

ONLY IMAGES

The Postcard as a Way  
of Urban Knowledge

Jordi Sardà Ferran

**Foreword by**

Maria Rubert de Ventós  
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## FOREWORD

### EXPLORING THE CITY THROUGH POSTCARDS

Maria Rubert de Ventós

The advent of postcards coincided with a period of growth and turbulence for cities in the Western world. Jordi Sardà, with a collection comprising over 400,000 postcards, sees them as a means through which to take us on an extraordinary journey that documents city transformations and novelty illustrates the history and vicissitudes of the shaping of the modern metropolis. Their changes and evolution, stunning moments, most beautiful glimpses and endless nuances are discovered in this work supported with images which, taking an analytical and comparative approach, presenting an array of references with acute sensitivity.

The postcard, that popular yet fragile document, could not have ever imagined either that it would be used to illustrate this exuberant and learned explanation, or that it would shine in its newfound role. Paradoxically, postcards, while merely fleeting objects, apparently lacking in substance only debatably valid for responding to complex phenomenological aspects, are transformed with the reflections of Jordi Sardà into a new and powerful lens through which to consider the changing nature of urban life over the last 150 years. This perspective is reminiscent of others, such as that of Walker Evans, a key photographer who captured American culture in the 1950s and fellow postcard collector. In this book in this book, postcards, which for many years stood as evidence of a visit, making use of their fleeting, fragmented, intimate and inter-subjective qualities as well as their unique, bilateral union of image and text, reveal knowledge that has gone unnoticed by the established disciplines and methodologies seeking to transform landscapes and cities.

The work guides us through the multiple dimensions of the modern city. It explores the different perspectives used in postcards to see the city as a whole, and how it is represented and symbolised. It brings into focus the places where life and activity converge: plazas, markets and stations. It selects and contrasts the representative monuments and buildings, all configuring the modern city, and the symbols that secured civilisations and empires. It shows and compares spectacular night skylines, where the city vanishes and dissipates under the lights, and behind doors where the architecture itself is the main setting.

The book takes the reader through the bustling shopping streets of different cultural cities, such as Cannebière in Marseilles. It depicts the new forms of mass leisure. It delves into their insides and arteries, their catacombs or underground tunnels, without forgetting the city's changing places which transforming according to their use. It culminates with images of the changes that took place in Barcelona's public spaces from 1952 onwards. Extraordinarily and unlike any other document, each postcard certifies these key moments in time.

Ultimately, *Only Images: the postcard as a way of urban knowledge*, takes us on an extraordinary and immensely appealing journey. This unique and eccentric body of work is neither a definitive nor an unambiguous classification, such as that of Aby Warburg, serving as a discourse that dissects the modern city and lays the foundations for several interpretations. It is a consummate work of curation and juxtaposition that, with its taxonomy and new focus, provides a radical perspective of contemporary town planning.

## FOREWORD

### SIGNS OF LIFE, GREETINGS, MESSAGES...

J. Rafael Moneo Vallés

Postcards bring together steamboat and train postal services, internationally regulated in the second half of the 19th century, and photography. It is no wonder that collectors avidly pursued them because they satisfied both the desires of those who contemplated boundless, ever distant horizons and of those who had an interest in specific and peculiar items.

It comes as no surprise that Jordi Sardà, an architect from Reus, took to collecting postcards. In his words: “Like José Luis Borges’ collector, I wanted to have all these images. It was also a way to travel, to discover cities and countries. The further away, the better”. As lovers of their city, the people of Reus know there are many more out there and, although perhaps not wanting to live in them, they would at least enjoy a visit. Jordi Sardà cherishes postcards. On all his travels around the world, he always knew that the journey entailed returning to the city that brought meaning to his life: Reus, the departure point and destination of his travels, as illustrated by the maps and graphics on which he documents and classifies the postcards.

The transformation of a photo into a postcard, into a message we received trying to show us what a faraway place unknown to us was like, implied that those who published the postcard were ultimately responsible for deciding what it was that characterised the city, and what made it diverse and unique. Postcards as photos of architectural work, a commemorative monument or a park established a certain canon that defined what ‘the image of the city’ should be considered to be. They were ahead of the famous expression Kevin Lynch was to coin in the second half of the 20th century and sensed

that architects in the 21st century would make the iconographic value of their works one of their goals.

The photos of old postcards have today become valuable documents, so much so that it is difficult to speak of the history of a city without reaching for an image that leaves those looking at it with the perspective of the postcard publisher. Their value as documents is now acknowledged by everyone. So it is unsurprising that, like Jordi Sardà, those who are attracted to cities and their history, resort to postcards to discover them.

Ordering and giving meaning to a postcard collection like Jordi Sardà’s is no small feat. As Jordi says: “I have spent many hours of my life creating and organising this collection. Hours that, I would like to think, haven’t always been in vain”. It would be a mistake to think that this book merely reflects the work of ordering and cataloguing his collection. The texts included are also of value, eloquently and passionately telling us of how one experiences and understands cities while involving us in readings, interests and similarities. An extensive range of texts allows for establishing guidelines for classifying the postcards, which revolve around what the author calls “five journeys, one city”. The journeys lead him to it (‘Towards the city’) to study its insides (‘Through the city’), to see how it is inhabited (‘The People’s City’), to contemplate how it was built (‘The city of architecture’) and to consider everything that surrounds it (‘Other urbanities’).

Barcelona, as a paradigm and mother of all cities that Jordi Sardà has sensed, discovered and experienced, is to follow, serving as a guide for the postcards.

On contemplating the postcards, he shows to us of Barcelona, it is no wonder they can be defined as valuable documents regarding its history. Barcelona, for Jordi Sardà, “is the dream city that I have had the privilege to find. I have been on five long journeys and many paths to achieve that. I have accumulated a number of experiences in looking at the city and now, I want to make them and the postcard images available to Barcelona. There are so many memories within them

that I have to classify and eliminate them. I’ve only chosen around a hundred.” I know that Manuel de Solà-Morales, who knew Barcelona so well, encouraged Jordi Sardà to take those journeys, using the postcards in his collection. That is precisely what Jordi Sardà has done in this work, which shows Barcelona’s recent history through his postcards. The book will undoubtedly help both residents, whether or not they are natives, and visitors to see and perceive the city in its full splendour.

## INTRODUCTION

### RESEARCH ON POSTCARDS

A doctoral thesis is not just a study. It is a report, an essential justification, a testimony and a testament. Dissociating some concepts from others is no easy task, particularly when relating to a personal, heterodox academic project, namely, here in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning of the Barcelona School of Architecture at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (DUOT, ETSAB-UPC). There, research relating to the city, is understood in a very broad sense: rigorous, but not orthodox. Normally, one works with archives (historical theses), in laboratories (scientific theses) or on boards and screens (artistic theses). But I haven't done any of that. Maybe it was bold, perhaps even arrogant, to propose a research project, and even more so a thesis, based exclusively on one's own material. Let me explain.

I have amassed a very considerable collection of images – sent initially by friends and family, then acquired on my travels, through purchases (initially a few, but later a lot) and then generous donations–, which include photographs, prints, city maps and, above all, postcards. I collected them because they were easy to obtain and preserve. Their limited cost was also a factor: with a single image and text, I gained a small piece of the puzzle of the world. Like José Luis Borges' collector, I wanted to have all the images. It was also a way through which to travel and discover cities and countries. The farther away, the better. I have visited cities, archives, museums and publishers, and, just like in Jean-Luc Godard's film *The Carabineers* (1963), I have always returned home with a suitcase full of postcards.

Time and my insistence have given rise to a very considerable volume of material. The collection, as I will now call it, was the main source of research and, for most chapters, the only one. I have spent many hours of my life creating and organising the collection. Hours that I would like to think haven't always been in vain. Sometimes certain postcards resisted being ordered. They refused to follow the guidelines. They looked up at me and talked to me. These images led me to propose the work.

I have followed my own advice, the advice I give to students regarding the conditions that all research must meet to achieve adequate content and academic rigour. The thesis should be accessible, enjoyable, local and universal; it must take risks and, above all, be sincere. These concepts are not unlike those that Umberto Eco sets out in his book *How to Write a Thesis*.

First, the source should be accessible. In other words, one should be able to consult it on a continual basis, without it being too burdensome or generating language or interpretation issues. Reality often interferes with this desire. Even if it is accessible, the material must be read, checked and reviewed, all of which are essential parts of the project and, indeed, are often its objective.

I have faithfully followed the second piece of advice: make the subject matter interesting and enjoyable at all times. The lengthy phase of selecting and classifying the research material, which I did every day for over five years, was from the outset one of the most satisfying tasks I have ever undertaken.

For me, deciding one by one on the capacity, appropriateness and significance of each image—in the selection phase I had around two hundred thousand in my hands—was just as enjoyable as it was stimulating.

I tried to make my work both local and universal. The collection contained postcard images of the city, reflecting its monuments and energy, art and faces, as well as many of landscape views. I proposed five chapters for the thesis. Three of them, ‘Images only’, ‘The collection’ and ‘Comparative Readings’, contain universal and open postcard images. While the other two, ‘Only Barcelona’ and ‘Image and Text’, use local postcards with images exclusively from Barcelona and the Mercadal in Reus, and the texts from the Camp. Therefore, the material is both universal and local, as are the objectives and results.<sup>1</sup>

The fourth piece of advice is that research should take risks. Given that the source is so close, perhaps using it in such an exclusive way seems a sin of pride. As much as stating that the postcard is a way of urban knowledge and purporting to show it only with its images and texts. This may be the riskiest aspect of the thesis. I sustain that the postcard—small, fragile and humble only in appearance—, embodies an enormous amount of information that I have not yet been able to fully highlight.

This is a very personal project. The abundance of expressions such as ‘I praise’, ‘I believe’, ‘they are interesting’, etc., are often more confessions than reflections. The thesis is also a way of sharing the material I have collected so far, with the clear intention of compiling, selecting and disseminating all of it. As such, I think the research can be considered *sincere*. Some will be of the opinion that looking at the city through the sole filter of the postcard is an appropriate method for obtaining new results, while others will be of the opinion that

the postcard, as a partially filtered vehicle, offers an excessively kaleidoscopic perspective failing to provide knowledge sufficiently different from that of other means, such as photography, cartography and statistics, etc. I hope to have found arguments to satisfy some and refute those of others in fair measure.

As *Only Images* is a study of images, I have written little. I would like them to be eloquent that enough to speak for themselves without the need for text, as Martin Parr does in his *Boring Postcards* (1999) edition. I also drew inspiration from how Marguerite Yourcenar explains herself and writes, particularly in how she structures her text. I admire the cadence of Italo Calvino’s narration. I believe I have learned from Josep Pla how to confirm, so to speak, my own opinion. And from Virginia Woolf, I wanted to capture the rhythm, like waves, continuous and changing.

I should add that most of the quotations and references are from books that I have been able to hold in my hands, to read and reread. They have also come from films that have interested and shaped me. I appreciate discovering new material and obtaining information and knowledge, but even more I appreciate reflectively using that which I already know and value. This reaffirms my will to use my own close-to-hand sources, which may seem reductive, but I consider it to fair and above all sincere.

#### THE TITLE

Entitling is important. The title of this thesis has always been provisional and open-ended. *Only Images: the postcard, a way of urban knowledge* is eloquent and clear. But there have been others. *Saturday Quirks*, too personal; *Imago urbis* or *Imago mundi*, too solemn and too close to *Forma urbis*;<sup>2</sup> *Cartoline*, the Italian word

<sup>1</sup> This publication only includes a part of the thesis. It contains the chapters “Only with postcards”, “The collection” and “Barcelona. 1952-1986”.

<sup>2</sup> Josep Parcerisa: *Forma urbis. Cinco ciudades bajo sospecha*.

for postcard, referring to the cardboard support of the image –I was attracted to the idea of using the name of a part of it for it all; and *Humble Images*, from which the title *Only Images* derived. *Reproduction Prohibited*,<sup>3</sup> has always been on standby. It evokes a contradiction between sharing and copyright, and questions the concepts of ‘multiple’ and ‘collection’, and even of research itself.

It is interesting to confirm the meaning of the words. I was able to validate the close relationship between imagining (forming the mental image of something) and image (a figure, representation, likeness or appearance). Pointing out this ambivalence is suggestive. I considered *Imaginations or Images* as the title of the thesis. However, I was bothered by the ‘or’, which expresses alternative and exclusion. *An insignificant fact* was the beautiful title of a conference by Susana Solano.<sup>4</sup> The word ‘insignificant’ seemed to me an almost irreplaceable word for the postcard and the thesis. It conveys ‘meaning nothing’, ‘being worthless’ and ‘unimportant’.<sup>5</sup> However, the term is long and requires the company of another shorter and more precise word, such as ‘fact’, which I was unable to find.

Therefore, I decided on *Only Images* with the subtitle *The postcard, a way of urban knowledge*, a PhD title which gave me no hesitation. ‘Images’ is a self-evident term and refers to the source material of the research. ‘Only’, contains negation and entails restriction. *Only with Images*, would perhaps be too explicit. ‘...way of urban knowledge’ is, in fact, the hypothesis to be tested and justified. In any event, everything remains on the table, ready to be replaced with a more precise term if it arises. Perhaps *Metic* is appropriate, meaning ‘a foreign resident’, a foreigner who comes to stay, incorporating him or herself in the culture of the new destination. Perhaps *Insignificant Metic* could be a good name, if not for the thesis, then for the travelling postcard.

## SOME REFERENCES

Most postcard publications fall into two categories: those showing images from a single location and those from a single publisher. The former category, resulting from local collecting, abounds the most. These collections are mostly published with the support of the municipality and contain short historical foreword and extensive collections of images. Although they have short print runs, are of poor quality and enjoy little circulation, they document both urban life and history well. They allow us to understand the place: through their images they attest to its physical and social construction and transformation.

The latter category brings together all of a publisher’s postcards. These publications enjoy the support of deltiology societies and benefit from the precision and rigour of collectors. Greater care goes into their publication, although the quality of the images is still lacking. They almost always lack text, and when there is text, it is descriptive, thus turning these publications into inventories and catalogues. The images shift these publications out of balance, although they are not worthless. In fact, the postcards are like that: almost exclusively image. Both types of publications –nothing but memory and nostalgia– in no way encouraged me to imagine that my collection could become a suitable subject for research.

While looking for ways to show off the postcard, I noticed how visual artist Eugènia Balcells uses it remarkably successfully. Both in New York and at the Barcelona Forum, she treats the postcard as a tiny fragment whose content/image can only be discovered up close. It is one piece of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle that she herself draws and constructs.<sup>6</sup> It is a clever way of saying that postcards are only images of monuments and that monuments are only postcards. But in my opinion, this artistic avenue is trite.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Perejaume’s *Postalers*,<sup>8</sup> where small mirrors, placed

<sup>3</sup> On all the postcards, there appears *reproduction prohibited*, *reproducción prohibida*, *reproducció prohibida*, *riproduzione vietata*, *proibida a reprodução*, *reproduction interdite* or *nachdruck verboten*, etc., conveying the same explicit concept: protect the rights of the publisher.

<sup>4</sup> The conference took place at the ETSA/URV in Reus in 2008, where she explained her work and her exhibition in Madrid (15/11/2007-02/01/2008).

<sup>5</sup> The Real Academia Española: *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Dictionary of the Spanish Language) and María Moliner: *Diccionario de uso del español* (Dictionary of Spanish Usage).

<sup>6</sup> Exhibition *Barcelona in Progress*, Fòrum de les Cultures, Barcelona (May-September 2004).

<sup>7</sup> As well as the beautiful compositions, that Oriol Vilanova has recently produced with his postcards at the Tàpies Foundation, which are included in the corresponding catalogue.

<sup>8</sup> Perejaume exhibition, held at the Sala d’Exposicions de la Fundació Caixa de Pensions (12.3.1985-31.3.1985).

like postcards in the display-artefact, reflect and capture the world. Furthermore, the display can be moved, as Perejaume does in *Atlas*. It is a brilliant way of having all the postcards without having any at all. I hope I can find as magical and imaginative a formula as Perejaume's that will allow me to show the collection and encapsulate the thesis. Maybe a single image, maybe a thousand words, or maybe just one.

Fortunately, I came across some publications that stimulated my interest in postcard books and, above all, they allowed me to view my research as current and timely. These were *Walker Evans and The Picture Postcard*, by Jeff L. Rosenheim, the twin books *The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn* and *The Dawn of the Colour Photograph: Albert Kahn's Archives of the Planet*, both by David Okuefuna, and the surprising work *Postcards* by Martin Parr. In addition, Susan Sontag's book *On Photography* – an indispensable text –, and, above all, Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and *Le texte et l'image* helped me to discover the difficult relationship between image and text.

However, the first publication that led me to link collection and thesis was *Luz Cenital*, a thesis and publication by Elies Torres. His images, the lesson of his categories and his incisive comments were my first stimulus. I valued the construction of Martin Parr, a photographer of everyday life and an unorthodox collector, in his series of images compiled in an enthralling look at postcard images, eloquent, though never associated with texts. I find even the paper of this enriching and encouraging book appealing.

Susan Sontag's reading offers essential culture on the history of photography, especially American photography. Such reading inevitably leads to Walter Benjamin's *On Photography* and, in turn, to Gisèle Freund's *Photography and Society*. All three are based on the reflection on photography, understood as medium and art, a theme that Pierre Bourdieu

picks up in *Un Art Moyen*. Roland Barthes' reflections and his literary reading of the image establish a deep relationship between image and text. It is an emotional and overwhelming must. The books of Albert Kahn's vast oeuvre of photographers do not reflect postcards. Their images stand as a true inventory of the world promoted by the philanthropist, of whom I do not intend to become an heir, but rather an admired follower.

Jeff L. Rosenheim's publication provides an in-depth look at the work of Walker Evans. In it, Evans explains his collection of postcards as the inspiration and basis for his prolific photographic work. Both the work and collection, deposited at the Metropolitan Museum of New York, were exhibited and published. Evans<sup>9</sup> does write texts, and Rosenheim compiles them. *Lyric Documentary* is as intense as some of the comments regarding photograph-postcards. I was also interested in the categories put forward for organising them. Knowledge and dissemination of Evans' work allowed me to believe I valued the construction my obsessions made some sense and could be shared. I was understandably delighted to see some overlap among the images in the collections of Walker Evans, Martin Parr and my own.

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Walker Evans: *Lyric Documentary* in Jeff L. Rosenheim: *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard*, pp. 103-125.