Streetset: Towards a framework for evoking the character of urban space

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Photography is a critical recording tool in the planning stages of urban development. The camera is used to organise physical information, triangulate the dimensions of space and chart the terrain of a site, usually from above. However, these expansive mechanisms tend to look at the city comprehensively, while the idiosyncrasies and anomalies that contribute to an area’s character at ground-level can sometimes be overlooked.

Character is an urban feature that local authorities seek to preserve and enhance as rapid change alters the aesthetic composition of the city. However, it is also a value that is challenging to explicate because the word can mean different things to different people. There is no visual framework to capture urban character and as a result it is often spoken about in hypothetical terms.
The digital application Streetset responds to these challenges by prompting and provoking city-goers to collect photographic typologies of unique urban characteristics in their local area. The practice of collecting photographic typologies of the street is an artistic tradition that goes back more than a century. Photographic urban explorers such as Eugène Atget, Lisette Model and the late Michael Wolf, have proven that the photographic typology is a powerful tool for collecting motifs which contribute to the identity of the city. Their images have been likened to fragments of evidence, attesting to the soul of places and immersing audiences into the disappearing ambience of the street.

This paper will outline how Streetset can build upon the work of these practitioners. It will introduce the app as a platform to collectively observe and assemble the aesthetic architectural patterns that punctuate our cities, giving them rhythm and meaning. By recording these patterns as a community, we can better understand the unique qualities of the urban environment and express what these places mean to us.

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Dan Brackenbury is a PhD candidate in the School of Architecture at the Royal College of Art, a Teaching Fellow in the School of Design at the University of Leeds and a Research Assistant at the Interactive Technologies Institute at LARSyS in Funchal, Madeira. He is a multidisciplinary designer with a particular interest in film and narrative photography. His artistic practice is particularly concerned with the relationship between urban landscapes and storytelling.

In 2018 he self-published an architectural photography book entitled *Dalian: A Fragmentary Photographic Survey*, charting the colonial buildings that are rapidly disappearing throughout the city of Dalian, China.

He has travelled widely for his work and has undertaken videography and photography commissions in various parts of the world including Malaysia, India, Peru and the United States. He regularly exhibits and screens his work, recently taking part in shows at the ICA, Tate Modern, BFI Southbank and the Forum Des Images in Paris.