Augmenting People's Geographies of Seattle: Digital platforms as participatory methods

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Abstract

This paper jumps off from a discussion of two overlapping place-based projects which the authors and additional collaborators are currently working to develop in the Seattle, WA metropolitan region. One project, called unARchived, entails an open-source augmented reality iOS app and accompanying website, which are themselves sub-elements of a larger umbrella-project called the People's Geography of Seattle (PGS). The PGS started in 2017 as a university-public collaboration among community-based public historians, artists, storytellers, activists, and faculty at the University of Washington. Both projects draw on frameworks of participatory action research, counter-mapping, and community archiving and story-telling. Rooted in such approaches, both projects aim to curate historical and contemporary images, oral histories, interviews, maps, tours, and other artifacts in a manner which might amplify existing community capacities while at the same time countering dominant, naturalizing understandings of the rapid tech-capital led development and displacement ongoing in the city and the region. Crucially, we approach such activities as *methodological starting points* rather than outcomes. In that context this paper aims to extend ongoing conversations about how digital cartographic and visual humanities platforms—unARchived being a first iteration of one such platform—might accommodate overarching visions based on the approaches outlined above while also engendering additional engagements including further place-based collaborations, organizing efforts, and anti-displacement actions themselves.

Keywords:
People's geographies, Urban development, Archives, Place-based collaborative methods, Counter-mapping, Counter-narrative, Digital Humanities, Augmented reality

What kind of interventions for what kinds of urban challenges?

In Seattle and the surrounding region, dramatic urban transformations have become status quo. Over the last decade, development has rendered entire neighborhoods unrecognizable in a matter of years. Regional housing prices and costs of living have skyrocketed—seemingly in tandem with the volume of omnipresent construction and traffic. Large encampments of people experiencing homelessness now proliferate in spaces beside freeways, wooded areas, and other interstitial spaces. Hardships are clearly being endured by many even as the fortunes of the region as a whole appear to be more prosperous than ever. These appearances are further connected to other visceral, if less readily visible shifts: The displacement of low-income residents and the fragmentation of historic communities of color; the sudden and uneven remaking of social-ecological environments and relations at multiple scales; and profound changes in the identities, 'structures of feeling', and lived cultures of the people themselves. Residents find themselves confronting difficult questions about their relationships to places, past experiences, and to each other.

Many of the issues just described are not unique to Seattle. Indeed, they seem to be signal features of a certain genre of contemporary urbanization, and would be very familiar to people in and around San Francisco and Vancouver, New York and Washington DC, London and Dublin, and all manner of urban areas where—following profound shifts in the geographies and logistics of global production associated with the late-20th century—"creative," information, and tertiary or high-end finance, technology, and service sectors have come to dominate local economies. As is now widely understood, urban environments like these increasingly serve as both nerve- and/or command-centers (Sassen, 2018) as well as crucial "surplus absorption" mechanisms for multi-national flows of capital (Harvey, 1985). In this context, municipalities, urban planners, and even certain classes of residents themselves have become key stewards of investment and growth in and through urban built environments and land uses (Logan and Molotch 1987, Stein 2019), increasingly looking to maximize returns for capital and landed property interests first, and only then to maximize public benefit where possible and derivative. At the same time, numerous urbanists and urban scholars (e.g. Anderson 2020, Hart and Negri 2009, Marcuse 2015, Roy 2011, Seemster 2015) have also noted the outsized roll that symbols, discourses, narratives, and forms of place-based popular and institutional common sense can play in conditioning political- economic and other structural formations in post-industrial cities, dominated as they are by so- called "immaterial" forms of labor and cultural capital.

In many contemporary cities, the overlapping forces noted above combine in a manner where seemingly nonconcrete things like information, creativity, story, and 'brand' are not just currencies of industry, but can actually influence the fates and economic value of specific spaces themselves. After all, the stories and sensibilities that people associate and enact in relation to different places are part of how differing urban locales come to be differently valued. Further, these same place-specific stories and sensibilities—frequently bound up with specific historical narratives as celebrated or suppressed in different spaces themselves—often connect in consequential ways to broader forms of common sense about the perceived mutability or

inevitability, costs or benefits, justness or unjustness of broader urban development agendas and policies in different contexts.

These broader structural and cultural dimensions are key to understanding the character of the challenges facing places like Seattle, and perhaps equally crucial for conceptualizing potential responses. Clearly these are complex issues, demanding critical public scrutiny, study, and coordinated deliberative action in registers corresponding with the broader dynamics entailed. But what kinds of study and action might be appropriate for these contexts? Starting where and engaging what communities?

Towards a People's Geography?

The People's Geography of Seattle (PGS) project is one attempt to engage the issues and questions outlined above. The PGS aims to strengthen relationships across currently under-connected communities, institutions, and individuals that are currently working at intersections among urban development, displacement, environmental justice, and structural inequity in the city and region. Through a series of initial forays, we have slowly been establishing protocols, methods, and technological tools pursuant to these aims.

Much of our work has been rooted in pedagogical experimentation and teamwork with students. Since 2013, we have run several iterations of a graduate-level urban studies studio-style experience called "Expedition Seattle," in which students work collaboratively toward a place-based inquiry of specific neighborhoods undergoing development. Students have produced detailed studies, gathered archival and policy materials and engaged key stakeholders in neighborhoods across the city.

Starting in 2017, jumping off from the foundation created through coursework, we began to facilitate a series of public conversations beyond the classroom. These were designed to bring stakeholders together; to identify emergent questions, issues, resources, and interests; and, from there, to facilitate structures of connection and cooperative support. Along these lines, we organized and hosted a public event at the downtown branch of the Seattle Public Library, featuring a panel of activists and public documentarians from several neighborhoods, in conversation with one another and with an audience of more than 150 people. We also hosted workshops and walking tours, hosted visiting scholars, and organized meals where potential collaborators could meet and discuss ideas. The PGS project now include a loose federation of, on the one hand, interdisciplinary scholars and students from cultural studies, humanities, interactive media design, social science, and environmental science backgrounds at the University of Washington and, on the other hand, community-based artists, activists, public historians, and documentarians undertaking disparate projects across the Seattle and the region.

Over the course of all of these activities, we have gained invaluable insights into the municipal landscape of Seattle and region—especially in relation the fragmented municipal and political landscape of Seattle and the surrounding region. Local political and civic cultures here have long been oriented toward a kind of live-and-let-live libertarianism wherein it is often thought that local and personal issues are best dealt with locally by enterprising people, while state and

institutional activities should be oriented towards facilitating rather than limiting this kind of enterprising autonomy. In the present, moreover, these conditions seem to have wrought a fragmented institutional and political landscape wherein civic identity and key aspects of municipal organization and dissent have been largely devolved to neighborhood and district levels, but where local interests themselves have few mechanisms for meaningfully intervening in development-friendly, technocratic processes that dominate (this is home to the wealthiest individuals and corporations in the world, after all) at city-wide and regional levels. This is part of the reason why, even in a city known for its active oppositional politics, entire sections of Seattle have quickly been rebuilt in the image of private and corporate interests while fragmented oppositional groups have struggled to mobilize laterally and vertically enough to exercise self-determination, let alone real power, even in their own spaces. From a critical perspective and as many community collaborators have insistently noted, there are clear continuities here with much longer-standing relations of settler-colonialism and extractive racial capitalism—formations that are at once political-economic and cultural-ideological, and which have underwritten still ongoing processes of dispossession, displacement, and erasure while profoundly shaping the cultural and ecological landscapes of the region. These are crucial insights that we now strive to take forward into the next phase of our work.

unARchived

Based on our activities and conversations to date, we now see clear and powerful connections between culture and economy at play in the city and the region—especially in the interplay of place, narrative, experience, dominant forms of common sense, and dominant forms of development. We are therefore now pursuing activities that hone in on these same dimensions, in hopes of intervening in the interplay among them. Specifically, we are exploring place-based digital platforms as a means of extending the kinds of conversations, activities, and analysis that the PGS has been involved in to date.

Aside from the structural and cultural ones already described, many of the other insights emerging from the first years of the PGS have been methodological. Embracing participatory action research and asset-based approaches (e.g., Cahill et al. 2007, Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) we have always been interested in forms of place-based praxis that might at once surface and produce knowledge, build capacities and connections, and produce powerful (counter-) narratives about our core concerns. From the outset, the PGS has been inspired especially by radical cartographers who have done brilliant work in other urban contexts (e.g. The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute, The Counter-cartographies Collective, The Anti-displacement Mapping Project). Likewise, inspired by a diverse array of experiments with critical pedagogy (ranging from the work of Paulo Freire, to the activities of the Highlander School, to more recent experiments with the university as "undercommons") we have strived to be critical and reflexive about the strengths and limitations of university-based work and attuned to the countless forms of knowledge and expertise that reside in communities beyond the university. As we have been in conversation with artists, community historians, and others, we have also come to recognize the radical potential of archival and curatorial methods (e.g. Flinn 2011, Sellie et al. 2015) to combine and extend all of these other dimensions.

Along all of these lines, one initial idea shared by collaborators was that it might be useful to produce something like a written "People's Guide" to Seattle, similar to other radical guides recently published in other cities (Pulido et al. 2012). Such guides feature powerful counter-narratives and counter-topographies, often presented and written by activists and others whose stories and experiences are underrepresented in mainstream discourse, that channel attention and resources towards vulnerable communities and against forms of inequality, racism, and injustice. But as we were considering our own version of such a guide, we were troubled by difficult questions. Who would get to choose what would be included? Who would end up doing the work, and who would ultimately benefit from such a publication? Given that the rapid pace of change is part of what is at issue in Seattle, would such a publication be appropriate for what we wanted to accomplish? In response to these questions, we decided to turn the "People's Guide" model on its head, which is to say, to try and approach the production and curation of such a resource as a process and a method, rather than as an outcome in itself. The first iteration is what we call "unARchived" —an app for iOS and an accompanying website.

unARchived is an interactive experience that uses geolocation and augmented reality to explore critical histories and narratives of place. It is open-source, and designed to enable public content creation and sharing. The name unARchived was inspired by the seemingly boundless potential uses of augmented reality to unearth and reveal changes in the built environment and urban fabric over time, spark discussion as to why things have developed the way they have, and highlight efforts to create a more just and equitable urban future. The app allows users to visualize and experience the past and present of development and displacement in Seattle through interrelated, media-rich place-based stories. By overlaying current buildings and landmarks with images, historical documents, stories, and other qualitatively rich content, the app can present the changing history of particular places in any number unique and interactive ways. We hope unARchived will become a tool to facilitate serious analysis and conversation about development, displacement, community, urban culture and ecology, the promises and perils of technology, and other tensions that have been with the city since its founding and are everywhere being intensely negotiated in the present.

Moreover, the app will invite and allow different communities with different experiences of these histories and changes to present their own narratives using these same place-based methods. As we have been developing and piloting unARchived, we have focused on Pioneer Square, Seattle's oldest neighborhood, to show some modest examples of what the platform can do. Eventually however, we'd love to collaborate with communities and support them in creating and sharing their own experiences using the platform. The first step towards this ambitious goal is creating an authoring app, which will allow users to design their own site-specific AR experiences by placing images, video, audio, and 3D models at specific places within a neighborhood, in order to "unarchive" that neighborhood's history.

Ultimately, we hope unARchived will become a multi-sited, multi-layered collective project spanning multiple communities and extending and expanding the commitments of the broader PGS project. Moving forward, we hope to keep facilitating generative activities toward these ends, including additional courses in which students work to implement community-led archival visions; the incorporation of narrative, visual and performative elements including curated

experiences such as walking tours, installations, and performances; the development of additional digital-humanities components related to these and other activities; and the hosting of additional community-embedded public events and workshops to share and advance all of these.

Conclusion

Like many other cities of its type, Seattle now finds itself at a historical moment where vexing dynamics of movement, development, and ideology are being negotiated in place; where dramatic transformations that are at once technological, ecological, and profoundly human are underway. How do we tap into the wealth and wisdom that has accumulated around these things over time to avoid repeating or deepening the violences inherited from the past? What is the history that we are currently producing in this place, and how will future generations assess the inheritance that we are leaving to them? These are big issues, and they seem to demand ways of creatively and critically thinking together and sharing information in place and across space. The People's Geography of Seattle project has started to explore these questions in and through place-based participatory research. We ultimately hope unARchived can be the next step toward meaningful university-public collaboration in the face of pressing urban challenges.

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