

Why is there no pedestrian perspective here?

We are conditioned from an early age to adopt an aerial or geographical perspective—a habitual way of seeing that portrays the city as a functional system rather than an evolving, living organism. Such habits help us find directions more efficiently. They shape a habitual, conceptualised way of viewing the city. However, often, this aerial perspective excludes subtle perceptions and individual opinions. What are the necessary factors that make a map a successful representation of the city? What does that mean?

Most of my experiences of a city come from walking through the street—through the friction between the shoes I choose for the day and the surfaces of the roads I walk on. These days, I've been doing a new small practice, which is to make comments on the frequently observed 'layers' of the road surface in my head while walking in Islington in North London daily. Walking, as a research practice, allows me to observe the city through subtle and fragmented moments. As such experience accumulated, I started to have new recognition—to see the texture as the layered skin of this city, which later recognised this as evidence of the city's surface being constantly altered, repaired, and evolving. This process allows me to situate myself in the present, align my perspective with that of a pedestrian, a participant and capture physical memories.

While doing so, I conducted a parallel investigation by revisiting the spots I had commented on in Google Street View (hereinafter referred to as GSV). During my visit, I uncovered a stack of street images for each location, revealing snapshots of the spot across various years. This unintentionally created database records a loose process of how the layers evolved during the recent

decade. This allowed me, much like an archaeologist, to collect and observe recent changes to the road surface in another time and space. This behaviour of collecting images, totally not the intentional function of Google Street View as a tool, is personal and unsystematic.

During the visit, I also discovered some other things about this feature within a universal mapping platform. The perspective within GSV is in the centre of the road, which is the perspective of vehicles. Conversely, when I try to look down at my feet, at the ground, Google Street View often reveals its stitched-together nature. The three-dimensional space is spread out, and things are accidentally flattened. It feels like having a super prosthetic eye that melts the world into a layer of endless images.

It is difficult to stably address the perspective of pedestrians in GSV. When I try to drag the viewpoint downward, I may fall into another time and space or be suddenly sent back to the flat map view. What appeared before me was a strange, off-centre lichen, and I, like a time traveller, was lost in the not-so-distant past of the city in another world. Sometimes, when I find myself in the ‘wrong’ time and space—one without any image records—a seemingly open and spacious road turns out to be a dead-end. Through the layers of screenshots and expanding collections in my folders, the voice of one question grows clearer: Why is there no pedestrian perspective here?

When this question arises, a rational voice quickly counters: the decision to exclude personal experience and to unify perspectives, simplifying and symbolising information, is inevitable for practical purposes and functionality. However, in the moments when I attempt to engage with the pedestrian perspective, only to be pushed away by this seemingly dehumanised and authoritative database, I begin to realise that this force of exclusion is not as objective as it appears. Functionality is not an excuse. Subtly, the force that pushed me away from the pedestrian's perspective in GSV indicates the fact that we didn't choose to but were lured to view the city as a flat surface, always under control and recording.

As a space of mapping, a map is also a space of practice. There have already been various visual practices that incorporate subjectivity and challenge the initial rules in geographical maps. Based on my research and questions to this stage, my practice will continue to focus more on: How can we integrate the pedestrian perspective into the practice of using and creating maps to uncover more subtle narratives about our surrounding environment?

