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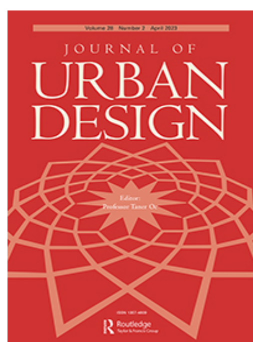

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Urban humanities as a framework for the study of public space during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT
COVID-19 has revealed limitations in traditional public space research methods. There is a need for new approaches to study and intervene during times of crisis. Interdisciplinary urban humanities approaches can help researchers respond to pandemic public space dynamics. This article develops a framework linking urban humanities practices – thick mapping, filmic sensing, and digital storytelling – to the production of space at multiple scales. A case study is presented of a course that employed these methods and proposed speculative design interventions to accommodate street vending, skateboarding, and unhoused people in the Westlake neighbourhood of Los Angeles.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic radically altered the experience of public space and introduced new challenges to studying it. While the pandemic emphasized the importance of public environments, particularly for marginalized groups, including street vendors and unhoused individuals, it also exacerbated many existing spatial injustices which demand careful investigation. At the same time, the pandemic revealed the limitations of traditional methods to study public space, underlining the need for new approaches to observe, analyse, and intervene in public space during a crisis.

Urban design research is increasingly concerned with socio-spatial conditions and user experiences in studies of public space. Despite these advancements, the pandemic exposed the limitations of certain conventional methods, including participant observations and interviews, in the study of public space. While recent scholarship introduces some promising avenues for pandemic public space research, including 'non-participant observation' (Herman and Drozda 2021) and online discourse analysis (van Eck, van Melik, and Schapendonk 2020), researchers continue to encounter practical challenges that call for methodological creativity. Thus, an important task for those engaged in urban design research and practice is to develop strategies to study public space during times of crisis.

This paper argues that urban humanities approaches offer useful tools to overcome the practical and epistemological challenges of accessing and understanding public space in exceptional circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Urban humanities is an

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emerging, interdisciplinary field of inquiry centred on the complex relationships between human beings and contemporary cities (Cuff et al. 2020). Integrating architecture, urban planning, the humanities, and other disciplines, urban humanities draws upon multiple methods – mapping, film, and spatial ethnography – to capture complex, place-based readings of cities and their inhabitants. Speculative and future-oriented, these approaches aim to not only see the city in new ways, but also, importantly, to inform creative and actionable interventions to advance spatial justice. By blending interdisciplinary methods and bridging social and spatial considerations in the study of public space, urban humanities approaches can enable researchers to access a different knowledge of overlooked spaces and marginalized users, and to respond through design interventions.

This paper demonstrates how urban humanities approaches can be employed by public space researchers to study pandemic public space. It responds to the research question: how can planners and designers expand their methodological approaches to better understand and respond to public space in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? A case study of a course and research exercise in the Westlake neighbourhood of Los Angeles illustrates how urban humanities approaches helped uncover differential socio-spatial practices in public spaces during the pandemic, and enabled researchers to respond. Drawing from this experience, this article proposes an analytical framework that links urban humanities methods, applied at different scales, to yield new understandings of conceived, perceived, and lived space during the pandemic.

Reflecting on the case, it is argued that urban humanities approaches enable public space researchers to overcome some of the constraints posed by the pandemic. Furthermore, these approaches also facilitate a deeper understanding of socio-spatial injustices by identifying the tactics of resistance by marginalized groups and deploying future-oriented urban design interventions. The integrated, applied, and interventionist approach of urban humanities shapes a practice that is not only reflexive and analytical but also action-oriented. It is this prospective yet pragmatic focus that differentiates urban humanities from other people-centred, observational approaches to studying public space.

The article that follows first reviews broader trends in the study of public space, including recent advancements in pandemic public space research and the developing practices of urban humanities. Next, the structure and goals of the research project are outlined, which employed urban humanities methods to study experiences in Westlake's public spaces. Using the analytical framework, findings are presented, along with a discussion of how applying these methods across scales revealed new insights into perceived, conceived, and lived space. Lastly, limitations of this approach and proposed avenues for its further development are discussed.

Literature review

Evolving methods to study public space

The theory and practice of urban design have evolved to reflect changing ideologies and technological advancements, shifting focus from the large-scale to the small-scale (Birch 2011), from aesthetic concerns to vernacular architecture (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 1999), and from economic motivations to justice issues (Lowery and Schweitzer 2019). The methods used to study public space and inform urban design interventions have also evolved.

Early urban design scholars, often architects, employed visual methods. They analysed site plans, figure-ground diagrams, and drawings to conceptualize how the spatial distribution of urban form – streets and squares – could produce quality public spaces. Sitte [1889] 1945) traced the composition of European squares, encouraged artistic principles in design practice, and argued that enclosed squares would reinvigorate social life. Cullen's (1971) 'serial vision' asserted that public spaces should function as a series of dramatic places that invite people to walk and rest, with illustrative drawings to encourage place attachment, publicity, and the human-scale.

In the 1960s and 1970s, urban designers employed observational methods like walking audits of pedestrian usage, surveys, and film to assess how different groups use public space and inform design improvements. Lynch (1960) was among the first to employ spatial ethnographic methods, using interviews, maps, and photographs to demonstrate how people produce mental maps of their cities. Jacobs' (1961) participant observations of sidewalk life in Greenwich Village led to her recommendations for short blocks, mixed-uses, density, and pedestrian space to support urban vibrancy. Whyte's (1980) time-lapse footage of daily activities in New York City's privately-owned plazas offered a new approach to researching public space through embedded observation, which then informed human-centred interventions. Inspired by this approach, Gehl ([1971]) 1987 studied necessary, optional, and social activities to improve the walkability and bikeability of Copenhagen. This shift in focus from urban form to social use prompted researchers to consider the importance of more quotidian elements like shade, street furniture, and smaller-scale interventions to foster more equitable and enjoyable public spaces.

More recent studies have also employed spatial ethnography, with researchers blending personal narratives, critical cartography, and film to respond to diverse sociospatial practices. For example, the essays by architects and urban designers in *Everyday Urbanism* (1999) promote storytelling and photography as tools to uncover how communities reappropriate public space for cultural uses (i.e., vending, shelter). Annette Kim's *Sidewalk City* (2015) uses critical cartography to represent spatial practices in Ho Chi Minh City both temporally and three-dimensionally. Diaries, photographs, and maps ground urban design research in the realities of everyday life.

Despite these methodological advances, urban designers still struggle to study the complex challenges faced by marginalized groups such as street vendors (Munoz 2016) and unhoused communities (Darrah-Okike et al. 2018). Everyday spaces and informal activities are still often excluded from the study of public space (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 1999; Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014). Relatedly, urban design interventions continue to prioritize expert-driven ideas over those of marginalized groups, and technical design capabilities and strategies over local knowledge (Loukaitou-Sideris and Mukhija 2016; Lowery and Schweitzer 2019). COVID-era health mandates have exacerbated these methodological shortcomings, and presented a new challenge: how to conduct public space research during the pandemic.

Pandemic public space research

Innovative approaches to urban design research may be essential for addressing methodological difficulties posed by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic presented exceptional challenges to the study of public space, which researchers confronted

with strategies to access public life differently and to examine public environments through the lens of unconventional methods (Cook & Thorsen 2021; Cui et al. 2022; Gerbaudo 2020).

Observing social withdrawal from public spaces, experts questioned how the pandemic might influence users' perceptions and experiences (Hardy 2020; Honey-Roses et al. 2020; Kasinitz 2020; Mehta 2020). Many lamented the loss of social life, as well as the rise in systems of control in public spaces. Van Eck (2020, 374) equates the pandemic to a temporary death of public space (Mitchell 1995; Sorkin 1992), while others note how activities and access were significantly restricted by surveillance, fines, and hostile architecture (Low and Maguire 2020). Even as cities reopen, some anticipate ongoing health concerns and aversions to large gatherings in public spaces (Honey-Roses et al. 2020). The role of virtual communities in replacing in-person public gatherings has sparked debate. Though technology enables unprecedented online social connections and activities, some worry it comes at the cost of increased social isolation and public space privatization (Kasinitz 2020; Low and Smart 2020).

Many cities reconfigured public spaces, carving new outdoor areas for pedestrians, cyclists, and dining (Flynn and Thorpe 2021; Kraus and Koch 2020). Indoor activities moved outdoors, 'expanding' and making public spaces 'stickier', to entice a more diverse crowd to stop and linger (Gregory 2022, 166; Mehta 2020). These transformations blur the lines between private and public realms, creating what Bell (2021, 81) calls 'new atmospheres of liminality;' a passage through time and space characterized by ambiguity and disorientation. Some planning authorities are formalizing 'open streets', curbside pickup areas, permanent sidewalk expansions, and street closures (NACTO 2020; Webb 2018). Others have stopped enforcing regulations, increased street vendor permitting, and lowered misdemeanour offences in minority neighbourhoods (Gregory 2022). Scholars noted an increase in pop-up interventions, flexible infrastructure, and 'tactical urbanism' (Pradifta et al. 2021; Rojas-Rueda 2020; Gregory 2022, 171).

In the early days of the lockdowns, researchers asked how vulnerable groups would fare in public spaces in the context of COVID-19 (Honey-Roses et al. 2020), and uncovered important early findings. BIPOC communities experienced more criminalization, fewer benefits, less access, and disproportionate hardships during the pandemic (Hardy 2020; Valentino-DeVries, Lu, and Dance 2020). The pandemic also highlighted long-standing differences in the perception and use of public spaces: to some, public space is an exclusive destination for leisure and consumption, but for some marginalized groups, it is a place to assert ownership, survive, and be political (Flynn and Thorpe 2021). While some populations were harassed and criminalized for activities like public drinking, similar behaviour by paying customers was legalized during the pandemic (Gregory 2022). Flynn and Thorpe (2021) write about an uneven sense of ownership, where users paid for differential access to public space. These privileged claims reinforce race, class, and gender discrimination. Despite restrictions and health concerns, millions marched through public spaces to demonstrate during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 (Gerbaudo 2020; Kasinitz 2020).

Traditionally, the study of public space has relied on physical access (Gehl and Svarre 2013). Conducting research during a pandemic presents fundamental obstacles, due in part to inaccessibility and social distancing measures. In response to pandemic-related restrictions, researchers largely avoided collecting *in situ* empirical data, instead

employing alternative methods to engage with public spaces from afar, including theoretical speculation and personal experience (Bell 2021; Gregory 2022), online journalism (Gerbaudo 2020; Mehta 2020; Sandset 2021), and social media analysis (Cook & Thorsen 2021; Cui et al. 2022; van Eck, van Melik, and Schapendonk 2020). van Eck, van Melik, and Schapendonk (2020) conducted 'fieldwork-from-a distance' by using social media to interpret the effects of the pandemic on Dutch marketplaces. Similarly, Herman and Drozda (2021) relied on 'non-participant observation' and digital ethnography to analyse social media content about park users. These digital techniques aided researchers in overcoming the challenges presented by limited physical access to public spaces. Far from replacing in-person fieldwork, these methods offer alternatives that generate new and complementary data. However, hybrid methodologies for pandemic public space research may be further developed into a cohesive framework. Urban humanities is a promising approach to address this gap.

Urban humanities as an approach to studying and intervening in public spaces

Urban humanities is an emerging field and approach to study dynamic public spaces. This approach focuses on human beings and their particular experiences in urban places. The disciplines of urban studies and the humanities are often isolated in different departments, following distinct pedagogical traditions. As a novel framework, urban humanities emphasize 'bidirectional' practices and strategies that work across disciplines and scales to create a dynamic intellectual and educational dialectic (Cuff et al. 2020, 10). This approach interprets engaged scholarship and intervenes through various speculative practices.

The humanistic lens is capacious and includes cultural expressions, social forms and structures, ethnic and racial composition, multi-layered histories, languages and linguistic expressions, as well as built and lived spaces (Cuff et al. 2020, 3). Urban humanities employ media that capture multiple and simultaneous dimensions of the city and its people. This urban pedagogy is empirical, interactive, representative, and creative. It is situated in specific urban contexts and lived experiences of everyday life, which generates place-based knowledge.

In its commitment to address social and spatial injustice in cities, urban humanities is future-oriented, relying upon creative and actionable interventions to reimagine our collective lives in an increasingly complex, urbanized world. These practices of 'immanent speculation' are grounded in real places, but they unlock the transformative potential of the city to envision social and spatial justice (Cuff et al. 2020, 5–16). Urban humanities suggest creative practices of imagination and action in ways that traditional disciplinary methods fall short, and which require a multiplicity of skills and disciplines. These practices fuse research and speculation, generating layers of open-ended information that allow for new possibilities to emerge.

Urban Humanities adopt three central creative practices to study, understand, and transform the urban, in a manner that supports futurism and spatial justice. First, *thick mapping* is a cartographic representation that tells stories through layers of images and data. The practice draws from what ethnographer Clifford Geertz termed 'thick description' (Geertz and Darnton 2017), as a pluralistic approach to interpreting processes that are complex and unfinished. Synthesizing positivist and empirical data with the creative

sensibilities of design and humanities, thick maps incorporate multiple readings that are simultaneous, conflictive, and incongruous. As a process, mapping captures various iterative phases of research and analysis, including observation, documentation, representation and production. The information on these maps transcends any singular, definitive 'thin' approach to knowing. In this respect, thick mapping is a form of radical cartography that deconstructs simplified and partial constructions of reality (Cuff et al. 2020). For example, in a recent study of intergenerational public space in Los Angeles, a thick map presented not only the spatial features of neighbourhood public spaces, but also the uses, experiences, and desires of both youth and older adults, to inform design and policy recommendations (Wendel et al. 2022).

A second urban humanities practice is *filmic sensing*. Looking through a device's lens involves a sensory act that incorporates aesthetic and acoustic dimensions across time. The process of framing and capturing an urban environment and its inhabitants also implies a form of discovery and thinking where practitioners make sense of the situation. Film can capture embodied and sensory ethnographic contexts that often elude other forms of data, but it also implicates the filmmaker in a self-reflexive exercise that interacts with others' presence and experience. New York-based artist Neil Goldberg employs filming sensing techniques to examine diverse individuals' experience of urban phenomena. He documents those struggling to climb stairs, getting food to-go, or missing the train (Cuff et al. 2020, 125). These representations of city life are often challenging to capture on paper or in words, which is why film offers a deeply personal and temporal dimension to urban research and pedagogy.

Lastly, *spatial ethnography* merges narrative, media, and fieldwork. Rooted in anthropological observation and field visits, spatial ethnographies allow the researcher to immerse themselves in unfamiliar settings and to construct compelling narratives through description. This approach captures the relationships between the city as an object of analysis and the subjects that inhabit its spaces, while also underscoring the researchers' positionality (Cuff et al. 2020, 19–28). Spatial ethnography prioritizes digital storytelling. Through the medium of film, digital storytelling foregrounds the local knowledge and everyday experiences of user groups to inform urban policy and design recommendations.

Together, these interdisciplinary urban humanities practices provide a scalable toolkit that can be adapted and applied to the complexity and contextual specificity of various user groups and spaces. Pertinent to addressing the challenges of COVID-19, these three approaches also give researchers the flexibility to conduct remote and in-person research on pandemic public space. To justify this argument, the section that follows details how these approaches were used in the Westlake neighbourhood during a public space course, and outlines the analytical framework.

Research context and methods

The Westlake neighbourhood

Westlake is a dense, multicultural neighbourhood just west of downtown Los Angeles. Originally developed in the early 20th century as an upscale residential district, it experienced disinvestment and decline after the mid-century due in part to 'white flight'. By the

late century, Westlake had become a destination for successive waves of immigration, particularly from Central America (Clifford 2017). Today, Westlake's population is predominantly low-income renters, who rely heavily on public spaces for leisure and recreation (Demographic Research Unit 2017). Given the neighbourhood's central location, it has recently been the subject of real estate speculation and gentrification (Deegan 2018), with development pressures influencing regulatory and design strategies that threaten the uses and users of the neighbourhood's two largest parks – MacArthur Park and Lafayette Park – as well as their abutting sidewalks. In response, neighbourhood residents contest increased regulation, policing, and surveillance: skateboarders, street vendors, and the unhoused expand the literal, metaphorical, and temporal boundaries of Westlake's public spaces on a daily basis, creating new spaces for play, sustenance, and survival.

The Westlake public space capstone course

As part of the university's Urban Humanities Initiative, a group of eight graduate architecture and urban planning students participated in a 10-week capstone course titled 'Expanded Public Space for Different Social Groups in Westlake/MacArthur Park'. The course's purpose was to employ urban humanities approaches to develop speculative design interventions that could foster more inclusive and expansive public spaces in Westlake. An 'expanding/contracting' dialectic was the key concept underpinning the course: regulatory, design, and policing strategies *contract* the meanings, uses, and users of public space, while marginalized populations *expand* public space by countering conventional meanings and activities and suggesting new ways of being in public.

The research process was iterative; students worked between scales, identified emerging themes, explored the various expansions and contractions of public space, and discussed urban design interventions to accommodate user groups based on observations. Throughout, a spatial justice lens sharpened the focus on spaces and groups that are unevenly represented in and underserved by conventional planning and architecture practice. Given that the course took place entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic, urban humanities methods enabled students to understand and intervene in public space in novel ways, and also aided in overcoming some of the challenges posed by the pandemic, particularly conducting fieldwork remotely and abiding by social distancing requirements.

The course began by creating thick maps to depict neighbourhood dynamics; these incorporated observations from site visits and from news and social media, as well as demographic and socioeconomic neighbourhood data from the census. In the following weeks, students narrowed focus to specific public spaces, employing filmic sensing to capture experiential information about various spatial practices of their users. Shifting to the smaller scale of individual experience, students then used digital storytelling to gather from users narratives about their uses and desires for particular public spaces. Moving beyond numbers and maps to include still and moving images and personal histories of everyday users of public spaces, these explorations fostered new understandings of expanding and contracting public space. To conclude the project, students synthesized findings and developed speculative design interventions to envision and activate more expansive and spatially just public spaces.

A framework to understand how everyday social space is produced

Based on findings, an analytical framework was developed to demonstrate how urban humanities approaches both addressed pandemic-related methodological limitations and revealed how public space is conceived, used, and reimagined by various actors. Applied to the case, the framework (Table 1) captures relationships between practices, scales, and space. The framework draws upon Lefebvre's critique of how the *abstract* spaces of capitalism have come to subdue *differential* spaces where alternative social and political activities may take place (Lefebvre 1991). Lefebvre's (1991) conceptual triad illustrates three interconnected ways that space is socially produced. First, space is abstracted by planners and designers who *conceive* of public spaces for productive uses. Second, designed spaces shape how people *perceive* they can use them. Third, abstracted space then limits people's everyday *lived* experiences in public spaces.

As extended by Elden (2007), *conceived* space is the logic and rationale of maps and plans, *perceived* space is the material that is generated and used (e.g., sidewalks, parks), and *lived* space is how space is produced and modified through appropriation, meaning, and symbolism – the ways in which everyday life is experienced through rhythms, gestures, and resistance. Seen in this way, Lefebvre's conceptual triad is a useful theoretical lens that can aid urban designers in understanding how social, spatial, and temporal conditions shape one another. Urban humanities is a useful methodological lens to explore perceived, conceived, and lived space in actually existing public spaces. Linking this theory and methodology together at various spatial scales can help planners and urban designers better understand and address spatial injustices (Table 1).

This framework is operationalized to analyse public space using three urban humanities methods: thick mapping to document neighbourhood dynamics that influence its production and use, filmic sensing to explore spatial practices in public spaces, and digital storytelling to understand everyday lived experiences in Westlake. Using these urban humanities approaches to understand the production and use of space helped students address pandemic-related methodological challenges and inform future-oriented, speculative design recommendations. The following section highlights key findings, implications, and avenues for future inquiry.

Table 1. A framework to understand and respond to the production of public space.

Triadic concept	Spatial scale	Urban humanities method
Conceived space	The neighbourhood (political-economy)	Thick mapping as a way to understand and spatialize the complex history, design and development, politics, planning agendas, and neighbourhood dynamics
Perceived space	Parks and sidewalks (public space infrastructure)	Filmic sensing as a way to visually capture the way that public space infrastructure shapes its use and how different user groups use public space
Lived space	User groups (everyday experiences)	Digital storytelling as a way to understand cultural meanings of, attachments to, and alternative uses of public spaces, and incorporate users' voices into design proposals

Findings and discussion: applying humanities methods in the study of public space

Conceived space: thick mapping at the neighbourhood scale

To understand public space conditions in the neighbourhood, students began by producing digital thick maps in which users, activities, and data were situated geographically, thickening the maps by layering qualitative and quantitative data. This exercise sought to move beyond conventional representations of *conceived* space to depict a more complex account of neighbourhood conditions. In small groups, students began with base layers of geographic and demographic data, including the location of parks and public spaces, and demographic data such as race, household income, and language spoken at home, adding additional data points and layers that introduced perspectives from media, community voices, and advocates on issues like gentrification and displacement, neighbourhood identity, and real and perceived crime. Through this process, students deepened understanding of how the neighbourhood is conceived by policy makers, scholars, and in popular media, and then moved beyond these conventional representations to also include the experiences of underrepresented voices and their alternative narrative claims to public space.

For example, one group of students highlighted past and present conditions in Westlake's largest park – MacArthur Park – at night, using temporality as a lens to explore public space expansion and contractions (Figure 1). By collecting data over a series of night-time observations as well as from surveys of online forums and social media channels, the group was able to understand and cartographically represent the less acknowledged, planned-for, and often maligned night-time users and uses of the park. Scans of blogs and newspapers revealed that MacArthur Park is often depicted as a daytime space for recreation, while night-time is generally perceived as dangerous, unpleasant, or threatening. However, as the group thickened the spatial dimensions of their map with temporal layers (Figure 2), geographically situating users and activities at different hours, they uncovered under-acknowledged patterns of night-time use, including food vending, resting and sleeping, and even fishing in the park's large central lake. When mapped together, these observations suggest that the park expands temporally in response to user activities, taking on new functions and meanings throughout the night.

These findings illustrate the potential of thick mapping as a visual and analytical tool to more deeply understand and represent the confluence of history, planning agendas, and everyday dynamics in public space, and to expand conventional narratives of public spaces and users. Thick mapping was a particularly well-suited method given the constraints of pandemic restrictions and remote research, allowing researchers to incorporate existing geographic and demographic data as well as in-person observations and digital content, social media, and news clips, much of which was accessed remotely.

Perceived space: filmic sensing for everyday spatial practice

After exploring broader neighbourhood conditions through thick mapping and identifying several themes related to temporality, informality, and play, students narrowed focus to particular public spaces in Westlake that exhibited distinctive expanding-contracting dynamics: spaces in which local users were contesting limitations brought by ongoing

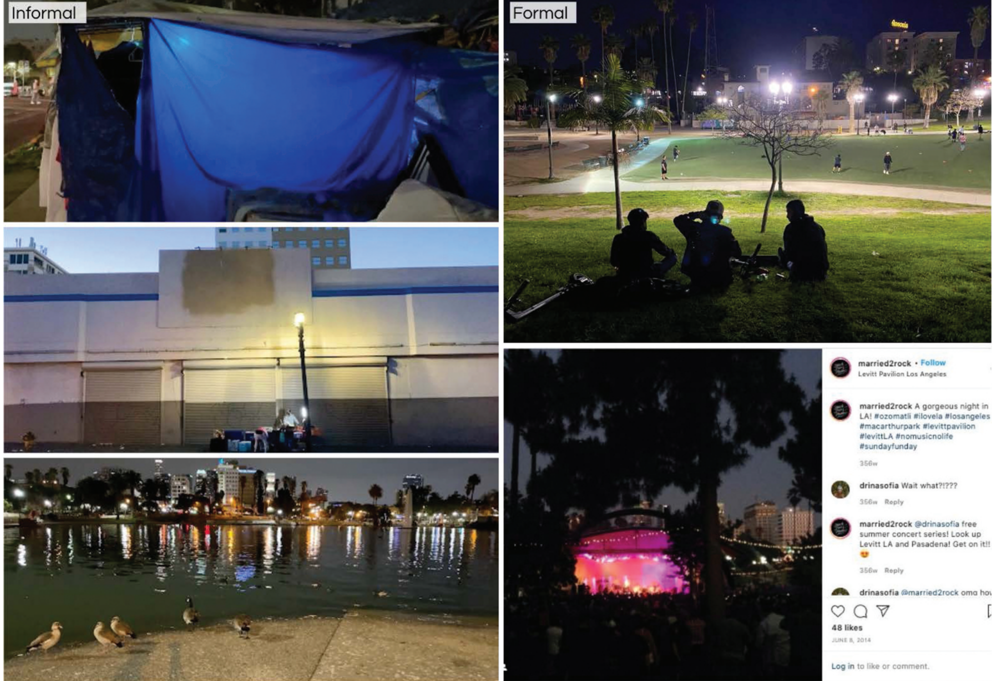

Figure 1. Night-Time observations captured by students in film and posted publicly online reveal a park that employs public and private light sources, inhabited by human and non-humans, and used for formal and informal activities. Source: authors.

spatial and regulatory systems. Sharpening the scale of the explorations to particular parks, sidewalks, and other public infrastructures, students used filmic sensing as a tool to capture *perceived* space. Students gathered footage of the social and spatial practices of different user groups, which in some cases resisted contraction and asserted expanded visions of and aspirations for public space. The analytical process of reviewing the footage and editing the films offered further opportunities to understand the day-to-day production of *perceived* space in Westlake.

Focusing on the street vendors who line Alvarado Street, a major thoroughfare abutting the eastern side of MacArthur Park, students used filmic sensing to capture a complex portrait of the everyday experience of street vending. Filmic sensing addressed pandemic-related challenges, bridging the gap between a researcher physically present in Los Angeles during the course and another participating in the course from a remote location. The first student researcher narrated their walk through Westlake's vending spaces, captured on an iPhone, while the second student researcher remotely viewed this experience through FaceTime, experiencing the sights and sounds digitally (Figure 3). Stitched together with screen captures from Google Maps and online news media, the resulting film captured a layered, multi-point perspective of street vending.

The film affords the viewer an immersive representation of the activities of street vending and the sidewalk as a space for socializing, consuming, selling, and living, juxtaposed with media narratives of the ongoing legal challenges and over-policing faced by street vendors. In the face of criminalization, financial constraints, and regulatory

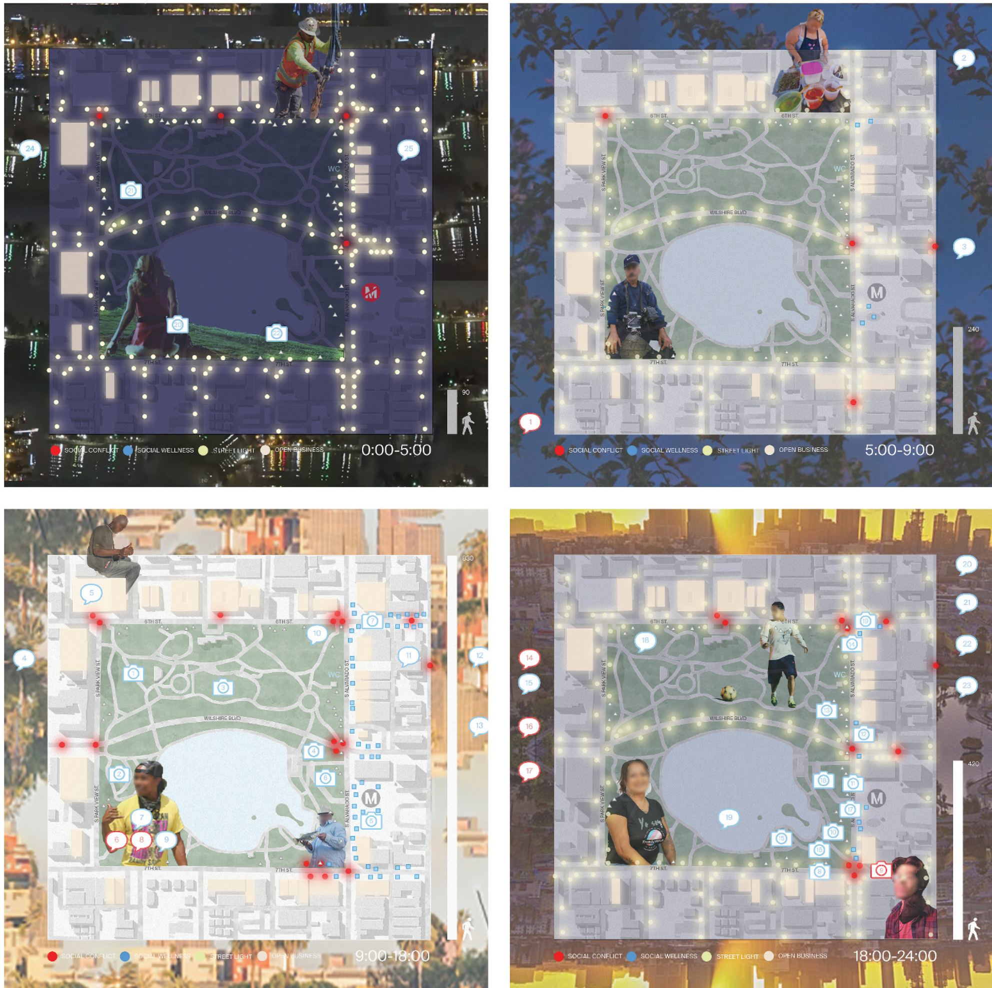

Figure 2. A thick map showing the social and atmospheric dynamics of night-time public space in MacArthur Park. Source: authors.

barriers that seek to contract public space, street vendors continue to adapt, transform, and expand the space of the sidewalk with their carts, stands, tables, and tarps. By highlighting the vibrancy and vitality of the sidewalk economy, the film challenges conventional conceptions of what constitutes legitimate uses of sidewalks, namely as spaces for movement. Furthermore, filmic sensing proved useful as a tool to overcome pandemic-related challenges of remote research, to collect and analyse patterns of use in select public spaces, and ultimately, to better understand how the relationship between public infrastructure and spatial practice informs perceived space.

Lived space: telling the stories of everyday users

While filmic sensing helped to analyse use patterns in Westlake's public spaces, students also sought to understand how different user groups develop meanings of and

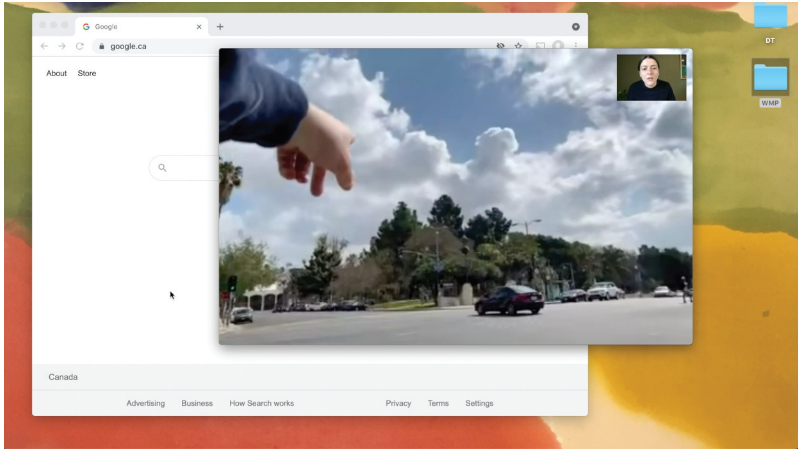

Figure 3. A still from a film depicting sidewalk conditions Westlake, incorporating a researcher's first-hand experience captured on an iPhone, and a remote researcher's experience captured on a computer screen. Source: authors.

attachments to public spaces. To do so, students used one tool of spatial ethnography – digital storytelling – to elevate the stories and experiences of individual users and to understand public space as *lived* space. As the pandemic placed constraints on in-person interviewing, digital storytelling was presented through a variety of media. Students developed an interactive website that collected and remixed existing interviews, news clips, videos, and other media into an exploratory forum and living archive for the stories of street vendors, celebrating their contributions to the neighbourhood and critiquing their ongoing criminalization. To protect the anonymity of night-time park users, another group of students developed a series of de-identified sketches, based on observed scenarios, interactions with, and stories from night-time park users.

Students also used digital storytelling to explore how a skate plaza in Lafayette Park, the neighbourhood's second largest park, serves as a second home to its users, some of whom travel from across the city to use the space. Weaving together interviews with skateboarders and footage of material interventions in the park, the group created a video montage of how users engage in tactics to reconfigure and occupy the plaza (Figure 4). Footage included graffiti on fences as public art, bolt cutters used to open new pathways to fenced-off fields, and homemade ramps and rails positioned to augment the plaza's functionality. The film tells the story of how skateboarders collectively transformed the plaza into a communal public space by performing architectural tactics and asserting a political claim to the space. By denoting the plaza as their 'second home', skateboarders politically and physically expanded the space to fit their particular needs. They brought in obstacles like benches to improve usage, hosted cookouts, played music, painted some of the obstacles, and reappropriated the plaza for several hours each day.

Digital storytelling enabled students to incorporate first-person narratives alongside other observations and media to advance the stories and experiences of different public space groups. These digital histories challenge conventional representations of these groups, often advanced by the public, planners, and policymakers, and highlight how users produce new meanings for Westlake's public spaces.

Figure 4. Tactics of resistance observed in Lafayette Park include cutting fences, graffiti, community skateboarding events, sheltering in place, shoe recycling, and vending. Source: authors.

Speculative design: projecting into the future

At the final stage of the project, findings from thick mapping, filmic sensing, and digital storytelling were synthesized to inform speculative design interventions to support the expansion, both conceptually and materially, of public space in Westlake. The practical tools of urban humanities allowed students to observe, document, and gain a new understanding of expanding and contracting dynamics, and based on these findings, to also envision new design interventions. The speculative design and policy interventions drew inspiration from the tactics of resistance observed amongst various user groups in the neighbourhood: the night-time activities in MacArthur Park, the vibrant sidewalk economy of Alvarado Street, and the reconfiguration and use of Lafayette Park by skateboarders. Each proposal emphasizes flexibility over fixity, contextuality over generalization, and adaptability over rigidity, with the goal of better serving marginalized public space users.

One proposal suggested an illuminated piece of urban infrastructure at the park, to serve both symbolic and functional purposes, after dark (Figure 5). Park users can literally and metaphorically ‘plug-in’ and inhabit this space for play, leisure, or commerce, while also getting electric power from publicly-accessible sources in the park. Another proposal addressed the needs of street vendors by proposing a service hub that included a commissary, storage, and restroom facilities as well as legal, and advocacy resources,

Figure 5. Proposed 'Plug N Play' night-time light installation. Source: authors.

paired with an online 'living archive' of vendor stories: a website that serves as a platform to collect and share stories from media and first-person accounts about their everyday lives, struggles, and successes (Figure 6). A third proposal offered a speculative redesign of Lafayette Park that offered flexible infrastructure to support the experience and representation of diverse users, including skateboarders, graffiti artists, and the unhoused. The proposal connected park paths with lighting to encourage 24/7 use of the park, removed fencing, added communal vending and garden spaces, and introduced restroom and shower facilities. As the product of months of analysis, interventions expressed observations and findings, but also engaged with the everyday experiences of some residents in Westlake. Drawing from the practices of urban humanities, these design interventions open up a space for speculation about the future of public space in Westlake.

Conclusion

As a brief application of urban humanities approaches to understand public space dynamics in Westlake, this research raised several important issues and limitations. First, students were acutely aware of their positionality as outsiders to the neighbourhood. In some cases, the exercise of documenting public space conditions, through photography or film, highlighted public space users' vulnerabilities and ongoing power differentials. Focused opportunities for researchers to navigate these challenges, by exercising reflexivity throughout the research process and by sustaining dialogue with instructors and peers over issues of power and positionality, are critical in public space research involving marginalized communities.

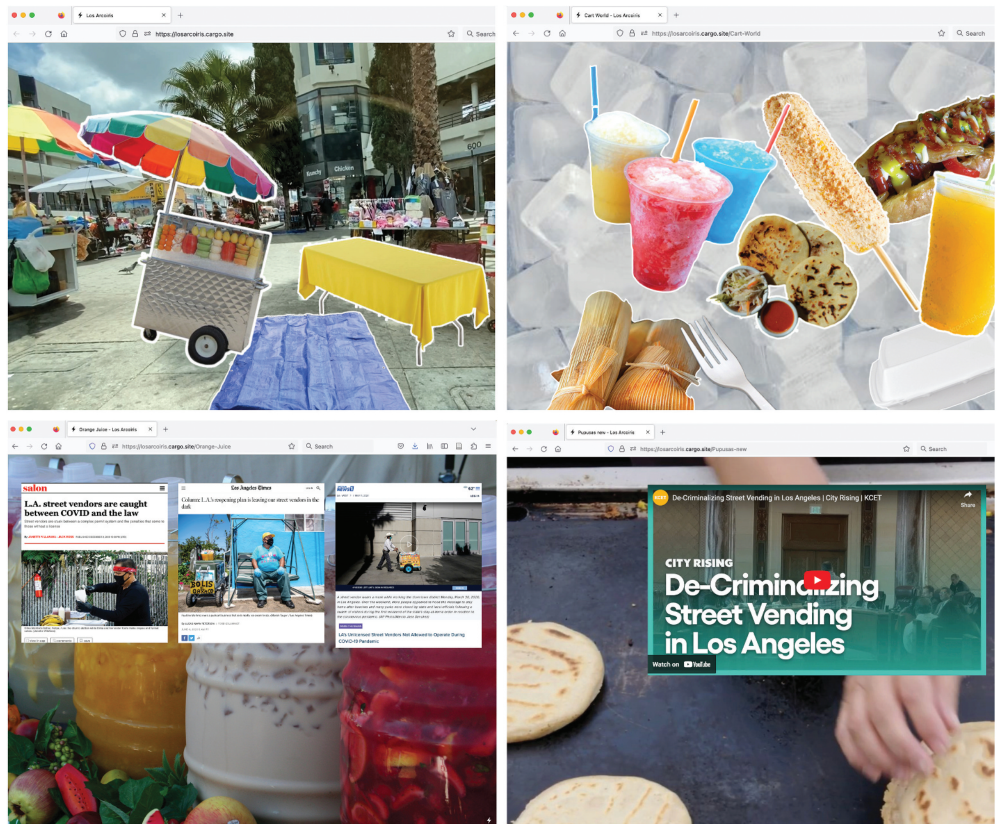

Figure 6. A website presented an online archive of vendor stories, incorporating news clippings, interviews, and videos, alongside iconic images and graphics representing the vibrancy of street vending in the neighbourhood. Source: authors.

Second, students engaged in a process of understanding, documenting, and developing proposals over the course of a ten-week academic quarter. Due to this short timeline, research generalized users and experiences and did not fully account for the fine-grained, individual experiences of many users. This tension between individual perspectives and generalized observation is not only present in the research process, but is also an important consideration for future research and action.

Third, this was not a client-based studio project but one that invited exploration beyond the context of existing policies and practices and invited students to propose experimental interventions. The absence of a community-based client and the researchers' positionality as outsiders to the neighbourhood raise important questions about the relevance of the proposals for neighbourhood residents.

Despite these limitations, urban humanities methods enabled students to weave together material conditions, narrative representations, and future-oriented visions to study pandemic public spaces and to understand spatial injustice. Rather than imposing top-down solutions, the speculative designs drew inspiration from the observed tactics of resistance by various user groups, with the goal to expand public space, advocate for spatial

justice, and critique conventional planning and design practices that seek to contract public space.

This paper argues that urban humanities approaches carry potential not only to address the methodological limitations of conventional urban design pedagogy, research, and practice in the context of COVID-19, but also to uncover new insights and guide justice-oriented interventions in public space. As the case study demonstrates, these interdisciplinary approaches helped researchers gather multimedia data that reveal a complex portrait of expanding and contracting dynamics of pandemic public space. As an alternative to the prescriptive nature of conventional urban design methods, urban humanities approaches enabled exploration, artistry, and playfulness in research. The data informed deeper understandings of perceived, conceived, and lived space, as well as future-oriented urban design interventions. Such approaches carry potential for urban design education, research, and practice during the ongoing pandemic and into the future.

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