

Research in Practice

Dissertation Proposal

Crime, Landscape, Unawareness

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Course: BA (Hons) documentary photography and visual activism

Illustration list

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Crime, Landscape, Unawareness

An Independent Research Document Proposal

Not all harm is visible. In cities and towns across the world, public split space quietly absorbs moments of violence, loss, and neglect. These incidents: a fatal accident, a police killing, a moment of collective trauma, often leave little behind to mark them. With no plaque, no media attention and no memorial, the site becomes familiar again. People walk by without knowing, and the place fades into normality. These moments are not just forgotten; they are often actively erased, shaped by collective discomfort or systematic neglect. What is absent from view still lingers in memory, infrastructure, and experience, waiting for someone to look more closely. In this essay I will explore 3 keywords: crime, landscape, and unawareness, supported by a minimum of three photographic case studies discussed in relation to visual artists, writers, and theorists. A short context of this writing is to examine how these terms interconnect conceptually and how they may offer a framework for understanding how photography engages with the hidden or overlooked aspects of everyday environments. This research will attempt to link the three keywords to form a question for my independent research document exploring areas of interest via observation, spatial analysis, and visual interpretation.

Crime

Crime is often understood as a breach of law, addressed through policing, prosecution, and punishment. However, many acts of harm remain unresolved or expunged from public record altogether. In a larger sense, crime also includes systematic failures, wrongful convictions, and structural violence that go unaccredited. A sociologist, David Garland, argues *modern society is shaped not just by crimes it punishes but by how it manages public fear and selectively distributes justice (Garland, 2001)*. Some events are remembered; others are forgotten, often based on whose lives are considered worthy of public attention. This imbalance between what is punished and what is forgotten reveals how crime is not a fixed concept but one shaped by politics, history, and power. As Johan Galtung argues, *some of the most damaging forms of violence are*

structural, embedded in institutions that create inequality and suffering without direct physical acts (Galtung, 1969). Among these are racist policing, social deprivation, and environmental neglect, which are rarely prosecuted yet have a great negative impact. The World Justice Project reports that *fewer than half of people globally feel the justice system applies the law fairly, with even fewer believing that those in power are held accountable (World Justice Project, 2003).* This implies that, as often defined, crime fails to sufficiently capture the whole spectrum of harm felt in many communities. It also emphasises the importance of silence not only in the legal system but in the cultural and visual scene. Things unrecorded, unspoken, or unseen become easier to ignore. In this context, artists and photographers working with the subject of crime are not just documenting transgression; they're often exposing its aftermath, its misclassification, or its removal.

Photography can respond to this imbalance by reactivating visibility. In *The Innocence*, Taryn Simon took pictures of people who had been wrongfully convicted and positioned them in locations that were connected to their charges. From suburban streets to deserted shopfronts, these pictures are serene and unfrontational, but when combined with the stories that go with them, they take on a tense quality. Simon's project reveals that crime can live on in a location even when there is no longer any visible



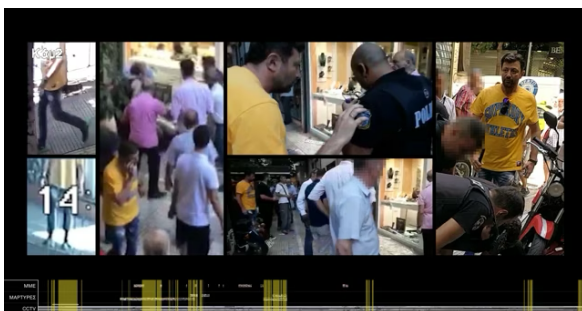
Man in wooded area (Simon, T) 1

sign. Her work challenges the notion of photographic truth by posing the question of how easily meaning and evidence can be misinterpreted. As Charlotte Cotton notes, Simons' photographs *deliberately understate visual drama in favour of psychological complexity, pushing the audience to reconsider how we construct narratives from images and context (Cotton, 2009).*



Frederick Daye (Simon, T) 1

An example of this is Simon's image titled *Frederick Daye, Alibi Location, American Legion Post 310*, where Daye is pictured alone in a dimly lit bar, ignited by colour string lights, framed by patriotic wall hangings and everyday décor. The mood is quiet, even festive, but beneath is an uneasy tension: this is the very location where 13 witnesses testified Daye had been during the crime. Yet he served 10 years for an offence he did not commit. The image's sombre meaning stands in blatant contrast to the room's familiar features, such as its televisions, bar stools and chequered floor. Simon invites the audience to examine closely what appears normal and think about how such a location might become caught up in the processes of legal failure. Although the image doesn't explicitly state anything, Daye's posture of solitude and stillness evokes a persistent sense of injustice. In this context, the image turns into a subdued critique of the systems that are unable to differentiate between assumption and reality. The image gently broadens the meaning of the term crime beyond its usual connotations by implying that it also refers to the psychological fallout from unjust punishment and the hidden transformation of ordinary places into hazardous locations.



Zak Kostopoulos video stills (Forensic) 1

In a more investigative approach, Forensic Architecture uses spatial analysis to examine acts of state violence that have been denied or ignored. Using video, mapping, and architectural modelling, the team's 2018 investigation into Zak Kostopoulos' death attempted to

reconstruct the murder and refute the official version of events. Eyal Weizman, founder of the group, describes this method as *counter-forensics*, which is the process of creating alternative forms of justice by utilising geographic and visual data (Weizman, 2017). Their research shows that absence itself can serve as a cover-up and that crime is not always notable or obvious.

Crime, as a concept, extends far beyond the boundaries of legal codes and courtroom outcomes. It includes the ongoing consequences of damage: the unaddressed sorrow, social neglect, and systematic failures that last long after the incident is concluded. Crime can manifest itself not just in violent behaviour but also in the suppression of those actions, in the denial of responsibility, and in the removal of memory from the public eye. As a framework for critical thinking, it encourages contemplation on how absence is a form of power, how inaction can deprive justice, and how social structures define what constitutes wrongdoing and what does not.

landscape

Landscape is more than scenery; it is shaped by cultural memory, social structures, and historical events. As Denis Cosgrove argues, landscape is a *way of seeing that reflects a system of power* (Cosgrove, 1984). What we choose to see and what we choose to forget is embedded in how we design, manage and photograph space. In urban settings, sites of violence or trauma may be cleaned up, rebuilt, or allowed to decay in ways that erase their past. This creates what Kenneth Foote terms a sanitised *landscape*, where any signs of damage are eliminated to prevent unease or controversy (Foote, 1997). Such landscapes are not passive: they actively shape how history is understood and remembered. The absence of physical markers or public memory at sites of conflict or suffering can make these places appear neutral, even peaceful, despite their histories. As geographer Tim Cresswell notes, *all spaces are inscribed with meaning, often political, whether we recognise it or not* (Cresswell, 2004). When harm is concealed or forgotten, landscape becomes a tool of silence. Examining landscape through this lens reveals it, not just as a visual subject but as a contested site of narrative control where memory and forgetting are managed through design, maintenance, and representation.



terrain gallery display (Ristelhueber, S) 1

Documentary photography can push back against this sanitisation by showing how space holds memory. In *Fait* (1992), Sophie Ristelhueber photographs the aftermath of the Gulf War in Kuwait through landscapes marked by craters, wreckage, and abandoned infrastructure. The absence of people in the images shifts the focus to the terrain itself: damaged, silent, and scarred. Ristelhueber's work invites the viewer to read the landscape as a form of evidence, a surface where violence has been absorbed rather than erased.

A similar treatment of space can be found in Richard Misrach's *Desert Cantos*, a series that explores the American Southwest, including sites used for nuclear testing and chemical storage. His images are aesthetically pleasing and appear calm; nonetheless, the backdrop they depict: environmental degradation, militarisation, and persistent contamination, generates a conflict between beauty and disaster. Misrach pushes us to address the concealed history inside familiar or overlooked landscapes, prompting a revaluation of what the environment truly reveals.



pool, Salton Sea (Misrach, n.d.) 1



Submerged gas pumps(Misrach, n.d.) 1

In *Submerged Gas Pumps, Salton Sea* (1983) from the *Desert Cantos* series, the viewer is faced with a submerged petrol station, its pumps partially swallowed by water and its signage silently reversed, as if the location itself had slipped out of time. Though there are no people around, the picture is rich with meaning. Once a sign of mobility and consumption, the petrol station is today an echo of failure: environmental, economic, and infrastructural. Misrach does not criticise; instead, he allows the landscape to speak in its own ocular language. The scene's beauty is captivating, pulling the observer in before revealing underlying unsolved conflicts. The terrain is neither decorative nor vacant; it is a reservoir for previous decisions and accumulated harm. Through this lens, the term landscape transforms into something political and affective, a multi-layered environment where memory, neglect, and human aspiration coexist together.

Both projects demonstrate that landscape is not simply a physical setting but a constructed and interpreted space shaped by cultural, political, and historical forces. Landscapes can embody memory or act as tools of erasure, depending on how they are framed and represented. In photography, landscape becomes a place of investigation not only about what is clearly visible but also about what has been hidden or forgotten.

As a keyword, it encourages thought on how visual practices could reveal these layers and how ecosystems absorb the results of human activity. Landscape can evolve into an analytical framework for investigating power, persistence, and the remnants of invisible damage buried in daily terrain.

Unawareness

Often influenced by habit, distraction, and repetition, unawareness is a state of modern living. Philosopher Tim Ingold describes *perception as an embodied process shaped by movement (Ingold, 2000)*. We learn to overlook what appears unimportant. Similarly, Michel De Certeau explained that *people navigate cities through habit, following familiar paths and barely noticing their surroundings. Living with systems that encourage efficiency over attention generates a form of blindness not by choice but rather by consequence (De Certeau, 1984)*. Beyond navigation, unawareness can be understood as a cultural and psychological adaptation, a filtering tool created to handle information overload and the expectations of fast paced surroundings. In many cases, what is overlooked is not invisible but simply no longer perceived as meaningful. The things we ignore, often those we've seen so many times, pass without consequences, or we are taught not to question. Sociologist George Simmel referred to this as the *blasé attitude*, a psychological response to urban overstimulation in which individuals mitigate their responses to maintain functionality (*Simmel, 1903*). Unawareness is not merely the lack of knowledge but rather the consequence of ingrained dissociation. Investigating it uncovers how perception is influenced not just by our selective observations but also by what our surroundings condition us to overlook.

Photography can disrupt this automatic seeing by inviting a slower, more reflective gaze. In *Reframing History* (1997), Susan Meiselas returns to locations of political protests in Nicaragua, installing large prints of her own archival images directly onto the buildings where the events occurred. These overlays collapse time, bringing the past into the present. Viewers are confronted with the history embedded in their surroundings, history they may have otherwise ignored. Meiselas initiates a public discussion about image and place, encouraging people to reconnect with what has been forgotten.



Reframing history (Meiselas, 2004)

1



Nicaragua Billboard (Meiselas, 2004) 1

In the photograph, *Muchacho is withdrawing from the commercial district after three days of bombing (2004)*. A historic image taken during the Nicaraguan revolution is reinstalled at its original site decades later. Printed large and woven into the fabric of the street, the archival photo depicts a bombed-out area; however, in the present-day frame, it lies against a backdrop of greenery, schoolchildren, and society as a whole. What's striking is the contrast between past and present, not just visually but emotionally. Many of the scene's participants seem oblivious to the importance of the image as they move around it and gaze beyond it. Meiselas lets the moment develop naturally; she doesn't push conflict. The difference between past violence and present-

day routines speaks for itself. This subtle coexistence of pain and normalcy shows how unawareness works not by denial but by time, habit, and the silent absorption of public space into daily life. This image serves as a soft reminder that history doesn't always announce itself. Therefore, the term unawareness acquires a cultural and structural significance that defines not just what is omitted but also how readily the visible may turn invisible in plain sight.



American ghetto (Vergara, 1995)

1

Camilo José Vergara adopts a different method: long-term repetition. Throughout several decades, he has recorded the change of American inner cities by shooting the same structures and streets across time. Rather than showing sudden change, his photos create a slow record of deterioration, gentrification, or survival. Vergara exposes what others miss by going back to the same locations: the slow decline of community, the vanishing of buildings, and the changing value of the location.



American ghetto (Vergara, 1995) 2

This ongoing visual archive is made tangible in one image from the *New American Ghetto* series, where two men walk past a massive, sealed-off housing block, its windows shattered or boarded, its entryways obstructed with concrete. The abandoned structure looms, but it blends in with the rest of the street. The individuals in the front pass by casually, not out of disinterest, but because the structure's decay has become

routine. The scene exemplifies how unawareness develops not through absence but through overexposure. The scene embodies how unawareness forms not through absence but through overexposure. The visual cues of decline no longer shock; they settle into the background. Vergara's photographic series doesn't seek drama; it quietly observes the way harm embeds itself in everyday space. In doing so, it challenges one to consider how lived surroundings affect our perception, neglect, or unquestioning acceptance.

These studies demonstrate that unawareness is more than just a lack of knowledge; it is a state influenced by habit, distraction, and social conventions. It depicts how individuals and cultures learn to cease noticing, whether through repetition, desensitisation, or cultural avoidance. Photography that challenges this state of mind can serve as a visual intervention, interrupting familiar ways of seeing and prompting a renewed awareness of space in history. As a keyword, unawareness opens further analysis into collective memory, perception, and the politics of attention. Offering fertile ground for exploring how visual practices can unsettle what has come to feel ordinary.

In conclusion, crime, landscape, and unawareness are inseparably connected, with each influencing how past harm is visually and socially processed. Scenes of crime frequently lose their connection to the events, over time becoming neutral as a result of neglect and lack of awareness. This elimination is not necessarily intentional, but it is perpetuated by cultural norms, spatial design, and institutional silence. The essay centres on the emotional and physical legacies of crime, the cultural influence of landscape, and the psychological state of unawareness. However, the true power of these concepts comes from their overlap. Together, they offer a framework for thinking about how suffering is visually handled, how it fades into the background, and how photography might counteract that disappearance. Each of these terms creates a separate line of research, spanning from urban trauma and territorial justice to collective memory, public forgetfulness, and visual ethics. However, the most pressing and fascinating subject, and the one I believe would be best suited for my independent research, is "***How can documentary photography expose everyday urban spaces linked to past crimes or deaths that are otherwise ignored or unseen by the public?***" This inquiry combines the three keywords into a targeted, visually appealing,

and socially relevant investigation. It allows me to investigate how photography might be used to reawaken locations, witness history, and promote ethical visibility. It also indicates a practical dimension: how photographers might interact with underutilised locations in intelligent, respectful, and politically diligent ways. As a prospective study topic, this question provides both a strong theoretical foundation and a deep human relevance, drawing attention not just to what we see but also to what we miss.

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