

Social Media Platforms and Representations of the Urban Landscape

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Abstract: This essay is presented that discusses the relationship between social media platforms and representations of the urban landscape. On the one hand, the various social media platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for landscape photographers. Firstly, they can share photos and videos about the urban public spaces and environment with each other timely and conveniently. Secondly, the built-in special effects of social media platforms make everyone can be the “civilian artists”. Their observations and discoveries enrich the context of urban landscape. Thirdly, photography has become a new social language with the help of social media platforms. Lastly, the mass audience and powerful infectivity of social media platforms affect the representations of the urban landscape positively. On the other hand, social media platforms also affect the representations of the urban landscape negatively. First and foremost, the lack of values in photos uploaded to social media platforms is a serious problem. Secondly, the photos and representation of urban landscape are spoiled because social media platforms stifle people’s creativity. Lastly, the attractive photos uploaded to social media platforms just represent the unreal world.

Keywords: Social media platforms; Urban landscape; Photography; Mobile phone; Users.

1. Introduction: Social Media Platforms and Urban Landscape

In September 2012, Google announced that it has acquired Nik Software, the multiple image editing plug-in and tool for iOS and Android. In April 2012, Instagram, one of the most famous online social networking services that enables its users to take pictures or videos and share them either publicly or privately, was acquired by Facebook for \$1 billion (about £793millions), which is its largest acquisition to date. [7]

These two acquisitions make people pay more attention to the relations between photography (especially mobile photography) and social media platforms. At the present time, Social media is so popular that the numbers of active users of famous social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr are counted in millions and they continue growing (see Figure 1). [18] With the great success of Instagram and other image-and-video based platforms in this social media era, the discussion about the influence of social media platforms on photography becomes increasingly intense.

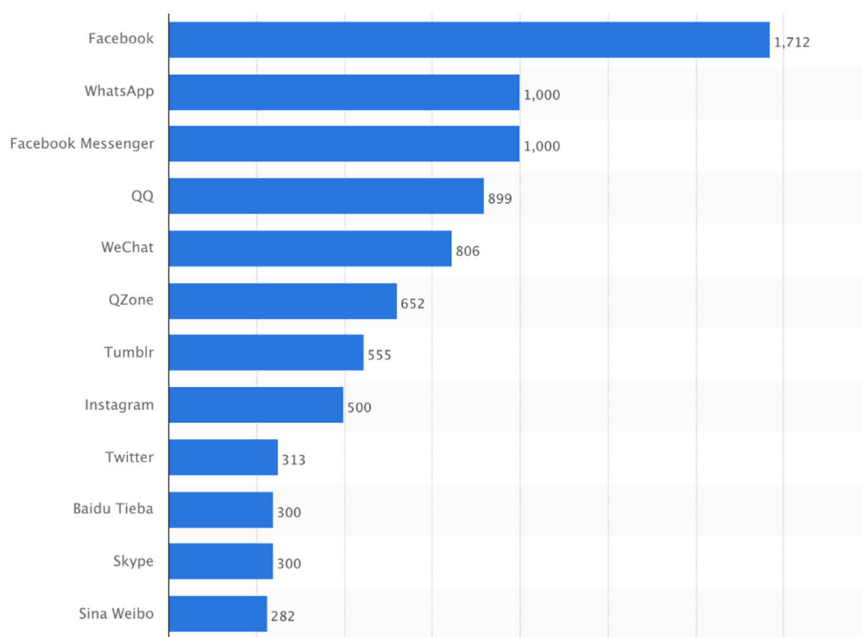


Figure 1. Number of active users in millions

The explosive growth of photo and video-enabled smartphones and the use of social media platforms are transforming the representations of the urban landscape through moving and still images. The amount of urban

landscape photography generated daily by social media platforms is mind-boggling. Instagram alone generates nearly 450 thousand posts which are used the hashtag #urbanlandscape(s). A large amount of users of social media

platforms post the urban landscape photography from nearly anywhere around the world in real-time. [9]

2. Advance Effects of Social Media Platforms on Representations of The Urban Landscape

With the increasing quality of smartphone cameras and rapid expansion of social media platforms (especially photographic social media), taking photos of urban landscape has become quite omnipresent. This chapter investigates how the social media platforms affect the representations of the urban landscape positively.

As Erin Despard mentions in her journal :

Arguably, photography has played a special role in elaborating and securing landscape's secret powers, since it was invented just as the landscape 'way of seeing' was becoming naturalized. [3]

The invention of camera smartphone and social media platforms radically improved the 'way of seeing'. Instagram, famous social media platforms, also claim that it is 'a new way to see the world.' [3]

2.1. Built-in special Effects Make "Civilian Artists"

Faced with the rapid development of social media platforms, anyone can be the 'photographers' even they haven't any professional experiences of photography. When we now ask 'who is a photographer', the answer is no longer anyone who is employed as a photographer. The answer is that potentially, anyone and everyone can be a photographer. There are no longer standards as the dividing line that separates social media platform users from photographers.

In fact, most of the social media platforms don't have large numbers of excellent photographer users to create and upload the high-quality photos. In order to solve this problem, social media companies are trying to develop intuitive and friendly interfaces which are much more easy to use. [8]

Take Instagram for example, it provides users various built-in special effects such as filters, cropping and blurring to make the mediocre photos look more interesting. The users don't have to master PS or other professional editing software, these special effects are enough for ordinary users to create the "stunning" photos of the urban landscape. DiCampo says:

Instagram has opened us up to what I'm calling 'The OMG Crowd' of general Instagram users outside of the circle of photographers – young people who, whether they realise it or not, are exploring the world through an inundating stream of photography. I could not go offline and have the same impact. [6]

At the same time, People don't have to spend hours in the darkroom producing prints. They can create extraordinary photos by using built-in special effects and adore the possibilities that built-in special effects bring to photos. Photos tell stories and post-production enhances those stories.

As a result, Instagram enables the ordinary users and casual amateurs to become civilian photographers of the urban landscape. [16] People become more confident of their photos and willing to share it on the social media platforms. Actually, all of these affect the representations of the urban landscape positively.

Although it remains to be discussed that whether the social media platforms built-in special effects improve the professional skills of photography, these special effects

stimulated people's interest in urban landscape photography. Along with the development of social media platform, people are more willing to captured the fascination with and the appeal of the land and its expanse.

2.2. Timely and Convenient

The social media platforms which are based on the photos create a micro community, the users have chances to interact with other people through "follow", "share", "like", "comments" and other operations. Compared with the traditional ways (take a photo with the camera and print it or transfer it to the computer), the online photo-sharing social media platforms based on the camera phones can make people more convenient to shoot photos, upload them and share urban landscape at any time and any place. [4] Highly streamlined functionality (relative to Facebook or Flickr, for example) makes it possible to edit photographs on location and in place. [3]

In recent years, American photojournalist Benjamin Lowy has discovered that iPhone allows him to capture photos in the absence of a strong sense of work instead of using a bulky digital camera, always paying attention to the shutter speed, aperture, post-production and other technical problems. These are reasons why he changes the shooting methods from traditional photography to mobile phone photography. The rapid development of camera phones and photographic social media platforms means that more and more people are disposed to represent the familiar urban landscape by phone photography and increasing their engagement with the landscape. [4]

As Tomas Van Houtryve, a Belgian documentary photographer and a member of VII Photo Agency, mentions that Instagram has allowed him to take pictures he'd stop taking altogether. Sometimes people will hesitate to take photos when they should face the digital cameras and huge raw files. Van Houtryve adds,

With Instagram, it has kind of brought that joy back where I can just take a moment – it's worth what it's worth – send it out and move on to something else. [6]

Instagram is like a visual notepad. If people have an idea, they can shoot it by camera phone first and if the idea takes hold they can go out and shoot it with a more advanced camera. As the street photography website 'in-public.com' maintains---their photographers share an "ability to see the unusual in the everyday and to capture the moment". [5]

Taking and sharing photos on social media platforms is a kind of natural release experience which makes people feel the excitement of capturing the urban landscape's beauty.

2.3. Photography--- A New Social Language

In the era of social networking, people pay more attention to the content and creativity of urban landscape photos. They upload photos to social media platforms and derive pleasure from sharing. Now the culture of photos has become a "social sharing" era, many people take photos in order to have social interaction with others instead of enjoying taking photos. From camera to smartphone, from photo album to social media platform, urban landscape photos are getting more and more attractive. The requirements of the photos have changed accordingly, network sharing is a new direction of urban landscape photography---attractive and creative photos are more likely to reflect the "value" of taking photos. Photography is becoming a social language. Everyone communicates with photographs today. [6] The key to success

of Instagram and other social media platforms is to find that photos will transcend or even replace text and become a new way of communication in the social media platforms.

Since social media platforms and smartphones are widely used by people, photos captured on smartphones and instantly distributed to others relate directly to that one user's everyday point of view and experience. [15] This relation between photos and users are actually conducive to the representation of urban landscape. With the development of social media platforms, urban landscape photos are closely linked with daily life and become more and more meaningful. To a certain extent, not only are people taking and sharing more photos, more often, they are becoming more and more engaging in the exploration and representation of urban landscape.

Photography is not only one kind of artistic creation or a medium of communication anymore, it has become a new social language which is closely linked with daily life.

2.4. Mass Audience

In the early days, social media platforms are typically used by journalists and photographers. As Karim Ben Khelifa mentions:

In most cases, we never really meet our audiences, and with Instagram you can interact directly with your followers.... Of course, when we post images on that platform, we're not necessarily telling a story like we usually do – with 15 images, for example. But there's a sort of romanticism, where we seek beautiful or incredible images. [6]

Social media platform has a large number of users who build up a bridge for photographers- audience even photographers- employers communication. At the same time, it also provides photographers more opportunities to promote the urban landscape.

Many instances indicate that mass audience is helpful for urban landscape photographers because photographers' careers depend on the audience after all. Architects Asif Khan and David Knight maintain a photoblog titled AANDD. [13] The blog which records the traces left by inhabitation on buildings and urban spaces has grown in popularity recently.

In addition, News junkie, the cofounder of the website 'sitephocus.com', is interested in photography, technology, and urban design. He creates an extensive online photo library and analyses how urban landscape photographers are using social media platforms in their practice. Social media platform is the perfect tool for people, especially photographers. It can import a large number of audiences to expand the spread of urban landscape photos with a minimum of time.

2.5. Powerful Infectivity

There is a steady stream of photos sent out through Instagram and other social media platforms every day. People especially young people check their social media accounts several times a day. When Joshua Galbraith who works in operations at a New York City law firm was interviewed, she declared if someone takes a really good photo of landscape she wants to see that place by herself. [11] To a certain extent, the powerful infectivity of social media platforms promotes the development of urban landscape photography. At the same time, this kind of powerful infectivity enable a more broadly accessible means of visually engaging and communicating about urban landscapes and inspire a certain hope. [3]

In addition to a website, Grand Park located in Los Angeles also has official accounts of Instagram and Facebook (see Fig.2). [17] It has been the focus of substantial cultural programming to entice people into the city centre, and its administrators have cultivated a comprehensive and strongly visual social media presence. As Erin Despard mentions:

The social media platform makes it possible to edit photographs on location and in place. This suggests that its effects in relation to urban spaces may be perceptual as well as social, simultaneously aestheticizing and elevating the social and cultural value of particular locations, qualities and events. [3]

The powerful infectivity of social media platforms reveals the individuality and vibrancy of these everyday urban things. [5]

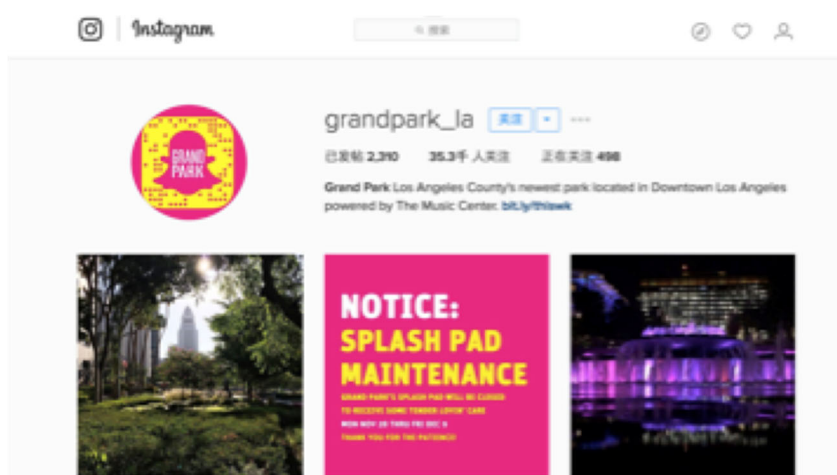


Figure 2. Instagram of Grand Park [17]

3. Adverse Effects of Social Media Platforms on Representations of The Urban Landscape

3.1. “Like” Is Not Equal to Value

In the past, photos are printed and held a physical place on

the wall, to be looked and commented upon for decades. Nowadays, photos uploaded to social media platforms can be "liked" and scrolled off the screen in a matter of seconds. [16] The rapid development of camera phones and photographic social media platforms means that people have chances to take photos and share them anytime and anywhere. [14] However, The lack of critical analysis in this trade in photos

is a serious problem. There are no connections made between most photos uploaded to the social media platforms, and very little said of them.

As Martin Middlebrook mentions that he can't stop providing the so-called "attractive" photos which just like the fast food. When he deleted these photos, he had no regrets. Maybe you will receive many compliments with an exclamation point. However, these "like" and comments can't reflect the value of your photos. They just provide a wonderful illusion.

Every day, there will be more than 380 million photos uploaded to the Facebook. At the same time, the amount of users of Instagram is increasing rapidly. There are so many social media platforms which can be used conveniently. People share photos by social media platforms and comment on photos on other people's accounts. However, this phenomenon doesn't represent the glorious unfolding of the representation of urban landscape. Actually, as Kate Bevan named her article "Instagram is debasing real photography" [1], some scholars and researchers think that social media platforms devalue the photography. As Pierre Bourdieu mentions in his book *photography: a middle-brow art*:

For some social groups, photography is primarily a means of preserving the present and reproducing moments of collective celebration, whereas for other groups it is the occasion of an aesthetic judgment in which photographs are endowed with the dignity of works of art. [2]

It is the difference between social media platforms photos and photographic works. "Like" is not equal to value.

3.2. Stifle the Creativity

As mentioned before, social media platforms provide users various built-in special effects such as filters, cropping and blurring to make the mediocre photos look more interesting. The users don't have to master Photoshop or other professional editing software, these special effects are enough for ordinary users to create the "stunning" photos of the urban landscape. In reaction to the phenomenon, Kate Bevan, British writer and Broadcaster, roundly criticised this kind of photographic social media in her column. In her point of view, Instagram and other photographic social media greatly reduces the real value of photography and stifle the creativity. The photographic social media built-in special effects especially filter stifle the creativity and significance of photo post-production. Kate Bevan does not object to the existence of Photoshop or other professional editing software, but she thinks that popular filters such as "vignette", "Polaroid" and "Cinematic", only allow users to make same photos rather than to enable them to develop creativity. [1]

These retro style filters also make people have the wrong concept of time when watching the photos. The photo taken a few seconds ago just looks like a photo taken many years ago when it is added the retro style filter. One of the significant elements of urban landscape photography is to record the moment of history. The retro style special effects of social media platform could only add the meaningless sense of the age that it intrinsically doesn't have in the photos. In the international festival of photojournalism (VISA) held in Perpignan, France, the director Jean-Pierre Laffont says that these mobile Apps (social media platform) are just fooling people, only those lazy people like this trick.

Photography is a creative medium, as Kate Bevan says:

Social media platforms are the antithesis of creativity. They make all pictures look the same. They require no thought or

creative input: one click and you're done. [1]

Each moment is distinct. So adding a faux-aged look by social media to photos is not to give meaning to the urban landscape photos. Conversely, it spoils the photos and representation of urban landscape.

3.3. Unreal World

In the past, urban landscape photography may explore the deep urban surface and question how and why it came to be. As Gillian Rose mentions in her book:

Photographs can capture something of the sensory richness and human inhabitation of urban environments. [10]

In addition to this, Mia Hunt also says:

Some object photography interests itself with these everyday textures, explores the relationships between objects and space, and plays with the perceived value of mundane things. [5]

Stephen Gill, British experimental, conceptual and documentary photographer, has the ability to capture the dreaminess and textures of banal urban landscapes. In an interview, he says:

I've taught myself to really step back and have that equal treatment of things. I know that while photography is often seen as the amplification of something, it is also good at doing the opposite, quietening things and not enhancing them. [5]

Photography has the ability to capture the beauty of the often overlooked aspects of the urban landscape. However, to some extent, social media platforms are destroying this beauty. Most photographers want to take attractive photos because their careers depend on it after all and urban landscape photographers are no exception. In the era of social network and information explosion, attention from the audiences determines everything. Urban landscape photographers need to keep providing the so-called "attractive" photos which just like the fast food in order to gain more exposure and grow reputation at a faster rate. The photos of the often overlooked aspects of the banal urban landscape cannot attract the audience who indulge in glamorous urban landscape anymore. As Valeriya Safronova says:

On social media platforms like Instagram, the point is rarely to depict reality. Filters soften harsh lighting and captions hint (often vaguely) at fun that can't be captured in words. [11]

Urban landscape photographers would always keep their audience in mind and care a lot about the "like" and comments on social media platforms. They try their best to make the photos presentable and look perfect instead of exploring the urban landscape veritably.

4. Conclusion

As I mentioned before, with the rapid development of smartphone cameras and rapid expansion of social media platforms, people have more confidence in their urban landscape photos. That is why people become more willing to share photos on the social media platforms. In early times, high-quality users such as professional urban landscape photographer uploaded a large number of high-quality photos on the social media platform. In addition to these wonderful photos, easy and the convenient ways of sharing also attracted plenty of users to join the social media platform successfully. As a result, massive urban landscape photos have been widely spread. Actually, all of these affect the representations of the urban landscape positively.

However, The number of social media platforms' users

who can share the high-quality photo is in the minority. At the same time, a large number of low-quality photos also lead to a gradual reduction of high-quality users' willingness to share. Eventually, the average quality of photos which are uploaded to social media platforms will decline. As a social media platform established for professional photographers, the website '500px.com' focus on quality rather than quantity of photos. Once photos are submitted they will be moderated and only high-quality photos would be published on the website. In recent years, 500px has changed from high-quality photography community to the amateur photographic social media platforms gradually in order to resolve the contradiction between the quality of photos and number of users. A good social media platform needs to encourage high-quality users to share their works and provide them chances to gain more audiences. At the same time, the social media platform also needs to guide ordinary users to be the consumers of high-quality photos.

With the large numbers of users joining the social media, the reduction of urban landscape photos' quality is unavoidable. However, if the number of users is not enough, the high-quality urban landscape photographers won't have a sense of accomplishment. So the question, how to maintain the balance between them, has become the severe challenge of each social media platform. As Brian Phelps says,

The potential of social media platform is like a treasure chest full of riches without a key.

It is not easy to unlock the full potential without effort. The social media era is an era of constant experiments, and there aren't always clear solutions, says Kashi,

The world is not the same as it was just five years ago, let alone 30 years ago when I first entered the profession. We must adapt and make tough decisions as we move forward. That is also why it's critically important to share information and communicate with one another, so we stay stronger and aware.

The representation of urban landscape is influenced by social media platforms both positively and negatively. On the one hand, social media platforms are created to help give a further boost to the photo sharing. People are more receptive to feel the beauty of urban landscape through the photos. At the same time, social media platforms make it easier for people to become a loyal audience of urban landscape photography. On the other hand, due to the intensive visual impact of these social media and networks, it is almost impossible for people to find fresh stimuli in a large number of photos. If each photo uploaded to social media platforms is stunning, it won't be more meaningful than the others. The key to the question is whether the urban landscape photographers' ideas and insights will be affected by the social media platforms. It is not suitable for photographers who capture the affective potential of the urban landscape and focus on the relationships between space and people to despise the social media platforms. Social media platforms make photography convenient, even vulgar. However, it cannot be denied that social media platforms are particularly significant for the representation of urban landscape and lay the foundation for its development both now and moving forward.

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