

Helsinki Photomedia 2026: Placeholders*

Foreboding photographs

Photographic documents, risk and liability within the fabric of construction sites.

Michiel De Cleene, PhD researcher at faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Belgium

michiel.decleene@uhasselt.be

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Arch. Nicoletta Grillo



2025 – photograph made on a construction site in Lokeren, BE.

Extended abstract

Foreboding photographs

Photographic documents, risk and liability within the fabric of construction sites.

Construction sites are temporary, yet intense concentrations of material, societal, legal, economic and communicative tensions. They are complex and layered sites through which **liability**, propelled by a proliferation of **(photographic) documents**, moves faster than bricks and mortar. Liability, in this context, refers to the legal responsibility that individuals or organizations have for acts, omissions, or conditions that cause harm, damage, or loss during the planning, execution, or aftermath of construction activities.

Legally speaking, liability only comes into existence after the fact, the fault, the damage, the catastrophe. But it starts wriggling and manoeuvring long before. Identifying potential liabilities and finding ways to shield against them has become an industry in its own right and, as such, ties in with prevailing capitalist concepts like **risk** mitigation, **insurance** and **speculation**. On construction sites, photographs play an instrumental part in documenting potential problems and shifting liability accordingly. As a direct consequence, constructing a building generates a plethora of photographs, most often made with a cell phone by an architect or engineer during a site visit. These photographic documents serve as proof of progress, misunderstandings, mistakes, sloppiness or the unfinished state of things and end up in reports.

According to the OED, ‘liability’ denotes (1) legal responsibility for something or someone, (2) the thing for which someone is responsible, or (3) a person or thing whose presence or behaviour is likely to put one at a disadvantage (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010). It’s a confusing definition, because it blurs the line between the burden and the source of the burden – between being liable for something, and the thing itself being a liability. The word flips between cause and effect, duty and danger, making it slippery both in language and in law. The term’s semantic elusiveness seems to foreshadow its ability to move fast, contrary to what its etymological origin: the Latin ‘ligare’ – to tie, to bind, might suggest.

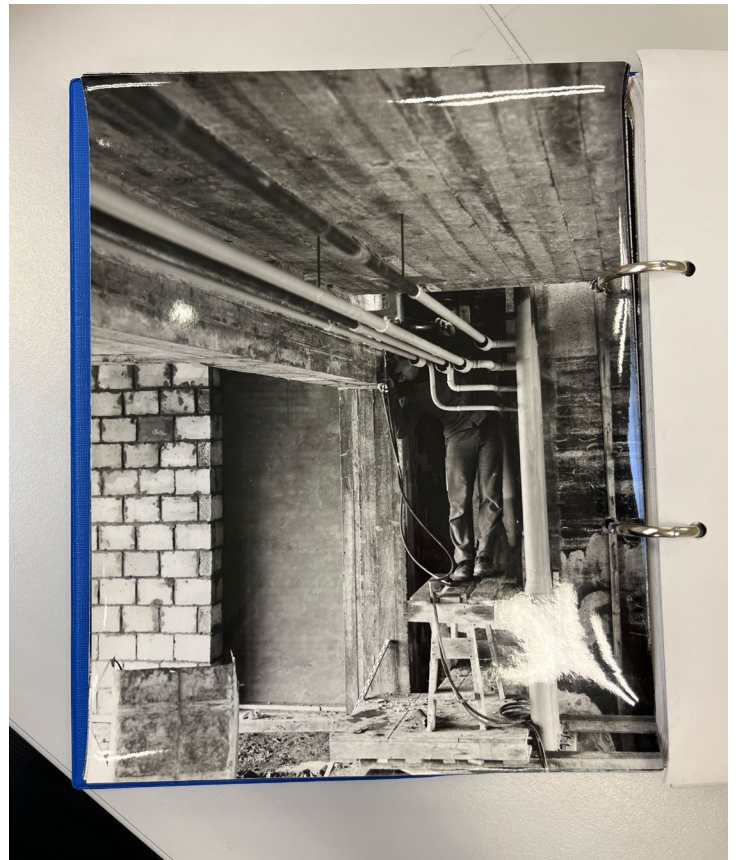
Media historian Lisa Gitelman argues that ‘if all documents share a certain “horizon of expectation,” then, the name of that horizon is accountability’ (Gitelman, 2014). The temporality of documents is therefore intrinsically double: they look backward to record an event and forward to anticipate the demands of responsibility. A photograph of a loose brick, for instance, is preserved so that accountability– in this case liability – can be assigned should the brick fall and hit someone in the head. Documents are kept for future reference: while what they describe necessarily belongs

to the past, their use value lies in the future. Of course, most documented bricks never fall.

Photography thus possesses not only descriptive capacity but potentially also an anticipatory or foreboding quality. We are used to treating images representationally, they stand in for something absent or past. Yet, when you apprehend a photograph – like a risk assessor would – as a document of potential peril, as a scale about to tip, as a building about to collapse, you escape this logic. The photograph becomes a herald of something that exists beside the world, not as a copy of it, but not separate from it either. The photograph no longer (only) represents, but demonstrates a possibility. Although photographs are typically understood to come *after* the fact, in liability regimes they are often produced *before* and *because of* the fact – even when that anticipated accident never materialises. What we're left with is a world replete with images of loose bricks. This foreboding quality of photography dissipates the moment the brick actually falls. At that point the photograph is inevitably reclassified as evidence: a post-factum document through which liability is retroactively assigned.

In keeping with the methodology developed in my PhD project *Building Documents*, the presentation will bring together multiple iterations of this vernacular mode of photography. These materials are drawn from a range of archives – including urban planning departments, insurance companies, and architectural offices – alongside photographs produced within my own artistic practice.

Positioned at the intersection of both architecture and photography theory and practice, *Foreboding Photographs* traces an underlying tension: images begin to appear suspect. When the world is viewed through the lens of risk and liability, everything photographed becomes potentially hazardous – on the verge of falling, failing, or causing harm.



1970 – photograph made on a construction site in Gent, Belgium. From the archived collection of a large Belgian contractor, 0123-VC fd6, Vlaams Architectuurinstituut.

Keywords: photography, document, construction site, risk, liability