

Google Street View and the transition from the unknown to the known

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Introduction: The everyday landscape

Isolated examples of the term *everyday landscape* appear in nineteenth-century literature but the term only takes on a polemical value in the twentieth century with the work of writers such as Robert Venturi and J. B. Jackson.¹ Where the nineteenth-century everyday landscape was a background for important events, Venturi's became a provocative source of inspiration; Jackson "discovered" an otherwise-ignored vernacular landscape from the vantage of his motorcycle. As the Venturian understanding of the everyday landscape is still operational today – the theme of the present conference session is an obvious example of its persistence – we need to identify the factors which contribute to identifying a particular building or environment as part of the everyday landscape.

Both Venturi and Jackson support the notion that if we want to find the everyday landscape, we need to go looking for it: for both, it seems, the everyday landscape is not the published landscape. Considered as the fruit of personal discovery or direct experience, the everyday landscape carries romantic and nostalgic notions of otherness, but it can also be considered pragmatically: a building can be defined as part of the everyday landscape if we need to travel to it to find information about it. At one end of a spectrum are those buildings for which information can be found in public libraries anywhere; on the other end of the spectrum – in

the everyday landscape – are those buildings for which information about the building is not available except locally.² A building depicted across multiple modes (in published photographs, text, drawings, construction specifications, fire insurance maps, and so on) is less likely to be part of the everyday landscape than one which is neither drawn, photographed, or mapped.³ Photographs of the everyday landscape are often anonymous, lacking attribution.⁴ A working framework for identifying a building or environment as part of the everyday landscape can be defined as follows:

- 1 There exist few multiple depictions of the building (e. g., photographs and drawings);
- 2 in particular there is a lack of publicly available (i. e., published) information;
- 3 of the information which is available, attribution and provenance are uncertain, or absent; and
- 4 there is a high reliance on direct experience of place in order to conduct research.

Using this framework, the "anonymous" corner gas station in the author's hometown is part of the everyday landscape while an exhaustively photographed and published building like Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim is not. Information about Bilbao (photographs, text, drawings, etc.) is available in books and libraries anywhere on the planet but this is not so of the other. The Venturian understanding of the everyday landscape excludes precisely those buildings which are exhaustively photographed and published.

* This is the author's version of the published paper.



Figure 1. Main Avenue, Fargo, North Dakota, prior to Google Street View.



Figure 2. Main Avenue, Fargo, North Dakota, in Google Street View.

Google street view

Google Street View, launched in 2007, is an online tool providing Internet access to street-level photographs of urban and rural settings in several countries including the United States.⁵ Its promise is simple: place-specific photography for any publicly accessible street on the planet is made available via Internet to anywhere on the planet. New photographs are added on a regular basis.⁶ Google Street View photographs are produced by means of omnidirectional cameras mounted on vehicle roofs.⁷ For a “user” of Google Street View, it is possible to view photographs presented in a 360-degree horizontal panorama from any mapped location, and to easily simulate movement in one’s point of view from one station point to an adjacent one. The effect is suggestive of remotely controlling a street-level camera from a computer desktop. This paper asks of Google Street View – hereafter GSV – whether it forces a redefinition of the “everyday landscape” framework defined in the previous section, or as another possibility, whether it reinforces the distinctions between the

everyday landscape and the non-everyday landscape, as historically understood.

The possibility of a redefinition

Consider what GSV makes possible with respect to a particular urban environment, for example a segment of Main Avenue in Fargo, North Dakota, west of the city’s downtown.⁸ Compare GSV images with a set of street-level photographs taken by the author prior to Google’s introduction of Street View. Both sets of images are continuous over a given scope (the images can be understood as a horizontal panorama with left and right edges), but while the author’s photographs constitute a single panoramic image, as in Figure 1, GSV offers the possibility of multiple 360-degree panoramas from points along the street. Figure 2 shows “stitched” views made possible through GSV, both obliquely (top) and also perspectively (bottom); GSV thus heightens the perception of a complete environment.

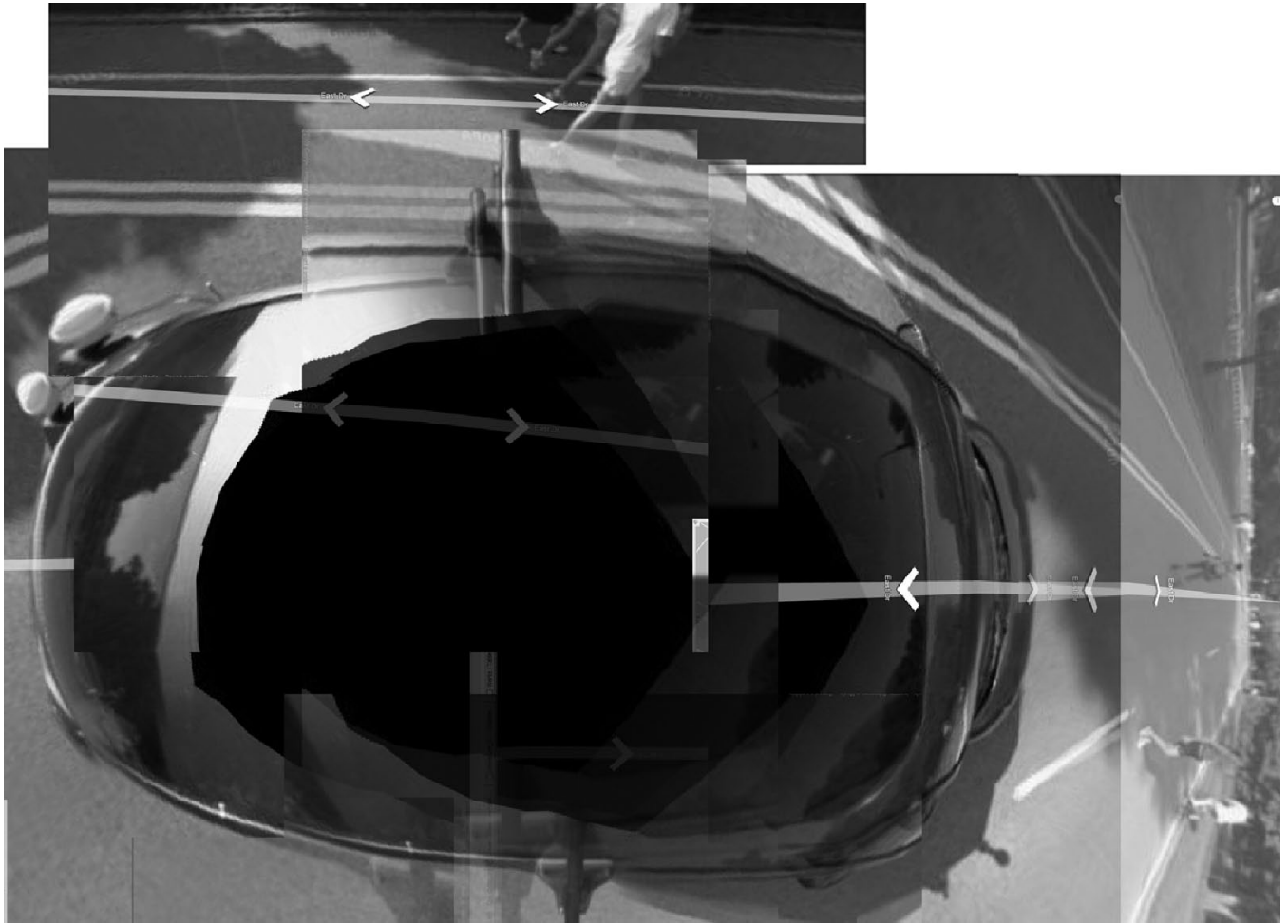


Figure 3. Google Street View vehicle in Central Park, New York City. Image: Photomontage by Christenson, using GSV images.

It appears in consequence that GSV's approach to photography fails to discriminate among what it sees – whether it is between Lincoln Cathedral and a bicycle shed, or between “high” and “low” architecture, or between “pedigreed” and “non-pedigreed” architecture, or indeed between “building” and “non-building.”⁹ Anything which can be photographed from a public street is photographed. The tool can be used to view canonical buildings, parking lots, crimes in progress, or whatever is happening on the street as the GSV vehicle passes by. GSV appears to suggest that there may be no difference between the everyday landscape and its non-everyday counterpart.

GSV's promise of worldwide dissemination via the Internet means that for many places in the world it is no longer necessary to travel to a place to acquire a photograph of it – GSV has already done so. Because GSV confounds the difference between, on one hand, place-specific photography and on the other hand, information which is widely disseminated and available everywhere, it implies that a historically reliable means of establishing a distinction between two supposedly distinct kinds of landscapes may be eroding. GSV begins a transition of the environment from the unknown to the known, or at least to the knowable – that is, into a form where information awaits organization by scholars.¹⁰

Possibility of reinforcing historical distinctions

Like many historical photographs of the everyday landscape, GSV photographs are not attributed to particular photographers. More than a simple omission of attribution, GSV actively conceals it, by promoting an immediacy or “liveness” which in reality is not present, omitting the intermediary of the photographing camera.¹¹ In newer images, the photographing vehicle is graphically obscured, but in older imagery it is sometimes visible (Figure 3).¹²

GSV relies on the assumption that what is visible from a public street is publishable knowledge.¹³ Anything which is not visible from a public street is not accessible through GSV, and thus, the tool reinforces a distinction between a private kind of knowledge – that is, site-specific knowledge associated with the everyday landscape – and a more public kind of knowledge, that is, knowledge which we can gain anywhere. GSV’s approach appears to fit comfortably within Google’s corporate notion of diffusing information generally.¹⁴ But consider the parts of the world which are not covered by GSV, which as of the date of this writing, meant all of Africa, South America, and Asia with the exception of Japan. This priority given to the “West” can be said to promote old distinctions between that which is familiar (to Western scholars) and that which is not, raising not technological but political or ethical questions.¹⁵

GSV appears to be organized non-hierarchically but this is somewhat misleading.¹⁶ In particular, because of tagging and the possibility of adding user content, GSV enables a distinction between the everyday landscape (i. e., that which is not tagged), and the non-everyday (i. e., that which is heavily tagged and supplemented by user content). As an example, a Street View of London’s (non-everyday) Palace of Westminster from Westminster Bridge gives access to several dozen user photos and the possibility of dynamically navigating between them. A similar Street View from the

(everyday) Main Avenue bridge at Fargo, North Dakota, as of the date of this writing, provides no user photos.

Conclusion

As tools like Google Street View promise to distribute worldwide the kind of knowledge historically associated with direct experience of places, an important historical distinction between the everyday and non-everyday landscape is eroded. Because of GSV, it is now true of many places on the planet that we do not need to experience them directly in order to photograph them.¹⁷ On the other hand, GSV reinforces many old distinctions, such as that between public and private, or between the known and the unknown, and it introduces new ones with strong parallels to old, such as the possibility of tagging or adding user content for famous (non-everyday) buildings – all other buildings having not yet been discovered, in exactly the sense that Jackson discovered the “vernacular landscape.”

Does GSV demand that we reconsider what we mean by the everyday landscape? The tool makes possible a new way of seeing the everyday landscape, but it also perpetuates practices of foregrounding exactly those interesting, attractive, controversial, or famous buildings which have always been foregrounded. GSV’s situation is ambiguous, potentially liberating and controlling at the same time. But the tool is still new, and its legacy will depend on the degree to which people who inhabit the so-called everyday landscape are willing to work to foreground what is there.

Notes

1. Typical nineteenth-century usage is exemplified by Michelet, in his description of Solari's Madonna of the Green Cushion: the "everyday landscape" is simply the background for the painting's subject. See Jules Michelet, *La Femme* (translation by J. W. Palmer), New York: Carleton, 1867: 59. For the contemporary understanding, see Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966: 103; also John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, and D. W. Meinig and John Brinckerhoff Jackson (eds.), *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
2. Fred Kniffen has written about the importance to fieldwork of consulting "unusual documentary sources" – i. e., locally available ones – such as folk paintings, county histories, and early travelers' accounts. See Fred Kniffen, "Folk housing: Key to diffusion," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55, no.4 (1965): 556-557.
3. See Peirce Lewis, "Axioms of the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," *JAE* 30, no.1 (1976), in which the author writes (p. 8): "One has no trouble finding excellent books about famous buildings like Monticello, or famous symbolic structures like the Brooklyn Bridge. But it is hard to find intelligent, non-polemical writing about mobile homes, motels, gas stations, shipping centers, billboards, suburban tract housing design, the look of fundamentalist churches, watertowers, city dumps or garages and carports ..."
4. For an interesting case concerning photographic attribution, see Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964. Rudofsky's captions do not identify photographers or dates of photography. The section titled "Sources of Illustrations" at the end of the book lists several photographers – although many photographs are credited not to individuals but to museums and libraries – and like the captions, it, too, omits dates entirely. Early in the book, Rudofsky admits the necessity of historical photographs only as substitutes for contemporary ones, and then so in cases where it would be difficult or impossible to produce new photographs because of restrictions affecting photographers' mobility in areas previously photographed – in particular, within Communist countries. Such political factors, which must certainly affect the construction of architectural pedigree, are glossed over in the text accompanying the images. Rudofsky's information-organization practices tend to promote photography as neutral documentation, separable from political motivations, biases, or limitations, and, most significantly, from its own history as a practice.
5. See <http://maps.google.com/help/maps/streetview/where-is-street-view.html> (accessed August 15, 2009). The source page includes a map of the world with presently mapped locations highlighted.
6. Google has stated that "[w]e're working to expand our coverage to areas that are not presently covered." See <http://maps.google.com/help/maps/streetview/faq.html> (accessed August 15, 2009).
7. See <http://maps.google.com/help/maps/streetview/behind-the-scenes.html> (accessed August 15, 2009).
8. Main Avenue in Fargo is a field of the author's ongoing research into digital representation of architecture.
9. The reference to "Lincoln Cathedral and a bicycle shed" is from Nikolaus Pevsner, who famously declared that while the cathedral is architecture, the bicycle shed is not. ("[T]he term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.") Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1960: 7.
10. "When we isolate from the world a neglected architectural variety and name it vernacular, we have prepared it for analysis. The term marks the transition from the unknown to the known." Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000: 20 (emphasis added).
11. Although precise information on the date of specific GSV photographs is apparently not available publicly, Google has indicated that there is a delay of as much as one year between the production of the photographs and their public posting. See <http://maps.google.com/help/maps/streetview/faq.html> (accessed August 15, 2009).
12. The GSV vehicle is visible in some older imagery if the viewing frame is rotated downwards from the horizon.
13. Although refer to the case of North Oaks, Minnesota, which in 2008 requested that Google remove Street View photographs of its houses on the grounds that as a private community, its streets are not, in fact, public. Lora Pabst, "North Oaks tells Google Maps: Keep out – we mean it."

[Minneapolis] *Star Tribune*, sec. A, May 31, 2008.

14. Consider, as illustration, this quote from Google's online Corporate Information statement: "Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." <http://www.google.com/corporate> (accessed August 15, 2009).
15. Ethical limitations to GSV's approach are evident in the recurring news stories of individuals or groups petitioning Google to have images removed on privacy grounds. See note 13 above, or for a more recent example, see Ben Leach, "Couple who sued Google over Street View photos of home lose privacy case," *Telegraph.co.uk*, February 19, 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/google/4695714/Couple-who-sued-Google-over-Street-View-photos-of-home-lose-privacy-case.html> (accessed August 15, 2009).
16. There are hierarchies in the way GSV organizes information but these only become clear when the limits of its coverage are made visible. That there is a bias, for example, toward tourist destinations in urban settings such as San Francisco or New York becomes clear if the dates of their initial coverage are compared to those of views from the rural Midwest.
17. flickr (www.flickr.com) also makes this possible.