

Framing A House, Photography and the Performance of Heritage

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Article abstract

Using data from qualitative research on vernacular housing, this paper discusses the role of photography in the heritage restoration of an outport community in Newfoundland. An assessment of the instrumental role usually played by photography in ethnographic and material culture research is made in light of the vernacular uses of photography. The socially coded and symbolic character of this built environment signals distinct taste and class cultures which are performed in narrative and material media. Photography contributes to the local performance of the past and the sign value of the built environment: it legitimates the invention of heritage and at the same time offers a means for local residents to contest dominant codings of their houses. In developing this case study, the role of photography will be considered from a variety of perspectives: as a research tool for the ethnography of communication; as a resource that offers access to categories of local knowledge; as a communicational practice that provides a corpus of texts for oppositional readings; and as a problematic representational form which raises questions about the medium in relation to research.

FRAMING A HOUSE, PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF HERITAGE

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In Maurilia, the traveller is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old postcards that show it as it used to be... If the traveller does not wish to disappoint the inhabitants, he must praise the postcard city and prefer it to the present one, though he must be careful to contain his regret at the changes within definite limits: admitting that the magnificence and prosperity of the metropolis Maurilia, when compared to the old provincial Maurilia, cannot compensate for a certain lost grace, which, however, can be appreciated only now in old postcards, whereas before, when that provincial Maurilia was before one's eyes, one saw absolutely nothing graceful and would see it even less today, if Maurilia had remained unchanged: and in any case the metropolis has the added attraction that, through what it has become, one can look back with nostalgia at what it was...the old postcards do not depict Maurilia as it was, but a different city which, by chance, was called Maurilia, like this one.

Italo Calvino. 1979. *Invisible Cities*, p. 27. London: Picador.

I. "I luvs to go a moose hunting..."

It is fall. Hunting season on the northeast coast of Newfoundland has been open one week, and all the festive hubbub is in full swing. Adorned with new items of camo and orange clothing, hunters have been cruising slowly along the shoulders of the highway scanning the woods for a glimpse of a rack moving in among the trees. The adventurous have been in over the barrens following tracks and droppings on the path to their own bull or cow. Sleepless and eager, they sit in each other's trucks and talk about the animals they think are out there. When a shot does find its mark, they parade with trikes and trucks to transport the carcass home and initiate its transformation from animal to food.



Figure 1.

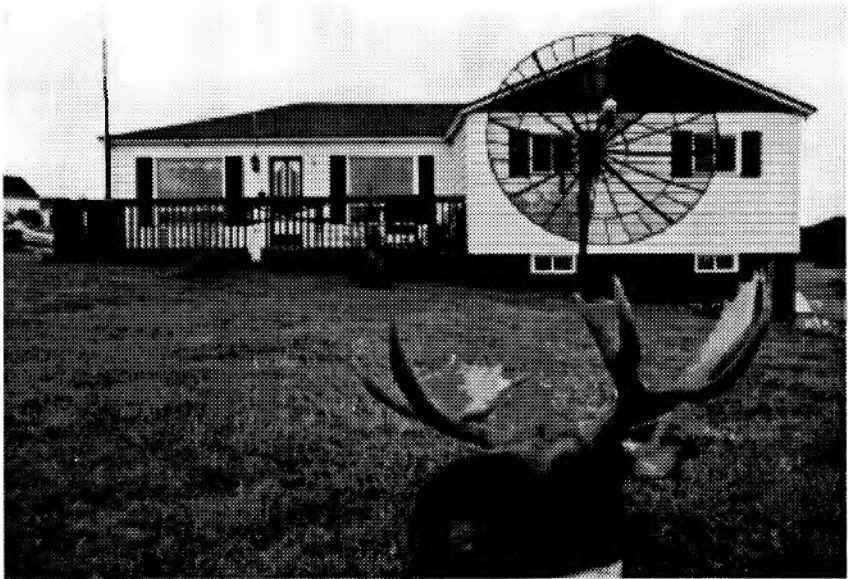


Figure 2.

I am standing in front of a house with my camera.¹ There is a moose head with an impressive rack of antlers propped up on the front lawn. The juxtaposition of house and moose intrigues me. I am a researcher interested in vernacular architecture and I am trying to photograph the visual play between the antlers and the owner's television satellite dish. The moose head is an artfully posed if somewhat morbid sign of this festive time in the community's life. The exhibition of this fragment of moose carcass is a seasonal, transient modification. Prone to decomposition, it will be a short-lived signifier of skill, accomplishment, and even respect. It is also a community photo opportunity that strategically uses the recently renovated house as its backdrop. My reverie of achieving a satisfying composition, reflecting on hunting as cultural performance, and decoding the significations of transient lawn art is interrupted when the front door opens and the hunter's wife calls out to me, "Brian, do you want some thread?" Thread? I think: beast with horns, minotaur, paths through woods, labyrinth, Theseus, sacrifice, Ariadne, a chain of classical associations that lead nowhere. "Thread?" I call back. "To tie up the ears," she responds, as if I should have known, "so you'll get a better picture."

I took the picture, but declined the thread offered to enhance it. Making the decapitated moose appear more alive in a photograph was not my goal, but her offer did suggest a path away from the labyrinth of my reverie. If the camera is just a research tool in the service of fieldwork, an adjunct technology that illustrates the primary process of translating or transforming data about houses and their modifications into language, why would there be such divergence in our picture-taking aesthetics? How is my documentation different from hers? Does the fact of difference have any bearing on the way a researcher sees vernacular architecture? Might such difference suggest a more interested, less objective role for photography in the modification of the built environment?

For Bourdieu and other sociologists of photography, the answer to questions of aesthetic difference is not difficult: the realistic content of a photograph is so in relation to the social categories of those making or reading the image. The difference in aesthetics reflects a difference in the social uses assigned to the photograph:

Photography is considered to be a perfectly realistic and objective recording of the visible world because (from its origin) it has been assigned social uses that are held to be 'realistic' and 'objective'. [Bourdieu 1990: 74]

1. The basis for this article was fieldwork conducted between 1984 and 1986 as a post-doctoral fellow with the Institute for Social and Economic Research. Funding for initial research came from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. During 1992, follow-up research was conducted, specifically considering the role of photography in this context. This research was funded in part by a Faculty Research Grant from The University of Calgary. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Communications Association annual meeting in Ottawa, June 1993.

To oppose the aesthetic differences implied in our conversation elevates one motivation (documenting moose and house) at the expense of another (taking a "better picture" of moose and house). One practice becomes categorized as professional, the other amateur; one objective, the other constructed; one informed, the other naive, and so on. If, however, we admit that both aesthetics are reflections of social use, the objective pretensions of the one are problematic in relation to the realistic aspirations of the other. There is nothing essentially objective about the camera or its products. The use of photography in fieldwork is no longer a naively documentary enterprise, a form of illustration that legitimates the truth claims of the ethnographer with proof positive of having been wherever. The use of photography in ethnography is ideological, or at least, tendentious (Sekula 1975). It serves and communicates inflections of power common to any form of representation.

For more than a decade, researchers choosing ethnographic methods for cultural research have been labouring under the mood of critical discussions which have implicated ethnography in the postmodern crisis of representation and challenged its authority as a means of representing cultural knowledge (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rabinow and Sullivan 1987). Prominence has been given to linguistic representations, and most frequently celebrated are experimental initiatives which disrupt the authority of the transparent, monovocal use of language (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Rose 1989; Tyler 1987; Van Maanen 1988). With the possible exception of museum exhibitions (Becker 1981; Cannizzo 1991; Fulford 1991; Lyman 1982), the realist use of photography in ethnographic research has escaped unchallenged and unproblematised. Although the discussion of the socially constructed (Bourdieu 1965), culturally dependent (Worth and Adair 1972) and reflexive potential of the camera (Ruby 1982) predates the postmodern critique of ethnography, the camera continues to be presented as an objective recording apparatus for field researchers. For the dissemination of research, photography remains the unchallenged exemplar of the real (Caulfield 1991). The indictments made against ethnographic writing pose equally valid challenges for the methodological use of photography in folklore and material culture research.

Typically, discussions of photography in fieldwork settings perpetuate the dualism sketched above and decry the photograph's expressive and aesthetic qualities as a means of elevating objective and instrumental qualities. As Bourdieu declared, both perspectives are social products and such definitions serve social purposes:

...the most trivial photograph expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation to a whole group. [1990: 6]

Rarely is the social character of the medium a methodological focus for researchers. When Ruby was discussing the necessity and legitimacy of ethnographic researchers being reflexive about their use of visual technologies such as photography, film and video, he was intent on dismantling a naive realism which considered such visual representation as beyond (or perhaps prior to) methodological considerations, merely an index of the real. Certainly he felt this initiative was tied to the ideological basis of cultural research as a postcolonial project, and that it was complicit in the process of constructing the subjects of such research. His point, though, was to consider the use of the camera in field research as communication. "The implication is that all forms of human communication are motivated and ideologically based within the culturally conditioned expectations of what messages can occur in which contexts" (1982:128). Tracing the ideological base has taken a decade (Edwards 1992).

To this interest in the camera's relation to ethnographic research can be added the observation of George Marcus that the representations (in word or image) of cultural research exist now "in a much more complex field of such representations occupied by diverse others who aggressively and eloquently 'speak for themselves' in the same media and to the same publics in terms of which anthropologists once felt themselves to occupy a secure position" (1990:3). Such multiplicity of visual discourses demands an acknowledgement on the part of ethnographers using televisual technologies in their research. Articulating the relation of their images to vernacular and indigenous ones prevents the photograph from being naturalized as real. Articulating the strategies for using televisual technologies in fieldwork renders the ideological visible.

Several orientations have offered themselves to ethnographic researchers using visual technologies in material and cultural research: a) to make personal, subjective declarations as a talisman to ward off accusations of bias (Ruby 1982); b) to espouse a participatory or collaborative methodology through which subjects are invited to be complicit in their own representation (Caldarola 1987); or c) to reduce the status of the cultural world to that of representation (Dorst 1989). The first two orientations are located more or less within a traditional view of the human sciences: the aim is to reinstate the legitimacy of visual representation in research by factoring out (or in) qualities which might taint it. The third orientation expresses Marcus' sense of a modernist ethnography as one engaged with a subject that is thick with representations. Dorst found that in contemporary settings characterized by "indigenous self-documentation and endlessly reflexive simulation" (1990:2), unless the ethnographer is to be viewed as "superfluous," one must consider the research site "as an image, an idea, an ideological discourse, an assemblage of texts" (1990:2-3).

This article explores another option, albeit one implicit in those already mentioned. To admit that the use of the camera in fieldwork is a form of communication suggests the possibility of multiple, culturally coded uses of this

technology. Methodologically, the use of the camera by ethnographic fieldworkers cannot be considered superior or exterior to other forms of representation, native or otherwise. It is one among many and signifies by virtue of its place in the context of other representations and discourses. To pretend distinction would be to perpetuate the pretence of objectivity. Such pretence misses the opportunity to engage the look of houses as read by their inhabitants. This article explores the images produced in the study of vernacular architecture in relation to other local uses of photography.

Viewing the research application of photography in relation to vernacular photography forces accountability to an interdisciplinary critique of methods in cultural research. At the same time it diminishes the traditional dualism of aesthetic and documentary approaches by heightening attention to cultural performances involving images, their production, display, exchange, collection and consumption. The qualities of these performances suggest the differential responses people have to the literal and figurative construction of their built environment. This article considers photography in relation to the fieldwork process; the relation of fieldwork to the local context of images, what George Marcus calls “the full matrix of existing representations,” and, finally, the relation of the local context of images to discourses of power.

II. Fieldwork in a subjunctive mood

Between sips of pekoe tea, I am riffling a deck of photographs, one for each house in the community. As part of a “grand tour” (Werner and Schoepfle 1985) of the community, the photographs reduce the need for an actual walking tour with each resident. I am dutiful in quizzing my informants about empirical properties of each pictured house: age, type, various residents, architectural modifications and so forth. Like flash cards for learning a foreign language, I hold each image and then record the replies.

The procedure is not without difficulties. I gulp my tea. I debate about a date square. The houses are not all recognizable despite the sharpness of my focus, the consistency of my exposure. As the photo cards flash, I realize that I am the one learning the language.

For ethnographic researchers curious about fieldwork methods, there is no lack of manuals, textbooks, and guides to reduce uncertainty. Although theorists have been keen to discuss fieldwork as writing, typically they have done so at the expense of doing fieldwork. Thankfully, some may say, but the consequence is that researchers continue to practice with research tools held with a positivist grasp. Most manuals dealing with fieldwork practice consider photography in conjunction with other mechanical and electronic fieldwork tools.

Bruce Jackson’s recent *Fieldwork* is an example of this: he lists photography in a section on “Mechanical Matters” along with other chapters on

microphones, movies, and so forth. Within folklore scholarship, this tendency goes back at least to Goldstein (1964) and is perpetuated through Dorson (1972), and Georges and Jones (1980). Goldstein discusses photography in a chapter subsection entitled "Equipment as Observation Tools" but does make the point that "though rarely used for such purposes, the still camera can be used by the imaginative collector for filming performance contexts" (1964:99). Jackson is quite explicit about the esteem in which photography and other mechanical matters are held:

...the machines and their products are never more than tools to capture information which in turn will add to our knowledge and increase our understanding. [1987:108]

Falling prey to the traditional opposition of the objective and the expressive, Jackson warns prospective researchers using photography that they are in for trouble if they treat photography as an end in itself. Jackson sees two problems: relying on the photo to do the collecting, and, worse, having the constraints of a technology influence the conditions of one's research. "The fieldworker with a camera looks for a nicely lighted scene, for a fine image" (1987:112). The basis of Jackson's cautionary tale is Edward Ives, whose renunciation of photography he quotes at length. Both Ives and Jackson feared that concentrating on the means of representation would result in their research being devoured by their obsession with aesthetics. For Jackson, there is no choice between the positions he maps for the camera-toting researcher, transparent documentary or aesthetic expression: "...if making beautiful photographs is your primary concern, you're not doing folklore..." (1987:195).

The actual methodology which Jackson employs when using the camera echoes some of the strategies offered by John Collier, Jr., in his classic work, *Visual Anthropology*, subtitled *Photography as a Research Method*. First published in 1967, and revised with Malcolm Collier in 1986, the text exemplifies the realist essence of photography in ethnographic research. On the one hand, photography is a form of covert action, its manifest essence belies subterfuge at the same time that it acts as a calling card (1986:23), "can-opener", and as a "golden key" (1986:25) to cultural communities. The Colliers believe steadfastly that, "Photographs are precise records of material reality" (1986:10). Their manual is presented as an antidote to professional indictments that photography is just an impressionistic art form.

A subjunctive version of folklore research, approaching fieldwork as if following these manuals would be structured with benign, cinematic metaphors: you begin your documentation of a community with long, establishing shots and then zoom progressively closer to the research target, the performance context. The Colliers take their metaphors of "mapping and surveying" from WW II Air Transport Command photomurals that helped guide allied bombers, and from petroleum industry exploration (1986:29-30).

Establishing shots are seductive for cultural researchers: they foster the illusion that the community under analysis is spatially contained within the camera's field of vision. From the moment of the shutter's release, the contradictions and crisscrossings of multiple networks and affiliations are frozen in a topographic unity. Even when such communities were deemed "traditional," the residents came from multiple cultural backgrounds. Such an approach to understanding housing modifications, even in particular communities, contains the project spatially. Residents become exotic "folk" whose geographic isolation is verified by the camera—the Colliers concentrated on villages in Peru and the Maritimes, their photos prove cultural difference. The photographer, like bombers and reconnaissance geologists, remains outside the picture while change becomes an internal, regulatory process of the community itself. Taking a series of panoramic photographs permits initial hypotheses about land-use patterning in a particular community. By comparing these contemporary "sweeps" (1986:33) with historical ones, it even becomes possible to hypothesize change and variation.

Throughout *Visual Anthropology*, photography is presented as a redemptive technology, a Robocop of research blasting away the confusing and disagreeable to leave the hard sheen of truth. Any hint that this might be construed as an expressive activity is dispelled with case after case where photography saved the day. In a discussion of research on Maritime housing, the field researchers, "two to a car," tried to assess housing in terms of relative poverty. As the Colliers report, "Roads, yards, sizes of houses, conditions of repair were checked off appropriately on dittoed forms as they drove down the country lanes" (1986:37-8). In the end the researchers were unable to agree on standards for judging these features. So photography stepped in to provide the objective record of the houses and permit the researchers to achieve consensus. As John Collier Jr. says without a hint of irony, "I recorded several whole rural communities, each in a matter of hours" (1986:38)!

At no point in the process did the people who lived in the houses influence the research. This is especially true of the production of the photographs. The Colliers are emphatic: "Ultimately, the only way we can use the full record of the camera is through the projective interpretation by the native" (p. 108). Interpretation here is of the photographs themselves; the natives are brought in to "project" meaning on the photographs after they have been taken by the researchers. For the Colliers, native interpretation is tied closely to the process of photo elicitation, or projective interviewing.

In architectural research, photo elicitation involves mapping the communities by taking photos of each house and building, and then producing something like a deck of architectural trading cards. These cards are then flashed before residents in a guided interview. The truth value of the photographs acts as a

control in the interview. The technique assumes, however, that those interviewed are able to recognize the houses pictured in the deck of photographs.

In making the photographs for such interviews, I endeavoured to “collect” as much conventional architectural information as possible—facade, symmetry, roof and gable design, fenestration, etc. The fronts of houses face the water, and often this was the orientation I chose for the photograph. In contemporary Newfoundland, however, the water is no longer the transportation route of choice. Residents of outport communities more often see their neighbours’ houses from the roads and lanes that pass along the rear of the houses. To produce a set of photographs for photo elicitation, it was necessary to first understand how residents typically saw the houses in their community.

This is a rudimentary distinction between etic and emic ways of picturing houses and it echoes the conversation about photographing moose. In the same manner it destabilizes the realist pretence of photography. Without considering this distinction, photography reproduces a formalist and modernist project aimed at collecting the texts of architecture, albeit as second-order signifiers—photographs of houses not houses themselves. This recurrent challenge to the status of the photograph opens the way to considering the role of photography in architectural change.

III. “Mind your eye!”

The erstwhile Anglican rectory (classic Georgian plan designed in England, reproduced around the province) is having major structural timbers, sills and studs repaired by a local carpenter. Boyd shows me around the site, pointing out aspects of his repairs and those of others who have tended the house since it was built in 1919. Looking down at the foundations, I walk into a crossbrace of his scaffold. “Mind your eye!” says Boyd and grins. Whenever we walk by the scaffold he says, “Mind your eye!”, gleeful that he knows where to step as thoroughly as he does. I respect him for that, and rub my forehead only when he is not looking.

Boyd learned his trade by apprenticing to his grandfather, but having always been self-employed locally, he never earned journeyman’s papers and was excluded from union jobs. Despite this bureaucratic wrinkle, he has worked on houses in the area steadily for more than 40 years. His skills are such that he will frequently reproduce architectural details by hand—cove mouldings, door casings, window mullions—that were machine-made in their original form. Even the lumber, he logged and milled himself. When he repairs a house, even one 75 or 100 years old, the result is often more traditional than when he started.

On almost any Sunday evening from June to August, if you walk between the local history museum and the Anglican church, you are liable to meet Boyd. He will initiate conversation by asking what you think of their restored village.



Figure 3.

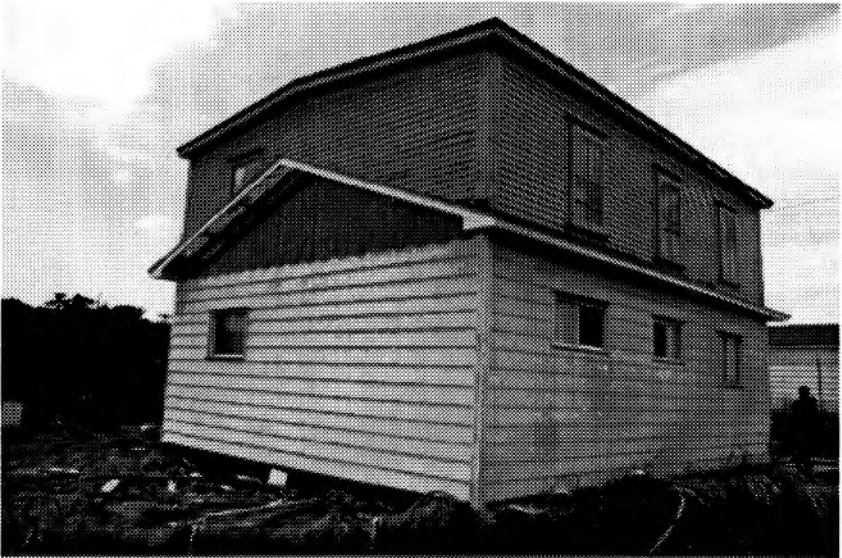


Figure 4.

Boyd delights in asking the unsuspecting tourist how much they think a particular house is worth, then revealing the running tally of government funding that has been spent on restoration of historic buildings in the community over the last 15 years: One million, two million, over two and a half million dollars. As someone intimate with virtually every house in the community, he loves to point out the excesses of these interventions in the built environment: cosmetic use of brick foundations, removal of original slate roofing, streamlining of dormers and so forth.

Boyd does not need to read Baudrillard, Jameson or Dorst to be attuned to the ironies of living in this place. The contemporary obsession with heritage has replaced tradition with surface, made the present look of the place a vertiginous parody of the past where nothing is what it seems. Environment alone demands change and modification, but the lived contradictions of multiple histories and times have given way to a seductive, monolithic narrative imposed from outside the community that seeks to typify the turn-of-the-century character of particular buildings. As a resident, he has seen houses built within the repertoire of traditional house types,² he has seen that repertoire expand and vary, he has seen some vernacular structures be modernized following confederation and resettlement while others are maintained in their traditional form, and he has seen the same houses renovated yet again to give them a vernacular appearance. As a prominent carpenter, his hands have played a part in all aspects of this work.

For evidence of the ebb and flow of these practices, Boyd carries a pocket full of photographs during his Sunday evening walks. Some are family snapshots, some old newspaper clippings, others, photos taken by the Reverend Edmund Hunt (1981; Murrin 1985) earlier in the century. Boyd uses these images to measure how government dollars have contributed to the contemporary divergence of houses from earlier stages. If you are an avid listener, he might invite you home and explain his version of the built environment in even greater detail, including an analysis of the class divisions and the exploitative role of the merchants.

Boyd is not alone in having a personal collection of photographs of local houses. In conducting interviews, several residents had two family photo albums, one of immediate family members, the other of buildings in the community. Given the climate of rapid material change, these residents feel it important to have a personal record of the community in its earlier stages. Even in the local history museum, photographs work to suture the personal with material culture.

2. The types and evolution of vernacular houses in this part of Newfoundland have been well documented. See particularly David Mills 1982. When interviewed regarding the various types of houses and their differences, Boyd frequently resorts to Mills' etic categories, "first generation", "second generation," etc. This terminology was taken up by historic-resources consultants in determining the age of the community's housing stock prior to allocating funds for restoration.

The sources of these collections varied, and included old photographs, newspaper clippings, postcard views, and so forth. The touristic construction of the locally picturesque has a surprisingly long history [see *Views of Trinity* (1913)], tied directly to the merchant presence in the community. As a centre for trade, both local and foreign, it was common for visitors to want an image of the place to take home with them (see McKay 1994; Overton 1984).

In terms of releasing the camera from the grip of positivist research rhetoric, Boyd was decisive. His own peripatetic performance with images demonstrated their tendentious nature in the service of an oppositional reading of the built environment. Treating images as historical instead of social facts would lead one erroneously to consider the truth value of his performance instead of the agonistic quality that articulates relations of power (government versus local), class (urban aristocracy versus local working residents) and taste (elite appreciation of architectural heritage and the commodification of the marginal versus folk appreciation of convenience and emulation of the centre). Boyd would forcibly direct my eye towards details framed by his oppositional discourse. "Here is something you should photograph," Boyd would say and lead me around the corner of the house to point out a discrepancy in a bead moulding along the facings, suggestive of the homogenized skill that produced it. "Mind your eye!" he would say, trying to keep me alert to the scaffold encompassing the house.

Although this research had always been predicated on local knowledge of housing and modifications, the photography had not. If I had ever tried to emulate the prescribed methods of photography in folklore fieldwork, it was abandoned after the confused response to my interview technique and banging my head once too often on Boyd's scaffold. Perhaps I needed a poke in the eye, but the camera has a very particular role in maintaining or illuminating existing relations of power whether through the local performances involving photographs, or performances by researchers, consultants, or government officials. Understanding local knowledge about vernacular architecture and its modification also involves understanding local representation of vernacular architecture.

Certainly the camera as a research tool can play a role in recording technical and material qualities of vernacular housing—types of foundations, joinery, cladding, etc. It can also play a role in recording aesthetic aspects of housing, what makes a house good by local standards. Perhaps, most importantly, the camera can play a role in illustrating the moral categories through which houses signify, what makes a building eligible and desirable as a residence or a home. It can contribute to the documentation and illustration of these activities, but it is also complicit in others: reducing the built environment to a visualist rhetoric, masking the researcher's own moral categories with the realist rhetoric of the medium, and so forth.

IV. The matrix of existing representations

George Marcus has suggested that one of the strategies used by ethnographers to enhance the authority of their cultural representations is to suppress relations with other (competing) representations. As a revision to such practice, one that has a potential for being more critically engaged with its subject, he suggests ethnography be “aware that it operates in a complex matrix of already existing alternative representations, and indeed derives its critical power and insight from this awareness” (1990:7).

In this particular case, there is a considerable matrix of representations produced by historians, folklorists, and anthropologists, and government researchers. More intriguing are the touristic views, museum collections, family albums, and so forth. The blend of elite, popular and local representations are unified only in their articulation of a discourse of place. A consideration of two further aspects of this matrix should serve to demonstrate this point: photography used in heritage preservation and interpretation, and vernacular or snapshot photos.

In the late 1970s, the provincial government hired a British consulting firm to assess the housing stock in this community in order to make recommendations concerning heritage preservation. Project Planning Associates (1973), who undertook the study, must have also read textbooks on photography and fieldwork because what they provided in their report was a survey and map of the community annotated with a running commentary on matters of taste.

The narrative throughline of their survey was praise and blame. Houses with recognizable architectural merit (in terms of elite periodizations and detailing—palladian windows, second-empire roof lines, etc.) were identified as were the various pollutions in the designated area of the study (cladding dimensions, contemporary fenestration, paint of saturated hue, etc.).

Car wrecks were for many years the focus of official outrage and persecution in the province and they were certainly singled out in this study as pollutions which must be removed before the heritage character of the community could re-emerge. The Project Planning Associates’ report was illustrated with an extensive photographic inventory, line drawings, and a detailed site map with cursory judgements attached to many of the buildings. A frequent compositional strategy in the photographs involved juxtaposition: posing an offending wreck against a residence deemed to have historic character, or pairing a photograph with an idealized ink drawing of the restored site. Given a realist coding, the photograph is assumed to carry an implicit moral judgement regarding the intrinsic horror of the pictured pollution, car wreck, deteriorated house, modern renovation, and so on.

In reading through the minutes of regular and extraordinary town council meetings during the 1970s and 1980s, it was clear that extensive time had been

spent in trying to live up to these imposed standards regarding pollutions of the environment. Once government funding began to flow for restoration-related projects, the council had the responsibility of enforcing bylaws pertaining to the area designated for heritage work. The frequent focus of council attention was on two vehicles parked on Boyd's property. Boyd drove one of these cars, but because of its untrustworthiness, he kept the second one close by for spares. The practice reflects an ethic of reuse that is best exemplified in the architecture of the community. Virtually every vernacular house has some section of it that has been built from materials scavenged from other older houses. In some instances, the source house may have been on the original site, while in others the parts may have been moved from another community a considerable distance away.

The similarity of subject matter in the Project Planning Associates' photographs of the community and those produced in connection with my research are remarkable for the dissimilarity of intent. They are part of morally distinct projects, one an effort to impose historical continuity through arrested architectural development, the other an investigation into social organization and taste in relation to vernacular housing. If there is a moral judgement to be made here it pertains to the infidelity of photographs, not the juxtapositions of cars and built environment. One of the major heritage sites in the community, the Hiscock House, now embodies this contradictory nature of photography.

The Hiscock House was documented photographically in the original Project Planning Associates' study. Its merit was related to its Georgian styling and the angular accretions of shops, offices and kitchens. In a caption to one of these plates, the structures are described in formalist terms as offering a "fantastic composition." Nearly a decade after the house was first opened as a Provincial Historic site in 1984, an old summer kitchen and office area was also renovated for public viewing. Unlike the main portion of the house, which contained furnishings and decoration unreflective of the original owners, this new section documented the lives of the original owners and the eventual acquisition of the building by the government for a historic site. The interpretive panels on the walls contain many local and family photographs, and included on a reading table was a facsimile of the final owner's family photograph album. This portion of the display was completed after the owner's death so many of the images remain uncaptioned and the public is asked to provide names and details where possible. Several of the photographs which feature the house are also part of Boyd's roadside lectures which articulate the unravelling of local history.

Photographs are not partisan. What they make visible, however, is the incorporation of subjects—material culture generally and houses in particular—into particular discourses. Without a consideration of this process, researchers become complicit with such discourses.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

V. “One hundred and eighty-one dogs”

In a kitchen with family, visitors and strangers, evening settling over us, the conversation turns to the way things were around here, to local history. The host, Chesley, says, “You know, there used to be 181 dogs here, one time.” He is referring to data from the 1921 census. He had helped clear an old house of its contents after the death of the owner, a local justice of the peace involved in census taking in the area. The census tabulated material such as the number of dogs a family owned. Chesley pets this fact as proof of myriad changes, in population, in occupation, in prosperity. Among the articles from this house earmarked for the dump was a collection of negatives the justice’s wife Emily had taken between the 1920s and the 1950s.

Chesley has enlargements of two in particular that form a panorama of the community. One summer day forty or fifty years ago, Emily had climbed to the top of the headland overlooking the harbour and made a sequence of exposures panning across the whole community. Chesley brings them forward in their new cardboard mats for all hands to see. There is a degree of fidgeting to make the two match for the full establishing shot effect, and then much activity in identifying existing buildings and remarking on those that have vanished or been remodelled. The host takes advantage of a lull in the conversation for critical reflection. Gesturing to the panorama outside his window, he says, “People think that this here now is like it was back then in those photographs. But it’s not like then, here, now.”

He is not a carpenter, but a fisherman. His comments are not about simulation of the past, or even part of an oppositional discourse aimed at reclaiming a sense of autonomy. His comparative remarks are about the nature of the space he currently finds himself in: houses that mimic suburbs anywhere, houses with rusting Russian cars parked alongside, houses with satellite dishes, and houses with wild trophies decorating the lawn. His work with this indigenous, photographic survey of Emily’s is a means of marking the diverse and contradictory character of histories present.

In discussing photography as a communications technology, Raymond Williams felt (as did Bourdieu) that the photograph is a product of a new kind of dispersed and mobile society. The photograph enables and maintains social relations which would otherwise suffer. He goes on to say that,

...in altering relations to the physical world, the photograph as an object became a form of the photography of objects: moments of isolation and stasis within an experienced rush of change; and then, in its technical extension to motion, a means of observing and analysing motion itself, in new ways— a dynamic form in which new kinds of recognition were not only possible, but necessary. [1975:22]

Chesley's performance with these matted snapshots, like the performance of the Colliers, or the Project Planning Associates, participates in this new kind of recognition. His own movement away from a particular image of the past is more vividly accounted for by the photographs. And it is more necessary because of the proximity of a political economy constituted by photographs.

I have tried to suggest here that thinking about photography in relation to fieldwork can alter the sense and understanding one has of a place. The discourse that portrays photography as objective document or as expressly aesthetic disguises the social reasons for doing so. Such discourse also misses photography's performative and oppositional role in everyday life. Finally, such a discourse denies its complicity with the dominant standards of the centre. Considering photography as the product of a dialogue opens material culture research to alternative ways of seeing a place and more complex forms of engagement with local knowledge and representation. The photograph plays a central role in the telling of a place. Grappling with these issues in the context of fieldwork and picture taking is a means of clarifying whose place one's pictures are taking.

It takes me a long time to make photographs for this research. I hold the camera steady and wait before pressing the shutter. Who is this picture for? How will it be used? Will someone come out the door and suggest another way of seeing the scene before me? In the end, I return my articles and photographs to the local history archive. What I hear back is that they like them, "because of the pictures." The photographs do not speak for the people or their community. The most I can hope for is an image they can use to speak for themselves.

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