

Dennis Letbetter

From the very inception of the invention of photography, the city has been a subject. The city, where most of the world's population lives, remains a great and evolving human laboratory with its varying solutions, successes, signal failures, moments of humanist brilliance and intentionally nurtured neglects. Visual antecedents for cityscape photography lie in hand generated works whether drawings, paintings or even the more inspired of architectural renderings. Personally the most perpetually compelling examples are Piranesi and especially Canaletto and one painting, *View of Delft* by Fabritius. . The single point perspective explored by painters is the only possibility afforded the photographer using single exposures.

The 19th Century examples of photographers are too numerous to list in entirety, but mention must be made of particularly inspirational influences for me, as well as historical landmarks. The very first photograph, by Nicéphore Niépce, taken from a window consists of architectural elements. Fox Talbot was photographing London

scenes at the same time that Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre was photographing Paris. The claustrophobic Glasgow images of Thomas Annan have commanded my imagination and deeply informed my own vertical photographs. An endless fascination with the ability to capture so many details on a photographic plate along with the comparative ease of an outdoor exposure continues to this day and has led to an abiding genre of cityscape work.

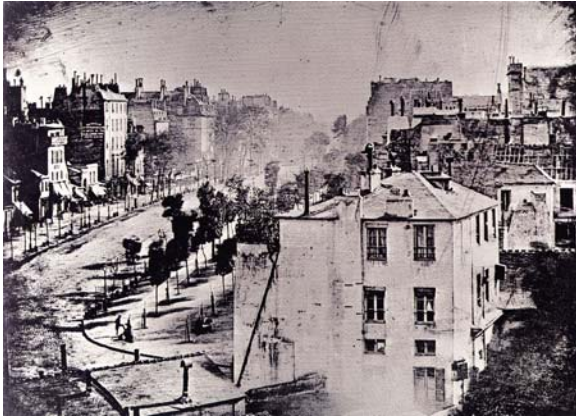
There are countless single images, sometimes panoramas, that have nurtured my own work, but of foremost and abiding significance is that of Eugène Atget. It has been suggested by John Szarkowski that Atget simply knew where to put his tripod. It is an observation which at once reveals the challenge and the secret of photography, particularly for photographers who print, as I do, from an uncropped full frame negative. A ready facility at determining point of view can only be born of a dedicated experience with a given camera format and lens. It is a consistency found in great work since the inception of photography. Ralph Gibson



Carel Fabritius, *View of Delft*, 1652



Nicéphore Niépce, *Saint-Loup-de Varennes*, 1826



Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, *Paris*, 1839



Thomas Annan, *Glasgow*, 1878

is particularly brilliant in his lifelong use of a Leica and a very few select lenses. From such a limitation, magic can be engendered. Borges railed against young students of poetry all wanting to write free verse endlessly, suggesting that they should first write sonnets for twenty years, after which they might begin to understand the very meaning of free verse. All arts demand a similar discipline and rigour.

Atget has largely left his Paris unpeopled. A by product perhaps initially of the early morning light he preferred before people were venturing out for the day, but clearly it developed into a preference. His city images appear uncluttered as if an empty stage when the curtain rises on a theatre piece, where any number of social scenarios can endlessly unfurl themselves. This allows for a kind of dreaming within a real space, an opening to our mental meanderings and imaginary encounters that the presence of too many carefully described people can discourage. At such times photography can approach literature.

The use of a panoramic format in my own cityscape work was initially instigated by a frustration. Invited in the year 2000 to exhibit in Moscow, I wanted to work in this beautiful and complex city as Atget had

done in Paris. I was told, incorrectly it turns out, that the 8" x 10" film I required was not available. Discouraged as to how to work, my thoughts turned to the intriguing work done in Prague by Josef Sudek.

Slowly his use of the panoramic format began to seem a thoughtful solution, and from Sudek I learned the courage to cut off the tops of buildings, to include a lot of empty foreground, to explore urban space more than specifically to exploit the properties of a given building or scene. The camera I use is of the same aspect ratio as that used by Sudek, but creates a 6 x 17 cm image on roll film rather than the single cut sheet film he used. As well I have the huge advantage of two arms whereas Sudek had to make do with but one, a heroism that remains a constant example of courage. To prepare for work in Moscow, I shot for months in San Francisco, learning how the camera sees city spaces. Previously I had only used my Linhof camera on seascapes containing forgiving natural shapes.

Though the spaces of each city are different, whether in the width of the boulevards, the height of the buildings or the vertical variances topographically, most essential is to know how the camera sees, and as with Atget, to know where to stand when a given

view is desired. As expected, Moscow was a challenge, more open, less vertical than San Francisco, but completely compelling. Subsequently I worked with the same camera in Kyoto and Tokyo. Each new urban space requires diligent patience and indulgent meanderings on foot, camera in hand, to discover its secrets, its visual key, its two dimensional resolution.

Flint, my native city, where I lived the first twenty years of my life, has posed for me the greatest challenge of any urban space. Situated in Michigan, once a great industrial center, and the beneficiary of the generous philanthropy of the first business elite of the city, it was a supportive environment in which to grow up, with a vigorous cultural life and an adequate public education readily available. Now, in the 29 years since I've left, the greed and corruption of the city leaders and antiunion industrialists have left a once vital city broken, daily losing its population, with once safe and beautifully manicured neighborhoods now broken by poverty, racism and violence. The elementary and junior high schools that I attended have closed because of a lack of funding, not a lack of students or need. A now deposed mayor was allowing trees to be cut from city parks with plans to permit

family members to profit from the lumber. The historic downtown has become a ghost town, with the majority of the new businesses in the county placed just outside of the city limits, in vastly extending malls, chewing away at farmland, shrinking the tax base of the city of Flint immeasurably. It is all part of the neoconservative philosophy of socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor. Once thriving neighborhoods are now drive by shooting zones. The visionary, philanthropic leadership of earlier city leaders such as Dort, Mott, and Durant has been replaced by a contemporary generation of smug, tax dodgers and fence building elitists who sleep in the symphony, evidently fatigued from their labours. In my mind Flint Michigan is a dead canary in the mine of recent American policies. Likely it is not the only one, but the one with which I am intimately familiar. My challenge photographically has been to simply see this city, as I had done other cities without a political prejudice or judgement nor a nostalgia. The exploration of the beautiful and the ugly, the considered and the unconsidered, the bleak and the vital, the explicit and the incidental in architecture and city spaces are all photographed without emphasis of one over the



Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget, *Paris*, 1926



Josef Sudek, *Prague*, 1959





Dennis Letbetter, *Moscow*, 2000



Dennis Letbetter, *Tokyo*, 2002

other. The work is about a place, the traces, scars and remains of a transformation and a neglect. Working for the first time in color, armed with a map, I made certain not to make a single exposure outside of the city limits, and not to be intimidated by police recommendations that I not venture into certain dangerous areas, perceived locally as zones where it is open season on whites. In living in any place, it is not only the signal, beautiful or the celebrated that one experiences. I want to show Flint as it is seen daily by her residents. It is much more than the good neighborhoods, or the cultural center. There are trees, empty streets, a crack in a wall, countless quotidian views that at once can fascinate and repulse. These photographs are the distillation of more than one thousand negatives exposed in August 2002. This is quite simply Flint as I know it and see it.