

## **Digital Rendezvous: Experiences of Students, Staff, and Alumni on a Campus Memory Map**

**Allison Powell, Brian Hendrick, Arpan Ganguli, Tatevik Sargsyan, Shagun Shah, Eva Tkavc-Dubokovic**

London School of Economics and Political Science

Department of Media and Communications

Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE

### **Abstract**

This project aims to develop interactive maps, where students, staff, and alumni can share their memories about a physical space: a university campus. We propose creating several digital maps of the LSE for past decades, where individuals associated with the university can map their memories with current or past physical spaces around the campus. The visualization of historical and current transformation of this physical landscape will potentially promote ties in this community of association and contribute to the growing body of work on collaborative memory and geo-socially located imaginaries.

### **Introduction**

Digital technology blurs lines between virtual and actual realities, as communities of association move across time and space using different mediums of communication. When we look at academic networks as an example of such communities of association, there are walls within which these communities have traditionally existed. In the example of the LSE student, staff, and alumni body, these walls are represented by a limited access to facilities, resources, and networks. Digital platforms augment these walls, but carry the message of the organization they represent, while many personal memories and emotional connections are left unstated. Additionally, physical space is not a static phenomenon, especially in a constantly evolving city such as London. Places are built and destroyed, and data about past memories associated with a particular space becomes irretrievable. Decentralized communities of online communications allow for these memories to be archived and, potentially, available as a source for facilitating a dialogue and reinforcing alumni network connections. We propose a prototype for a mapping application to explore sharing memory about space, which expands to virtual and actual communities of association, while employing memories about present

and absent spaces from alumni, staff, and students of this community. It is an attempt to build a virtual global community around a local space, which, in our case, is the LSE campus. We will collect what Kelley refers to as “geosocial data”, which allows participants of the experiment to tag locations on a digital map with a short statement about their experiences and memories of it. Moreover, we aim to look into the LSE archives to present a map of historically important transformations of the campus architecture based on personal reflections of individuals no longer able to communicate their memories.

### **Digital Imaginaries: Between Actual and Virtual Memories of Places**

Digital technology transcends the spatial-temporal realm, and therefore allows for virtual localities to be accessed on a real-time global scale. Cyberspace is a domain in which users are digitally situated/ virtually embodied, and this domain can be used as a medium to help develop communal relationships that are constrained by location and temporality. “Cyberspace is neither empty nor abstract, and is certainly not separate; it is a community of connections wrapped around every artifact and human being” (Cohen, 2007). The embedded networks within society do not treat global and local as disparate, but actually bridge the gap between them. Space and time do not disintegrate within cyberspace and digital technology’s global village, rather “the global village spreads out to discover an expanded coexistence with/in a shared landscape.” (Barta-Smith, Hathaway, 2000) The goal of the app is to help alumni/staff/students discover an expanded coexistence with/in a shared landscape, or as Matthew Kelley puts it “‘collective’ digital urban imaginaries that are archival, generative, publicly accessible, and connected” (2013). The idea is to empower users with the capacity to develop a narrative of their past through an alternative medium which contributes to produce a collective memory of a shared locality within a global network

(Weedon, Jordan, 2012). In doing so, the platform provides a space for inputting personal memories about places and, consequently, enriching physical spaces with “residue of reminiscences” (Proust, 1981). Kukka, *et al.* project that there will be “an increased sophistication in the sociable uses of urban spaces and technologies, where people blend their online and offline worlds into a single lived reality” (2012). Essentially this is the ideal of the digital placemaking app, which tries to build a collective memory of a global community of association through combining personal memory contributions about spaces around the LSE campus.

## Methods

To develop a shared memory of places, we are looking at physical localities and their transformation over time, memories associated with said localities, and the ambivalent space where generational memory of physical places augments the locality in question. There are two levels of engagement in this scenario. First, two different persons, especially from different generations and cultural background, will have discrete mental associations with the same physical space. Second, as physical spaces transform over time due to construction efforts, memories about physical places are further fragmented. The premise of the app is to provide a common platform that might minimize this discontinuity by evoking a sense of solidarity amongst different actors who share their memories about a particular physical space. It is essential to first list out the stakeholders, which in this case are the LSE students, alumni and staff. Using individually input memories to “portray history, and not merely the state established history, is one way that spaces can take on deeper, perceptual meanings” (Mowla, 2004). Interpolating the aforesaid statement for the LSE mapping project, the intent is to create a coherence between the institutional portrayal of the campus and the perceptual meaning as constructed by the people associated with the institution, and how they affect as well as are affected by the transformation of various physical spaces within the institute.

### Visualization on the Map

This app aims to capture the change in the spatial distribution of the LSE over time by getting inputs from the alumni/students/staff. The space occupied by The LSE has been in a constant state of evolution over the years, with new buildings being added and old buildings being modified or even torn down. This has had an impact on the way the people associated with the institute associate with the the LSE and indeed, with each other. When discussing the idea about this project, members of our group had different memories associated with places around the campus that currently exist and are heavily utilized (such as the library or the Old Theater, where many public lectures take place), others,



Figure 1: Visualization of the LSE campus and prototype of colour-coding events (memories), based on segment of particular time.

emphasizing the fragmented representation of memories, spoke about more casual and less-discussed settings (such as a hallway, outdoors smoking area), which are often left out of the picture. Additionally, professor Allison Powell brought up the point of ongoing demolition and reconstruction of the campus and the fact that one of her significant memories about the campus is associated with the old Student Union Pub, which does not exist any longer. The LSE serves as an excellent hub for exploring the idea of mapping individual and often varying memories about physical places, as well as bridging local and global memories of its international academic network of association. This app aggregates all those memories by accepting User Inputs that are colour-coded depending upon the segment of time with which they were associated with the Institute.

The app can then take many different directions based on the form of analyses done:

1. One could analyse the “type” of activities that are likely to be held at a particular place, for example, Old Building, that has been the foundational building for The LSE since the 1920s.
2. One could analyse how students and staff experience a physical space- whether this experiences are similar or different (as one would need an LSE student/staff/alumni e-mail to input her memory, this information is traceble).
3. One could analyse how the “shift” has happened with respect to a particular activity, for example, meeting up for coffee.
4. One could analyse if there is a correlation between a special event and a particular place, for example, meeting one’s future life partner in the library (apparently, a very common feature as per Anthony Giddens).

The user input combined with the analyses can create an engagement between the trans-temporal and spatial experience mentioned above.

## Conclusions

We introduce an idea of a new digital map: its objective is to track individual memories that augment a physical space (the LSE campus). It is unique, because it intends to enrich the understanding of physical spaces with perceptual context, while, simultaneously, reinforcing a community of association. As new buildings are built and old ones are destroyed, the app also serves as an archiving device for past memories and a tool to understand the evolution of this physical space over time. Further development of the prototype will include addressing the question of the LSE international student/staff/alumni body to extrapolate whether individual member's country of origin affects the patterns of memory, bridging the gap between global memory about a local space.

## References

- Barta-Smith, N.A., and J.T. Hathaway. 2000. "Making cyberspaces into cyberplaces." *Journal of Geography* 99 (6): 253-265.
- Cohen, Julie E. 2007. "Cyberspace as/and space." *Columbia Law Review* 107 (1): 210-256.
- Kelley, Matthew. 2013. "The emergent urban imaginaries of geo-social media." *GeoJournal* 78 (1): 181-203.
- Kukka, Hannu, Anna Luusua, Johanna Ylipulli, Tiina Suopajarvi, Vassilis Kostakos, and Timo Ojala. 2012. "From cyberpunk to calm urban computing: Exploring the role of technology in the future cityscape." *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 84: 29-42.
- Moore, Shaun. 2015. "We Find Our Way About: Everyday Media Use and 'Inhabitant Knowledge'." *Mobilities* (Routledge) 10 (1): 17-35.
- Mowla, Qazi Azizul. 2004. "Memory Association in Place Making: Understanding an Urban Space." *Protibesh* 9 : 52-54.
- Proust, Marcel. 1981. *Remembrance of Things Past. Vol.1* (trans. C. K. Scott Macrieff and T. Kilmartin). Westminster, Maryland: Random House Inc.
- Weedon, Chris, and Glenn Jordan. 2012. "Collective memory: theory and politics." *Social Semiotics* (Taylor & Francis Group) 22 (2): 143-153.