

Preface

citiesLAB has emerged from collaboration between PhD students at the LSE's Cities Programme. The Cities Programme is an interdisciplinary centre bringing together a diversity of expertise and approaches to the study of the city. citiesLAB reflects that diversity and includes architects, sociologists, geographers and planners, with a common interest in understanding the interplay between the social and the spatial in contemporary London. The product of this collaboration is the formation of both a working group and a set of common projects to focus our explorations. citiesLAB has grown from the need for regular communication between students engaged with the solitary nature of doctoral research, towards a forum in which we regularly discuss our work and present ideas. From our early discussions a shared ground in terms of our methodological approaches became apparent.

Through the process of critiquing each other's work and in the light of a shared aim of linking social life and spatial forms, we came to identify a range of methodological approaches to the city. While there is extensive work on visual methodologies that emphasises the visual as data and concentrates on pictorial representation, we were beginning to use the visual as both technique and method: a process of exploring the city. This has caused us to re-examine the relationship between how space is represented and how it is lived at an everyday level as interplay between three crucial components: space, time and people. While our starting points often employed sociological methods, the conventional applications failed to offer the scope for both seeing and revealing the crucial intersections of the three components. In urban ethnography, the features of everyday life often play down a thick analysis of space by focussing on social interaction, where space is represented as a setting or backdrop for social life. Similarly when discourse analysis focuses on the interpretation of urban images, it often privileges the expert interpretation and neglects how others employ and make sense of the same images. The strength of discourse analysis is that it actively encourages the use of diverse visual materials and data, however the focus on power relations can be at the expense of the everyday. Semiotic analysis is useful for focussing on bounded representations of contemporary life, but in its conventional understanding can fail to capture the depth of the changing city; not simply a façade but a composite of power and everyday life.

Researching the spatial and social life of the city is a compilation of working papers that focuses on the extension of conventional research methods to integrate the three components of space, time and people in the city. London forms the exploratory setting for the papers in this first publication by citiesLAB and it is envisaged that this will form a series of ongoing common projects and interventions. The principle of collaboration – the sharing of ideas and the development of work in progress – is central to the ethos of academic life.

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