

Speculative Memories: Artificial Intelligence in Urban Narratives

Author1¹, Author2¹, Author3²

¹Institution1, City, Country, ² Institution2, City, Country

author1@domain.com; author2@domain.com

Abstract. This paper examines generative AI as an artistic means of exploring urban experience rather than representing the city as a complete object. It reads three artworks, *Abandoned Fictions*, *Abandoned Future*, and *Montevideo, 1983* through an earlier work, *Wind*, which used mediated reality to make network infrastructures perceptible. Across these works, the city appears through real and imaginary paths. Generative systems do not recover these dimensions objectively. They introduce a statistical urban imaginary whose generic forms and distortions confront the artist's situated knowledge. The paper describes the deliberate movement through a model's learned urban conventions as a *latent dérive*, extending the situationist practice into the space of generative representation. It argues that this confrontation can produce urban knowledge through art: not evidence, prediction, or a transferable method, but perceptual objects that expose the distance between probable images of a city and the ways a city is lived, remembered, and politically understood.

Keywords: Speculative memory, Generative artificial intelligence, Media art, Artistic research, Urban experience

1 Introduction

No one experiences a city as a whole. A person knows it through a limited set of routes, interiors, prohibitions, routines, and stories. Even those fragments do not remain stable. A demolished building can continue to organise a neighbourhood's memory; a public institution can be understood through events that occurred decades earlier; a future once promised can survive as disappointment long after the material conditions that sustained it have disappeared. Urban life is therefore not only spatial; it develops through time, imagination, and the unequal positions from which the city is inhabited.

Narration is one of the operations that gives continuity to this incomplete experience. It joins separate streets and moments into something recognised as *the city*. This does not mean that urban reality is merely fictional. Buildings, infrastructures, property, labour, policing, and transport impose material conditions that no story can dissolve. It means that these conditions become intelligible through accounts of what happened, what is happening, who belongs, what is dangerous, and what might still be possible. The represented city and the lived city continually produce one another.

This paper considers how generative AI enters that relation. Image-generation systems synthesise visual regularities from large and uneven bodies of prior images (Crawford & Paglen, 2021). They do not remember or observe a city, but construct plausible scenes from learned conventions about architecture, region, history, and photographic style. Their fluency can present a statistical image as though it were a view from somewhere.

The artworks examined here appropriate that condition. *Abandoned Fictions* (2024) and *Abandoned Future* (2025) construct fictional industrial landscapes in relation to Uruguay's mid-twentieth-century industrial project. *Montevideo, 1983* (2025) reconstructs a childhood city during the final years of the Uruguayan civic-military dictatorship. None of the works claims documentary authority; instead, they use synthetic images to place learned visual probability in tension with situated historical and autobiographical knowledge.

Generative AI does not offer a general method for understanding cities. These are artistic enquiries whose meaning depends on the histories and experiences from which they were made. The aim of this paper is to show how the mismatch between a model's probable city and a lived one becomes material for artistic research: through the three works it examines the operations of appropriation, selection, and framing by which a situated urban narrative is constructed, and it asks what such narratives can, and cannot, claim to know about memory, political economy, architecture, and subjective experience.

2 Urban Narrative and Mediated Exploration

2.1 The city beyond the view from above

De Certeau (1984) contrasted the panoramic image of the city with the practices of those who walk it. From above, the city appears coherent and available; at street level it is composed through detours, repetition, fatigue, access, avoidance, and habit. Haraway's (1988) account of situated knowledge makes a related demand: knowledge does not become objective by concealing the position from which it is produced. Its rigour depends on making its position and limits accountable.

The urban also exceeds the bounded city. Lefebvre's (2003) urban society names a social formation organised through networks of production, circulation, infrastructure, and everyday life. An industrial complex outside a dense centre can therefore belong to the urban as decisively as a central square. It reorganises labour, mobility, energy, settlement, education, and expectations of social advancement. This broader sense is necessary for reading the industrial works discussed below, whose sites are fictional and not confined to Montevideo.

Artistic practices of walking, mapping, and intervention have long explored what totalising representations suppress. Pinder (2005) describes urban exploration as a critical practice in which movement and representation are inseparable. The Situationist *dérive* similarly used passage through changing ambiances to encounter the psychological and political organisation of urban space (Debord, 1958/2006). Such practices do not produce a more complete map. They construct positions from which otherwise obscured relations can be perceived.

2.2 Wind and the *latent dérive*

Wind (Authors, 2015) provides an earlier point in this artistic trajectory. During urban walks, a mobile device registered the intensity and direction of Wi-Fi and cellular signals. One prototype rendered the resulting field as binaural wind; another distorted the live camera image according to the mapped signals. The work joined embodied movement to an invisible informational infrastructure, using an openly artificial metaphor rather than claiming to reveal the city as it truly was (Figure 1).

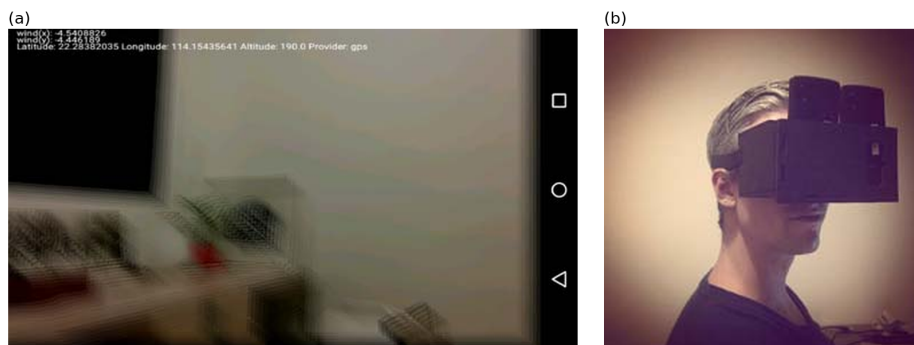


Figure 1. *Wind* (2015). The visual prototype distorted the live camera image according to Wi-Fi and cellular signals gathered during urban walks; the headset made this constructed informational layer perceptually present. Source: Authors.

Mapping data gathered in one city onto the image of another produced a meta-city belonging to neither. The apparatus did not simply display an existing layer; it constructed a new relation between body, data, and place.

The generative works reverse part of this operation. *Wind* began with signals gathered locally through a moving body. Generative image systems begin with representations accumulated elsewhere. They do not sense the street; they return an image shaped by an external visual corpus. The shift is from making a local infrastructure perceptible to confronting a distributed and largely inaccessible imaginary of urbanity.

This confrontation can be described, cautiously, as a *latent dérive*. The phrase does not equate prompting with embodied urban traversal. No body crosses a street inside a model; weather, danger, disability, policing, class, and accidental encounter do not operate there as lived conditions. The analogy names a movement through the model's learned urban conventions. Iterative generation and selection disclose where its visual space becomes dense, where a local city loses specificity, and which signs repeatedly stand in for history or region. The difference from the *dérive* is as important as the continuity: the latent passage investigates representations of urban experience while remaining outside the experience itself.

What remains of the analogy is methodological: a generative model is not available to inspection the way a map is; its internalised visual corpus resists direct examination and becomes knowable mainly through what it produces (Offert, 2021). What MacKenzie and Munster (2019) describe as the invisibility of contemporary image ensembles, collections too large and too operationalised to be seen, becomes partially perceptible only when the model is made to generate. Traversal is therefore not an ornamental metaphor but the principal available epistemology. The *dérive* studied the city by moving through it because no plan disclosed its psychogeographic organisation; the *latent dérive* studies a learned imaginary by moving through it because no other access exists. Each prompt is a step, each generation a sounding, and the sequence of generations, selections, and rejections the record of a route.

Practised deliberately, this movement yields more than images. It is a mode of inquiry: repeated passage reveals which cities, periods, and building types are densely represented, which exist only as borrowed conventions, and where a specific city dissolves into a generic one. It is a mode of thought: because the model returns, for any prompt, an effectively unbounded field of plausible variants, it makes counterfactuals inexpensive; interrupted histories can be provisionally continued, and futures that never arrived can be given form and examined. And it is a mode of critique: the model's defaults, the forms it returns when a prompt underdetermines it, externalise the assumptions of the visual culture on which it was trained, much as the *dérive* externalised the political organisation of space that planning naturalised. The three works discussed below are routes through this terrain.

3 Artistic Research as Appropriation

The works developed through historical and autobiographical research, generation, rejection, editing, sequencing, and, in Montevideo, 1983, sound and moving-image composition. These operations describe their material course, not a transferable protocol.

The relevant continuity with earlier media-art practice is appropriation. Media appropriation does not mean merely using a technical tool for an artistic purpose; it redirects the tool so that its assumptions and operations become part of the work (Authors, 2016). It also aligns these works with a broader current of machine-learning art in which artists proceed by redirecting learning and generation processes rather than accepting them as given (Audry, 2021). Here, the desired result was not the most convincing synthetic image. Fluency often dissolved the question into familiar visual genres: a universal industrial ruin, an indeterminate “Latin American” street, or a monochrome past whose grain performed history in place of specificity.

These were production problems, not systematic tests of model bias. Some images were rejected because they converted political or economic history into easily consumed atmosphere. Others were retained because uncertainty made the mediation visible. The artistic decision did not correct the model into neutrality; it established a relation between what the model could plausibly produce and what the work needed to remain situated.

Zylinska (2023) describes contemporary image culture as a perception machine in which human and computational seeing are increasingly entangled. In these artworks, that entanglement becomes an epistemic problem. The model supplies a historically saturated probability against which personal and local knowledge must work.

4 Three Urban Narratives

4.1 Abandoned Fictions

Abandoned Fictions depicts an industrial site that does not exist. The work refers to Uruguay’s period of state-led industrialisation, particularly the rapid expansion of manufacturing during the middle decades of the twentieth century (Bértola, 1990; Pérez Gómez, 2021). This project transformed employment, infrastructure, consumption, and expectations of national autonomy. Its later contraction does not retroactively make it a simple failure. The work is concerned with the persistence of the future attached to it.

The generated factory appears specific enough to invite recognition, but it cannot be located. Concrete volumes, steel structures, open terrain, mechanical interiors, and weathered surfaces combine into an industrial site

that resembles a memory without belonging to one. Its plausibility is therefore double. It draws on visual conventions of industrial decline, while its relation to Uruguay depends on historical framing and on an artist for whom this national project remains part of the political imagination (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Abandoned Fictions (2024). The factory is visually locatable but geographically nonexistent. Its apparent specificity condenses a national industrial history into an impossible singular site. Source: Authors.

This gap is what the work discovered through generation. The model could produce the image of an abandoned factory with great fluency, but Uruguayan specificity did not reside automatically in the result. It had to be constructed through selection, context, title, scale, and relation to a history that the image alone could not contain. The work thus makes visible a problem of urban representation: a peripheral history can become legible only by passing

through a globally recognisable genre that simultaneously threatens to erase it.

4.2 Abandoned Future

Abandoned Future extends the same enquiry across six images. The move from one apparent site to a series changes the claim. *Abandoned Fictions* condenses contradiction into a singular ruin; *Abandoned Future* refuses singular explanation. Its factories differ in distance, size, orientation, and degree of decay, but their repetition constructs the impression of a territory organised by interrupted expectations (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Abandoned Future* (2025), images a–d. Variation in scale and viewpoint establishes a serial landscape while retaining a narrow vocabulary of isolated factories, open terrain, and industrial decay. Source: Authors.

The series is urban not because it depicts a centre, but because industrialisation reorganised the relations through which urban society developed. Factory, road, energy network, worker, school, port, suburb, and national market belonged to one project of modernisation. The images imagine remnants of that distributed project. They do not document its geography, and six fictional sites do not prove a structural condition. They give spatial form to the historical perception that a promised future was dispersed across territory and later became difficult to locate except through its remains (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Abandoned Future (2025)*, images e–f. More monumental structures intensify the impression of a territorial project, while their familiarity also shows how easily distinct industrial histories collapse into a global genre of ruin. Source: Authors.

Seriality reveals the model's restricted vocabulary. Across changing compositions, industrial decline repeatedly returns as rust, monumental emptiness, broken surfaces, and encroaching vegetation. The series uses this recurrence but does not accept it as a transparent image of Uruguay. Its visual coherence is also evidence of a representational limit: distinct histories are made interchangeable by the conventions through which ruin is expected to look. The artwork remains between those two readings.

4.3 Montevideo, 1983

Montevideo, 1983 is a black-and-white generative video about childhood during Uruguay's civic–military dictatorship, which lasted from 1973 to 1985 and reorganised public life through censorship, political imprisonment, torture, exile, and fear (Roniger, 2016). The work does not reconstruct these events as scenes. It approaches the city through the forms in which political violence entered childhood before it could be understood politically.

The autobiographical material behind the work is spatial. It includes pre-dawn winter journeys through Montevideo with a mother to visit an imprisoned father: the cold, a bus stop three blocks from home, a closed bar, a wet wool scarf, silence, and the return to school after the visit. Strikingly, the visit itself is not remembered. The city survives where the central event does not. Streets, waiting, transport, and embarrassment carry a history that memory cannot organise as a complete narrative.

The generated video does not attempt to reproduce those routes. Its Montevideo is sparse, almost depopulated, and without stable landmarks. A solitary car occasionally crosses streets that resemble the city without fully becoming it (Figure 5). This emptiness is not historically descriptive; ordinary life continued. It is a retrospective spatialisation of fear and silence. The work asks what kind of city remains when memory preserves atmosphere more reliably than event.

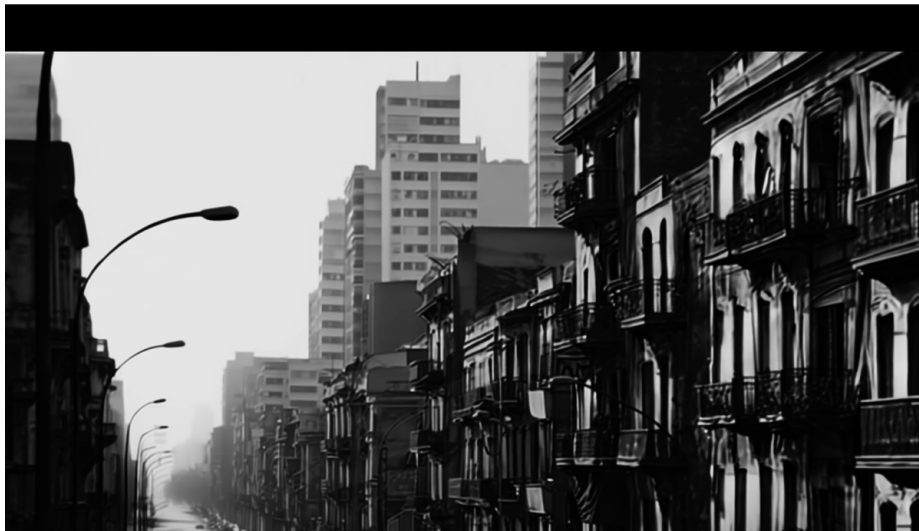


Figure 5. Still from Montevideo, 1983 (2025). The street resembles Montevideo without reproducing a recognisable location; vacancy functions as an autobiographical reconstruction of social silence rather than as documentary description. Source: Authors.

A carnival sequence interrupts this continuity. The *cabezudos*, festive figures with oversized heads, were experienced in childhood as frightening presences (Figure 6). Their appearance does not decode carnival as dictatorship. It preserves an unstable conjunction: public festivity, bodily disproportion, fascination, and fear occupy the same urban memory. The political resonance belongs partly to the adult who edits the recollection and partly to the child for whom the figures were already disturbing.



Figure 6. Still from Montevideo, 1983 (2025). The cabezudos sequence interrupts the empty city with a remembered childhood disturbance whose political meaning remains retrospective and unresolved. Source: Authors.

The closing image, a monumental building reminiscent of the government's *Palacio Legislativo* ejecting synthetic cubes, breaks from atmospheric plausibility altogether. Rather than explaining the dictatorship symbolically, the rupture prevents the video from settling into simulated archival realism. Institutional architecture becomes unstable precisely when the generated city seems most historically credible.

Generative AI is necessary to the work not because it retrieves a lost Montevideo, but because its failure to do so can be shaped. The model's approximate city, the adult's political knowledge, and the child's fragmentary recollection remain irreducible to one another. The artwork is produced in their disagreement.

5 Discussion

5.1 Statistical imagery and situated urban knowledge

Across the three projects, generative AI contributes neither factual recovery nor independent testimony. It produces a probable visual field. Artistic

knowledge emerges when that field encounters a situated history it cannot fully represent.

This changes what the image can do. In the industrial works, the ease with which a Uruguayan history becomes generic ruin reveals how peripheral specificity is absorbed by a transnational visual language. In *Montevideo, 1983*, the model's unstable approximation of the city supports an autobiographical form that would be weakened by exact reconstruction. The useful result is not accuracy or error alone, but the distance between them.

The *latent dérive* is what connects the three routes. In each work, the probabilistic breadth of the model, its capacity to return an indefinite series of plausible variants for any prompt, is not a nuisance to be curated away but the terrain under investigation. Selection traces a path through that terrain, and each work is a report from a different route: toward a single condensed site, across a dispersed territory, around an absent event. What the drift returns is not better representation but orientation: a practical knowledge of where the learned imaginary is dense, where it defaults, and where it fails a particular city. That knowledge is what the works convert into form.

Speculative memory names the artefact produced in this distance: a declared synthetic proposition through which past experience or unrealised futures are made perceptible without being presented as evidence. It is an urban narrative because it assembles dispersed structures, images, and recollections into a provisional account of how a city or urban territory has been lived. Its knowledge remains bound to that account and cannot stand for the experience of other inhabitants. Table 1 sets these spatial, temporal, and generative relations side by side across the three works.

Table 1. Distinct spatial, temporal, and generative relations across the three works.

Work	Spatial operation	Temporal operation	Generative tension
Abandoned Fictions	A singular, geographically impossible industrial site	An industrial future recalled through its imagined remains	Uruguayan history depends on a globally legible image of ruin
Abandoned Future	A serial territorial imaginary	Interrupted expectation persists through repetition	Variation exposes the narrow vocabulary of industrial decline
Montevideo, 1983	An autobiographical city without stable landmarks	Childhood reconstructed from routes, atmosphere, and absent events	The model's approximation remains in disagreement with memory

5.2 Speculative computational urbanism

This argument does not oppose artistic speculation to urban modelling. Digital twins and AI-assisted planning address other questions, although their own literature recognises unresolved socio-technical problems of context and participation (Azadi et al., 2025). Recent work has even used large language models to simulate planners and resident agents (Zhou et al., 2024). Such simulations may organise information or test formal scenarios, but generated viewpoints do not acquire the embodied and political positions from which urban needs are articulated. The artworks examined here offer no planning procedure; they clarify why memory, fear, expectation, and historical attachment cannot be treated as additional variables whose inclusion would complete the model.

The same limit governs these claims. These works arise from one artistic practice and do not claim to establish what Uruguay collectively remembers, how Montevideans receive the images, or what any community should build. A participatory project would require inhabitants to define questions and contest representations from the beginning; it cannot be simulated retrospectively by the artist or the model.

The ethical risks are also specific. Images of industrial decay can turn deindustrialisation into ruin aesthetics. Artificial monochrome can borrow the authority of archival footage. Adult composition can force childhood memory into a coherence it did not possess. Globally trained systems can make Uruguay legible only by replacing it with a portable visual genre. Framing and visible impossibilities can expose but not eliminate these risks. Images may circulate without context, while computation retains a material and environmental cost.

These limitations do not invalidate the works; they locate their knowledge. The images do not speak for the city; they construct perceptual situations in which the distance between statistical representation and lived urban reality can be experienced and argued over.

6 Conclusion

A city is never available as a complete image. It is encountered through material structures and unequal social relations, but also through routes, stories, absences, and projected futures. Urban narrative is one way these fragments become continuous enough to inhabit.

Wind approached this problem by connecting bodily movement to a locally sensed informational layer. The later works begin from the opposite direction: generative systems return learned images of urbanity assembled elsewhere. *Abandoned Fictions* condenses Uruguay's industrial history into an impossible singular ruin. *Abandoned Future* disperses that fiction across a territorial

series. *Montevideo, 1983* constructs a city around what childhood memory retains when the central political event is absent.

The generative system does not know these cities. Its value to the artworks lies in the confrontation between what it can make probable and what situated experience refuses, redirects, or leaves unresolved. The *latent dérive* names the practice that sustains this confrontation: a deliberate drift through the model's probable cities that turns generation into inquiry, variation into thought, and default into an object of critique. In that confrontation, AI becomes part of artistic research: not a method for producing better urban representations, but a medium through which the limits of representation become perceptible. The resulting speculative memories do not complete the city. They make its incompleteness available as historical, political, and aesthetic knowledge.

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