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Seeing the sites: perceptions of London.

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Chapter 8 Seeing the Sites – Perceptions of London

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London

Introduction:

This chapter investigates photographic images and accompanying texts provided by a group of people to illustrate their perceptions of London as a capital city. Many of the images represent an iconic building or symbolise an aspect of the City, but the commentaries present demonstrate nuanced connections with the City. These are textured and animated by experiences, people and stories which are based on memories of different times and places. The study reflects "multiple and heterogeneous ways of experiencing cities" Bell and Haddour (2000:1) and is developed from a multi layered approach which draws from visual anthropology and social semiotics. It is intended to present a series of glimpses of the city to illustrate how a group of people *connect to London and how they use visual images to illustrate those connections*.

The research findings are evaluated in the context of the literature on cities, city tourism and capitals and are discussed in terms of four themes: *power, gaze, mobility, and connections*.

London – Global City and National Capital

Pearce (2007) highlights the importance of Capital Cities in terms of their symbolisation of "*national identity, status and power*" (2007:8), their embodiment of traditions and symbolic significance, and their important role as seats of government and centres of transaction and consumption. As a national capital London is a city of cultural, political and symbolic significance and includes a concentration of iconic buildings, cityscapes and monuments that reflect this role (Hall, 2002; Pearce, 2007; Ritchie and Maitland, 2007). London carries out functions which are simultaneously nationally and internationally important and is identified as a world or "Global City" (Abrahamson, 2004; Bold and Hinchcliffe, 2009), characterised by its centrality in global economic networks and cultural.

London's built symbolic representations are linked to the most powerful institutions in the nation many of which are also internationally significant, including the government (Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament and City Hall), business (the Swiss Re Tower (Gherkin) and Canary Wharf), the monarchy (including Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London), and the church (Westminster Abbey and St Pauls).

London is "not unplanned but without an overall plan" (Bold and Hinchcliffe, 2009:9), and "has evolved....as a Global Capital by default" (Hardy 2006:87). It embodies layers of history which are reflected in the diversity of its built environment and population today. In the centre it comprises two cities, the City of Westminster reflecting the political power of Parliament and the City of London reflecting its financial/commercial power. Its complexity and polycentricity has increased as it has grown and engulfed surrounding settlements.

London is a city of multiple roles and identities, contrast and diversity which are reflected in its architecture, multi-culturalism and extremes of wealth and poverty. Many writers have attempted to chronicle and develop understanding of London, by developing a range of biographies, encyclopedias and guides to illustrate incidents,

themes and stories about the City (including Ackroyd, 2002; Hibbert, 1969; Weinred and Hibbert, 1983). The most recent highlight the complexity and rapid evolution of the City which “cannot be conceived in its entirety” (Ackroyd 2000:2) or “encapsulated in a single view” (Bold and Hinchcliffe 2009:9).

Tourism and tourist images of London

In 2006, London was identified as the most popular city destination in the world in terms of international visitor arrivals (Bremner, 2007) and attracted 1.69% of the global share of international tourism in 2007 (Visit London, 2008). Tourist visits are concentrated in Westminster followed by Lambeth and Camden and visitors are motivated by a range of factors including history/heritage, museums/galleries parks/gardens and pubs/restaurants (LDA, 2007) emphasising the importance of the broader city ambience on the decision to visit.

In London the difficulties in separating touristic and non-touristic experiences (Burns and Lester, 2005; Franklin and Crang, 2001) are particularly acute. The City’s symbolic, cultural and business roles attract people to move from other places in search for work, study and leisure opportunities. These flows of people have created a constantly shifting, diverse, multicultural and transnational population. The separation of tourist and non tourist is made more difficult in a modern vibrant city where roles are complex and constantly changing. People shift between host and guest roles and in a single day might experience the city as a resident, student, worker and tourist.

Westwood and Williams (1997) identify the uniqueness of the way people perceive the city which is mediated through “political, sociological, and cultural associations” (1997:181). Mackay (2004) claims destination image arises from “a compilation of beliefs and impressions, based on information processed from a variety of sources over time (2004,390) some before visiting the destination such as guidebooks, literature and media images and some based upon experience at the destination. London is globally familiar through media representations, and images of the City are widely used to indicate its various significant roles. Despite this perceived familiarity, visitors find themselves in an alien environment when visiting for the first time. Photography has a long history of being used to not only inform the viewer but also to allow the photographer to interact with and gain control over an alien environment (Urry, 2002). Photographic images, whether captured by tourists themselves or ‘found’ in magazines, brochures, websites, television and films influence play an important role in structuring their “gaze”, influencing they choose to see and photograph in a City.

Method

This research draws from data collected in connection with an ongoing research project which evaluates the images peoples create to illustrate their experiences of London. A multi-layered approach was adopted, drawing from social semiotics (Barthes, 1977, Chandler, 2002, Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Jewitt & Oyama, 2001) and visual anthropological analysis (Collier 2001, Pink, 2007). This methodological approach was selected to enable reflexivity and to reveal multi-layered and diverse meanings that contribute to peoples perception and understanding of places (Stevenson and Inskip, 2008).

In November 2006 and 2007 first-year undergraduate students at the University of Westminster were asked to provide one photograph of London they had collected and that had relevance to them. Each photograph was accompanied by a commentary of

100-200 words discussing the chosen image and detailing their age, nationality and duration of residence in London. Tourism students were selected on the basis of their international profile and mobility. Ninety-eight images were provided, fifty-seven of which were selected for the research underpinning this chapter. The chosen images were produced by students who had been in the City for between one month and five years and whose perceptions of London reflected their mobility and their relatively recent relationship with the City. The study group reflects the ambiguities and blurred boundaries around tourism, mobility and migration in the city (Coles and Timothy, 2004; Franklin and Crang, 2001 and Larsen et al., 2007) and the multiplicities of associations that influence perceptions of the city. This blurring is illustrated by a commentary from a student who has been in London for just over a month and provides one of the first photographs taken after her arrival. "The picture seems to be taken by a tourist, and at that time I did consider myself as a tourist...I was just discovering London" (2007)

The collection of photographs and associated commentaries were analysed in terms of subject, composition, meanings and the relationships between the images and the image-makers. After preliminary examination of the images themes were identified around commonalities, including iconic buildings and structures, street scenes, friends and family, and transport. The accompanying written commentaries were analysed in order to determine how the images were being used to connect the photographer to London. Social semiotic analysis was used to examine the surface and hidden meanings of the images of the most widely chosen subjects, Big Ben and the London Eye, to develop an understanding of what is being communicated by those images, taking into account both their content and context (see Stevenson and Inskip, (2008) for more detailed discussion of the methodology employed).

The group's perceptions of London were explored by considering the relationships between the photograph, the text and the person who created them. Four main themes were identified (*power, gaze, mobility* and *connections*) in the context of the wider literature on cities and tourism (including Abrahamson, 2004; Bell and Haddour 2000; Pearce, 2007; Urry, 2002 and Westwood and Williams, 1997). These themes reveal a range of meanings and draw attention to the complexities associated with experiencing, and relating to a complex and multifunctional capital city.

Which images are chosen to represent London?

The fluidity, mobility and diversity of the population of London are illustrated by the study group who has lived in London for five years or less and comprise twenty six nationalities. They are aged between 18-33 and most have chosen to live and study in London following experiences as tourists in the City. The majority of images provided by this group can be interpreted as reflecting tourism or leisure experiences as "guests" in the City.

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Figure 1 Images of London by theme

The fifty seven images were scrutinised and were themed into broad groups: *iconic buildings and structures*, *street scenes*, *people*, and *other* (including panoramas, parks and transport). 35% of the photographs showed *iconic buildings and structures*, with the most frequent occurrence involving a combined image of Big Ben and the London Eye – two structures which are physically proximate but significantly different in function and type. 88% of the images, illustrated clearly identifiable places in Central London, and photographs of many of these places could be found on the Visit London website. At one level these can be perceived as touristic images, however they show places with wider political/administrative, business, transport roles which symbolise London and reflects its Capital and World city role. The remaining 12% were difficult for the researchers to locate as they did not include city icons or popular streetscapes (such as Piccadilly Circus or Covent Garden). As such they could be seen to represent a more familiar or intimate relationship between the photographer and the city.

The relationships between photograph and image-maker

Morgan and Pritchard (1998) and Pink (2007) contend that the way people make images of places reflects the meaning of those places to them and is affected by their experiences, background and values. These relationships were explored by considering the photographs in the context of several easily identifiable demographic characteristics of the image makers: nationality, length of time in London, and age. There were no significant patterns or clusters when the photographs were sorted by nationality and by age. However clusters could be identified around the length of time spent living in London with four of the five panoramic views and all transport images produced by people who had been in the capital for one year or less.

Each photograph was examined in the context of the accompanying written commentary, 74% of which provided detailed and nuanced personal interpretations explaining the connection between the image and the photographer. Further connections were identified between these images and their meanings to the photographers and were categorised under five main themes. 52% of the photographers made connections with more than one of the above mentioned themes in their commentaries reflecting a multiplicity of connections.

- Friends and family-52%
- Home in London -33%
- Home outside London -31%
- Study or work places – 12%
- Revelation - 7%

The home outside London category relates to images which illustrate of a memorable experience in London undertaken when the photographer lived in another place or when they first arrived. The revelation category shows images that surprised the photographers and contrasted their experience with their expectations of London. modern buildings, multi-culturalism and its crowdedness.

Message in a photo

Semiotics is concerned with establishing the meaning of texts (which can be any medium) by the study of signs and the way they are communicated by those texts through representation (Barthes, 1977; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001). While it seems easy to determine the denotative meaning, or the common sense meaning, of an image (a

photograph of Big Ben denotes the clock tower attached to the Houses of Parliament), evaluation and analysis of the connotation requires an understanding of the codes that inform this connotation (a photograph of Big Ben may be related to the importance of the British political system or the start of the TV news). It is through socio-cultural conventions that the meaning of signs, which is arbitrary, is agreed upon and these can vary according to the point-of-view of the producer and consumer of the message.

The photographs in this research may be of Big Ben and the London Eye, but their deeper meaning to the image maker can be revealed by examining the composition of the image and the accompanying text. The images represent two well-known buildings in a particular urban setting. The interaction suggested by the image is that the buildings are important amongst the other buildings in the photograph (Big Ben is tall because it needs to be seen from a distance, London Eye is tall because the viewers on the wheel need to see for a distance). If, say, the Big Ben tower is in the centre of the image and the photograph is taken looking up at the tower then the composition of the picture indicates Big Ben is of central importance to the message and has power over the viewer (it is looking down, like an authority figure).

While it was possible to generate ideas about their connotation from the images alone, it was clear that this was substantially enhanced by the written text. Taken at face value, all we could be sure about the images was that they were photographs of Big Ben and the London Eye, taken at a certain time of day or night, and, because of the instruction for this project, they had something to do with London and had some meaning to the student. Analysing their composition led to some ideas about the roles of the elements within the image. Combining this with a detailed reading of the text led to a clearer view of the meanings that the image maker was attempting to communicate.

Six photographs were examined in depth, using criteria developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and Jewitt and Oyama (2001): *representational*, *interactive* and *compositional*. Analysing how the image represents the subject, interacts with the viewer and is composed help to formalise its interpretation. These criteria acknowledge that the interpretation of images is not only based on formal rules of composition but also on how the viewer's social context informs their interpretation of the signs within the image (Chandler, 2002). Three featured both the London Eye and Big Ben (1, 3, 6), two featured Big Ben (2, 5) and one was of London Eye (4). All featured the river Thames.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

The images were analysed using these criteria. Vectors, such as bridges, draw the eye around the image and indicate a strong relationship between the Eye and the Big Ben tower (particularly in 1 and 3, to a lesser extent in 6) and between these elements and the viewer of the photograph (1-6).

The framing of the image, and the relative importance of the elements within it are used to determine the key elements, here the London Eye and Big Ben (1,3,6), Big Ben (2,4) and the London Eye (4). The gaze of these elements in all of the images was at the viewer, drawing them in, although the angle of the photo and the distance it was taken from indicated a detached, impersonal relationship between the viewer.. The viewer's position relative to the subject indicates whether, for example, London Eye is more important than the viewer (4), or vice versa (1,6).

This type of image analysis attempts to provide the viewer with a clearer understanding of the meaning of the images by highlighting the key elements, the relative power between them within the image and between them and the viewer, and offers some insights into the message the photographer is constructing when composing the photograph and choosing it from a selection for the task in hand. A closer reading of the accompanying written texts, in conjunction with the analysis of the content of the image, gives an even clearer understanding of the particular message the photographer is attempting to communicate.

For example, in image 1 the photographer discusses her experience of riding on the London Eye:

“...ever since I was a little girl and watched the Disney cartoon ‘Peter Pan’ where they show Peter Pan standing on one of Big Ben’s clock hands.”

This ‘magical’ narrative is linked to her experience of being in London when she first arrived, and her choice of photo was made to communicate this. On careful examination of the image a child can be seen standing in the neighbouring pod of the wheel, looking down on London. This links closely to the experience in the movie where the children fly with Peter Pan and strongly reinforces the photograph’s message of London as a magical city.

“I have always wanted to see this magic city in real life.”

Although London is powerful (Big Ben and the accompanying Houses of Parliament indicating adulthood and the power of the status quo) it can be subverted by youth (Peter Pan) with the support of friendship. This reinforces the use of myth to conquer the fear of the unknown:

“London means to me, a new experience of life and a chance to improve my knowledge by attending the university here as well as living in a very dynamic and multicultural city”

Magic and myth are also strongly represented in 3 and 4. Image 3 was taken from the hotel window of a room once occupied by Impressionist painter Claude Monet:

“He was really inspired by the view from his riverside suite and produced some of his famous paintings of the Thames.”

and the ‘spectacular’ nature of the image, an ‘amazing feeling’ and magically personifies history. He also talks about the power of youth and how London can make anything happen:

“That is why I feel special and I have chosen this picture, because in London everything can happen with you.”

The photographer of image 4 discusses less about these issues in the text, but the abstract nature of his image indicates the likelihood he is trying to communicate a similar magical feeling (and his skills as a photographer), by choosing an image where the sky is not its usual colour and bright light is emanating from the water.

References to friends, leisure, and beauty in the texts indicate how the photographers are attempting to assert their relationship with London using these images and, although friends are not the subject of the photo they associate the well-being of

friendship with these images:

"I went for a ride with two of my best friends"

"I took it .. when I went out to meet couple of friends"

"It is one of those places where I love to walk along the river"

"You can see the beauty of the building"

"I spend most of my leisure time in that area as this is where I meet my friends most often"

They also all discuss how they took the photograph themselves, naming some of the elements or mentioning the time of day, the point they stood at when taking the image, or other specific elements that they could only know if they had taken the photograph themselves. In this way, by asserting ownership over the image (it is standard practice to 'take' or 'capture' a photo), they assert ownership over London.

"This picture is very important because it represents the first contact I had with London."

"I had a chance to capture this astonishing picture"

"The picture is captured by me"

"I took the picture myself"

Their experiences of London are generally favourable and associated with romantic notions of pleasure and opportunity. They do not attempt to explain what can not be explained, but present it in the image along with their feelings and leave interpretation to the viewer:

"I like the lights of the 'wheel' and their reflections on the water and also the clouds above the city"

"It is an amazing feeling when you have the opportunity to see the London Eye and the Big Ben together, especially when everything is calm, moderate and peaceful."

Perceptions of London

1. Power

In the study and on the Visit Britain and Visit London websites the most common image used to illustrate the city is of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament (16%), reflecting the political functions of the capital city and the importance of Big Ben as a national icon. Other iconic buildings and structures used in this small sample include the Tower Bridge (5%), and London Eye (4%) which are also illustrated on the header of the Visit Britain website. This would indicate that they are perceived as symbols of the Nation as well as the City.

While 7% of images show commercial developments (Canary Wharf and the Gherkin) the economic role of London is not discussed in any commentaries. One image of Canary wharf is used as a link reminding the photographer of New York, a place where she would like to visit, while another contrasts it with a relatively tranquil image of St Katherine Docks. The two images of the "Gherkin", are accompanied by text discussing its architectural status as a modern iconic building, noting the contrast to the heritage and tradition also associated with London.

These photos associate London with its capital city role as a political capital rather than its economic and cultural role. The dominance of the Big Ben images in the found

literature and in the sample indicate importance and symbolism associated with the political dimensions of the City. The recent addition of the Eye appears to have reinforced the importance and symbolic status of Big Ben.

2. Gaze

The images illustrate the importance of the London Eye as a site (or sight) to be seen and a place from which to view the capital (16% of the photographs include an image of, or are taken from the Eye). Due to its location and orientation, the Eye focuses people's gaze (Urry, 2002) on one part of London, drawing attention to and reinforcing the centrality and status of buildings and features which are close by such as Big Ben, Houses of Parliament and the River Thames. The commentaries provided with the London Eye pictures clearly identify the symbolic role of the buildings and structures in the photograph. Several refer to books, films and paintings based in London, and it is through these cultural signifiers that personal connections are made to the city. Rather than directly stating, "*This is a place I love to visit*", they attach themselves to London by using a cultural artefact (a book, film or painting) as an intermediary "*It reminds me of my favourite book/film/painting*", reinforcing the difficulty in expressing emotional connection with London in purely verbal terms.

The images that have been categorised as panoramic views are those with no obvious central subject and are taken from parks or Halls of Residence. Without the input of the photographer to inform us, the gaze in these panoramas is far less structured than the gaze from the eye. The texts try to comprehend the vastness of London, but normally from a vantage point that has personal meaning or significance to the photographer such as their accommodation, work place or local park.

3. Mobility

Physical or geographical mobility in the City is illustrated by the cluster of pictures of public transport in the city which were taken by the most recent arrivals. "This is my view from my window....I can see all the people that use the tube and just enjoy the movement of people" (2007). The idea of movement in and around the city is also illustrated in many pictures which are taken "on the move", from the Eye and from buses or in commentaries which describe the photograph being taken on a journey around the city.

The images and texts also reflect the diasporic nature of the group (Coles,2004) with people representing London in terms of memories that connected them to home, friends and family elsewhere. They also reflect a temporal mobility; some people use images that were taken in the past to illustrate lasting or pleasant memories of a visit to the City; others use images taken specifically for the research which remind them about an event in their past and a place that connects them to the city. For example one provides a photograph of the Millennium Bridge which she first saw when she won a trip to London in an art competition. It became significant when she moved to London as a place for reflection.

"Whenever I was upset or missed by family and friends, I went to the Millennium Bridge, drank coffee and watched London switching its lights on"(2007).

These photographs and commentaries show how recent arrivals in London use symbolic and iconic images to illustrate personal connections and meaning and how their relationship with the city changes over time.

"The picture reminds me how much I have opened my mind since then (I first arrived)" (2007).

“Two years ago my image of London would certainly be different...today after more than two and a half years living in London I seek much quieter places, where I can relax and get away from everyday busy life.”

People in the group chose to represent London in a way that reflects the place of the city in their own world, the commentaries making connections with work, home and friends. While the photographs are place- and time-based, the commentaries are derived from multiple places and times. In the study group perceptions of London are derived from good and memorable experiences.

4. Connections

These photographs show experiences of London, illustrated by images which are symbolic of the photographer's connection with London. Many of these images are considered by the photographer to symbolise the city and nation and they are used as backdrops to discuss an event which connects the person to the city. In this context it is not surprising that the study group has produced a wide range of images to demonstrate varied connections to and identity within London.

Bell and Haddour (2000) discuss how people “appropriate” places in cities, creating spaces for themselves. The commentaries illustrate how the photographers in the study appropriate or connect with places which are imbued with meaning based on an experience that is captured and formalised through the act of photography. They show connections to the city that are shaped and animated by a range of experiences which are situated within memories and connections to other places, times and people. The act of photography formalises this act of appropriation and is illustrated by a picture of a clocktower in South Norwood. This is identified in the commentary as the first photograph taken by the student as an “inhabitant not a tourist” and is appropriated as “my Big Ben”(2007).

The photographs quite closely reflect the “capitalness” of London with many providing images that symbolise national identity and history (Pearce 2007). However the commentaries identify a much more subtle and nuanced interpretation of the city and are more concerned with the collection of experiences, aspirations and feelings engendered by the city. The students who chose to represent family and friends provide stories about significant events or moments that connected them on a very personal level to London.

Conclusions

This investigation attempts to evaluate the use of images and text to illustrate connections between individuals and the City.

Photographs show a symbolic element which is then enlivened by a story about the experiences of the photographer . *Big Ben is identified as a the dominant symbolic construction of the meaning of London, however the commentaries show the extent to which images of Big Ben have multiple meanings to different individuals who use photographs as a way of illustrate a variety of experiences and connections to the City. The commentaries show how Big Ben is appropriated by individuals as a symbol of their connection to the city and interpreted in the light of their experiences.*

The photographs show some commonalities in the photographers' gaze as they seek to illustrate the City. However the commentaries identify the extent to which

perceptions of the city are textured and mediated through a wider range of associations (such as a visit with friends and family, their home in London and their memories of home elsewhere). Again, add some comments to lead the reader.

This chapter presents and evaluates photographs of London, recognising their central importance in our experience and perception of places. It explores images produced by recent arrivals who are culturally diverse, reflecting complex social networks (Larsen et al, 2007), diasporic elements (Coles, 2004) and mobilities arising in a multifaceted Global and Capital City. Commentaries focus around first or significant experiences in the city which often relate to touristic experiences in the City, illustrating the “embeddedness” of tourism in broader social practices/phenomena (Burns and Lester, 2005). The study illustrates the complexities involved in creating and using images to illustrate perceptions of London. The photographs, though physically located in London, are tied to experiences, ideas, comparisons and memories of other places

While the images produced by the group show a variety of places, London’s role as a Capital City is clearly important in the group’s perceptions. The majority focus on buildings and street scenes which are considered to be symbolic or represent the traditions of London as a Capital. Big Ben, as its dominant symbolic construction, both in the found images and those produced by the study group, reflects London’s role as a national and internationally significant political capital. However the commentaries provided with these pictures show how the photographers engage in a creative process to appropriate this national icon to create multiple meanings, interpreting it in the light of their experiences and using it to provide a focus for their identity within the city.

Capital and global city status present many complexities not just in terms of the economic, political cultural and social functions but also in terms of the mobility, diasporas and complex social networks of the people who experience it as residents, migrants and visitors. This study, while presenting a limited sample intended to reflect some of these complexities of experiencing and perceiving the city, highlights the varied and complex connection between people and places.

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Urry (2002) contends the process of photographing an object (or, here, a place) encourages the photographer to become an “amateur semiotician”, idealising places and representing iconic images.

The relationship between the images provided in the study and found images were considered by viewing images on two websites, Visit London (www.visitlondon.com) and Visit Britain (www.visitbritain.com). Perhaps add URLs as these sites were introduced earlier; see pages 3, 8. Both websites use partial images of Big Ben on their “header”. The Visit London site has nineteen images on its home page including two larger images of buildings associated with culture and history (the British Museum and Hampton Court Palace). Visit Britain has a photo gallery with changing images on its home page but uses a photograph of the London Eye to illustrate its UK Hotels and City Guides Section. Additionally, on searching ‘Google Images’ for ‘London’ images, the first page of results provides eighteen pictures, nine of which are of Big Ben, the London Eye or the two together. The full range of London images on all three websites are diverse and encompass a range of activities and buildings. However photographs of Big Ben and the London Eye dominate,