

# Visual research on changing places

## An example from Hackney

Richard Phillips

Many of you will be undertaking studies of place as part of your course. This article describes a project in Hackney that used photo and film to study perceptions of the area, and suggests how the techniques might be applied to A-level fieldwork


The photograph below captures some conflicting experiences of changes that have been taking place in Hackney, a borough in inner London. It suggests an area that is being promoted to investors, with some success, but which is also gathering dust and graffiti. This raises questions about how changing places are experienced by the different groups of people who live in and pass through them, and about how these experiences can be documented in words and images. Taking these questions as a point of departure, this article explores how the things we see can be used to investigate the processes and meanings that define a place, in this case Hackney.

### What shapes Hackney?

Hackney borders London's financial district (the City of London) and its digital industries quarter (Silicon Roundabout). It is also home to many artists and writers, new immigrants and established white working-class communities. It has been characterised as a place of 'super diversity' (where multiple groups live alongside each other) and dramatic 'churn' (in which there is constant change in the make-up of neighbourhoods and some residents remain for short periods before moving on). These socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and changes play an important part in defining Hackney as a place.

### Relationships

Relationships and connections between the individuals and groups who live in, and pass through, Hackney also help to shape it. Some argue that these residents do not simply coexist; they 'rub alongside each other' in a tolerant, accommodating way. Other studies are less optimistic, pointing to evidence of racism and exclusion, contributing to events such as the 2011 riots, which began in Tottenham, north London, and spread into nearby Hackney and other parts of the capital, as well some other English cities. There is also evidence of tension between richer and poorer residents, in what remains one of the most economically deprived parts of the UK.



Invest in Hackney



Images of a misspelt sign and a woman eating lunch outside a laundrette are a reminder of the different types of people living in Hackney

In addition to relationships between neighbours and others who encounter each other in their daily lives, Hackney is shaped by its external connections, such as those between Muslims in this local area and those in the Ummah — the global community of Muslims — as well as family connections between individuals living in Hackney and their relatives in other parts of London, the UK and the world.

### Meaning

Another key to understanding Hackney as a place relates to something less tangible, which is often referred to as *meaning*. Places become meaningful to people in different ways for different reasons. Place has been defined as 'location plus meaning'. There are many different ways in which meanings can be explored. Possible sources include urban planning documents, tourist and property marketing materials, musical and artistic depictions of place, and photographs and films. All of these capture ways of seeing a place that reflect what is meaningful to those looking.

### Visual fieldwork

The photo at the start of the article was exhibited in a show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. It was produced by students at Urswick School in Hackney, who participated in a local survey led by artist Amy Feneck. This was part of a larger project, conceived by an urban design consultancy — the General Public Agency — that helps developers, local authorities and other clients understand and plan for geographical change. This consultancy's 'public realm surveys' are designed to help 'people think in new ways about processes of change and the possibilities they open up'. This research by the agency is intended both to describe and also to help shape places.

The themes described above — the use of creative methods and the exploration of geographical change — overlap with the fieldwork component of A-level geography, where emphasis is placed on developing research skills. The survey in Hackney used a range of methods for collecting evidence about and interpreting a place, including sound, text,

photography, film, paint, sculpture, print and maps. A number of these methods were visual. Taking advantage of new technologies while also exploring the possibilities of more traditional visual sources including film archives, the Urswick students conducted two kinds of visual research:

- taking photographs
- making a documentary film of their own

### Ways of seeing: taking photographs

Although it was led by an artist, Amy Feneck, the aims of the Hackney school project were not primarily aesthetic. Photography was intended to illuminate experiences of change in the borough, asking how this was affecting different people and how they experienced and perceived it. Feneck regards the photography as 'a workshop exercise in looking at their local area differently, taking pictures of signs, symbols, also redevelopments and changes that were happening'.

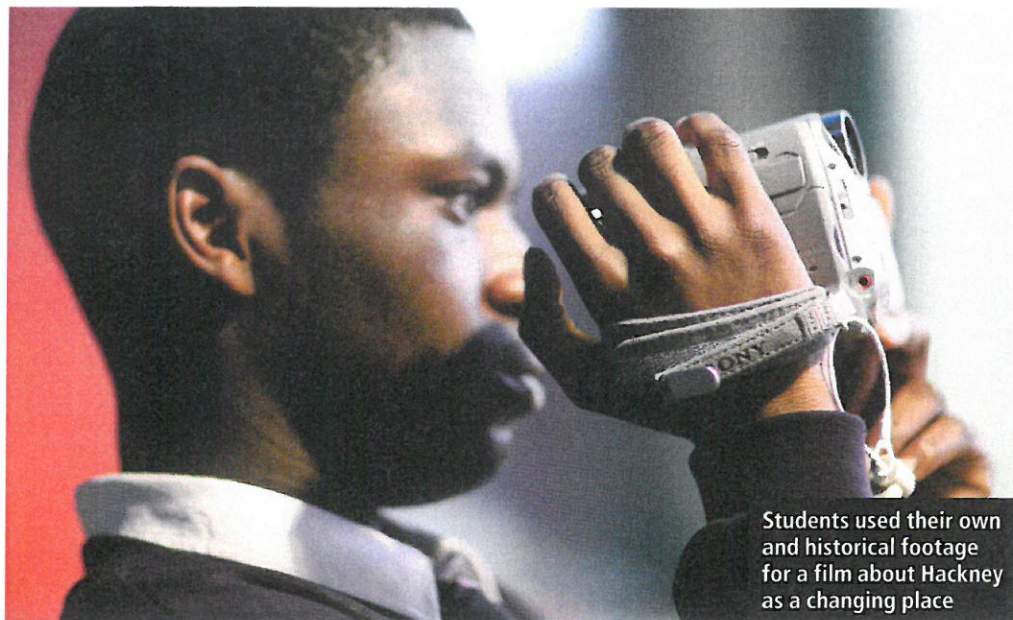
The photograph at the start of the article explores some of these issues. It depicts a place of investment and gentrification, where artists and city workers are buying up properties and spending money in fashionable shops, bars and restaurants. But the dust and graffiti in the photograph also allude to another, less fashionable and privileged Hackney. The picture speaks of the disconnection between people of different social classes (the rich investors and poorer long-term residents) and different generations (the older property owners and presumably younger authors of graffiti, for example).

Similar tensions are captured in a hand-painted signpost in which a spelling mistake may allude to differences in class and education and in a picture of a woman eating her lunch outside a laundrette. These images are a reminder of some of the people who may be marginalised by gentrification in this area, left behind by its change.

Collectively, these images illuminate one element of place — the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of residents, their relationships and connections.

### Meanings of place: documentary films

The Urswick students also explored changing meanings of their local area — the second key element in broader understandings of place — through documentary film. They found archive films in a local library and they made a film of their own, which combined older clips with new footage they shot themselves. They explored local areas through the lens of their camera, and included interviews with some local people who had lived in the area in the past.



Students used their own and historical footage for a film about Hackney as a changing place

In this project, the young people selected sites through which to explore changes that were taking place more widely in Hackney. These included shopping centres, parks and public buildings. They used archived films to understand how these sites had been seen in the past — their meanings to the film makers — and also considered their significance for new generations.

### Urswick School

One of the sites they investigated was their own school, Urswick, which was formerly called the Hackney Free and Parochial Secondary School. The school building was particularly significant at the time this project was underway (2010) because it was soon to be demolished and replaced. The students were interested in finding out what the old building had meant, and what would change with its passing.

Films the students found at the local Hackney Archives provided insights into what the school grounds used to look like and how they were once seen. Sources included government information films and amateur 16 mm footage, which showed social housing, schools and civic centres being rebuilt after the Second World War, and contained some footage of a ceremony in which Princess Margaret (1930–2002) officially opened the school.

### Further reading

Changing Places, Royal Geographical Society website: [www.tinyurl.com/zo8jj9a](http://www.tinyurl.com/zo8jj9a)

Moore, R. (2015) *Slow Burn City: London in the Twenty-First Century*, Picador.

Phillips, R, and Johns, J. (2012) *Fieldwork for Human Geography*, Sage.

The School Looks Around Toolkit (2010) [www.tinyurl.com/hx76kh8](http://www.tinyurl.com/hx76kh8)

These sources provided inspiration and some content for the film the pupils made themselves, entitled *Government Workers*, which explored the changing relationships between educational values, political idealism and school buildings. Amy Feneck explained 'The film focuses on these aspirations in their current setting, reflecting on the educational values and ideals that the school and its community now embody.' In making the film, the young people found that the school building, built in the early 1950s, had been central to a progressive education, housing and social project.

Against this historical backdrop, the students gained a clearer understanding of the changes they were experiencing around the school and local area. In their generation, as in the postwar period, Hackney and other parts of London were undergoing a building boom. In the 1950s, this meant new public housing and civic architecture, whereas in the 2010s, the focus had shifted towards the private sector, luxury apartments and service industries, with public-sector projects such as schools in the minority. These developments were illuminated by the pupils through their film and other visual research.

### What can you do?

The project described in this article is intended to offer ideas and inspiration, if not a direct model to copy, for A-level geography fieldwork. Wherever you live, local fieldwork will allow you to investigate geographical processes through changing places.

This article focuses upon a time and place of noticeable change, but Hackney is not unique in this respect. All places change, in different ways and at different rates. This project, led by the General Public Agency consultancy, was run in four schools — two in inner London, the others in rural Devon — and each of these found and investigated change. The rural

schools drew conclusions about how to run a project of this type, which they have made available through an online toolkit (The School Looks Around 2010) that could be useful to urban designers, community groups or teachers running similar projects.

For those studying geography at A-level, the project in Hackney offers a different kind of inspiration: ideas for particular methods that could be used to study changing places, and collect fragmentary evidence — rather than a complete case study — of one particular place as it undergoes change. This, in turn, speaks to the question of how to understand changing places in a broader sense.

Finally, as the background to this study makes clear — it was conceived by an urban design consultancy — this kind of research is not 'purely academic'. It can also inform civic design and planning processes.

### Points for discussion

- 1 How might the visual evidence of changing places produced through the Hackney project inform urban design and planning?
- 2 Why is it important to use a range of fieldwork techniques in human geography, and not rely too heavily on questionnaires and interviews?
- 3 Place is sometimes defined as location plus meaning. What is meaning?
- 4 What kinds of change are occurring where you live?

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### Key points

- All places change, in different ways and at different speeds. This means that it is possible to investigate 'changing places' wherever you live.
- In human geography, data collection methods should not be limited to statistics, questionnaires and interviews. They should include other verbal, visual and non-numerical data.
- This article describes two kinds of visual research: generating new visual documents to describe and interpret a changing place, and finding and interpreting pre-existing visual documents.