Picturing Urban Regeneration: A Study of Photographers in Liverpool, UK[1]

by Paul Jones
University of Liverpool

Abstract

This paper interrogates the practices of professional photographers working on commissions associated with urban regeneration. As distinct from analysis of the images that are an outcome of their labour, little is currently known about the knowledges of photographers working in such contexts. Drawing on research with one firm of photographers in Liverpool, UK, the article focuses on the ways in which these cultural producers describe and make sense of their productions vis-à-vis wider regeneration contexts; particular attention is paid to the ways in which they interpret and translate the criteria surrounding commissions into practice. A general contention concerns the photographers' reflexivity relative to the constraints and affordances they associate with commissioned regeneration work, which sees them operationalising the social visions emanating from clients working in urban policy sector. The article addresses the sets of social practices necessary to secure the conditions for making images in such contested contexts.

Keywords: *Photography; Urban Regeneration; Culture; Publics*

Introduction

1.1 Despite varied analyses on the additional impetus added to urban development strategies by photographic images (Crang 1997; Suchar 1997; Urry 2002; Parker & Long 2004; James, 2004; Wyly 2010), there is scant sociological research that engages directly with the practices of professional photographers working in regeneration contexts (for *en passant* discussions see Suchar 1997; Bennett & Koudelova 2001; Scarles 2004). Reporting on a study of photographers working on high-profile commissions emerging from urban regeneration strategies, a general aim of this paper is to contribute to filling this lacuna in sociological knowledge.

1.2 Interrogation of how photographers orientate themselves and their commissioned work to wider regeneration strategies necessitates avoiding reproduction of the 'ghost-like status' of the photographer (Newbury 1997: 422; Crang 1997: 359) evident in much social research on photography. Fleshing out and situating photographers' working practices in material 'productive contexts'[2] means positioning photography as a form of 'culture in the making' (Rubin 2012) relative to regeneration discourse, which in turn opens up a variety of potential analyses on the nature of photography as social 'mediation' (Crang 1997) concerning 'what and whom is shown how' (Corrigan 1988: 255), and the reception of images in 'target' publics (Becker 2004) including tourists (Crang 1997; Bramwell & Rawding 1996; Garlick 2002; Cornelissen 2005; Arreola & Burkhart, 2010) and investors (Bennett & Koudelova 2001; McEvoy & Impact08 2010).

1.3 Against this backdrop, but distinct from these varied and valuable contributions, this paper has two overarching concerns: (i) to investigate how photographers understand their contribution to the wider symbolic and material re-orderings associated with urban regeneration; and (ii) to reveal something of the social production through which they make photographs they consider will be legible to key publics (including, but not limited to, their clients and *their* intended audiences). Empirically, the paper draws on a study with a firm of architectural photographers based in Liverpool that has delivered extensive high-profile commissions for a number of influential public-private regeneration agencies.

1.4 Reporting on this small-scale research project, the paper focuses on the photographers' working practices and their representations thereof. A general aim of the study was to illuminate something of the

specificities of the practices and knowledges of photographers working for regeneration agencies as part of high-profile public campaigns designed to 'sell cities' (Hall & Hubbard 1996), in the process revealing one form that the cultural embedding of the political-economic transformations associated with urban regeneration can take. Engaging with wider issues of how regeneration and the associated extraction of surplus value from urban space is embedded in culture (Jessop 2004; Jones 2009) – including relative to how publics and 'iconic' sites are understood and represented in the process – major contentions of the paper centre on the situated practices of photographers and the translation of commercial regeneration briefs into images of the city assumed to be socially-resonant.

Picturing the city: photography, photographers, and urban regeneration

2.1 Since its inception as a profession, photography has had a symbiotic relationship with the symbolic and material transformation of cities. The rapidly-urbanising environs of the nineteenth century became testing grounds for the capacities of new photographic technologies. For example, many of the experiments of Louis Daguerre in the 1830s, that in effect constituted the origins of modern photography, focused on the streets of Paris (Rosenblum 2007),[3] while the pioneering documentary photographer Eugène Atget's later photographs of the urban fabric of the same city captured those people typically overlooked in traditional portraiture, in the process providing glimpses into the fin-de-siècle French capital (Krase & Adam 2008). The affordances of still-emergent modern photographic technologies – that Walter Benjamin considered 'the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction' (1971: 33) – were drawn upon by late nineteenth and early twentieth century city planners, who commissioned photographers to assist in adding authority to their claims for a variety of interventions in cities (James 2004; Parker & Long, 2004; Higgot 2012). When Mayor of Birmingham, the prominent Victorian reformer Joseph Chamberlin commissioned a series of celebratory photographic images of his improvement schemes of that city, aiming to both document the effects of major capital investment and to encourage more of the same (James 2004). Photographic images were also commissioned to 'verify the extent of poor living conditions so as to bolster the plans for the progressive benefits of rebuilding and regeneration' (James 2004: 99; also see Blaikie 2006), as is evidenced by Gillian Rose's (1997) analysis of the photographs of London's East End in the 1930s commissioned by local government. Focusing on photographic representations of areas of Stepney, and the construction of gendered and classed bodies therein, Rose's study interrogates both the aesthetics of these images and the subsequent political uses to which they were put in the context of 'slum clearance' strategies.

2.2 These brief examples also give a sense of professional photography's long-standing symbiosis with the representation of cities and the attendant construction of a modernising 'future gaze' (Jansson & Lagerkvist 2009) characteristic of those urban entrepreneurial interventions designed to attract mobile capital of various forms (Harvey 1989). When mobilised thus, the photographic form can add authority to wider claims-making about the social world, it is a cultural production that can add a specific force to other types of moves, either by chiming with existing interpretive frames or by supplementing projects to forge new ones. Photography contributes to the wider process of making sensible the bundles of material and symbolic interventions associated with urban capital investment; in urban regeneration contexts photographic images are typically commissioned and mobilised to both add meaning and resonance to existing political-economic interventions in cities and to encourage more of the same. Extending Ian Hacking's work (1983), photography commissioned in the context of urban regeneration initiatives constitute both a 'representation and intervention', in other words it is both a way that cities are simultaneously communicated and transformed in the process. Designed to chime with a public or an audience to make meaningful regeneration by 'embedding' political-economic transformation in socially-resonant forms (Jessop 2004), regeneration photography is 'a construal' of the world that is designed to shape subsequent construals (Jessop 2004, 2010), a representation in the world that connects meaningfully with others. Photography in regeneration contexts contributes to the construction of a wider interpretive frame to shape subjectivities and to transform the perception of a place in geographically distant audiences (Bazin 1960; Crang 1997; Scarles 2004) as part of a wider process through which cities are 'sold' (Kearns & Philo 1993) to a variety of publics.

2.3 However, it would be a mistake to assume photographic representations as *de facto* effective interventions in this respect: photographs do not operate outside of a wider context (Becker 2001), and are just one part of a much wider repertoire of cultural forms used collaboratively in the process of representing and 'selling cities' (Kearns & Philo 1993). Unpicking the 'additional force' (Sayer 2001) added by photographs to regeneration strategies is a challenging research agenda for sociologists, While certainly photographic images are commissioned (Scarles 2004) and 'made' (Rubin 2012) for a reason, signalling 'an intention to…' on behalf of the commissioning agency, but, to rework Italo Calvino's ([1974] 1997) famous observation, the city must never be confused with the images that are used to describe it. Indeed, it is in part by virtue of the modernism of the technology itself (Derieu 2012) that photographic projections of pasts and futures become constituent parts of 'frames' of political narrative constructions (Wallis 1970), themselves imbued with additional resonance thanks to the ostensible, but problematic, correspondence between photographs and 'reality'.[4] It would be a mistake in either theory or methodological practice to assume images correspond with the social worlds and urban sites that they depict (Benjamin [1931] 1972; Suchar 1997; Fosdick & Fahmy 2007; Mair & Kierans 2007; Varga-Atkins & O'Brien 2009); despite the promise of actuality 'photographs are not truthful records of reality' (Rose 1997: 277).[5]

2.4 Against this backdrop, addressing the hitherto under-researched *practices* of commissioned photographers in urban regeneration contexts allows for grounded exploration of some of these wider issues associated with doing cultural work for political agencies seeking to define and make resonant urban change. My interest here is not so much in interrogating the visual form of the photographs – itself an engaging and challenging research agenda that has been taken up elsewhere (for example, Becker

1974; Squires 1992; Crang 1997; Rose 1997; Suchar 1997; Knowles & Sweetman 2004; Sweetman 2009; Wyly 2010; Burri 2012) – but rather in the situated knowledges that emerge from the vantage point of professional photographers working in regeneration contexts (and the work they do to assemble a good photo in these circumstances). If commercial photography entails the 'subordination of artistic activity to socially regulated functions' (Bourdieu 1990: 8) how are these functions negotiated in practice contexts? A key focus is on the practical production of the image, on how photographers navigate the commission, and conceptualise the subsequent mobilisation of their images in service of wider political-economic agendas. This starting point opens up a series of questions relating to the translation of briefs of regeneration agencies into images and social spaces (Lefebvre [1973] 1991) legible to a range of publics.

Situating the study: a sketch of context

3.1 For the reasons suggested above, regeneration is a field of politics with a highly visual character; an increase in the stock of photographic commissions is characteristic of the cultural component of the governance arrangements described as 'urban entrepreneurialism' by David Harvey (1989). Certainly, in the Liverpool case, regeneration has provided an opportune backdrop for photographers. Since the mid-1980s the reconfiguration of the landscape of local governance agencies has seen an enthusiastic embrace of a range of strategies to bring urban space back into profitable use, including place marketing designed to attract mobile capital to such sites and opportunities – to secure the divestment of land and other resources from public ownership/control into the private sector (a crucial affordance enshrined in the Local Government and Land Planning Use Act, 1980) (for more detailed accounts of the local political-economic context and the implication of cultural production therein see Couch 2003; Jones & Wilks-Heeg, 2004; Jones, 2011; Richter, 2011).[6]

3.2 The firm of architectural photographers with whom the study was carried out have – since their formation in the mid-1990s – delivered work for a wide range of corporate and public sector clients in Liverpool and elsewhere. Focusing the empirical component of the research on one firm of photographers meant jettisoning any claim to representativeness, but the opportunity to study a firm with extensive experience of delivering high-profile commissioned work for the city's major regeneration agencies was propitious. The empirical component of the study was relatively modest, consisting of: a two-hour interview (alongside a number of shorter, less formal 'phone and email conversations); attendance at two meetings with clients; and accompanying the photographers on two shoots for corporate clients. For the longer interview, a portfolio of the firm's work for regeneration agencies in Liverpool was used as an elicitation device (Suchar, 1997), with the images providing cues to facilitate discussion on the photographers' accounts of key elements of their working practices.[7]

3.3 Photographs are socially-meaningful forms replete with potential for hermeneutic analysis, but I wanted to avoid positioning the research as primarily concerned with deconstructive or interpretative 'reading'; my concern was that this could have run the risk of abstracting the nature of the practices under consideration (Newbury, 1997; Jessop, 2004; Mair & Kierians, 2007). The study was designed to tease out something of the implications and imbrications associated with working on photographic projects commissioned by regeneration agencies, something that sociologists have yet to directly address. Seeking a sense of their practical engagements with typical commissions associated with regeneration, meant exploring the photographers' situated knowledges of urban political strategies, and in particular addressing how they made sense of their position and productions relative to the wider regeneration of the city. It was against this backdrop I sought to tease out the photographers' interpretation of regeneration briefs (including how they understood their images vis-à-vis the publics that the commissioners are seeking to engage with campaigns, and the types of urban sites they considered fertile ground for the production of images that would be successful in making regeneration campaigns legible to audiences). In short, I was particularly interested to find out what would constitute an ideal-typical (Weber, 1951) 'good photo' in this context, and how they would ordinarily go about assembling the social elements necessary to secure such.

3.4 The photographers frequently framed their descriptions of their own activity around an explicit distinction between: (a) 'personal work', i.e that photography that they do 'for themselves' (but whose audience is typically one familiar with the photographic field); and (b) the 'commercial work' carried out for clients in response to a brief (or taken independently but with future commercial exploitation in mind). While at points themselves problematizing a completely 'flat' distinction between these two forms of activity,[8] pursuing this categorisation allowed for discussion of their relation to commercial work, the primary type of activity with which the study was concerned. The commissioned work/personal work dualism was in sufficiently common usage – and the characteristics associated with each sufficiently stable – to suggest its frequent, taken-for-granted nature; while much discussion focused on the practices and knowledges associated with 'commercial' work, but 'personal work' was frequently used as a kind of 'contrast class' (Sacks 1989) that allowed articulation and clarification of the constraints and affordances associated with commissioned photography for regeneration agencies. Obviously, talking about photography is not the same thing as making images, but it became clear in the course of the study that the firm's partners were very used to discussing photography with commercial clients who – like me – did not share their technical expertise or experience.

3.5 At the two commercial shoots I attended, both in Liverpool City Centre, communication between the photographers (the firm's two partners, whose commercial work is predominantly produced for the company) were both very discursive events and were typically of a non-technical nature. At the initial shoot I interpreted this level of dialogue as perhaps being for my benefit, to make what was happening legible for me. However, as the shoot wore on I came to understand this dialogue as being directed to an ongoing negotiation and reiteration about possible interpretations of a generally agreed-upon brief, about what could constitute a potential setting for a 'good photo', what the brief could be taken to mean in *this*

particular social and environmental context. This dialogue very seldom took an aesthetically-rarefied or technically complex form, with shorthands for the brief and for a 'good' photo communicating meaning effectively and allowing the job to get done. Reflecting Mike Lynch's observation on the non-technical nature of much of the dialogue in laboratory work (1982), such 'shorthand' communication is possible precisely due to the previously-established coherence of the social meanings around the specific action at hand.

3.6 At the shoots the photographers also undertook a range of other non-technical work necessary to secure the conditions for what the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called 'the decisive moment', that is 'when things fall into place in the viewfinder in such a way as to tell the story just right... until the composition and the moment make sense, until you see something that corresponds to your conception of what's going on' (cited in Becker 1974: 11). Establishing the context where the decisive moment could be captured, and technical expertise exercised, requires much preparation and planning. When describing their typical working practices in generating the images for glossy brochures with an expensive 'look and feel', which are still a staple of the place marketing industry (Scarles 2004), the firm's partners referred to a variety of what they called 'ancillary stuff' around production of the conditions for creating this 'moment'. For instance, budgetary limitations often saw the photographers tasked with actively assembling such contexts (budgets would typically cover the photographers' time – but not extend to a location finder, models, travel, etc – making necessary a variety of improvisations in such regards). The necessities associated with the production of such saw the photographers drawing on their knowledge of particular sites and social settings conducive to the 'look and feel' desired by the commissioners; the use of particular perspectives, focus on particular types of materials and identifiable forms of social action were all used to this end. Prior to the exercise of technical expertise, including aesthetic judgement, commissioned photoshoots typically require a great deal of 'scripting' (Suchar 1997).

Regeneration photography and representing urban space: making publics

4.1 The planning of photo shoots and their execution can be understood as a 'representation of space' in Henri Lefebvre's terms, that is one of those cultural productions through which urban space is produced, and in the process elements of cities are foregrounded or omitted (Lefebvre [1973] 1991: 40–44). From this perspective, photographic practices constitute part of the conceptualisation of urban space that underpins its commodification. Commissioned photographs are one cultural representation that connect up with subsequent practices and political interventions (albeit partially and in unpredictable ways). It would be reductionist to simply ascribe the political-economic motivations of the clients to the photographers; the need to operationalise categories emerging from decisions already made elsewhere does not completely constrain the subsequent practice and form-making of the photographers, whose symbolic capital – and technical expertise – is such to ensure them autonomy within such conditions (Bourdieu 1990). How the images that come represent place are made, and the ideas about the city and its social pasts and futures that inform such, has not been the object of much sociological study, but the contention here is that by situating the actions of photographers against the backdrop of regeneration commissions we have much to learn about both the cultural embedding of political-economic strategies (Jessop 2004) and the work of photography and photographers therein.

4.2 One of the notable exceptions to this lacuna in sociological knowledge is Caroline Scarles' (2004) study of the photography commissioning practices of the Scottish Tourist Board, which concludes that professional photographers operate in a 'second space of mediation' (that is within parameters decided by clients who determine the ideological foundations on which photographers subsequently 'mediate landscapes'). While commissioning bodies typically draw on market research assessing national perceptions of the city/regional, and have a sense of the local capitals and resources that can be mobilised in the service of attracting attention and publics (Scarles 2004: 50), photographers' extend the scope of possibilities contained within the clients' nascent briefs. Indeed the translation and operationalisation of commissioners' sometimes amorphous aims can be understood as a key characteristic of their skill. Seeking to interrogate the ways in which these autonomies were secured and articulated, and the translations of the social representations they found in the ideal-typical (Weber 1951) brief, I was particularly interested in how the initial brief was interpreted and negotiated by the firm. A guiding assumption of the study was that the firm under consideration, due to their experience of securing and delivering major regeneration commissions, had an evidenced set of understandings that could be usefully analysed. The 'go alongs', in conjunction with the interview, allowed me opportunity to validate and re-interrogate my emergent analysis. In terms of data generated from these different interactions, the interviews – circa three hours in sum – were transcribed, and read alongside the field notes that were made after accompanying the two partners, whose commercial work is all for the firm under study, to the shoots and meetings.

4.3 When asked to summarise a typical brief from the variety of Liverpool-based regeneration and local development agencies for whom they had delivered work, one of the firm's partners suggested it was to 'destroy preconceptions, get away from the image that people may have when they hear "Liverpool" [...] The buzzwords all the time were "aspirational", "inspirational", and "iconic"'. Liverpool's devalorised cultural and economic status (for more detailed interrogation of which see Jones & Wilks-Heeg 2004; Boland 2008; Richter 2011) – is the backdrop to such political attempts at cultural repositioning. While sometimes the clients will have a particular site or event in mind that they want documenting, other times there will be a far more amorphous sense of what type of site or action the image should reflect (and construct – below). Commissioned photographs become a resource for the clients to focus their campaigns vis-à-vis such context, with commissioners often using the 'long list' of photographs initially submitted for consideration to help clarify their message. The initial response to a brief – which typically takes the form of a written submission to tender or a meeting – involves the firm generating ideas for shoots and images relative the brief.

4.4 If the photograph is not to represent the city as having been 'swept clean like a house which has not yet found its new tenant' (Benjamin [1931] 1972: 210) – but rather audiences are to be able to imagine themselves 'there' – then the image must chime with existing social categories (Corrigan 1988: 264), with social action needing to be constituted and captured in the process (Cornelissen 2005). Relative to the social composition of these images, and the selection of sites, buildings and social landscapes that entails the creation of *social spaces* as much as unproblematic reflections thereof, the photographers reported an acute awareness of the politics associated with foregrounding particular populations, and by implication then backgrounding or omitting others, in these 'representations of space' (Lefebvre 1991). Crucially these representations took form both in terms of the type of social action being represented and via the imaginative construction (Weber 1951) of the categories, including target publics, with which they were intended to resonate.

4.5 When asked to describe the ideal-typical (Weber 1951) publics into which their images were pitched, the partners used categories such as 'city break', 'director class', 'young professional', and 'young family'. These publics were determined by the commissioners, operating in the 'first space of mediation' (Scarles 2004), and subsequently codified in written briefs and meetings thereon. In the context of making their photographic images, these categorisations effectively stood proxy for social class and were sometimes further 'modified' with 'inference rich' (Sacks 1989) geographical regions, such as 'the South East', or particular cities 'London', or 'Shanghai'. These categories became one basis for the photographers' choice of sites and the practices being represented in the photographs; the problematization of such categories is a fertile ground for sociological analysis, in their commissioned work the photographers did not afford their images this task (this was in contradistinction to their personal work, where such tensions were explored). In fact the operationalisation and communication of these categories into photographic forms that would resonate with the *commissioners'* sense of these shorthands was one of the key characteristics of a 'good photograph' in this context. As recurring social proxies used by the photographers to guide the 'making' of the images, and relatedly I was also interested to understand the extent to which the photographers socialised the end 'user' of the image. Reflecting Scarles' (2004) observations, on the 'go alongs' and in interviews the partners did not explicitly discuss the reception of their commissioned images beyond the judgements of their clients; indeed, this was one of the characteristic 'contrasts' (Sacks, 1989) that defined their distinction between commissioned and personal work (the latter speaking more directly to what the partners called 'art world photographers').

Connecting here to there: imaging publics and places

5.1 So, for the photographers to make what they and their commissioners considered to be a successful image for regeneration campaigns involves a 'local production' (Garfinkel 1984) of articulating the types of architectural sites, landscapes, and other capitals that clients understand will resonate with those implicitly classed social categories decided in the 'first space of mediation' (Scarles 2004). Crucial to this is an appreciation of the aesthetics that will 'travel' readily and engage publics elsewhere. While the intentions of the commissioners cannot be 'read off' an analysis of the photographers' perspective, which is developed from a different vantage point in the 'circuit' of cultural production (Crang 1997), the firm's partners reported many occasions of the regeneration agencies commissioning photographs explicitly designed to make visual connections between Liverpool and cities elsewhere.

5.2 Indeed, so prevalent were these instances that the theme became one of the themes around which the interview in particular crystallised. Architecture was frequently a cultural resource used to this end. Drawing on the objectified cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1989) associated with certain architectural forms to (re)position Liverpool in the minds of publics requires a stabilisation of the visual conventions of the aesthetic form of such buildings – themselves commissioned in part to associate Liverpool with other civilisations (Jones 2011) – and the recognition of the related meanings (so, while the reception of these meanings can not in any sense be taken for granted, the representation of such forms can be understood as a signalling 'an intention to' on behalf of the commissioners and the photographers). One attempt to connect 'here to there', drawing on architectural capitals in the process, is the Liverpool-Vision commissioned image displayed prominently at both the Liverpool Stand at the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai and at the Museum of Liverpool's 'Global City' exhibition, which features a merged image of Liverpool and Shanghai waterfronts. The digitally modified image exploits the resemblance of the respective waterfronts to one another – both sites have early nineteenth century 'imperial style' architecture supplemented with recent high-rise interventions – and consolidates the 'twinning' of the cities in 1999.

Image 1 – Making connections

Image 1.

6.1 Reiteration of sites of objectified culture facilitates the 'placing' of representations in such a way that may have resonance elsewhere. Likewise, a major campaign on the London Underground in the run up to Liverpool's year as ECC2008 focusing on those objectified sites of cultural capital in the city (Bourdieu, 1990) that could be expected to resonate with a target demographic elsewhere ('professional, London').[9] In the context of a stigmatized cultural identity (Boland 2008), drawing on middle class and cosmopolitan cultural forms to represent a 'new' Liverpool – in the case the image of neo-classical architecture of the Walker Art Gallery with the inclusion of a knowing caption referencing The Beatles – perhaps suggests something of the culturally omnivorous lifeworlds with which such campaigns are designed to resonate.

Image 2 – Objects of culture: communicating capital

Image 2.

7.1 Captions can be used to exacerbate this effect. Indeed, Benjamin's speculation that 'captions have become obligatory' ([1931] 1972: 25) for the consolidation and communication of photographic meaning is particularly apt in the context of regeneration, which is a political field of operation that draws heavily on a wide variety of visual cultures. The ideal-typical (Weber 1951) regeneration photograph is seldom left to 'speak for itself', with making urban change legible to geographically-distant publics a collaborative achievement that sees the work of photographers supplemented by, amongst others, copy writers and graphic designers (Scarles 2004: 61–2).

7.2 My initial preconceptions were that photographers would have a clear sense of the eventual form that the campaign and its constitutive cultural elements would take, but this was seldom the case. Perhaps reflecting their operation in Scarles' 'second space of mediation' (2004) and something of the contingencies of their position in the wider production – which is institutionalised by the licensing arrangements that are typically the basis for commercialising the images they take – the photographers seldom knew exactly how and where their images were going to be used. The partners of the firm would only 'occasionally' have an idea of how these other contributions – including captioning and the 'tag lines' of campaigns – would be positioned vis-à-vis their image. Describing one illustration of such, the photographers recalled a commission for a regional tourist board, who for the cover of a brochure used a photograph of the waterfront that was prominently captioned "Open Your Mind to Liverpool"; one of the partners noted 'we knew the brochure was "lifestyle", and focused at South East, but we didn't know anything about [the caption]'. Another instance of this way of working can be found in the arrangements for the photographs in Image 2, which were originally taken as part of a city council's 'Lighting Buildings' campaign. On handover of the images they were actually used for this different campaign, a London-focused Capital of Culture promotion. Similarly, the firm had delivered the 'Liverpool' component of the merged Liverpool-Shanghai waterfronts (Image 1) in response to a previous brief for waterfront shots. The photographers were sanguine about the various unintended uses to which their work could be put by commissioners (who would typically hold the licence and be entitled to so do); this appeared a sufficiently normalised working practice – illustrative of the nature of the intellectual property regimes operative in professional regeneration photography – as to be unremarkable.

7.3 The merged photograph (Image 1) also speaks to a broader tension in attempts to transform perceptions of the city via reworking of sites sufficiently 'iconic' to be recognisable elsewhere. Liverpool's waterfront location has in recent years seen the establishment and consolidation of 'visual conventions' (Becker 1974: 7) – or perhaps 'aesthetic conventions' (Crang 1997: 360) – including via the establishment of a particular, definitive vantage point that will harmonise otherwise disparate elements: as Urry (1992 [2002]: 124–40) has observed, iconicity is contingent on perspective. The photographers were frequently

commissioned to innovate variations on the well-known sites of the city's waterfront – a UNESCO world Heritage Site – but expressed a desire to avoid the clichéd perspectives and reconciled landscapes associated with stock photos (Frosh 2001; Slater 2002). This balancing act was expressed via discussion of a number of interesting practical tensions, both in terms of the physical limits associated with creating new perspectives on the waterfront, and the possible variants of light, activity on the river, and the other environmental features, which could in principle become crucial distinguishing factors but that may not necessary make a 'good' commission photo. Too great a level of detail, activity that is not instantly recognisable, and radically different perspectives – one commissioner had suggested an aerial view of the waterfront architecture by helicopter – all threaten the integrity of the legible 'iconic' regeneration photo. The sense from the photographers was of treading a fine line with commissioned work in this respect. Their discussion in interview revealed awareness of a careful balancing between the reiteration of aesthetic clichés that can add legibility vis-à-vis urban change, but that can also risk diminishing their 'art world' status. Further, the more radical, disjunctives images characteristic of their 'personal work' often puncture exactly those aesthetic conventions and orderly images typically chosen to adorn billboards and brochures; the photographers reported the relationality of these distinct-but-related productions was the source of much ongoing discussion on both types of shoots.[10]

7.4 That such highly selective representations of Liverpool challenge the 'myth that the camera simply records whatever is in front of it' (Becker 1974: 3) is not lost on the photographers, whose work in the post-production stage – refining the digital image – is crucial. Post-production devices were sometimes used to stress the disjuncture and change over time that comparative 'before and after' photographs are commissioned to capture (one urban developer, keen to emphasise the transformation of spaces in which they had invested, commissioned 'before' images in black and white, with contemporaneous images rendered colourful and vibrant). André Bazin suggests it was the technological affordances of photography that 'freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness' (Bazin 1960: 7), and contemporarily the affordances of digital technologies are crucial to the photographers' practice. Reflecting on the changes associated with technological change, one of the partners reflected that 'with digital it takes us probably *less* time to take the photography and more time afterwards in post-production [...] now you're shooting stuff partly with a view to maybe thinking how you can post-produce afterwards'. Reflecting on commissioners' preferences for a particular aesthetic, one of the partners observed that 'now architects and developers want all the verticals nice and *straight* developers less so, but architects more would want all the verticals really, really straight and we've now got more [post-production digital] equipment [...] to make sure that all those verticals are straight, so a lot more of our photographs now look *straighter* than they did say ten years ago'.

7.5 The viewer and/or the intended audience is supposed to reify, to forget that these productions took place and that the commissioning and photographer decisions were made practically in response to particular sets of political and economic discourses. To mangle metaphors, the photograph should speak to you in terms you understand. In their cumulative effect photographs promise to forge connections and help create a context; they are cultural 'propositions' (Hacking 1983: 5–11) that need not be 'verifiable' to tell us something about the cultural embedding of the political economies of regeneration (Jessop, 2004). Against this backdrop any 'documentary potential is not inherent in photographs, but rather lies in an interactive process whereby photographs are used as a way of answering or expanding on questions about a particular subject' (Suchar 1997: 34; also see Krauss 1989). In other words, while images commissioned for use in regeneration and place marketing campaigns do not correspond directly and unproblematically with reality, it is precisely *because* they are imbricated and implicated by the intentions of the agencies that they are of sociological interest. As one of the partners observed at the end of the interview, 'photography is unique in its ability to record change. Obviously we think the photo is unique in many ways but that is one thing that in our practice, we come from a documentary tradition in a way [pause] and even if the commissioned work fails as art it's still valuable as a record'.

Conclusion

8.1 Photography is put to a range of diverse uses in the context of urban regeneration projects. The aim here has been to get a sense of how the re-orderings of cities associated with urban regeneration imbricates and implicates photographers' practices. The disparate imperatives associated with urban regeneration provide the 'constraints of the settings in which [photographers] did their work' and as such 'affected how they went about it, their habits of seeing, the pictures they made' (Becker 1974: 3). Studying the practices of photographers – and their self-representations of such – opens up a series of pertinent sociological questions relating to the practical translations of regeneration agencies' often disparate political-economic briefs' imperatives into photo-shoots and images.

8.2 In the case of this small-scale study, the photographers' understanding of their position in a 'second space of mediation' (Scarles 2004) was framed by an acute sense of the politics of the image, and the variety of aims emanating from outside of their work but impinging on it. Precisely because of the necessary negotiations associated with the productive contexts in which they were working – both in terms of the photographic field itself and the often entangled and specific expectations characteristic of the commissioning institutions – a picture of highly reflexive professional practice emerges from the study. The photographers of the participating firm were adept at pitching to the particular campaign and translating 'bundles' of social representations into images that, if successfully legible to clients, necessarily chime with a series of attempts to construct and draw upon publics and existing cultural forms.

8.3 Echoing earlier findings about the specific mediation of photography in these respects (Harper 1988; Crang 1997; Rose 2001; Knowles & Sweetman 2004; Scarles 2004), and as per one of general conclusions of Mike Lynch's laboratory studies (1982), it would be a mistake to assume that social scientific analysis enjoys a more privileged vantage point than the photographers' own in this respect.

The firm's partners were certainly not 'deprived of adequate access to their own socio-historical circumstances' (Lynch 1982: 500), but – on the contrary – had a sense of the institutional specificities associated with regeneration agencies ways of 'doing politics'; precisely because they were commissioned to help articulate such, the insights emerging from working in such contexts allowed for exploration of the tensions and constraints of regeneration that characterised their 'personal work'. It was through a variety of situated observations and understanding that the photographers had built up a convincing analysis of the regeneration process. My contention here has been that this knowledge cannot be derived from analysis of the commissioned representations of regeneration alone; situating the practices that lead to the creation and dissemination of such photographs in political-economic context is a major – and vital – challenge for sociological research in this area.

Notes

[1] I am extremely grateful to Roy Coleman, Andrew Kirton, Michael Mair, Gabe Mythen and Natalie Robinson for discussions on various iterations of this paper, and to three anonymous SRO reviewers for their perceptive and constructive comments. Many special thanks go to the participants in the study, who were extremely generous with their time and knowledge. All the usual disclaimers apply.

[2] I am particularly grateful to one of the SRO reviewers for suggesting this formulation.

[3] Walter Benjamin ([1931] 1972: 5) wrote on the affinity in the late nineteenth century between the emergent technology of the camera and the spectacular, futuristic and out-of-the-ordinary spaces of the fairground.

[4] Prior to the advent of the digital modelling technologies that have provided a way of assisting such imagining of the future (Harvey 2009), photographs of physical models were often used as devices to make legible such plans (James 2004: 104–5), increasing their capacity to 'travel' into new contexts (interestingly, Atget offered his photography services to architects and painters to supplement/replace their drawings).

[5] See Barbara Wolbert's (2000) critique of the role of photography in the development of anthropology, a discipline whose field-based character has seen images mobilised to add verisimilitude to knowledge claims. Wolbert interrogates some of the ways in which images, due to the latent associations of photography with realism, can offset fleeting research engagements and signal social proximity to 'the field'.

[6] Key amongst the network of distinct-but-related entrepreneurial public-private partnership that has emerged to this end is Liverpool Vision, the UK's first 'Urban Regeneration Company' whose self-defined brief is to 'harness the entrepreneurial energies of the private sector and coordinate the activities and interventions of public partners' (Liverpool Vision 2003: 5). Liverpool Vision made the initial suggestions both of bidding for the European Capital of Culture award 2008 (ECC2008) and of revalorising the waterfront through a series of residential and retail developments. The successful ECC2008 bid saw a wider reworking of the governance agencies around place marketing, many of whom were prolific commissioners of culture (Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004; Richter, 2011 for a more detailed analysis).

[7] I had originally intended to reverse this device, having asked the photographers to bring a portfolio of images that had been rejected by regeneration clients, so as to open up some analysis of the conditions of a 'breach' of the conventions of a 'good regeneration photo' in Garfinkel's (1984) terms. However, the firm's working practices meant this was not possible: typically, they would generate a relatively extensive online image gallery – of circa 60–70 photographs – from which the client, often in dialogue with the photographers, would devise a short list, with the images that were not selected usually deleted.

[8] The distinction was slightly more nuanced, with one of the firm's partners suggesting a threefold distinction between 'commissioned work; personal, self-initiated work that you *know* has commercial value; and you've got self-initiated work that you just do for yourself and that you just hope someone else likes it'. There was also the suggestion that the portfolio of personal work can lend symbolic value to the commercial as 'clients like to see personal work that hasn't been paid for by somebody else [...] actually it's more the design agencies they really want to see personal work because they want to see if you've got other interesting ideas'.

[9] As well as foregrounding some elements of Liverpool's cultural heritage, the images taken by the firm were also used to disguise elements of the urban fabric considered to be less appealing; during Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture (2008) their images were used on a billboard erected around a disused city centre building evidentially considered to be less in keeping with the desired urban aesthetic.

[10] Roland Barthes (1981: 66) has written on the use of disjunctive in photography, categorising the *punctum* and *studium*. The studium refers to those images that have widely-held and relatively secure meanings attached, whereas the punctum refers to those images that resonate deeply, in viewers' lifeworld and whose meanings may be difficult to communicate but are affective. The photographers explored these tensions in their personal work, with a number of galleries puncturing some of the orderly, and perhaps more readily 'legible', compositions their commissioned work was designed to engender.

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