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Urban Portraiture: Capturing the Personality of Place

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Urban Portraiture; Capturing Personality of Place

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Project Summary

This capstone aims to develop a prototypical process using digital photography to document the essence of place. A final visual narrative element is created with the intent of being utilized by architectural designers to draw inspiration and understanding from the setting in which they are designing. The process involved four distinct phases that culminated in a single narrative montage. These four phases included the actual photographing of the city, evaluating and taxonomy of the photographs into categories that best embodied the spirit of the place, the altering of individual photographs into their essential parts and pieces, and the process of montaging these individual pieces into a larger, single narrative. The project is a personal experimentation that utilizes a set of skills and values that can be recreated and repeated but also altered to culminate in a visual product that is unique to the designer and place.

Introduction

This project developed out of a belief that the knowledge and respect of an environment's current state is critical for the design process. Designers have a responsibility to consider the impacts of their work on the communities in which they are set. These range from the effects on people who will be exposed to them, the positive or negative implications on the inhabited and surrounding physical environment, the economic impositions or opportunities that it could create, and even the influence on a political system. Much of the information that is quantitative such as the site's relation to the sun, for example, is very straight-forward to obtain and available to anyone. What is missing in these studies and where the subjective nature of design could be so valuable, is documenting the qualitative aspects of place. The gap between the accessibility of quantitative and qualitative information of place has an opportunity to be curated by personal experience paired with designers' abilities to abstract and represent subjective material. This project aims to establish the practice of photography as a research method in documenting and understanding the qualitative facets of the context being designed for.

The accessibility of digital photography allows documenting, editing, and sharing moments like never before. I spent two years working with a portrait photographer, John David Pittman, who instilled in me a belief that a single photo has the ability to tell a story as well as words. After beginning design school and shifting the focus of my photos towards the build environment, I realized that a single image was equally as powerful but less capable of conveying a wholistic story compared to portraiture. We are so familiar with people—what their features are, the meanings behind facial expressions, their emotions—that a well curated portrait of a person can capture their personality in a single shot. The photographer knows these preconceived notions and can convey exactly what they want because of a universal understanding of these factors. Cities, towns, and cultures on the other hand often span many miles and have so many crucial characteristics and monuments that add to the personality of the place and cannot be captured in a single image. So how, if not in one, do you create a single visual narrative of place that is made up of photos? The majority of the capstone

processes were various attempts at understanding what combinations and alterations of images were capable of communicating personality as clearly as human portraits. The result is a sort of phenomenological portraiture that reflects a personal and subjective relationship to place.

Background

I will refer to and utilize the definition of place per Mina Najafi and Mustafa Shariff in their article, “The Concept of Place and Sense of Place in Architectural Studies”¹ being “Place is a where dimension formed by people’s relationship with physical setting, individual and group activities, and meanings.” The physical aspects of place can range from materiality, topography, light conditions, to climate factors. The social aspects of place, on the other hand, are things such as religious practices, traditional building construction techniques, or political climates. These characteristics can be divided into two categories of information—quantitative and qualitative. There are standards of practice that offer more direct ways of responding to quantitative data such as environmental responses and circulation requirements. The qualitative information presents the opportunity for the designer to make personal decisions about how the subjective is reflected in the end result. Alexander Tzonis and Liane LeFaivre in their essay “Why Critical Regionalism Today,”² give significance to the term ‘regionalism’ and frame it to offer a basis for evaluating the possibilities of post-modern architecture to capture the essence of a place in a contemporary way. They argue for an architecture that is inspired by the context of the site as well as the use of regionally-sourced design elements that are employed to engage members of the community to interact with and question its role. While Tzoni and LeFaivre provide a justification for the value of architecture influenced by its context, it is necessary to establish what sorts of regional design elements and factors are considered in contemporary practice and how they are ultimately reflected in the final architecture.

A firm whose beginnings sought to design architecture that was familiar and relevant to the area, Marlon Blackwell Architects’ work responds to the places in which it is set. The firm’s website describes the aim of the work as striving to “express the richness of the place and the ideals of the people they serve.” As described in “An Architecture of the Ozarks,”³ the work aims to not only respond to the specific site in which it is placed but to the larger culture of the place and surrounding community. Their ability to emulate vernacular forms and local materiality is unique to the firm’s developmental language. David Buege describes the Keenan Towerhouse [Figure 1], located in Fayetteville, Arkansas and constructed in 2000, as a vertical structure whose

¹ Mina Najafi and Mustafa Shariff, “The Concept of Place and Sense of Place in Architectural Studies,” *World Academy of Science, Engineering, and Technology* (dissertation, 2011), pp. 1100-1106)

² Alexander Tzonis and Liane LeFaivre, “Why Critical Regionalism Today?,” in *Programs and Manifestos on 20th Century Architecture* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1964)

³ Buege, David, Dan Hoffman, and Juhani Pallasmaa. *An Architecture of the Ozarks: The Works of Marlon Blackwell*. Chicago, IL: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, 2005.

form imitates the chicken-feed elevators present in the area or a trailer stood on its end.⁴ While the materiality of the Keenan Towerhouse utilizes the local wood of the Ozark Forest, the orientation and views created by the design of the structure further connect the viewer to the surrounding city and expansive horizon in which it is set. In addition to the influence of the physicality of place, Blackwell's work is economically conscious without losing the quality and integrity of the design. In 2013, the firm designed the remodel of the Northwest Arkansas Free Health Clinic, which serves those without insurance or means of paying for health and dental services. In an effort to embrace the economic limitations of the project and respond to the socioeconomic status of those that the clinic would be serving, the details of the building were meticulously designed and altered to meet the budget, while ensuring the same quality of design that would otherwise be implemented. Much of the firm's work abstracts the subjective character of place through familiar forms, materials, and construction techniques in a particularly elegant way.



[Figure 1] Keenan Tower by Marlon Blackwell Architects

Photography is a visual art form in which the viewer captures a subject (or subjects) through the control of light to create a still image. There is no shortage of talented photographers that capture the spirit of places around the world. I looked deeper into one—Tim Hursley—who has a broad range of work that exemplifies the types of photos that I aim to take in this project. Hursley has a wide range of work, from photographing the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York City to the

⁴ Buege, David. "Architecture or Entomology." In *An Architecture of the Ozarks*. Chicago, IL: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, 2005.

Henson-Holcomb Mortuary in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. As described by Jordan Hickey in an Arkansas Life article, Hursley's work shows the lingering presence of people, even if they aren't present in the photograph, and aims to capture the personality of a place.⁵ From my understanding of Hursley's process, he combines two different approaches to photography. On one hand, he captures images in the moment. Whether it be a random stop on the side of the road to capture a deteriorating grain silo [Figure 2] or an impromptu visit to a funeral home, his choices for the settings of the photographs that he takes are often unplanned rather than premeditated. On the other hand, Hursley describes knowing exactly how he wants to capture each image. He has a plan for how the image should be framed and lit, and the visual mood that he wants to evoke from his image before he ever takes the picture. I have studied much more of his work that captures the rural settings of the Southern areas of the United States. Through often complex and truthful images, Hursley shares with the viewer an insight into the reality of the everyday life of a specific place. His photographs, especially as a series, are able to tell a story with his mastery and careful usage of space, light, and camera angles. He describes his work as being a "relaxed search for light" and reliant on "irony and content." He seeks to create an image that differs from the norm and that is reflective of the spirit of the place it captures.



[Figure 2] "Agri in Arkansas" Tim Hursley

Studying the intersection of two critical visual practices has led me to find many parallels between the processes of architectural design and photography. Both photographers and designers respond to given information and make intentional decisions about how to represent it through a beautiful artifact. This information that offers a summative view of place is often studied in the initial phases of the architectural design process and, in my experience, is limited to objective and measurable data. In the design studios that I have experienced in the last five years of my education, almost all have inquired solely about the environmental data that would be influential in the design process and, in few circumstances, quantifiable social statistics available about the neighborhood directly surrounding the site. There is often a more personal and experiential aspect of place that cannot be learned or expressed

⁵ Hickey, Jordan P. "What Do Andy Warhol, Crystal Bridges And Southern Funeral Homes Have in Common? One Man: Tim Hursley." Arkansas Life, January 30, 2019.

through quantifiable information. Therefore, the traditional definition of place—a particular position or point in space—does not capture the qualitative aspects of space that this capstone is intended to pursue and represent. The breadth of the skillset that an architectural designer has allows us to respond to the quantitative data that defines a specific environment in tandem with the qualitative characteristics that capture the personality of the place.

Going into the production phases of the capstone I had clear understandings of what I wanted to capture with the images and why an understanding of place is critical in the process of architectural design. I was unclear as to the product that would result that combined the two. I think this aspect—the ultimate end goal—could change based on the individual using it as well as the place that is being documented. For me, this product became a montage that combined individual images and parts of images to form a wholistic view of the city. Photomontage, as defined by the Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism, is the assemblage of disparate elements into a composite whole often by way of juxtaposition.⁶ I have been particularly inspired by the work of David Hockney, an influential British artist whose montage work aimed to create a sense of depth and realism to photos that only portray a specified moment in time and space. Magda Michalska describes Hockney's art as a combination of painting and photography.⁷ Individual photographs are dissected and combined to form an image [Figure 3] with multiple perspectival views and aims to show a more comprehensive view of the place rather than a over specific and limited one. His work has been extremely impactful in the direction that the capstone has taken.



[Figure 3] Place Furstenberg, David Hockney

The image above is an example of what Hockney called 'joiners' which combine a series of photographs to create a larger image that conveys the reality of space that the artist experienced himself. In *Place Furstenberg*, Hockney depicts a popular

⁶ Sperling, Joshua, et al. "Montage." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, Routledge, 9 May 2016, <https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/overview/montage>.

⁷ Michalska, Magda. "David Hockney and the Camera: A Composite Polaroid Reality." *Daily Art Magazine*, 19 Oct. 2021, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/david-hockney-photographs/>.

courtyard-like street in Paris by taking a number of individual images using a similar vantage point and curating them to create a new abstraction of the space. The smaller, literal representations of the place get repeated, overlapped, and moved to express the personality of the street without losing the spatial clarity for the viewer. For example, portions of the road are repeated over one another to emphasize the texture and rich color of the ground while still maintaining its identity as the ground. The abstraction allows the similar colors of the street, sidewalk, and building surfaces to blend together. These become a background image that, if not for the context elements such as street signs, doors, and windows, may not be understood for their original identities. Hockney creates an image that allows the viewer to feel what it is like to be immersed in the street by allowing the qualitative characteristics—the strong colors and textures—to be experiential elements rather than literal ones.

Methods and Process

Phase One: Photographic Process

The research phases of the capstone began with deciding on a location for the case study to focus and starting the photographic process. In choosing a city to photograph, I prioritized the need for it to be a place that I had no previous knowledge of as to not bring any preconceived notions of what the place should or would be. After deciding on the hilltop city of Orvieto, I arrived by train with the intention of taking as many photos as I could to document my first experience. Over the course of seven different trips to Orvieto, I grew to understand the organization and history of the city more and more. It was important to visit the city in different weather conditions, times of day, and times of the week to have a holistic view of the climate and social activities. The overwhelming heat and strong shadows cast by the strong summer sun [Figure 4] are as important in understanding the personality of Orvieto as the brisk winter mornings when the fog surrounds the elevated city [Figure 5]. The city is characterized equally by its narrow, barren streets [Figure 6] as its large piazzas full of visitors during the holidays [Figure 7]. As I grew to understand the personality of the place, I had a better idea of what images I should be taking. Not knowing exactly what I would be doing with the images after I returned home, I made an effort to take photos from different vantage points, in different orientations, and made notes about where and when I took the photos. This became valuable in the post processing and montaging processes in being able to distort elements for new images within the final scenes.



[Figure 4]



[Figure 5]

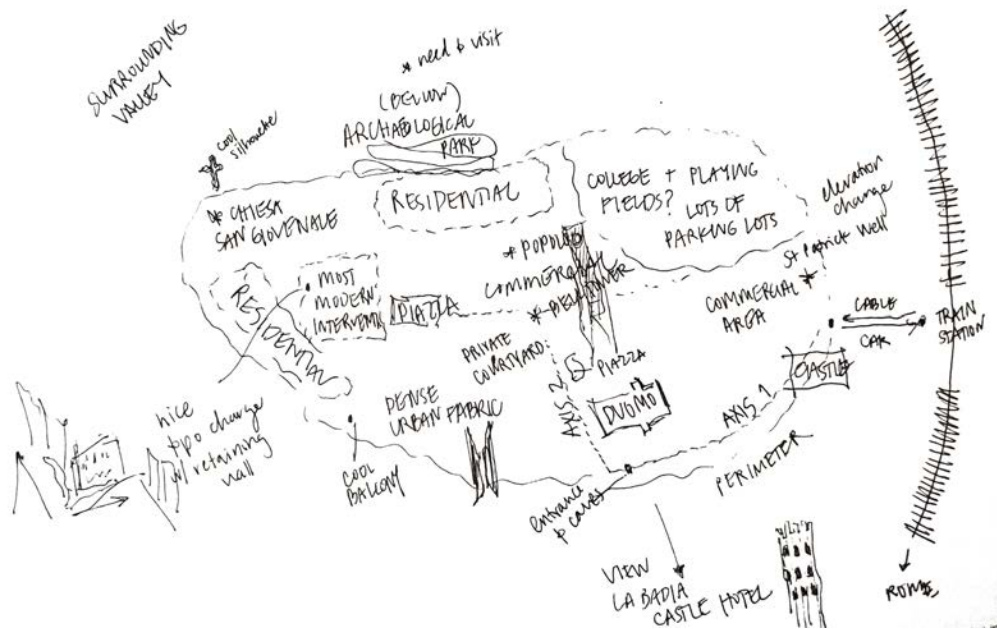


[Figure 6]



[Figure 7]

By the time I returned to Orvieto for the third time I was familiar enough with the city to begin planning specific photos that I thought best represented its integral characteristics. I made a number of maps and sketches [Figure 8] that planned the most importance vantage points and perspectives that I felt necessary to document. I visited and revisited many of the town's most iconic features, captured the street life and public spaces, and made a catalogue of the elemental objects such as various doors, windows, and material patterns.

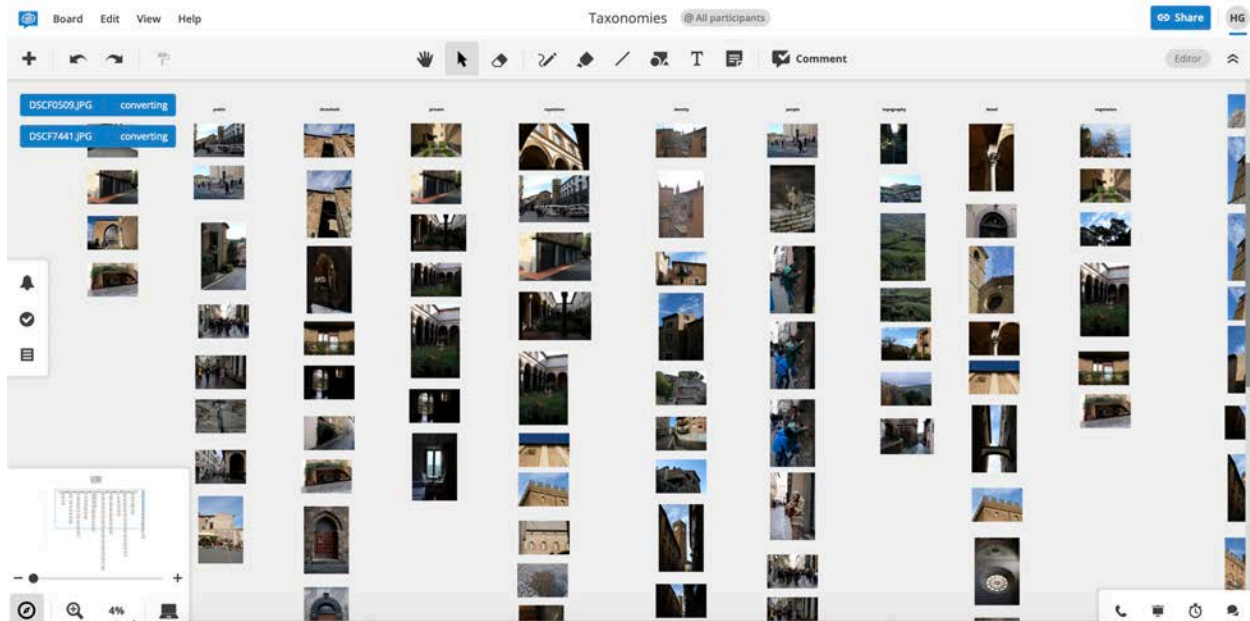


[Figure 8] Sketched Map of Orvieto

Phase Two: Taxonomy

I took more than two thousand photos in Orvieto that I needed to sort through and internalize to know what I was working with. Professor Terry suggested a system of categorization that broke the images into key groups that I felt best showcased the essential qualities of the place. The final groupings that I ended up with were—people, icons, private spaces, topography, vegetation, patterns, and elements. As I began sorting I soon recognized the relevance of both printing the photos and organizing them digitally. Seeing the photos printed taught me very quickly that I would need quality paper and that the lighting is skewed fairly dramatically when printed at a large scale. The categorization process was much more efficient digitally, where I could see a lot of the images at once and could manipulate and move them quickly. ConceptBoard [Figure 9] allowed Professor Terry and I both to look between categories, sketch over images to foreshadow what would come in phase three, and continuously add new images throughout the process.

As I began the process of choosing which categories each photo belonged in, we realized that many of the photos spanned multiple groups and lent themselves to be the most expressive of the essence of place. They were capable of conveying the most information and were often more spatial.



[Figure 9] Screenshot of Taxonomy Process Using ConceptBoard

Phase Three: Alterations

This phase looked at the photographs as individual products and explored the ways in which they could be altered, edited, and abstracted digitally to show specific bits of information. I selected a number of photos from each category (mostly ones that spanned multiple categories) and began trying various techniques in Photoshop and Illustrator to highlight various elements.

In order to call out specific attributes of the photos, I experimented with whiting out all other parts of the photos, desaturating aspects of the photos, and color-blocking elements to bring others into focus. Rather than allowing the viewer to draw their own conclusions about each image, I was drawing attention to the aspects that I intended to capture when I took the images. This process led me to have a series of different versions for each photo that I altered. Each series had various differences based on the information I wanted to call out. Below are some of the more successful iterations [Figure 10] of this process as well as a detailed description of the methods for one of the series—

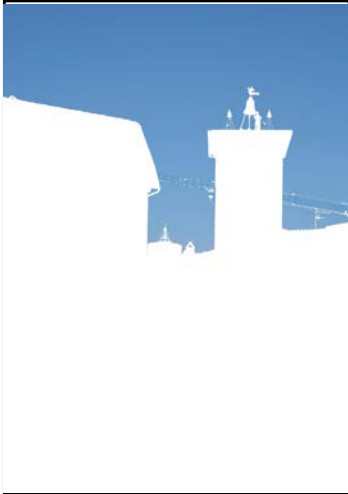


[Figure 10] Series of Alteration Processes

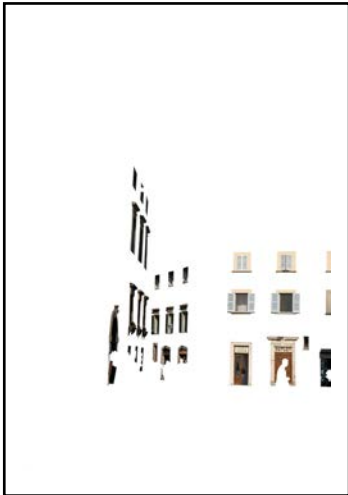
I noticed that throughout many of the images that I chose to alter, the sky and ground components were major factors in the composition. As seen in the top row of images in Figure 10, I did figure ground studies exploring the ways that the built environment meets the sky and found that it conveyed a lot of information about the city's density, topography, vegetation, and construction techniques.



Original Image: This is the raw image directly from the camera that hasn't been altered or edited. This was taken in the main piazza surrounding the Duomo in Orvieto. The photo fell into the "people", "patterns", and elements categories.



Iteration One: The first iteration that I explored for this image was the relationship between the roof lines and the sky. By whiting out everything besides the sky, it creates a prominent figure ground condition which highlights many key features that are characteristic of Orvieto. Besides the strong and clear reading of the formal aspects of the buildings, the contrast in color details the intricate bells and figurines that line the top of the buildings all over Orvieto. The figure of the crane also can be seen against the sky, highlighting the numerous construction projects happening in the city.



Iteration Two: The second iteration focused on the elements present in the image—the doors and windows. The perspectival nature of the elements is able to give clues to the spatial relationships in the image. I liked how the figures of the people standing in front of the elements also identify that the space is populated without needed them to be present. I felt that this iteration lost a bit too much of the context which led me to the third attempt.



Iteration Three: In an effort to maintain the legibility of the previous iteration in calling out the elements, I added back the remainder of the image but desaturated it. Initially it was black and white but Professor Terry's suggestion of changing the background to a sepia tone read much clearer. This was true for many of the images that I used a desaturation technique.



Iteration Four: This last iteration combines the second and third versions and to me is the best at communicating the most important aspects of the image. The perspectival nature of the elements paired with the insinuated roof line against the sky is a compelling diagram that represents the city well.

At the end of this phase of the capstone, I had many series of images that were interesting and conveyed a great deal of information about the city but there wasn't a strong relationship between the various groups. While they made sense individually, the series didn't form a strong narrative paired together. At this point, I met with the larger committee to get feedback about next steps and everyone agreed that these individual moments throughout the city could be montaged together to create a larger image. This solved one of the major issues that I was also facing—the spatial images worked great for the abstraction process but photographs that were focused on a single element or were zoomed in didn't provide much opportunity for any further alterations. This new method of montaging would allow these photos to become embedded into the larger narrative.

Phase Four: Montage

In order to understand the value of each image and what pieces of them were serving which purposes, we stepped back to phase two and completed a second taxonomy process. This time, rather than categorizing the images by specific content I looked at the qualitative versus quantitative images. I knew that the experiential images could be abstracted (colors, textures, light qualities) to get the essence across without being literal images. The initial task of adding the first image to the page became very daunting as everything I tried felt like it had to make sense spatially. Professor Terry suggested a background that combined the two consistent elements through the majority of the photos; the ground and sky.

I began tiling various portions of the images where the sky was a dominant figure, creating a gradient across the page that showed Orvieto's atmosphere at its brightest during the summer daytime to its cloudiest winter mornings. I struggled throughout the whole montage with how I should connect the various components of the visual narrative without losing the clarity of the diagrams I had created previously. The figure ground diagrams of the sky proved to be an effective transition between the

abstract qualities of the sky background to the white space that would be filled with the quantitative data. I tiled and overlapped portions of the 'skyline' [Figure 11] to communicate the formal qualities and intricate details that characterize the city as well as to introduce the figure of the monumental Duomo as you approach it from an oblique angle from either side. Orvieto's position as a town elevated above the valley felt important to communicate in the narrative and I explored using the same figure ground technique with images of the landscape. The result after this initial part of the montage process [Figure 12] was very emphatic and I felt like it could almost stand alone in telling a story about the city.



[Figure 11] Skyline Background



[Figure 12] Sky and Landscape Background

At this point, I began looking at the quantitative information and making decisions about what aspects were most important to include. The figural skyline lacked a sense of scale, so elements like doors, windows, and people were a good opportunity to bring life to the image. Images that included important features that expressed Orvieto's personality but didn't have a spatial or experiential aspect that could be used for the base were important in populating the white space below the skyline. For example, the streets of Orvieto are lined with shops on the ground floor whose colorful painted glassware and carved wooden products are displayed on metal grates and ornate tables outside of the front doors. I worked on photoshopping elements such as these [Figure 13] out of the raw images to build a sort of database to pull from and add to the visual narrative.



[Figure 13] Quantitative Data

During the second taxonomy process, one of the reoccurring ideas was the repetition of elements. I decided to use the intricacies on the facade of the church to introduce the repetition after realizing that full images too away from the skyline too much. I photoshopped all of the repetitive elements of the Duomo out and distorted them to be the same perspective as the skyline [Figure 14]. This same idea of repetition occurs with the windows along the skyline to the left of the cathedral and provided the opportunity for a transition into the more experiential images. I found an image [Figure 15] that clearly showed various types of windows and doors running along the shops in the main piazza. It also has a striking shadow line that cuts through the middle of the facade, indicating that the sun was very strong and brings me back to the warm afternoons in Italy. I went back, again, to Hockney's method of overlaying components of the same subject to give it a less literal portrayal and experimented with sepia tones to maintain the contrast of the image but let the colors of the sky and elements stand out. These tiled image roughly follow the shadow angle and provide a transition of the role of the windows as singular elements to surface for light to cast [Figure 16].



[Figure 14] Repetitive Ornament on the Duomo



[Figure 15] Original Image



[Figure 16] Edit Highlighting Experiential

This transition to the base of the visual narrative continues by using the ground as a stitch between the experiential photographs that capture the personality of place through lightness and darkness, scale, and thresholds between public and private spaces. The same sepia effect as well as the repetitive tiling method continues throughout these images, forcing their qualitative characteristics to be recognizable without the viewer being distracted by the changes in perspective and their unrealistic placement above, below, and beside one another. The duality of the sepia effect applied to these photos allowed for the abstraction of the images but also captured the warm, darker tones that I associated with my experiences of the city. These photos depict scenes throughout the city of the narrow alleys, private balconies, and underground caves that create an ambiance of darkness and materiality that cannot be photoshopped as individual elements for the quantitative data [Figure 17]. The process of choosing the photos for this part of the montage prompted personal reflection on my perspective of what Orvieto's qualitative characteristics were.



[Figure 17] Qualitative/Experiential Montage



[Figure 18] Visual Narrative of Orvieto

Conclusions

The practice of photography and its relationship to architectural design is largely limited to architectural photography—the photos taken after a design is complete. While there is merit to this practice, I think there are untapped opportunities to utilize digital photography to inspire design, critique design, and evaluate its success after the completion. Architectural design influenced by place, the deeper sense of the word, should not be limited to physical distances and constraints. A strategic method of documenting place through photos and sharing them in a narrative format could be

useful in breaking barriers in the design profession and result in more meaningful and impactful work. This method of photographing, categorizing, altering, and montaging is a prototypical system that could and should be adapted for the user and setting. The process was a personal one that involved making decisions about how I felt towards the place and how best to represent it. With the visual narrative being a composition, each element had to be considered as a singular object but also its relationship to its surroundings on the page. For example, the green and white stripes that line the sides of the Duomo in Orvieto are an iconic part of the city and I felt the repetitive lines should be included. I went through a series of three iterations [Figure 19] of manipulating the stripes, adjusting their relation to one another and the figures adjacent to them. This is to say that the processes of categorizing, editing, and montaging the photographs required critical reflection but ultimately led to a greater understanding of the city. As I manipulated images and grew to understand the limits of digital editing, I've made notes about how I would approach the photography process by taking numerous photos of the same elements and spaces from various vantage points to allow greater freedom in the editing phases.



[Figure 19] Three Iterations of the Duomo Stripes

As designers we have the knowledge to understand and respond to objective, quantifiable data to create responsible solutions to urban situations. We also have the skillset to investigate the qualitative characteristics of a place and choose how it will influence the built work. My understanding of this final idea of the visual narrative has transformed from being a final product to being a tool that would ultimately continue evolving if the design process ensued. Both photography and architecture have the ability to capture objective and experiential information and I believe that the opportunity for an overlap between the two could benefit both processes.

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