



## ARTICLE

# Putting the 'i' in icon: An autophotographic study of iconicity

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## Abstract

This article addresses the potential of autophotography to generate new insights into the meanings of iconic sites. It draws on photographic and interview data collected as part of a broader study exploring the everyday urban sense-making of university students in Liverpool, UK. Iconic sites featured prominently in participants' images of meaningful city spaces as well as the spoken accounts in the photo-elicitation interviews. Visual depictions of urban iconicity are central to place marketing strategies attempting to attract visitors and investment. Yet on a local level, these icons and images have been criticised for alienating local populations and foregrounding lifestyles and cultures that are inaccessible to many urban residents. While we need to study icons critically, this article argues that we should not think of them reductively. The data generated here challenges understandings of icons as predominantly representational and establishes iconic sites as lived spaces that form part of everyday practices. Iconic structures are constitutive of 'geographies of memory' that are central to the development of a sense of place for university students. The autophotography method revealed that icons become symbols of elective belonging via which students highlight their connection to their university city beyond the more generic student infrastructure.

## KEYWORDS

autophotography, iconicity, Liverpool, students, visual methods

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Any social research risks reiterating what is already known about the world; getting beyond that is a challenge for us all. This article positions autophotography as a method that can bring new insights into the study of place meanings. It does so by reflecting upon a serendipitous research finding concerning the role of iconic sites in the development of a sense of place among university students. Throughout this article, I will discuss how autophotography, involving participant photography and photo-elicitation interviews, enabled the exploration of iconic sites as lived spaces that form part of student geographies. The deployed method allowed the generation of new insights into the meaning of frequently pictured urban structures such as icons and the role of the visual method in destabilising dominant place meanings.

The concept of iconicity is at the core of this article. Throughout, I draw on Leslie Sklair's definition (2006) of iconicity as a combination of buildings and structures that are famous beyond their immediate physical location and have distinctive aesthetic and symbolic qualities. Iconic sites occupy a contested position in the urban environment. They have predominantly

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been conceptualised as reflective of capitalist globalisation, with boosterist strategies implemented the world over, designed to establish a city as a distinctive and attractive destination (Jones, 2009; Sklair, 2006). Icons are immediately recognisable symbols whose representations form an important part of place marketing strategies attempting to attract investors and tourists (Kaika & Thielen, 2006). Iconic sites have thus become symbols for a type of urban politics that channels more resources into the attraction of investment than into services and infrastructure benefitting local populations (Harvey, 1989). How, then, can we explain the multiple ways in which iconic sites have been conceptualised as meaningful urban spaces by the research participants? This will be explored via an analysis of the accounts of university students around their practices in iconic spaces.

There are three parts to this article. The next section explores the ambivalent relationship between local populations and icons. This is followed by an introduction to autophotography as a method for the study of place meanings. My application of autophotography occurred as part of a larger research project deploying visual and mobile methods to research how undergraduate students make sense of the urban environment in which they study. Here, I will provide details about the research design and considerations around the position of university students in cities. In the findings, I present three insights that the method delivered, discussing how iconic sites are lived spaces, how they connect people to the city via memory and how their representational qualities are used to symbolise place attachment.

## 2 | BEYOND BILBAO

The 'Bilbao effect' is archetypal of tensions that are reflected in the commission of iconic structures oriented towards global elites and an international tourist class rather than local populations (Evans, 2003). While the opening of the Guggenheim in 1997 led to an increase in tourism and growth in associated markets, it has been criticised for its impact on the gentrification of adjacent neighbourhoods, the precarisation of the local labour market and its minor engagement with local residents and artists (del Cerro Santamaría, 2019). Bilbao has become a template for observations around how iconic projects foster social exclusion and the polarisation of local populations (Vicario & Martínez Monje, 2003). Although these tensions and counterintuitive drawbacks are well known (Sklair & Gherardi, 2012), beyond Bilbao there is less understanding of how local people apprehend the social meanings of these iconic projects.

Sklair and Gherardi (2012, p. 64) argue that '[c]ommon critiques of iconic architecture concern the alienation of the icon from the site/context where it is built and that iconic buildings aim to attract flows of investments and people, sometimes with no connections to the site of construction other than the economic activities induced locally'. Patterson (2016) revealed similar tensions in Toronto where local communities disagreed over the character and scale of two iconic developments. This evokes questions around the presence and meaning of consultation processes. Balke et al. (2018) show that these legitimisation processes often only serve as a smokescreen consultation at stages where projects are already fully conceptualised.

'Icon libraries' have received specific attention as indicative of a trend where community buildings have become co-opted into the language and symbolism of iconic architecture (Skot-Hansen et al., 2013). Here, tensions over the primary function and use of a space can arise when libraries also serve as tourist attractions (Ho, 2006). However, Goudsmit (2021) discusses that icons that are embedded in the civic life of the city have the potential to contribute to a collective urban identity. This idea has already received attention from Lees (2001) who argues that studies of (iconic) architecture need to reflect on how these spaces are experienced via embodied practice rather than abstract representations. Her ethnographic exploration of the Vancouver Public Library revealed the multiple ways in which the controversial flagship development was embedded within local identities and practices. Miles (2005) also argued that the regeneration of iconic sites can provide a sense of local pride and optimism. This demonstrates the ambivalent position of icons in the politics of memory. On the one hand, iconic sites are always at the intersections of geography, history and capitalism and a primary example of the ways in which collective memory is constructed, manipulated and instrumentalised (Saïd, 2000). On the other, icons are also 'grounded in the memories and lived experiences of 'ordinary' residents' and are thus made sense of in a localised context (Hoekstra, 2020, p. 694). The findings section will take a closer look at the ways in which iconic sites are lived spaces that connect local people to the city via memory.

## 3 | AUTOPHOTOGRAPHY AND PLACE

Visual methods have a special relationship to place as they allow alternative ways of bringing participants' environments into the research process. Despite the growing popularity of autophotography, literature about the method is still rather scarce. At its core it is a phenomenological method intended to get close to the lived experiences of participants and their sense of self and place via photography (Noland, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Yet, the method needs methodological grounding since current applications attribute a

variety of data collection and analytical approaches to it (Johnsen et al., 2008). To avoid any misunderstandings in my approach, I refer to autophotography as a method that involves participant photography and the discussion of these images in individual photo-elicitation interviews.

A starting point for autophotography sees research participants take images in response to a particular task or question, for example 'which places are important to you?'. Notwithstanding that images can be meaningful in themselves, in autophotography the focus is on the meaning that the images carry for the participant. As a result, 'it is not so much the status of the image that is of concern, but its *conceptual and analytical possibilities*' (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004, p. 6; italics in original). The centrality of meaning thus necessitates that after the images are taken, a process that uncovers their significance to the participants takes place. This is done through photo-elicitation interviews where the images are discussed with the participant photographer (Harper, 1986). Autophotography thus pays more attention to what is said about the photo than the photo itself.

In the last decades, scholars have realised the potential of autophotography for revealing new insights about place meanings. For instance, in Dodman's (2003) research on the relationship of schoolchildren to their urban environment, he notes that autophotography allows the involvement of research populations such as children whose urban sense-making is difficult to explore with a research technique focusing on words or text only. Similarly, Schoepfer's autophotographic research on gentrification (2014) demonstrates the importance of the method in eliciting conversations about everyday environments that are perceived as too banal to talk about. Both studies posit that images in conjunction with words are more representative of someone's sense of place than words alone.

Johnsen et al. (2008) and van Riel and Salama (2019) demonstrate the potential of the method to conduct research with marginalised populations (such as homeless people or unemployed young adults) where the images allow an exploration of their everyday spaces that is less intrusive than ethnographic practices. Here autophotography allowed overcoming (ethical) constraints that researchers face when attempting to physically access participants' lived spaces. What is always implicit in these uses is the potential to generate new insights or contradict taken-for-granted assumptions. This has been demonstrated by Lombard (2013) who counters romanticised visualisations of informal settlements in Mexico with autophotography images by local residents to show the multiple ways in which images impact the construction of knowledge about places (Rose, 2003).

### 3.1 | Autophotography with university students

The participants in my study were recruited in various university spaces via posters and flyers in common areas, announcements in the central messaging system and guest talks in lectures. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, the only sampling criterion was that participants were undergraduate students at the case study university. The resulting opportunity sample was diverse, containing students from all faculties, various social categories in terms of age, race, class, nationality and gender as well as some students from the local area. The autophotography task was to take pictures of places in the city that were meaningful for the participant's everyday life. Discounting a drop-out rate of 10%, all completed the task within a month during which I was in touch with them via email and text message. Once they had finished the photography, they sent me their images and we agreed on a time for the photo-elicitation interview in a café in close proximity to the campus.

At the start of the interview, print-outs of the photos were assembled in front of the participant who was asked to choose an image and describe what it pictures. These image descriptions led to a broader conversation about the significance of the pictured places. Once the conversation slowed down, the participants picked the next image to describe; this process continued until all images were discussed. There was no interview script, but most questions were attuned to the research objectives of the overall project. The image-led nature of the interview process gave participants more agency and made them visibly more comfortable in the interview setting. It made the interview process more predictable and transparent and enabled participants to lead parts of the interview by determining the conversation topic for each image. Several participants mentioned that it was an enjoyable and relaxed process for them. This observation is important for considerations around reflexivity and attempts to reduce power imbalances in the research process (Rose, 1997). Autophotography is resource-intensive for participants and researchers alike, and requires careful considerations around ethics; it also involves more effort to keep participants engaged given that the method comprises the image taking and the photo-elicitation interview (e.g., Johnsen et al., 2008; Lombard, 2013; Noland, 2006). These issues were also present in my research but were significantly outweighed by the depth that the method generated.

University students are an intriguing participant group for a study of urban sense-making. Students' residential patterns and leisure practices have been explored in studies highlighting the multiple ways in which students are subjected to processes of commodification on and off campus (Chatterton, 1999; Smith, 2005). This predominantly connects them with student-targeted consumption spaces but little is known about how students develop a sense of place outside of these spaces (Pötschulat

et al., 2021).<sup>2</sup> Universities are powerful players in UK urban economies due to the number and type of people they attract to a city (Goddard & Vallance, 2013). In this context, universities are active in the representation of the places in which they exist. Location is an important factor in marketing and recruitment (Rutter et al., 2017) as it allows universities to distinguish themselves from other institutions and thus they often rely on the power of the icon to advertise a vibrant city to prospective students. As in any place marketing, the role of social media in recent years has been crucial in spreading images and facilitating more interaction between content creators and consumers (Zhou & Wang, 2014). This creates an interesting premise for visual research into students' relationship with their university city and iconic sites.

The research was conducted in Liverpool, a city in the north-west of the UK that has witnessed numerous attempts at the regeneration and re-imagining of urban space (Sykes et al., 2013). Urban icons have held a central position within the political economy of Liverpool with visual representations of these sites telling a narrative of a city that is economically prosperous and culturally rich (Wilks-Heeg, 2003). From this varied landscape, there were three sites that feature prominently in the photographic place marketing of the city and were also reproduced in my participants' autophotography. The study of iconicity was not initially a research focus. However, almost every participant, while generating numerous images of meaningful everyday spaces, also included images of buildings and sites in Liverpool that can be said to be 'iconic' according to Sklair's definition (2006). Discussing how autophotography represents the multiple and contested meanings attached to urban icons is the focus of the next section where I analyse the three main findings that the method generated.

## 4 | AUTOPHOTOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS INTO ICONICITY

### 4.1 | Iconic sites as lived spaces

Two iconic sites, the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Albert Dock, came up frequently in the autophotography. In the interviews, both sites were conceptualised as out-of-the-ordinary designs that form part of everyday lives of students. The Royal Albert Dock (Figure 1) comprises maritime warehouses that were regenerated via one of the first private–public partnerships in the UK. The site displays the classical connection between iconicity and consumerism by hosting museums, restaurants and

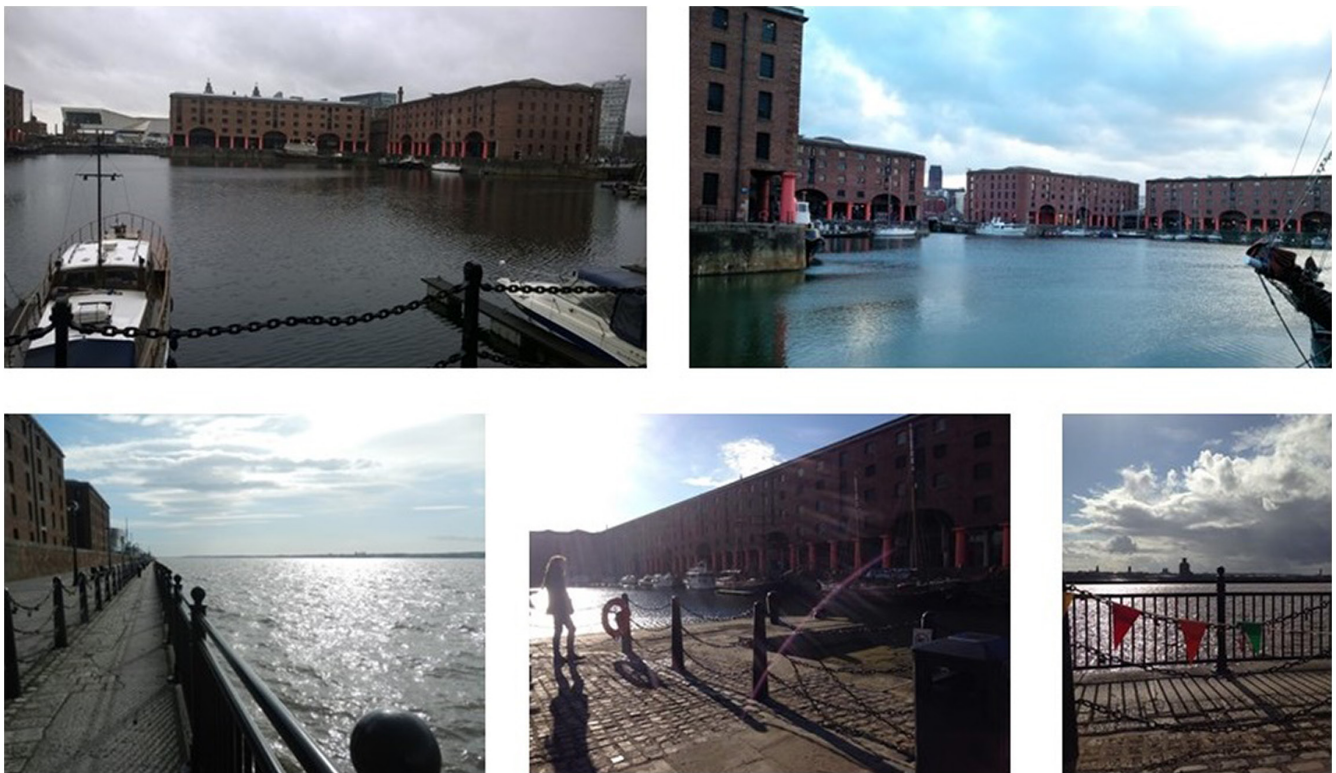


FIGURE 1 Images of Liverpool's Albert dock from the participants' autophotography



souvenir shops (Sklair, 2006). Several participants were interested in the arts and described visits to some of the galleries and museums that are present in the dockland area as well as restaurants and shops.

[The Albert Dock] is an area that I really love. I like to go there on the weekends and when they have new exhibitions [...] I like the area so I like to be there like I like to go to like restaurants and bars on the docks. [...] It's very pretty and I like that it's kind of old but completely modern as well.

(Stina)

Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral (Figure 2) was designed in the 1930s to be one of the largest churches in the world, but the eventual building was much smaller and cheaper with a radically different design to the original plans. Today, the cathedral is a central part of Liverpool's 'urban brand' and features frequently in representations of its 'skyline' (Sklair & Gherardi, 2012). Also the Cathedral was seen as a used space where some participants were able to live out their faith or attend events associated with family and kinship. Participants also referred to the cathedral as a useful meeting and orientation point in the city; its elevated position and out-of-the-ordinary design, both also constituents of its iconicity (Sklair, 2006), mean that it is visible from most parts of the city centre and thus functions as a useful visual hallmark. The following quote exemplifies this point:

This is the Metropolitan Roman Catholic Cathedral. It's meaningful to me because I use it as my sort of place mark. So if I'm somewhere I do not particularly know in the city I will look for the horrible tower and ... No, I think when I first got here I made fun of it and I thought it's a bit like a spaceship but I've grown to sort of love it and appreciate it for what it does.

(Maria)

Overall, the discussion of the Docks and the Cathedral revealed that these sites are made sense of as spaces that form part of lived urban geographies of students. While their form is an important reason for their embeddedness in the participants' lives, they predominantly stand in for their function. This adds to current assumptions around iconicity which argue that the icon is often more about surface than depth in its attempt to attract attention and people (Jones, 2009). Understanding the lived experiences around these spaces enables us to study icons beyond what they represent, and explore them as sites of practice (Lees, 2001). Essentially, the autophotography method uncovered alternative ways of making sense of and *using* iconic

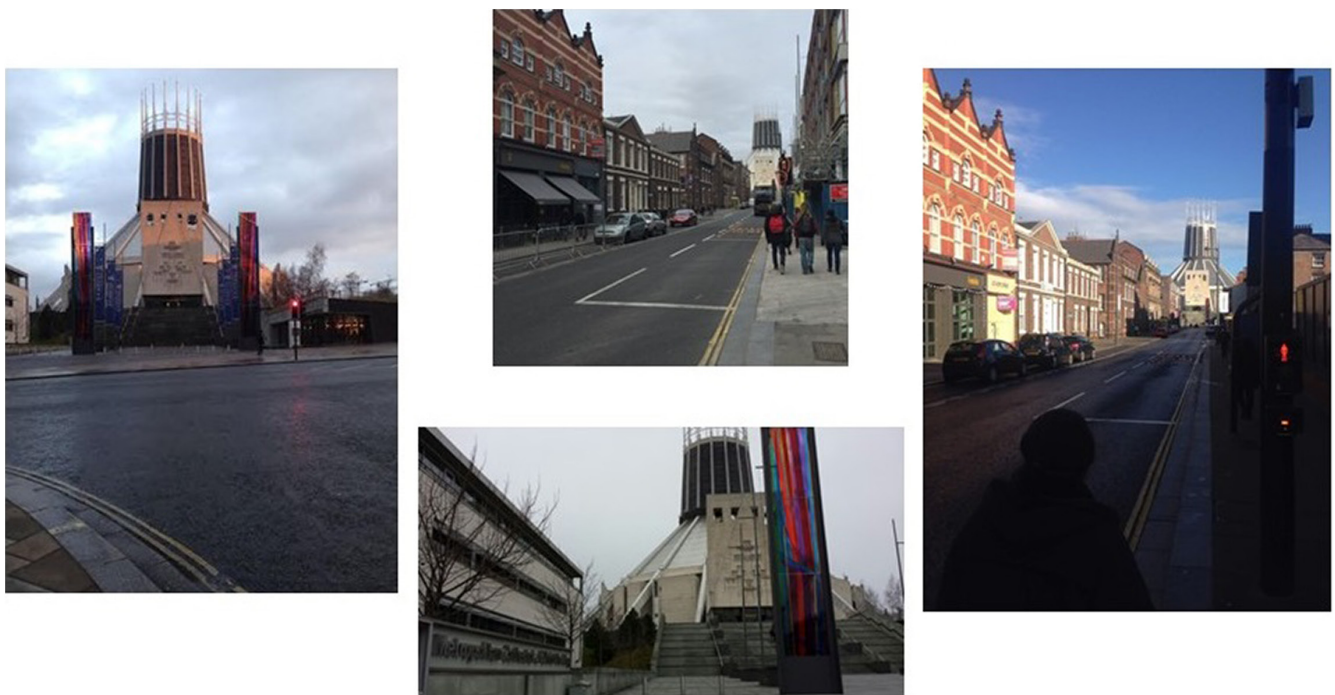


FIGURE 2 Images of Liverpool's metropolitan cathedral from the participants' autophotography

structures. For the participants, the sites' fame, aesthetic and symbolic qualities only mattered marginally (Sklair, 2006). Ultimately, their representation in the autophotography projects was bound up with lived experiences of the sites (Lees, 2001).

## 4.2 | Visualising geographies of memory

Understanding the iconic sites discussed here as lived spaces of university students means that they are sites of social action. The autophotography images remind us not to obliterate the meaningful (social) practices that cohere around sites represented in place marketing. Given the distinctive and out-of-the-ordinary character of the pictured icons, they are also places where the participants spent important moments with local or visiting family members and friends.

The weekend before I went into halls we came up with my parents [...] and I remember walking down to the Catholic cathedral because my dad's Catholic so he was like 'oh you'll go to church here'.

(Laura)

I love the docks. [...] Like when my sister came [...] when we go out for dinner we always go to the docks because it's just a bit special.

(Sandra)

Hence, it is not just the everydayness that explains their meaning but also the ways in which iconic sites support special interactions. They are spaces for ordinary and extraordinary activities and are remembered as such. This relates to the potential of icons to become symbols of memory and nostalgia (Bartmanski, 2011) where, detached from their time of construction and the symbolism then, they are connected to personal and individual memories and come to represent them. As such, icons have the potential to construct localised forms of collective memory that connect people to a place (Hoekstra, 2020).

Memory, understood here as the past made meaningful in the present, is central to the functioning of groups and collectives. What was emphasised in the autophotography was not the type of collective memory that is central to the construction of nations and cultures (Saïd, 2000). Instead, participants referred to 'communicative memory', an 'everyday form of collective memory' that connects smaller groups such as families or friends and is limited in terms of its social and temporal significance (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 127). The autophotography revealed that the icon becomes an anchor of memory, a symbol of a collective past that serves to sustain the group identity and connect it to place (Misztal, 2003). Hence, the autophotographic research highlighted the lived and the symbolic nature of icons and the ways in which iconic sites become embedded in 'geographies of memory' via practice (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004).

## 4.3 | Symbols of elective belonging

The final finding focuses on the representational qualities of icons. Understanding how social meanings become associated with material form is at the core of iconicity (Alexander, 2008). Rather than studying their representational qualities as place symbols in urban economies, this section looks at the ways in which the participants appropriated the icon as a symbol of 'elective belonging' (Savage et al., 2005). This relates to the third iconic site that frequently came up in the photography task, the Liver Building and the ensemble of three Grade I and II listed buildings, commonly referred to as the 'Three Graces', that it forms part of (Figure 3). The Liver Building is privately-owned and in contrast to the other icons cannot be accessed by the public. Whereas the Docks and the Cathedral were primarily included as sites of practice, the Liver Building was included precisely for its 'iconicity' (Sklair, 2006), i.e., as a site that is famous beyond its physical location, and has distinctive aesthetic and symbolic qualities associated with Liverpool.

Many participants included images of the Liver Building and, in the interviews, they emphasised its status as a particularly meaningful symbol of Liverpool. However, rather than reiterating the place marketing narrative that often follows visual depictions of this building and acknowledgments of its iconicity, the participants had developed their own personal (yet socialised) symbolisms.

I'm a fan of buildings like the symbols of cities and it's like they describe Liverpool for me. [...] Yeah when I sent the pictures of Liverpool to my friends [...] I sent them the tower and the skyline with the Liver Building.

(Carlo)



**FIGURE 3** Images of the ‘three graces’ from the participants’ autophotography

I just think [the Liver Building] is Liverpool really. It's the landmark of Liverpool. You think of Liverpool and you think of the Liver Building.

(Tom)

In the photography task, the participants included many images of everyday urban spaces that are more traditionally associated with students, such as student accommodation, nightlife venues or campus and sports infrastructure. In contrast, images of the Liver Building did not represent a lived space but functioned as a representation of the participants' relationship to the city outside of more typical student venues.

Analyses around how people attach to their immediate environment frequently use imprecise concepts such as identity, belonging or place attachment (Hoekstra, 2020; Lees, 2001). The concept of ‘elective belonging’ overcomes some of these issues by focusing on how an individual expresses their sense of connectivity to a place rather than whether their association with a territory and community is (officially) recognised (Savage et al., 2005). In including images of the Liver Building, the participants made a visual statement of elective belonging to Liverpool beyond the more generic student spaces targeted at them. Images of this building often led to broader discussions of how the participants relate to the city beyond their student status but as local people. This adds to our understanding of iconic urban sites; whereas icons have been established as lacking place-specific associations and alienating local populations (Sklair & Gherardi, 2012), the autophotography method uncovered that they can also become symbols of place association for local populations like students.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Contradictory meanings of urban icons are also an expression of the diverse social stances from which people make sense of the urban environment. University students have distinctive structural characteristics in urban economies with much private sector activity targeted at them (Pötschulat et al., 2021). Essentially, they form part of the type of audiences that city governments aim to attract via place marketing. This paper has studied the role of the icon in visual and verbal accounts of students' relationship to their university city. Given the urban positions of students (and their institutions), it is easy to assume that their sense of place is tangled up with the types of images and narratives that aim to attract people like them. Yet, as the autophotography method has shown, their sense-making and use of urban space cannot always be related to the economic model that justifies their presence in cities.

Exploring this via an analysis of the role of icons in a local context was the primary purpose of this paper. While their ‘iconicity’ (Sklair, 2006) is part of the reason why the participants are drawn to them in the first place, the method revealed how iconic structures become sites of practice embedded in the everyday life of university students. They form part of geographies of memory that connect students to urban space via meaningful social encounters. Even in their most representational form, the participants adopted the icon (and images thereof) as a symbol of how they connect with their university city. In essence, the

autophotography method enabled an exploration of how the participants relate to the representational as well as lived qualities of iconic sites.

Autophotography could be criticised for constituting ‘bad’ photography according to aesthetic criteria since the images are often taken in snapshot quality (Johnsen et al., 2008). More substantially, the method reduces the importance of the visual due to its dependence on interviews to elicit meaning. Yet, since people relate to place in complex and contradictory ways, more intricate methods are needed to study this. Combining participant photography with photo-elicitation interviews allows a closer understanding of how people attach to their lived environment. In the case of this study, autophotography allowed the generation of more nuanced knowledge into the local significance of iconic sites, highlighting that we need to think of icons critically but not reductively.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Photovoice, in its conception, was a similar image-based method inasmuch as participants record social issues in their environment but using these images and group discussion to influence policy (Wang & Burris, 1997). Autophotography, in contrast, aims to understand the participant's life-world without necessarily focusing on broader issues and their management.

<sup>2</sup> This does not just refer to students who move to their place of study but might also be the case for those who study in/near their hometown. Holton (2015) has found that their local sense of place can be challenged or decline due to an increased engagement with student infrastructure.

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