



Studying local places

Cities can be seen as made up of flows and networks

Place is now a core element of geography AS and A-level. It may be a topic that you are less familiar with, but it provides a whole range of fieldwork and research opportunities. Here David Holmes focuses on the possibilities for qualitative fieldwork

The traditional way of describing places in geography is to refer to location. Today some writers refer to urban spaces as 'hypercomplex', recognising that places are made up of webs of components and relationships. If we 'peel back' the locational layer we begin to see how cities function as flows and networks: some physical and visible but many more subtle, with social, and often invisible components. Remember that these flows change minute to minute, hour to hour and day to day (something that can be investigated).

Qualitative fieldwork

If we take this approach to place, fieldwork studying local neighbourhoods might be mainly qualitative (non-numerical) in design. This type of study is in many ways more challenging than the quantitative ('counting' fieldwork) that you will be familiar with from GCSE. Rather than numeracy, it requires a set of skills including social and cultural awareness. Qualitative data are often in the form of texts, images and descriptions of behaviours, actions and practices witnessed in the urban landscape. Figure 1 shows some examples of qualitative and semi-quantitative fieldwork and research approaches that can be used to explore aspects of place.

Place profiling Presenting an analytical narrative about why this place is important, along with the basic facts about a place

Place check Using qualitative notes and information to create evidence showing how a local area can be changed and improved

Clone town and retail diversity Using the range of different types of shops and services as an indicator of town and city-centre health

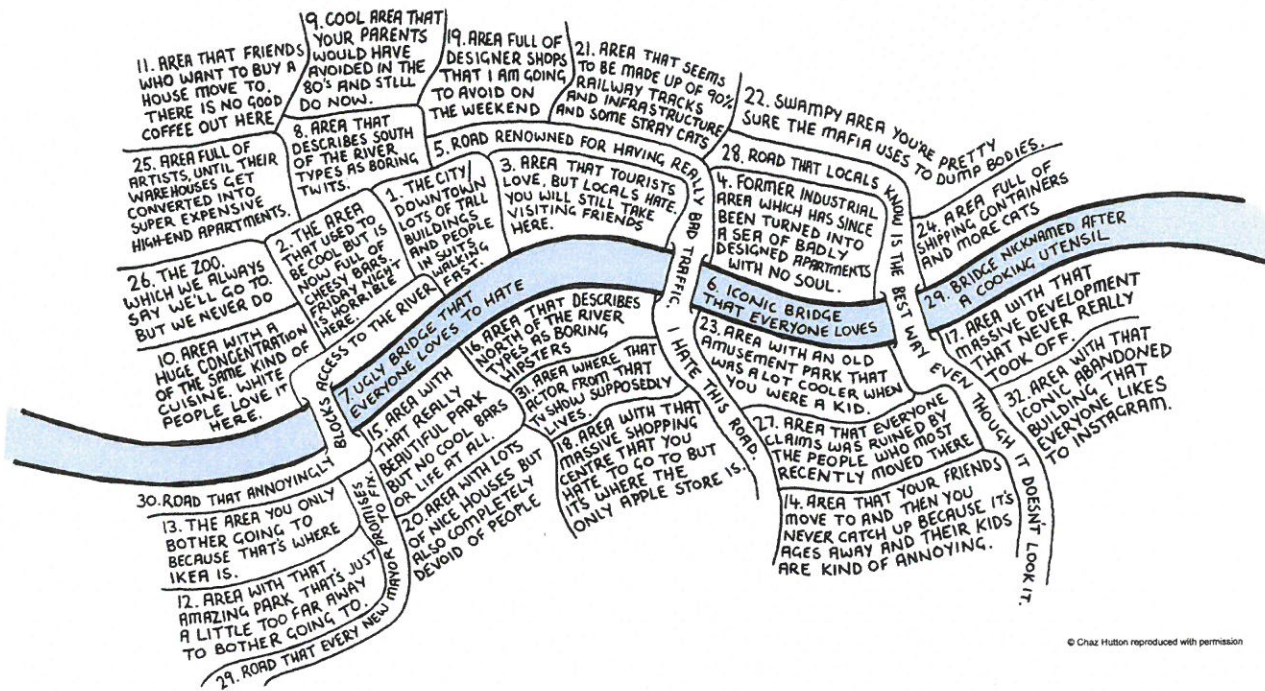
Urban soundscapes Recording volumes and types of noise within the built environment which may have strong links to quality of life

Twitter landscapes Searching on Twitter for images that people have posted about an urban area

People flows Recording different flows of people (and speeds) in contrasting urban spaces. Individuals vs couples vs groups

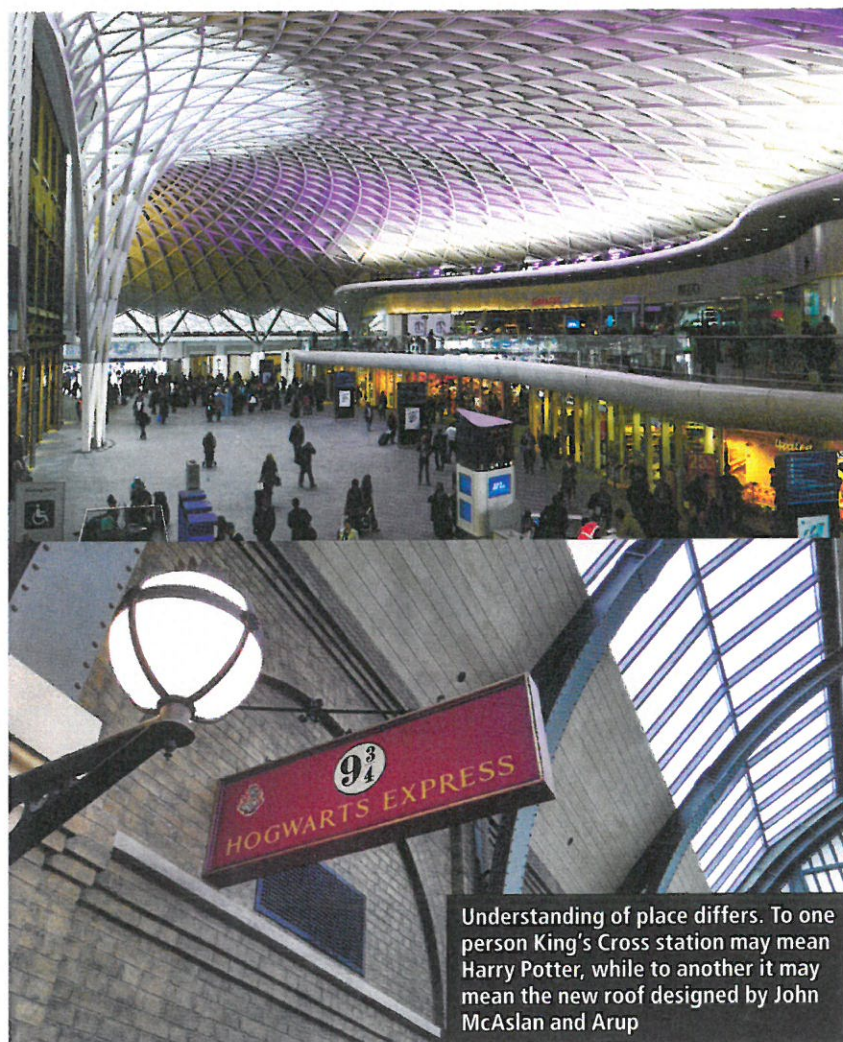
Figure 1 Some of the fieldwork and research that can be used to help understand urban patterns and processes

A MAP OF EVERY CITY.



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Figure 2 An example of a place map found on Twitter (Chaz Hutton/@instachaz)



Understanding of place differs. To one person King's Cross station may mean Harry Potter, while to another it may mean the new roof designed by John McAslan and Arup

Further reading

Holmes, D. (2016) 'Geographical skills: What is a geographical enquiry?', *GEOGRAPHY REVIEW* Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 6–8.

Holmes, D. (2010) 'Practical geography: Psycho-geography', *GEOGRAPHY REVIEW* Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 37–39.

Holmes, D. (2008) 'Practical geography: Image-based fieldwork', *GEOGRAPHY REVIEW* Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 21–23.

An interesting blog about psychogeography:
www.classiccafes.co.uk/Psy.html

Good practice would include a 'research journal' of information collected, recording the times and places of observation, your preliminary thoughts and records of events as they happen, adjustments made during the research (if any), questions and ideas that occurred to you.

Mapping local neighbourhoods

Mental maps can reveal interesting views of place. Figure 2 for example is a personal representation of London (there are many more examples online).

As well as looking at different forms of spatial map, you might also record changes in neighbourhoods over time, say a few hours or even a 24-hour period.

- How does space change with time of day, for example in terms of how it is being used and by whom?
- What patterns and flows can be identified, and how do they act as either barriers or pathways into different parts of the urban fabric?
- Is there any evidence of illicit activities, and if so where and when do these occur?

Of course techniques such as extended interviews (video or audio) can be useful in explaining such complex geographies.

Table 1 Questions and techniques you might use in local investigations

Possible 'question'	You may want to record information about...
What's unique here/what's special about this place?	Take photographs, images, make sketches about particular elements of the built environment that help you identify with the place. You might even want to talk to people and find out what makes it special to them
Who are the people using the spaces?	Gender, religion, clothes etc. What is their spatial distribution? This is a study of ethnography. Try to map and record
Who is marginalised or excluded from this space?	Who is not well represented/found here, e.g. young, old, disabled. Is there a visible 'underclass' (this may include people begging on the street etc.)?
What does the design and architecture say about the space?	How the age and style of buildings in some way tells us about the character of a place, and how that influences our opinions, especially as visitors. Also important is an idea of scale and use of different types of building materials, e.g. modern (glass, steel, polished stone) vs traditional (rough stone, brick, concrete)
What is the 'feel' of the neighbourhood?	Use adjectives to describe what your instincts are about particular places; create a map to show this. Also create lists of words
What would you feel proud of if you lived here?	Record information about the best places. They may be indicated by unusually high densities of people, or something that you think is particularly special or interesting
How could this space be improved?	What parts of the urban environment are most disappointing (this could include neglect, dirt, dereliction)? Again map and provide evidence to support your ideas
How is this place different from another local area?	Carry out a comparison of differences: focus on the 'feel', e.g. streetscape, furniture, design, architecture and of course people

Table 2 Evaluating other representations of place

Possible 'question'	You may want to record information about...
Who produced the image/text?	Was it an individual, company, government body, NGO or other type of agency?
Why is the image being produced?	What ideas is it trying to convey? Comment on the style and nature of the image
Who is the image intended for?	How widely will it be read or viewed? Is it for mass consumption, or designed to appeal to a particular group or demographic?
How is it presented?	Does the type of medium (e.g. YouTube, poster) mean that some groups may be excluded?
Who is included?	Are there any particular groups of people that are included in the image/text?
Meaning of text?	If text is part of the image, what is the 'surface' and 'deeper' meaning of the piece? Does it reveal anything about the conditions in which it was produced?
Does it challenge myths?	What effect could the image have on society or individuals? Does it for example, reinforce or challenge any established myths about a place?

Psychogeography

Psychogeography is a way of looking at people and places using a range of complementary (and sometimes unusual) qualitative recording methods. It offers an approach to understanding how the built environment is linked to the human environment. Psychogeography tries to provide a framework in which a researcher can uncover a 'textured' or layered view of the real world in a particular place. Psychogeographers write about 'hidden landscapes of atmospheres, histories, actions and characters which charge environments'. Under this heading there are a number of possible questions and ideas, all linked to local investigations, as shown in Table 1.

Place representation

Representation means the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way. As geographers we learn about places through different representations:

through the images we see, through reading both fiction and non-fiction, through maps, social media, reports, television, YouTube, films, paintings, poetry and so on.

This is a potentially interesting aspect of fieldwork since one person's representations of place may attempt to communicate something specific which is different from another person's understanding of the same place. I like to call this idea 'image-reality' and there is a lot of good, qualitative fieldwork and literature research that can be undertaken in this respect.

Table 2 presents some questions you can use to help evaluate other people's, agencies' or stakeholders' place representations. Note that use of the word 'image' here refers to any type of place representation, visual or written.

Conclusions

Fieldwork enquiry into the representation of place is likely to be a popular choice at A-level and AS. This is not a new type of geographical

thinking, but instead a review of practical methods for interpreting and recording the urban landscape. Qualitative and quantitative fieldwork should be seen as complementary to each other, rather than mutually exclusive. Neither type is better or worse than the other. They may generate contrasting perspectives but this is all part of the richness of understanding and interpretation that can be used when studying place at a local scale.

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