Images as a Tool of Discovery

Camilo Jose Vergara, June 28, 2005

Since the 1970's I have been documenting America's ghettos by photographing the built environment in Harlem, the South Bronx, Chicago, Newark and other places. I record mostly the buildings where people live, the factories, institutions and offices where they work, the streets they walk along, objects people use, and the fields and parks in which they play. I take photographs of the pictures and drawings I find on bedroom walls, inside abandoned factories and on external building walls. I also photograph objects people use such as toys, fire hydrants, and old machines. From the beginnings of my project I decided not to focus on images of poor people--often minorities who inhabit these areas, an approach the street photographer Helen Levitt might have taken. For me a visual history of urban America organized around portraits of minority residents would be very limited. People are often engaging; their feelings and emotions are moving; yet it is often difficult to know much about them from photographic likenesses. I found that images of the physical communities in which people live often better reveal the choices made by residents and city officials over the long haul. When presented together as a series, photographs of the built environment constitute the essential element of an urban history told from the ground up.

I use photographs as a means of discovery, as a tool with which to clarify visions and construct knowledge about a particular place, or city. I take panoramic photograph of cities from high viewpoints as well as from ground level. I prefer to photograph with even light, avoiding haze, harsh shadows or rain so the images are as clear and revealing as possible. A set of photographs coupled with interviews from a block, neighborhood or a building became the starting point for developing stories that I hope will help establish a place's changing identity. My work asks basic questions: what was this place in the past, who uses it now, and what are its current prospects? Using insights from a variety of disciplines such as ethnography, history, and archeology, I uncover patterns shaping the nation's poorest and most segregated post-industrial cities.

A photographic image is never complete in itself. As I work, I write down the location and record as much data as I can about when changes to a building occurred, and when new functions may have appeared. I write down the opinions of residents I overhear as well as my observations about the surroundings. Many times I find the names and telephone numbers of people I need to contact recorded on the facade of commercial buildings. Since my photographs are rich in information, which can only be gathered from people who live in the area, I share them with locals. People are often surprised to discover that an outsider has uncovered small details about the neighborhood they had overlooked. Remarking, for example, that a house down the block was painted green but is now painted red, or commenting that a tree on the corner has been cut down, helps prompt locals into ongoing dialogue with me.

In addition to extreme poverty and segregation, my documentation project reveals seven unique features of ghetto communities. The form these take, the frequency with which they are found, and the manner in which they cluster together and reinforce each other, contribute to the distinctiveness of these urban spaces.

- [1] Fortification: Buildings are turned into intimidating fortresses by eliminating windows, entrances, and erecting fences to seal the perimeter of the ground and the roof. This hardening of structures coupled with the use of video surveillance and guard dogs makes them difficult to get into.
- [2] Ruins: Buildings sealed up, or left open, decay, and often become filled with discarded materials.
- [3] Empty lots: Vacant land that nobody seems to want or cares for I place unclaimed land under observation, looking for the remains of what was there, for the vegetation that grows on them, for the efforts to clean it up and for the uses now given to it.
- [4] Social Containers: New buildings are built and old structures such as former hotels, hospitals and schools are converted into care-taking institutions such as homeless shelters, prisons, public housing projects, and drug treatment facilities to house the destitute, the addicted and the sick.
- [5] A Visual Language of Art and Advertisements: This street art includes ubiquitous memorials to dead gang members, drug dealers as well as people caught in the crossfire; murals, paintings and graffiti, the work of individual artists working independently as well as youth projects for the improvement of blighted cityscapes sponsored by schools and civic organizations.
- [6] Public Service Billboards: These public signs have short messages designed to teach ghettos residents how to live. The admonitions in these billboards are a contemporary equivalent of Ben Franklin's <u>Poor</u> Richard's Almanac.
- [7] Bringing Suburbanization to inner cities: New developments such as commercial malls, big box retailers like Target's and Home Depot's, entertainment centers, and new gated or fenced communities introduce suburban construction styles and values in inner cities.

Among other features that give ghettos their distinctive physical identity are large waterfront developments seeking to create safe middle class enclaves, and public projects that place there facilities no other

community wants. Inner cities are fertile grounds for storefront churches and check cashing places; conversely, banks, movie theaters, new car dealerships and business hotels are very rare.

These elements are present to different degrees in different declining cities and in different sections of these cities. They all suggest ways in which once thriving urban areas adapt to diminished circumstances. Architects and planners play only a small role in building, -their main shapers are politicians, demolition companies, homeowners, scavengers, arsonists and small contractors who seal vacant structures and do home improvement jobs.

In 1970, sociologist Lee Rainwater used the expression "the worst in ghetto living." to describe life in the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects of St. Louis. Since they were imploded other places such as the now mostly gone Robert Taylor Homes in the South Side of Chicago, the green fields of the East Side of Detroit and the drug markets of North Camden have become well-known examples of the worst urban conditions in the country.

Ghetto residents often identify themselves with their city; yet this identification is ambiguous since much of what they love about their communities exists only in memory. Fondly remembered neighborhoods are now dangerous, public services are poor, taxes are high, and food and other essentials overpriced, making the daily life of residents fraught with pain and disappointment. Since some disaster may strike at any time to make them angry, it is not surprising that they often choose not to look too closely at their world. Individuals or organizations committed to transforming these decaying communities almost always coming from outside and are referred to as "they." People are weary of visitors who come and probe their neighborhoods feeling that such inquires will inevitably reflect badly on them and their families and may even lead them to being relocated or displaced. Officials too are tired of having to respond to questions about their city's violent, corrupt, polluted, and run-down reputation, a place that is home to those who cannot afford to live elsewhere. How can they attract investors and bring jobs when such terrible images of their city prevail. For example, as recent billboards placed throughout the city of Gary, Indiana, signed by Mayor Scott King, read: "If you can't say anything good about Gary, don't say it."

Some may convey the same message to me as my work as it becomes public. I worry about how local residents will respond to my work. Will they like it? Is not my portrayal of the neighborhood too bleak? Will my images make a bad condition worse, exaggerating a situation acknowledged to be bad? Could these images challenge residents to express their city's identity in a different way? The last thing I want is to insult residents and annoy city officials.

Why, then do I continue with my documentation of America's least fortunate cities? The reason is because I find these places moving. Because their streets, panoramas of ruined buildings, their rubble, their crumbling water towers and smokestacks, have the power and the beauty of desolation. Because these landscapes are visceral, they make their observers stop and reflect. Because they are isolated from the mainstream, ghettos persist and grow. If more people were to experience these places, the more quickly they may be transformed.

One day the ghettos we have known for the last four decades will disappear. Indeed, much of the funding provided by the federal government to house the poor is spent on the demolition of public housing and its replacement with smaller units. Commercial streets such as Broadway in Gary are being razed and many industrial sites in Chicago have already been cleared and rebuilt while others are slowly being decontaminated. Images of Camden available on this site provide a link that makes the transition from the industrial city to its next phase comprehensible.

Rap music, the single most popular of ghetto exports is a strong presence in the spirit of our times. Yet its raw descriptions of life in the "hood" have not done much to encourage change among its enormous audience. Indeed the success of rap is tied to the persistence of the ghetto as rappers describe it. Rap encourages living for the moment, and spending conspicuously in cars and clothes. It glorifies violence and promotes drug use and irresponsible sex. Drawing its energy from these ghetto cityscapes, rap does not encourage the audience to visit, invest or settle down and raise a family in the neighborhood.

Documenting Camden

Camden made a tremendous impression on me when I visited for the first time in 1979. Its decay seemed to pour out of the row houses into the narrow streets, and residents seemed disoriented as if they were not living there, but just were passing through. Drug dealers appeared to control the streets as they manned dozens of corners, operating as if they were conducting legitimate business. Prostitutes along commercial streets were eager to offer cheap sex. Addicts and the homeless flowed continuously in and out of vacant buildings. There was a pungent smell of fire in the air. Since Camden's population peaked in the early 1950s, the city has shrunk to under 80,000 inhabitants.

When I visit I drive through the city selecting its poorest areas for closer and more detailed observation. Over repeated visits I have I documented the city's downtown, North Camden, the length of Broadway including most of South Camden and along Haddon and Mt. Ephraim Avenue, sections of southeast Camden. Recently I have spent time photographing Cramer Hill.

The city offers several high vantage points from which it's possible to repeatedly photograph urban panoramas: Northgate I, and II, two subsidized high rises, about 180 feet tall and the Ben Franklin Bridge. I photograph from City Hall and from the roofs of two of the old RCA buildings still standing. Recently I have made use of three high-rise public housing buildings, one in the south and the other two in southeast part of the city. Vacant factories and theaters also provide vantage points. On the streets I often elevate my shots by standing on the roof of cars. I carefully examine the images taken from high vantage points and ask myself questions about what I see. I observe new construction as well as demolition, and take note of the new colors selected to paint businesses and houses and of the various uses to which vacant land is put: play, parking, or dumping.

With its small row houses, Camden gives the impression of once having been a very neighborly city, a good place to raise a family, with space for having a couple of chickens and a tree in the backyard. I liked the way the Delaware River ran calmly bending along the city's edge with the skyline of Philadelphia raising on the horizon.

From battleships to radios, from fountain pens to tomato soup, Camden used to make it all. However having lost more than a third of its population, much of the city is now empty of people or simply razed to the ground. Camden is today a city of empty lots and vacant buildings--about 5,500 according to the 2000 census--as well as junkyards, and cemeteries. Also on the waterfront is a new entertainment center catering not to the city's residents, but to the region. Here and there are traces left by the earlier generations of Italian, Polish, Ukrainian, Irish, German, and Jewish immigrants who passed through the city as they pursued the American dream. In the midst of all is the presence of Walt Whitman, his home, his mausoleum, and an arts center that bears his name. Indeed his words, "In a dream, I saw a city invincible" are inscribed on western side of Camden's City Hall.

A small section of the city along the Delaware is now home to the New Jersey Aquarium, The Tweeter Center, the Victor Building Lofts, The Campbell Field Baseball Park, The Battleship New Jersey and new corporate office buildings. Nearby is the Camden campus of Rutgers University. Most of the city remains what a former city mayor called a reservation for the poor.

"The structure of a city is like a vessel that shapes the spirit of inhabitants," said German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in 1950 on the occasion of the 1900 anniversary of the foundation of Cologne. Even in the midst of their bombed out surroundings residents of this city were proud of their ancient heritage and were ready to make sacrifices to rebuild. They had no better place to go.

Camden faces a similar challenge. It is much more difficult to create a sense of identity that could lead to a rebuilding from within in Camden today than in Germany after the War. People who lived in the city during its years of prosperity now reside in the suburbs. They don't know the contemporary city except by reputation. Very few of today's residents saw the city in its prime. Most of them are young—their median age is 27. Many came from other places from Puerto Rican, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and from a variety of American cities. As the city revitalizes, neither the past nor the contemporary identity of the city will prevail.

Going Public, Camden Website

About three years ago I learned that the city was about to change dramatically. The State of New Jersey committed \$170 million to stimulate investment in the city. Among those responding was Cherokee Investments, a private developer of brownfield sites that plans to build 5,000 houses along the Delaware River in Cramer Hill. The development will result in the relocation of over 1000 current residents.

Two years ago The Ford Foundation approached me with an offer to document Camden and Richmond, California. I have taken this opportunity to update, to re-conceptualize, and to organize my work in Camden, and to select images to present on the web. I like the idea of a cursor traveling through a map of the city, searching for images of buildings and other sites, and being able to see how those change through time. For Camden I was challenged to present ghosts of the past, the ruins and the still living city as one so that people anywhere could explore its forms. It was important to establish the site's identity and style; that is to explore the elements that in their various forms define the city's current character. I felt the urge to create a strong central core of images and ideas to which those familiar with the city as well as total strangers could respond.

I want this website to lure someone, somewhere to take a digital tour any time of day or night, to familiarize themselves with the special character of the city, to become interested and eventually drawn to see Camden for themselves. In my wildest moments I imagine the site as a way to end the city's isolation.

I include images showing panoramas, entire blocks and hidden corners of the city as well as some of the many things that have been left behind overtime such as a half a century old giant bulldozer, gas stations from the 1920's, and the image of a red fish on a still functioning business. I want to explore the rich patterns and textures created by abandonment, and boarding up of buildings as well as by fires and vegetation growing inside buildings. Amidst all this I want to show the survivors: the women who still wash their stoops everyday even though the neighboring house is a burned-out wreck, the workers that clear the plots behind vacant houses to grow gardens, community organizers that create schools, youth programs and build housing in the worst parts of the city, and the children dressed in uniforms, walking through desolate blocks on their way to school.

In assembling the Camden site I have placed a web of sensors, that is series of images that allow the audience to visualize the city as it changes. As the documentation continues, the site will grow in complexity and richness. I will search for Camden's new form as a divided post-industrial city as well as continue to add photographs to existing themes.

In addition to present themes I will add a selection of places where people buy food and clothes. In the process I intend to test the theory that in Camden one cannot buy a business suit or a dress shirt, as a local reporter told me a decade ago. New themes will be the presence of Walt Whitman with links to his poems relating to Camden and the work of William Hargrove, Camden's master unbuilder and head of Hargrove Demolition, a firm that claims to have razed five thousand buildings in this city alone. The development of the Delaware waterfront and its borders, Camden's Berlin Wall, with the hyper-ghettos in the north and south will be another theme.

As part of the site I will have links to other websites. Some will show the products made in Camden. There will be links to the city prosperous past showing for example the yacht built in the city for Commodore Vanderbilt, the exquisite fountain pens once made there by Esterbrook and Enrico Caruso coming to record for RCA.

This site will become interactive and open to commentary. I expect people to respond and even challenge the virtual city presented. I fear is that if we are not careful it may become yet another place people gather to tell stories about the good old days. Yet I would rather have a website portraying principally the recent history of postindustrial Camden, a visual depiction of a city going through a generation of decline, that is of becoming increasingly different and segregated from the rest of America, and on this basis begin a dialogue that seeks to understand that difference.

Web designers Cory Clarke and Dan Di Simone will open the site to the audience. The Camden website will be able to accept stories and commentaries from viewers, thus making the city's recent history a continuous dialogue.

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