**How to analyze a photograph:**

What are the key strategies for photographic analysis?

Distinguish between facts and evidence

Discover how various parts of an image support a larger idea or concept

Demonstrate how explicit parts combine to form implicit wholes

Address specific ideas (how, for example, an idea of poverty is supported by elements within an image), or more theoretical positions (how, for example, the parts of an image speak to an understanding of war).

Photographs appear to give an unmediated view of the past, free of the partiality that colours written documents. However, the illusion of direct contact is just that: an illusion. Photographs are not unmediated: in each case, the subject has been selected, framed, and thus partially constructed by the photographer. Photographs contain a ‘chaos of information’: they preserve an instant, but this too is problematic due to the entropic nature of urban space.

How do we know that the flow of life captured within the frame is at all typical of the space depicted? Furthermore, the image itself is formed by mechanical and chemical processes, and may have been cropped, retouched or tinted. Furthermore, photographs do not exist as disembodied images. They are objects with particular social currency, and may be passed around, mounted or collected in albums according to a range of social conventions and practices which are historically specific.

Further problems arise when consulting images in archives. Unfortunately, photographs are not always subject to the same procedures of documentation as other archival sources. In many cases, the name of the photographer has not been recorded, nor is there any information as to why the photograph was taken. Photographs are often undated, or the dates may prove to be inaccurate when cross-referenced with other sources, such as street directories.

In the fields of architectural history or urban studies, photographs can be compared with architectural plans, illustrations from the building press, street directories, and the buildings themselves (where they survive) in order to test and corroborate the information contained within them. Ultimately, it is crucial to reposition photographs as constitutive of the discourses of urban space.

Formal Analysis:

What are the standard composition elements of a photograph?

Overview

-Where does your eye settle when first looking at the photograph? Why?

-Where does your eye move next?

-What are the planes/regions of the photograph (i.e. dividing, horizontal or vertical lines)?

Light Values

What is light and what is dark in the photograph?

How do these light values draw attention to details in the photograph?

How do they obscure details?

Background/Foreground (Focus)

What is foregrounded in the photograph?

What is backgrounded in the photograph?

What is sharply in focus?

What is blurry or out of focus?

What details are emphasized or obscured by these techniques?

Detail

What do you see (literally) in the photograph? Are there people, places, or things?

Are people shown? Describe them (in terms of race, class, gender, occupation, etc). What are they doing? Can you get a sense of how they feel, based on their facial expressions, body poses, or interaction with others?

What type of space does the photograph show? Is it urban or rural? Inside or outside? In a home, work, or leisure environment? Can you tell the specific location (town, state, region or country)? Is the space open or crowded? Calming or disorienting? Is it an everyday scene or something unusual?

What other objects are in the photo? How do they interact with or augment people or places in the photo?

Gaze

Where are people in the photograph looking?

Do they seem aware of the camera? If so, what is their attitude towards it?

hat is significant about where they are looking or what they are looking at?

Is there anything significant about what the person is not looking at?

Frame/Cropping

How closely is the photograph cropped to the subject? Is there lots of background or almost no background? Does the main portion of the photograph go almost to the edges of the photograph? Does it feel crowded or spacious?

What might lie outside the frame?

What is not shown in the photograph, and how might that be significant?

Content Analysis:

Subject/Content:

The subjects of the image, their appearance and gaze

The components of the image, their arrangement, the use of color, and where your eye is drawn within the image

The types of narrative elements present in the image—what story is told? Is there an implied chronology before or after the image?

Audience/Content:

The historical and cultural contexts from which the image emerged

The historical and cultural contexts in which the image is seen or read–the contexts surrounding audience

The message/image itself, and how historical and cultural contexts shape the way a particular theme or subject is presented

Perspective:

The photographer’s/filmmaker’s gaze or perspective and camera angle.

The framing of the subject matter.

The use of the camera to establish an illusion of intimacy, or sense of distance.

See:

https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/photography.original.pdf

https://learning.knoji.com/using-photographs-as-historical-evidence/