The city has always been celebrated in terms of its central icons, and many of these plot a visual hierarchy; if not of skyscrapers, then of church spires and towers. The camera has followed these, and indeed, such icons remain the basis of our own tourist maps through the city as we construct our individual geographies of urban space. The direct opposite is the street and the negotiation that such a space at eye level implies. Street-level both engages with the clutter of the city, its chaos, and process, and also celebrates its multiplicity, difference, and (at times) danger. It suggests a human dimension rather than an ideal prospect…. To be a walker in the city is to engage in a very distinctive relationship with the urban scene, and the flaneur has been rightly celebrated as a distinctive figure of the modern city. The camera negotiates between two poles, the vertical and the horizontal; extremes of visual unity and disunity which suggest part of a larger dialectic as to how the city has been seen: the public and the private, the detail and the general, the exterior and the interior, the historical and the modern, the permanent and the temporary. All add up to the compulsive complexity and enigmatic quality of the city as both an experience and a phenomenon, for effectively what the urban photographer has consistently asked is what Charles Dickens, in his great urban novel of London, *Bleak House*, also asked: what does the city mean and how can one represent it?

…[O]ne of the most sustained attempts to photograph New York City … is by Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946). Stieglitz brought to the city an idealism which bordered on the spiritual, seeking to find in New York an image of America’s promise as a dynamic and modern culture, aligning it with a romantic idealism in which the city was alive with spiritual possibility. And yet what we find in the period from the 1890s, when he started to photograph New York, to the 1940s, when he abandoned photography, is an underlying conflict between the attempt to create ideal images and the evidence of a material and human world of urban conflict inimical to the ideal vision he sought.

*The Flatiron* (1903), for example, is one of his definitive images of New York. One of the first skyscrapers in the city, this was built close to Stieglitz’s famous 291 Gallery on Fifth Avenue. Situated on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Broadway, it gained its nickname from the triangular area of land on which it was built. On the morning Stieglitz photographed it he was overwhelmed by what he saw, for it seemed to shimmer amidst a fall of “fresh snow,” and appeared to him as an image of the “new America still in the making.” Typically, Stieglitz bases his image on a mix of tonal range and compositional formalism. In turn he lays stress on the natural elements within the scene: trees, snow, and the sky. The urban scene, as it were, is
reduced to a minimum. The building appears to rise above a delicate, almost filigree pattern of trees as part of a lyrical frisson which lays stress on its delicate presence. Ethereal, it has been flattened by the point of view: no longer a building, it has been transformed into a mirage.

Stieglitz, as he does so often, denudes the building of its solidity and function as an office. The realist context gives way to an imposed ideal frame of reference. Thus Stieglitz seeks to maintain his perspective always at the expense of the commercial, historical, and material aspects of the city he photographs. The Flatiordon was photographed endlessly as an icon of the new modernity of city life (see the images by Coburn, Luchasz, Steichen, and Abbott, for example), but only Stieglitz photographed it divorced from the chaotic textures of the city streets that surrounded it.

This is typical of the way in which Stieglitz approached the city per se. From 1902 he virtually abandons the street as an area of interest, preferring instead the perspective of the new skyline, or he retreats behind the windows of his various galleries as he moves, literally higher and higher above the city itself. He photographs Old and New New York or The City from across the River, but it is as mythic spectacle, not as insistent reality. His primary vocabulary remains one based on light, water and sky—the very opposite of what a city is made of. More problematically, he empties his images of any human presence, so that he seems to inhabit a city given over to ideal forms and ideal moments. From the 1930s he looks out on to a midtown Manhattan from his apartment high above the streets. What Lewis Mumford called a “ghost city” is now the dominant mood of the last images: somber, still, bleak, and melancholy. From the Shelton, Looking West (c1935) is typical of this final period.

Thus Stieglitz was effectively defeated by a city he sought to unify and idealize according to an underlying philosophy of meaning. He rendered the social and human context neutral, and increasingly faced the material evidence of the city, not as symbolic image, but as raucous and callous reality of the kind we find in the paintings of the Ash-Can School and in the naturalist
writing of Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. He found what John Dos Passos, in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), call a “city of scrambled alphabets” which was to become the increasingly dominant condition to confront the urban photographer as the century advanced: a continuous condition based on disunity and fragmentation—a made world always hovering on the edge of meaninglessness.

But other American photographers of the period did allow the cameras to inhabit precisely that photographic space so inimical to Steiglitz’s vision and, in so doing, established one of the central bodies of work in relation to the American urban tradition. In many respects, this has been read as a documentary, even journalistic, response, but that is to take it out of its ambiguous context as an example of urban photography. Here the city is not a spectacle, much less a unity. It is, rather, an invisible city, at times an underground city, in which the sheer density of the human presence threatens to overwhelm the camera as it seeks to image street-level experience. Jacob Riis (1849-1914), especially his images for *How the Other Half Lives* (1892), remains basic to the viewpoint. Riis focused on the appalling conditions of New York’s Lower East Side in an attempt to alter housing conditions amongst the overcrowded and infested tenements.

The images that go into *How the Other Half Lives* raise many questions, but their status in terms of the photograph’s ability to move into forbidden and invisible urban geographies is exemplary. They penetrate a secret city. Indeed, as the response of the photograph developed, what emerges is a series of cities within a city: multiple layers of what constitutes the meaning of an individual urban identity. No single photographic response achieves any definitive vision of what it stalks. So, where Stieglitz favored the avenue—broad expanses of urban space where the eye is free to roam at will, either upward or indiscriminately—Riis limited himself to the alley and the court. Both are extremes, but both equally underlie very different aesthetics of the city and the way in which the physical and perceptual space of the city scene is to be negotiated and interpreted by the camera. It plays into the complicated language of visualization and what the eye privileges as part of its preconceived image of what the city might or should be.

There is much that is ambivalent about the use of space in the urban context, and the contrast between private and public space is to remain fundamental to the whole way the city has been seen…. But space is also related to the terms by which figures are framed within their environment. Thus, any focus on the figure enters into part of a complex typology as to how space is suggestive of the mythology of possibility and freedom, and historical and sociological realities. Lewis Hine (1874-1940), for example, records New York over a period of some thirty years and does so in direct opposition to Stieglitz. Where Stieglitz sought the long look, so Hine
makes the street and the figure absolutely central. Over this period he concentrated on three separate but related areas: the European immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, the “processing center” for immigrants before they were allowed entry into the United States; the Lower East Side, a densely populated area of immigrants; and the Empire State Building—as the official photographer he photographed its entire construction. Collectively, his photographs remain an extraordinary record of a city’s process of change. What marks them out, however, is their continuing commitment to the human figure. The images of Ellis Island fix individuals in a strange land. Often shown as confused, they picture for us the very process of realignment and regrounding of lost cultural certainties. The Lower East Side images involve work and the terms of everyday existence which, collectively, respond to the density and plurality of the area at the time. The Empire State Building images celebrate the enormity of the enterprise and give us almost sublime panoramas of the city from the highest building in the world (as it was in 1931). What distinguishes Hine’s approach is the way that the human figure is always central to the meaning. It is the workers on the Empire State that Hine celebrates, and he allows them to dominate the scene. This is not a city constructed through the photograph; it is a made and built city dependent upon labor, and Hine’s achievement is always to relate that labor to the larger workings of the city’s superstructure—its being, so to speak, as a social and economic organism. Bowery Mission Breadline (1906) is characteristic. It offers acute attention to the details of each figure as a clue to the assumed complexity of their individual terms of existence. Never a dealer in stereotypes, Hine allows the figure to retain its own distance and unique space within the city’s amorphous meaning and geography.

Although never sensational, Hine’s work underlines the extent to which the city has been viewed as a spectacle. And much photography of the city has viewed it (and continues to view it) in terms of the bizarre, even the surreal. Like the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe’s The Man of the Crowd, so the photographer roams the city in search of the strange. Both day and night exhibit a sense of film-noir as the city, through the photograph, is revealed in its true condition. The photographer as flaneur is basic to this development, but there is also a commitment to an underground, almost subterranean city, which the photographer must seek out and become privy to. The city is part of a perverse world of sensation, danger, and the violent: not an ideal
environment of the kind Stieglitz wanted, but a nightmare environment of the vicarious and the brutal—*Tableaux vivants* of a bizarre world.

Weegee (Arthur Felig) (1899-1968) is a case in point. Photographing New York in the 1940s, his is primarily a secret imagery of what he saw as a naked city. His subject is its exhibitionism and he is the photographer as the voyeur. His mode is the press flash-gun, literally exposing his subjects in a sensational manner, and concentrating on the extremes and moral foibles of the urban crowd. Weegee’s subjects constitute an underworld in their own right, so that each image has the element of the bizarre. One feels that, like Brassai, Weegee images a secret city: murder victims, muggers, transvestites. But he also images private moments—anything that might feed his hungry eye in search of the sensational and murky photograph. *Murder in Hell’s Kitchen* (1940) is exemplary Weegee, and both in its title and approach defines the photographic ground that makes up his most significant of texts, *Naked City* (1945)…. Weegee thus raises the act of looking and its concern with spectacle and the spectacular to the level of an analysis of a subconscious “terrain.” We should not be surprised that he is, along with Lisette Model, one of the central influences upon another New York photographer of the bizarre and hidden: Diane Arbus.

Arbus is in many ways a unique portrait photographer, but in the context of New York her work has a particular significance. Hers is a limited and personal urban geography, and if she photographs the street she does so always in relation to the figure which dominates the space of the photograph. Her quintessential terrains are the rooms of people’s private spaces—especially bedrooms, where the public showing of city life is disregarded as so much make-up and masking. Her vision reflects a terrible sadness and loneliness, a city made up of isolated individuals. The pervasive sense is one of dislocation and angst. Arbus extends Edward Hopper’s images of intense loneliness into a psychological mapping of the urban condition. In this context the street … remains a theater of public faces and anonymous types. No wonder then, that two of her “favorite” areas were the New York morgue and 42nd Street.

… [P]hotography has a long tradition of the street figure. John Thomson’s (with Adolphe Smith) *Street Life in London* (1878) and *Street Incidents* (1879) are part of a continuing concern to place the figure in an urban context without recourse to the picturesque or caricature. Many of
these pictures attempt to convey the terms of existence to an audience otherwise ignorant of the life imaged. Thomson’s images of the London poor, for example, *The Independent Shoe Black* (1876) allow the figure its own independence, at least in terms of the way the images judges its existence. Thomson’s figures, in this sense, are similar to Strand’s and in a later period to William Klein’s. But perhaps the quintessential study of “street” figures remains Walker Evans’s *Many Are Called*, photographs of people on the New York subway. These are candid images, and Evans took then with a concealed camera. What they suggest is an intense and quite extraordinary sense of ennui and emptiness. This is the people of the city, both underground and caught off guard. The black-and-white images suggest an unrelenting greyness quite at odds with some of the more dynamic images produced by New York painters in the same period. Collectively, they create an image of urban loneliness and separation. The irony is they do so *underneath* the streets. They picture, as it were, the city’s subterranean condition where people are isolated in an anonymous environment.

New York has maintained its centrality as a photographic icon of the urban condition. Moving between extremes, photographers have photographed a mosaic of urban contexts and texts. Indeed, the problem of trying to read it has become increasingly potent. As long ago as the 1930s Berenice Abbott, confidante of Eugene Atget, whom she befriended in Paris, established one of the major photographic enterprises of the twentieth century—the photographing of New York City as an entire urban space in its own right. To look at these images is to be overwhelmed by the sheer variety of approach: Abbott refuses to limit the camera or to focus the lens on a specific register of meaning. She is as various and as pluralistic as possible, and there is often a freshness to the images which belies their quasi-documentary nature as a record of the city in the period.

And yet, as they accumulate in their visual effect so we begin to sense an underlying ambivalence in meaning. New York, for all its spectacle, will not yield to the camera in the way Abbott wants it to. *Columbus Circle* (1933) is a central image in this context and constitutes a visual essay on the picturing of the American city. Both “Columbus” and “circle” suggest part of a traditional American historical urban iconography, the very things the image can no longer read. This is a photograph that makes the city as text basic to its concerns. The scene is, in effect, a
series of signs on which we look, and from which we derive the sense of two very different cultures and two very different traditions, in a process of fundamental transition. What dominates the scene is a series of signs which have displaced the traditional codes of meaning. Thus “Mayflower” points to no more than a hotel, and “Columbus” refers to a statue marginalized by a new kind of urban architecture and symbolism. In brief, there is no historical perspective. Whatever suggests history has been subsumed into an iconography of advertising which not only dominates (the signs, especially those for “Rye Whiskey” and film) but determines the way we view the city.

Abbott is acutely aware of the sign and its implications for how we understand the city as a text rather than an environment. Her photographs are full of adverts, signs, boards, directions: the basic alphabets of communication in an urban space. Columbus Circle, in that sense, is ahead of its time and suggests a postmodern condition. All is flux, and the solidity of its title has given way to a transitory state of relative placement, much like the bus-station in the center of its space.

More and more the photograph has reflected a fragmented sense of the urban. We have moved, in this view, from the nineteenth to the twentieth to the postmodern city, urban spaces which cannot be read visually. An example is Joel Meyerowitz’s Broadway at West 46th Street, New York (1976). A color image, this gluts the eye with the way in which the city has become a text in its own right, and yet the codes have been scrambled. Effectively this is an environment given over to high capitalism, so that despite the variety and detail at street-level, the guiding presence is of an all-encompassing ambience which belongs to a corporate America and international market-place. New York is here the international city, but it exists without any sense of its past, or of its different localities. For all its color and vibrancy this is, in many ways, a deeply pessimistic photograph….