the picture. None of the other people who were moving at the time of the photo are visible due to the extended exposure time.

1 For the history of the ori-

2 Sagner, Karin et al., p. 279

nology was quickly developed further and the exposure times had already been reduced to a few seconds as of 1840. Paris in particular, its appearance having undergone fundamental changes at this time due to Georges-Eugène Haussmann's all-encompassing urban redevelopment, saw the emergence amongst artists of a committed photography scene. The city "provided artists with new motifs and an entirely new view of the city, a public view

beyond all conventions, which allowed the artist and viewer to experience the city as an ever changing entity. City space and urban life where seen as essential elements of modern life. The radical renewal of the urban reality thus not only changed the citizen's perception of the city but also the artist's view of the city." 2 The camera now allowed the transformation of the metropolis and every passing moment to be captured and reproduced, a new perception that, in turn, impacted on painting. Fig. 2 Over and above this, the targeted selection of location, angle, detail, and image composition enabled the creation of a subjectively interpreted portrayal of urban reality, giving the observer the opportunity to perceive the location of the photograph "with the eyes of a photographer."

Perception of the City

Large, modern cities and the new living and working conditions arising from them have been the subject of repeated criticism, particularly in the artistic sense. More especially, the destructive transformation processes of industrialization and the damaging influence of "juggernaut" cities on their residents have been documented in photographs and denounced frequently since the late nineteenth century. Fitting within this tradition, for example, is the book God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape by the architect Peter Blake, published in 1964. As the title clearly indicates, Blake is primarily concerned with making a dramatic demonstration of the consequences of bad planning. Fig. 3 He aimed to influence the planning profession, via the deliberate photographic accentuation of such situations as well as their comparison with what he saw as better examples. This he did successfully, as is evidenced by the positive reception his book received.





At around the same time but with the opposite intention, in Germany the photographer duo Hilla and Bernd Becher dedicated themselves to the encyclopedic documentation of monumental industrial complexes. In doing so they brought industrial buildings, seen until then as the banal and ugly representatives of a passing era, to the attention of a wider public; their documentation, compiled as typological series, conquered the art world, in which at that time photography played only a subordinate part. Fig. 4 The medium played an ever greater role in art in the decades that followed and "looking back, it can perhaps be said that the slow transition from the painted to the photographic image was in fact the art event of this century."3

One of the exhibitions in which the Bechers' image series were displayed was that in the George Eastman House in Roch-

Fig. 2 Caillebotte, Gustave: Rue de Paris, temps de pluie, Paris, 1877. The precise perspective of the surroundings, the use of depth of focus, and the seemingly arbitrary photographic moment are an exemplary illustration of the influence of the new medium of photography on painting. Fig. 3 Padridge, Ronald: Salt Lake City, Utah. In: Blake, Peter: God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape, 1964

3 Groys, Boris, p. 118













Fig. 4 Becher, Bernd/Becher, Hilla: series of images in: Loomis Coal Breaker/Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, 1974 Fig. 5 Adams, Robert: Tract Housing, North Glenn and Thornton, Colorado, 1973 Fig. 6 Gursky, Andreas: Salerno, 1990

4 Salvesen, Britt

ester, New York in 1975 with William Jenkins as curator. Under the title New Topographics—Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, Jenkins assembled works by mainly American photographers who focused on the transformation by man of American, mainly suburban, landscapes.4 While the Bechers were primarily concerned with the visualization of characteristic complexes and buildings in the process of losing their original functions, the focus here was more on the documentation of a landscape changing through traffic infrastructure, urban sprawl, and exploitation, with which the exhibition joined the 1960s' critique of civilization. Fig. 5 The opportunities for changing the analysis and reinterpretation of urban situations arising in times of profound social change can also be seen in many of the works of contemporary photographers: they display an intense preoccupation with the contemporary urban landscape in the process of transforming itself from the setting for

outgoing industrialization to the stage for the service economy of the twenty-first century. One example of this is the visual world of the German photographer Andreas Gursky, who, from 1985 to 1987, was a student in Bernd Becher's photography class at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art. With his large format images (and sometimes image series as well) he manages to create exemplary portrayals of current social and physical transformation processes and to accentuate these photographically. ^{Fig. 6}

Photographer and Space

Peter Blake, the Bechers, or Andreas Gursky might have very different motivations in their photographic approach to urban space, but what their work has in common is that it was made possible only through a conscientious reflection of the image contents before and during the process of image production. The relationship between the image-making observer and the object to be photographed therefore deserves a closer look. "It is not the camera but the photographer who takes the picture. Despite all the technical objectivity, each photo is necessarily subjective in its characteristics." 5 In order to capture his perception of a situation in accessible images the photographer has, as mentioned at the outset, a variety of means available for composing tightly framed fields of vision: not only the decision in favor of a visual object but also the choice of image composition, the detail, the perspective, the angle, the contextualization of the image elements, the photographic moment, and the technology

5 Overdick, Thomas: 2010, p. 138

6 Overdick, Thomas: 2010,

used (camera, lens, and film and/or digital image) contribute to the desired visual effect. This entire process of selection can be seen as an intensive preoccupation on the part of the observer with his own perception, the visual object, the image production, and the ongoing reflection of the interdependencies in this process. "Photography's media-inherent dialectic of being a (mechanical) image and a (composed) image at the same time forms the basis for a narrative style by means of which we can tangibly describe the visual expressiveness of cultural phenomena." 6 In the 1950s the representatives of what was known as street photography still saw themselves as a kind of invisible eye exploring the city in order to "freeze" seemingly arbitrary moments with the camera, thus generating images of reality that were as unaltered as possible. Fig. 7 Yet photographers are not only observers; their physical presence also makes them part of the

situation they capture as an image. Photography is not an analog, therefore, but a representation of reality, as a result of a process of observation and emphasis by the photographer. "To photograph is to confer importance." 7 Behind this conferring of meaning is also the direct, even if not always articulated, need



Fig. 7 Frank, Robert: On Saturday and Sunday the Street is Empty. Georgie is Alone, 1951

7 Sontag, Susan, p. 32

8 Overdick, Thomas: 2006, p. 284

9 Groys, Boris, p. 132

to actively interpret a situation. In this way the photographer can be able "to open up new perspectives on the familiar for the observer in order to raise issues, the solutions to which are to be sought through confronting represented reality." 8 In the process he slips out of the role of the creative artist to a certain extent and into that of the curator who "observes, assesses, and 'captures' things produced by others." 9 Photographs, therefore, can also be seen as theses drawn up as problem formulations and as attempts at initiating as broad a debate as possible.

Observer and Image

The depiction of an object or a situation as an image may be concrete, but its statement nevertheless remains so open and ambiguous that the observer is dependent on his own interpretation. He therefore assimilates a photograph's visual statement initially via his imagination and his (prior) knowledge. Viewing habits and personal interests play just as important a role in this process as the context in which the image is absorbed. Titles, captions, or the contextualization of a single photo in a series (as part of a documentation, for instance) can therefore make a con-

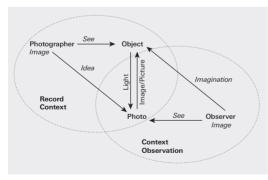


Fig. 8 Overdick, Thomas: Network of Relationships between Object, Photo, Photographer, Observer, Context, and Image

10 See Schnelle-Schneyder, Marlene siderable contribution to understanding a photograph. In the form of a silent question-and-answer game similar to a discussion or to a reader's encounter with a text, the observer can view the image from different sides and therefore practically "intersubjectively." The photographer has already gone through a similar process with regard to the real object depicted. In the ideal case, not only is the observer ul-

timately able to grasp the situation depicted, he is also able to understand the artist's embedded narrative. Consequently, there is yet another level superimposed on the contexts of image and observation: Fig. 8 the relationship between the photographer and the observer. 10

Planning and Photography

There are essentially three distinct areas of application in the use of photography by architects, urban designers, and planners: the analysis of existing (urban) spaces, the visualization of planned





projects, and, finally, the project documentation. Instead of taking a closer look at the capture and depiction of completed projects for purely documentary reasons, 11 here we are going to focus on the potential of photography for the understanding of existing urban situations 12 and their interpretation with regard to possible further urban development. Capturing everyday situations through photography generates quality-enriched images that are able to make a valuable contribution to the process of understanding and designing cities. Photography is thus in a position to convey information, contexts, and atmospheres to a degree not reflected in other media such as maps or diagrams, for example. ¹³ The integration of photography therefore enables the expansion of urban design analysis to include a visual narrative level.

Fig. 9 MacLean, Alex: The playful outlines of a shuffleboard court and pool in Miami Beach are most clearly seen from an aerial perspective Fig. 10 Nakheel Properties: Dubai Project Overview, 2010 11 See Heinrich, Michael, for example

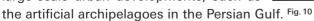
12 See Boucsein, Benedikt: "Situations," p. 25 in this hook

13 See Rieniets, Tim: "Mapping," p. 47 in this book

Gaining Insight through Photography

There are basically four distinguishable forms of the photographic portrayal of urban spaces: photomapping, as provided by the online service from Google Maps, for instance, is probably the most frequently used form of photography in everyday plan-

ning today. While its extensive availability makes it seem superficially objective, the exemplary images taken by the photographer, pilot, and architect Alex MacLean Fig. 9 illustrate how the deliberate selection of image detail generates meaning and how the boundary between art and science can obviously be blurred. The easy availability of satellite images on the internet has contributed to even already built cities being able to have a retrospective media impact on their own image through the design of large-scale urban developments, such as



A further possibility for approaching the urban realm is the systematic documentation already seen in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Here, the focus can be on a wide variety of spa-

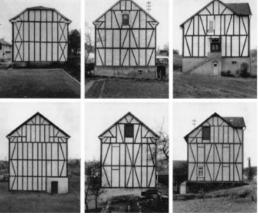


Fig. 11 Becher, Bernd/ Becher, Hilla: Typology of Half-Timbered Houses. Siegen Industrial Area, 1959-1961





Fig. 12 Schultze-Naumburg, Paul: Street in Lobeda, 1909. Left picture: "Example of good curve design in a road. The configuration means that all of the house fronts are visible." Right picture: "Adverse road conditions. The road is not heading to any visible destination. The bend is hard and sharp."

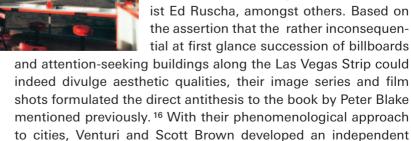
tial elements. Fig. 11 Since the late nineteenth century *image comparison* has not only been a common form of artistic observation and analysis but it can also be used to achieve a better understanding of urban qualities. Without doubt the most prominent examples of this are the Example—Counter-Example image pairs appearing in the *Kulturarbeiten* by the architect and theorist Paul Schultze-Naumburg, published between 1901 and 1917, Fig. 12 a series of books considered to be the manifesto of architectural traditionalism and which exerted extensive influence on the use of images by architects and planners.

Photo documentaries and essays produced through the reconnaissance and examination of urban spaces ultimately provide the most exploratory form and thereby also the most promising approach for gaining insight into the urban realm. An exemplary illustration of this is provided by two examples of the application of photographs in urban design analysis: for their book Learning from Las Vegas, published in 1972, Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and their assistant Steven Izenour used

suggestive visual language Fig. 13 that they also translated into their architectural and urban design projects, thus providing im-

portant stimuli for Postmodernist architecture. 17/Fig. 14

the research findings from a seminar on the city of Las Vegas held by Denise Scott Brown at Yale University. The image material created for this was strongly inspired by the books ¹⁴ published in the 1960s by the urban designer and architect Kevin Lynch and the photographs ¹⁵ of the artist Ed Ruscha, amongst others. Based on the assertion that the rather inconsequential at first glance succession of billboards



14 Lynch, Kevin15 See Ruscha, Edward, for example



Fig. 13 Scott Brown, Denise et al.: Restaurant on the Strip, Las Vegas, 1968

16 Blake, Peter

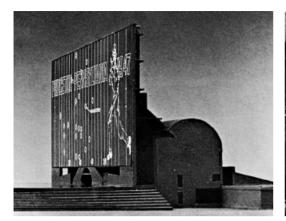




Fig. 14 Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates Inc · National College Football Hall of Fame, New Brunswick, competition entry, 1967 Fig. 15 Henderson, Nigel: Children Playing in front of the Hendersons' Terraced House in Chisenhale Road London 1953

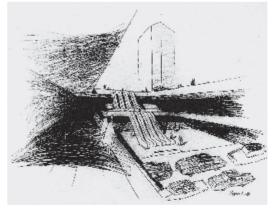


Fig. 16 Smithson, Alison/ Smithson, Peter: Re-Identification, 1953

Another form of the photo-essay was developed by the photographer Nigel Henderson, founder member of the British artists' circle The Independent Group, of which the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson were also members. It is said that Henderson's 1953 photographs deriving from forays into the working class district of Bethnal Green (where he himself lived) in London's East End inspired the Smithsons to describe their aesthetics using the term "as found." 18 And his images of children playing in the street do indeed suggest a great deal more than might be assumed initially. Fig. 15 By intentionally fading out the built-up surroundings and reducing the image to the area appropriated by the children for their game, he opens up a realm of opportunity previously hidden by the purely functional perception

18 See Lichtenstein, Claude/ Schregenberger, Thomas,

of the street. With the deliberate composition and the narrow focus of his depiction of a real situation, therefore, Henderson took the opportunity to design potential realities in his image series. Alison and Peter Smithson used his street scenes in the very same year for their CIAM Re-Identification grid, Fig. 16 attracting international attention. The spatial separation of motorized and slow traffic that derived from this ultimately became one of the guiding principles in their work, as can be seen in the



1957/58 competition entry *Hauptstadt Berlin*, Fig. 17 for example. Even though the separation of function alluded to by Henderson and relayed to planning by the Smithsons did not subsequently materialize, the example nevertheless shows how the city can

Fig. 17 Smithson, Alison/ Smithson, Peter/Sigmond, Peter: Haupstadt Berlin, competition entry, 1957-1958





Fig. 18 Citroen, Paul: Metropolis, photomontage, 1920 Fig. 19 Van der Rohe, Ludwig Mies: Design for Skyscraper at Friedrichstrasse Train Station, View from the North, photomontage, 1921

19 Lepik, Andres

be perceived and portrayed as a resource through the means of photography. The photographic images serve not just as inspiration or indicators of design-relevant issues; as a critical instrument they themselves have a direct impact on the design of urban developments.

Image Construction and Design

While the photographers mentioned above restricted themselves to the classic techniques of image production, there are other possibilities for creating the desired visual statement. Even by around 1850 the accidental double exposure of collodion plates had led to the discovery of the potential for overlapping different images, an idea sometimes used by artists as well. However, motifs making a significant departure from reality, long familiar in painting, became established art works only with the photo-collage technique developed by the Dadaists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Fig. 18 As already noted in connection with Schultze-Naumburg's Kulturarbeiten, the depiction of architecture using photographs became increasingly widespread in consumer and specialist publications after 1900. The montage now made the retrospective projection of designs possible in the medium of photography. 19 / Fig. 19 This technique prevailed

and the realistic photographic image went on to become the common form for depicting architectural and urban planning designs. These are generally images produced entirely by digital means, images that are "animated"—if at all—by only a few photographic visual elements like trees, people, and means of transport. Parallel to the ongoing improvements in computer technology, ever more sophisticated instruments for digital image processing and construction have developed since the 1980s,



the wide spectrum of these used intensively and as a matter of course in artistic approaches to urban images. Andreas Gursky's work is an outstanding illustration of this. Back in the early 1990s he began with the inconspicuous digital reworking of his large format photographs. With time, however, his focus shifted increasingly towards retrospective editing and composition. Gursky's more contemporary works continue to depict concrete places or events but are generally compiled from a multitude of individual image fragments to form a larger whole that ultimately makes the actual image statement using photographic means. In Gursky's own words: "the authenticity is not impaired; it is rendered all the more visible." 20 With his assembled concentration 20 Knöfel, Ulrike, p. 152 of individual scenes he creates allegories of contemporary global culture that surpass reality through their exaggerated force of expression.

The Danish photographer Peter Funch also produced the motifs for his series Babel Tales digitally. Fig. 20 The starting point in each case is the several hundred photographs of a place taken from the same standpoint. He uses this repertoire to condense events that occurred at different times into one image. In this way he endows the places with stories that could barely be told with a single photograph. Even if these stories might be fiction, they derive from concrete scenes encountered on site. This basis in reality contributes to the artistic result being accepted as a possible actual event even though the montage technique remains obvious. This makes it easy for the observer to conceive of how the reality narrated by the image could be. 21 Unlike portrayals illustrating what an image object is in as documented or as analytical a manner as possible, his photographs indicate that something can be. This also gives the photographer an implicit opportunity to take a creative approach with the camera and to construct narratives artistically. Nevertheless, the fact that only real, existing image elements can be used necessarily means staying close to reality, despite all of the interpretation and ma-

Fig. 20 Funch, Peter: Juvenile Bliss, from the Babel Tales series, 2010

21 For fiction and narration in photography see Blunck,

22 See Eisinger, Angelus: 2005

nipulation possibilities. The divergence between design and reality, familiar to us from other image media, does not occur in photography, therefore. ²² It is consequently an ideal medium, not only for artists, for approaching contexts and narratives going beyond reality as found.

The realistic construction of photographs also opens up a little-explored field for architects and planners concerned with design. These constructed photographs have a definite advantage over purely digitally produced renderings and collages that can be created completely independently of real space and are commonly used by planners to make designs appear as realistic and/or as "photo-realistic" as possible: the strength of both their production and their reception derives from their basis in reality. Photography is thus not just a technique for documenting or researching spaces but is always a creative act as well, one that cannot be carried out in detachment from the observed urban space. One key prerequisite for this in particular is the inquiring quest for suitable images of the reality before our eyes, however banal or routine they may appear initially. Thought through further, laterally, and anew, they harbor valuable potential for the design of sustainable cities worth living in, images which, once implemented, can also become a resource for images of tomorrow's cities. Photography is an appropriate means for establishing the value of these resources.

Depicting

Photography as a Means for Identification of Urban Potentials: A Project in Zurich

Foto Project Autumn semester 2010/2011

Often the qualities of urban areas cannot be perceived at first glance or with conventional tools of analysis. We can use the medium of photography in order to work out their specific potential. Through conscious observation, depiction, and evaluation it is possible to reveal unexpected characteristics of the city and lay down valuable foundations for the design of urban spaces.

The Zurich Nord region lies between the city proper and the airport. Due to its location at the edge of the city, it is strongly characterised by a plethora of infrastructure projects: the orbital motorway, airport, S-Bahn, refuse incineration plants, sewage works, industrial and commercial areas, television studios, and the back offices of large companies give the former Zurich suburbs and their neighbouring municipalities their eclectic feel. Zurich Nord has undergone massive changes over recent years with the upgrading of the airport site, improvement in accessibility with a new light rail system (Glattalbahn), and the spill-over effects within the metropolitan area. Existing housing cooperative complexes dating from the 1950s and 60s are being renovated or replaced by more tightly packed residential developments, while former industrial and commercial areas are being converted and brownfield sites redeveloped to provide additional space for housing.

This presents planners with a number of fundamental questions. How can the often highly heterogeneous juxtaposition of different uses, standards, and levels of intensity become an integral part of Zurich's urban landscape? What are the good points of this area—often unfamiliar to those who live in the city centre—and where is there potential for spatial, economic, and social development? The heterogeneity of the urban layout and the fragmentary nature of its distinguishing features provide few

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Workshop teaching: Kees Christiaanse, Simon Kretz, Marc Latzel (autumn semester 10), Joël Tettamanti (autumn semester 11), Michael Wagner

Students: Linda Epp, Nico Läser, Matthias Leutert, Eva Luginbühl, Saskja Odermatt, Monika Rudschewski, Angela Schütz 36

reference points for classic tools of analysis. Over the course of a week, a group of students set about discovering Zurich Nord with their cameras, in the hope of finding answers. Schaffhauserstrasse was chosen as the perimeter, as it leads out of the city centre and into the suburbs around the airport. A wide range of different uses come together along this street, as they do along other former thoroughfares that connect local places and have become integrated into the urban fabric. Photography is a good way of rooting out the resources that the city has to offer. The final image, as a product, is not the focus of the analysis. Wandering the urban landscape while paying attention to one's surroundings enhances awareness of the actual day-to-day use of public spaces, the different atmospheres in different districts, and aspects such as the design and demarcation of private spaces. The interplay between observation, image production, and reflection thus gives rise to a series of image sets that go beyond snapshots of the complexity of the urban space and not only develop their own subtexts and aesthetics but also elicit unexpected ways of interpreting the spaces under observation







Schaffhauserstrasse Different everyday worlds collide along Schaffhauser-strasse between Glattbrugg and Kloten.





Coming together Some unexpected places within the urban landscape provide a space for people with the same interests to meet.









Reflections The reflective glass façades of office and commercial buildings captured in photographs of the district.







Take-Off
For local residents, planes
taking off are a normal part
of everyday life.



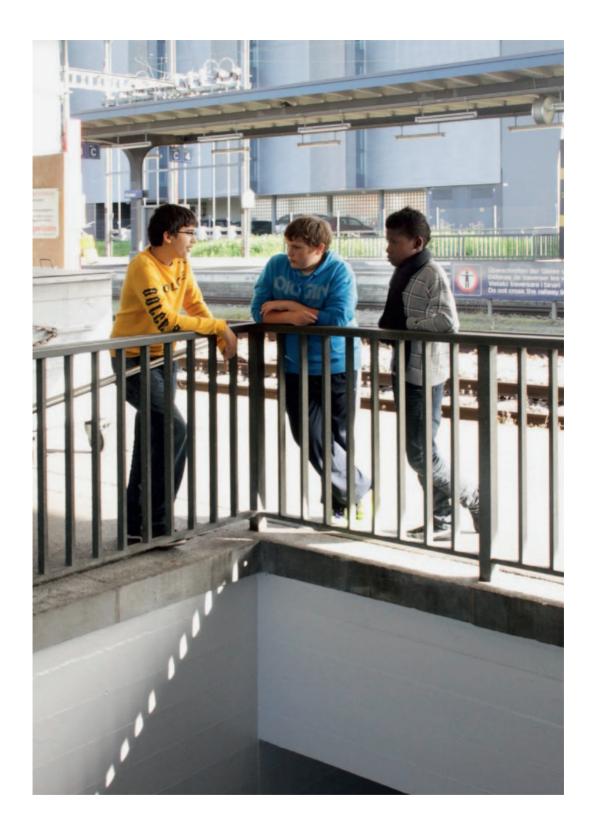




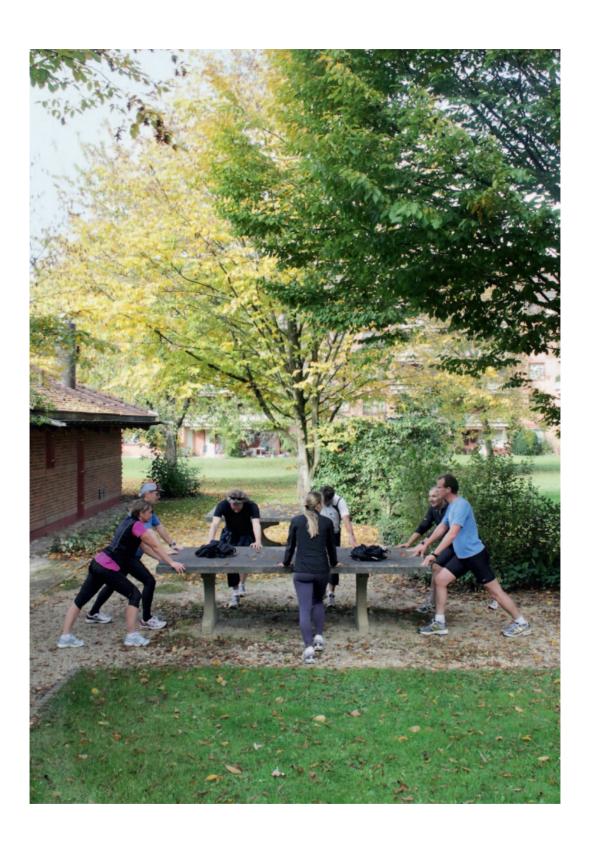








Meeting places
Temporary recesses in the
(semi-)public space are
suitable for a wide range of
users.









Hidden idylls Only a few metres away from the busy main street, gardens and spaces between buildings are becoming carefully tended places of retreat.

Picture Credits

- p. 26 / Fig. 1 Gallissaires,
 Pierre et al.: Der Beginn
 einer Epoche. Texte der
 Situationisten. Hamburg
 1995, p. 291
 Fig. 2 Debord, Guy: "Guide
 Psychogéographique de
 Paris" (1957). In: Gallissaires,
 Pierre et al.: Der Beginn
 einer Epoche. Texte der
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