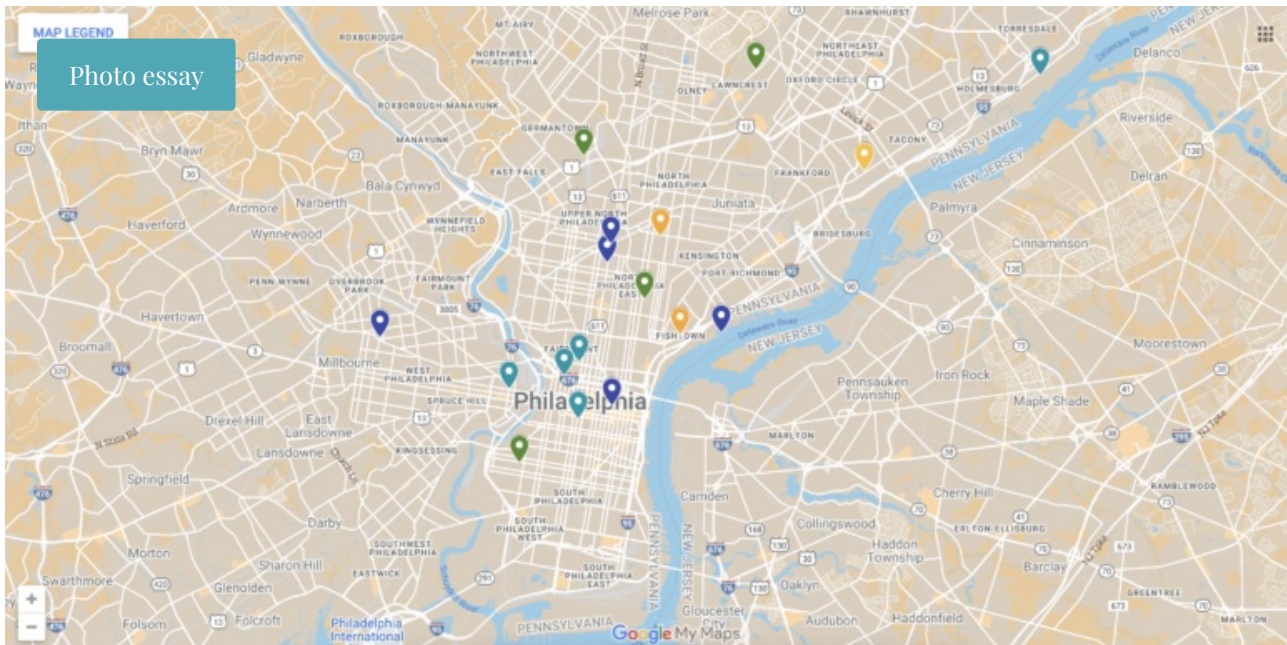




# Unearthing the right to the city through digital visual methods

May 15, 2022

Issue: Dislocating Urban Studies

Karen Paiva Henrique , Aparna Parikh

How can digital visual methods be critically deployed to examine urban social in/justices? In this essay, we draw on the right to the city paradigm to create a methodology where students use digital tools – namely Google Earth, Google Street View, and ArcGIS story maps/KnightLab – to visualize and represent un/just urban landscapes in Philadelphia, United States. These representations highlight the material and discursive spectrum of group visibility and their associated built environment to suggest the tension between systemic marginalization and efforts to reclaim city space. They also provide advantageous entry points to examine the implications of the visual for envisioning just cities through pedagogical exercises.

We build on the right to the city paradigm, which involves the right to live and shape the city in one's own terms. It entails a form of appropriation that foregrounds everyday use over real-estate-based financial valuations to promote the rights of citizens to physically access, occupy and use the city in ways that meet their collective needs, values and aspirations for the future (Harvey 2008). The suppression of such rights materializes in the persistent exclusion of certain individuals and groups along multiple and intersecting axes of inequality (for example, according to their race, ethnicity, class, gender and/or age), from official development policies (see, for example, Alves 2014; Doshi 2019; Ramírez 2020).

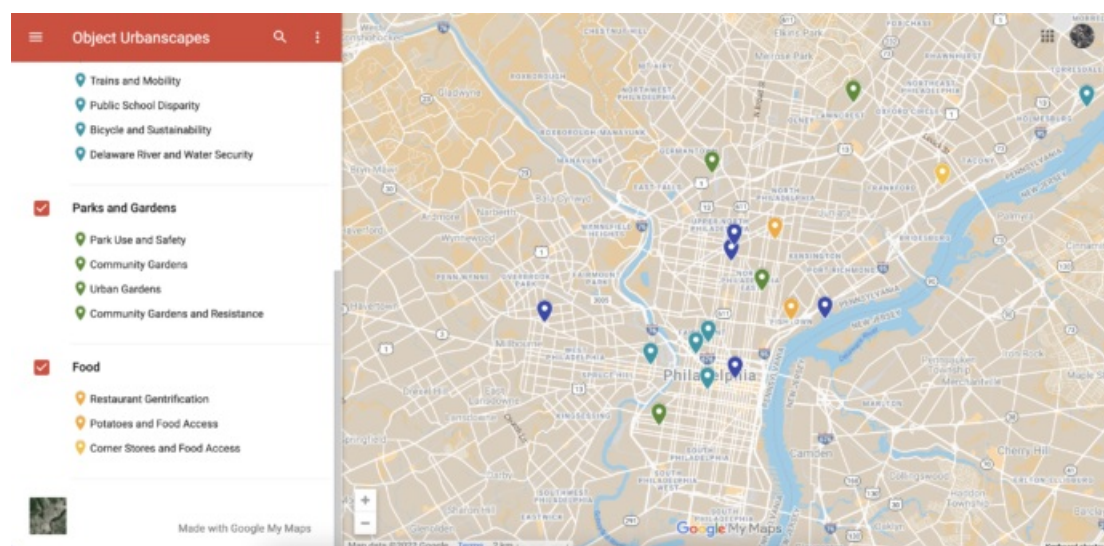
Philadelphia's urban landscape (like so many others across the global North and South) has long been shaped along socioeconomic and racial divides that become manifest in the uneven distribution of resources and a lack of recognition of poor Black and brown citizens whose labor helps to create and sustain urban life. The city's uneven development has also been marked and deepened by deindustrialization processes and associated cycles of disinvestment and gentrification of previously working-class neighborhoods (Balzarini and Shlay 2016). At the same time, and in response to these perverse dynamics, the city emerges as a stage for community action to reclaim both urban imaginaries and physical space (e.g., see Wherry 2011), as seen through community gardens and artwork.

Drawing on the right to the city paradigm as a conceptual entry point and Philadelphia as our study site, we developed a semester-long project where students use digital tools to critically visualize how injustice materializes and is countered in the city's urban fabric. The project was part of a course on "Social Justice and the City" conducted at Dartmouth College in 2020 by Parikh. The methodology was designed to adapt to constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, where field visits typically conducted during urban geography courses were rendered impossible. Instead, students 'entered' the city of Philadelphia using Google Earth and Google Street View and documented a particular site within the city based on their research concerns. After a preliminary image analysis, they drew on other data sources to extend and substantiate their results and narrate visual stories of in/justice using ArcGIS story maps/KnightLab.

Central to this methodological approach is exploration and discovery. At the beginning of the semester, students choose an (urban) object to focus on (e.g., a park bench, a billboard or a community garden). Students then embark on a 'treasure hunt,' canvassing different streets and neighborhoods to document the physical manifestation(s) of their selected

objects. The next step is to analyze the visual properties of their objects against demographic data and existing literature focusing on the themes and sites within which their objects are situated, among other data sources, to understand how their materialities are linked to historical and new exclusions as well as community negotiation and resistance in a continuously evolving landscape.

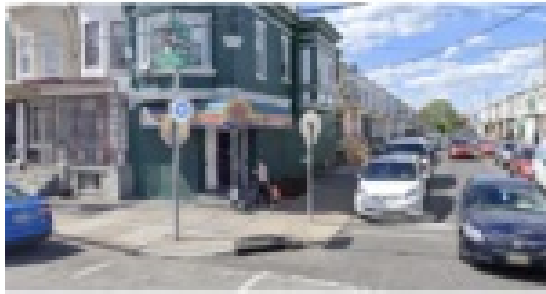
For students, this can be a transformational experience as they confront their own assumptions about what types of space have value and what that valuation means for their permanence status. Student projects highlight the role of visibility in such processes of valuation, and urban (re)development more generally, revealing broader patterns of exclusion and contestation when their individual projects are juxtaposed. Below, we present key lessons derived from students' individual and collective work, with attention to the ways our methodology allows them to disentangle some of the links between visibility, value, and justice and discuss what these lessons mean for unearthing the right to the city through digital visual methods in pedagogy.



The screenshot above shows a compilation of student work in Google Maps. Each pin indicates the site examined by a student, showcasing the relative locations of the projects, located primarily within the administrative boundaries of the city of Philadelphia. The colors indicate thematic grouping (dark blue: art & culture; light blue: infrastructure & institutions; green: parks & gardens; yellow: food) to highlight the overlapping scope of projects and emergent themes. The full map can be accessed [here](#).

## Lessons from student projects:

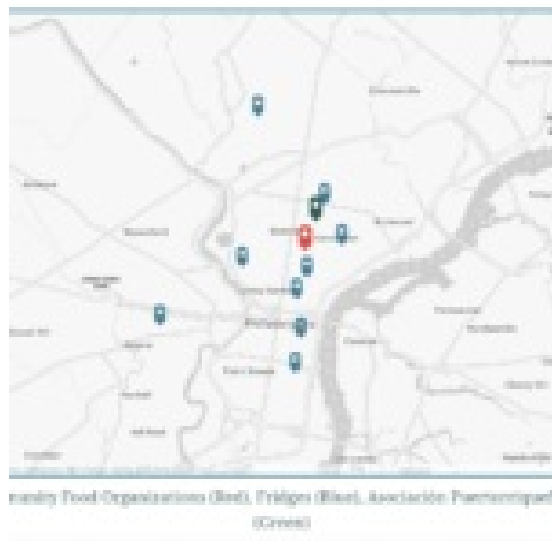
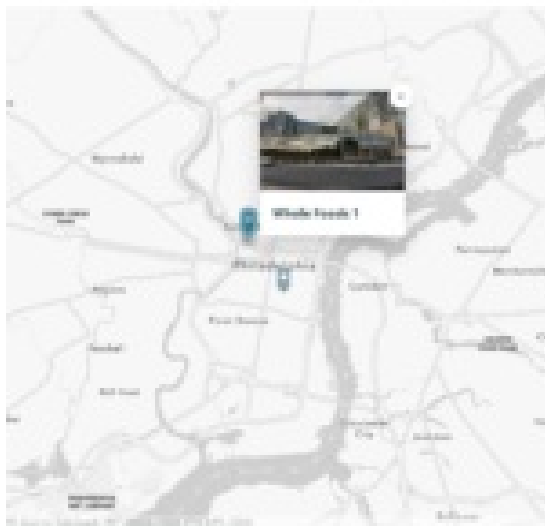
**Lesson 1.** Urban injustices are not only characterized by what cannot be seen or the adequate resources that are missing from a given space. They also materialize as communities are exposed or gain access to other resources that might be undesirable.



## Looking" For Healthy Food

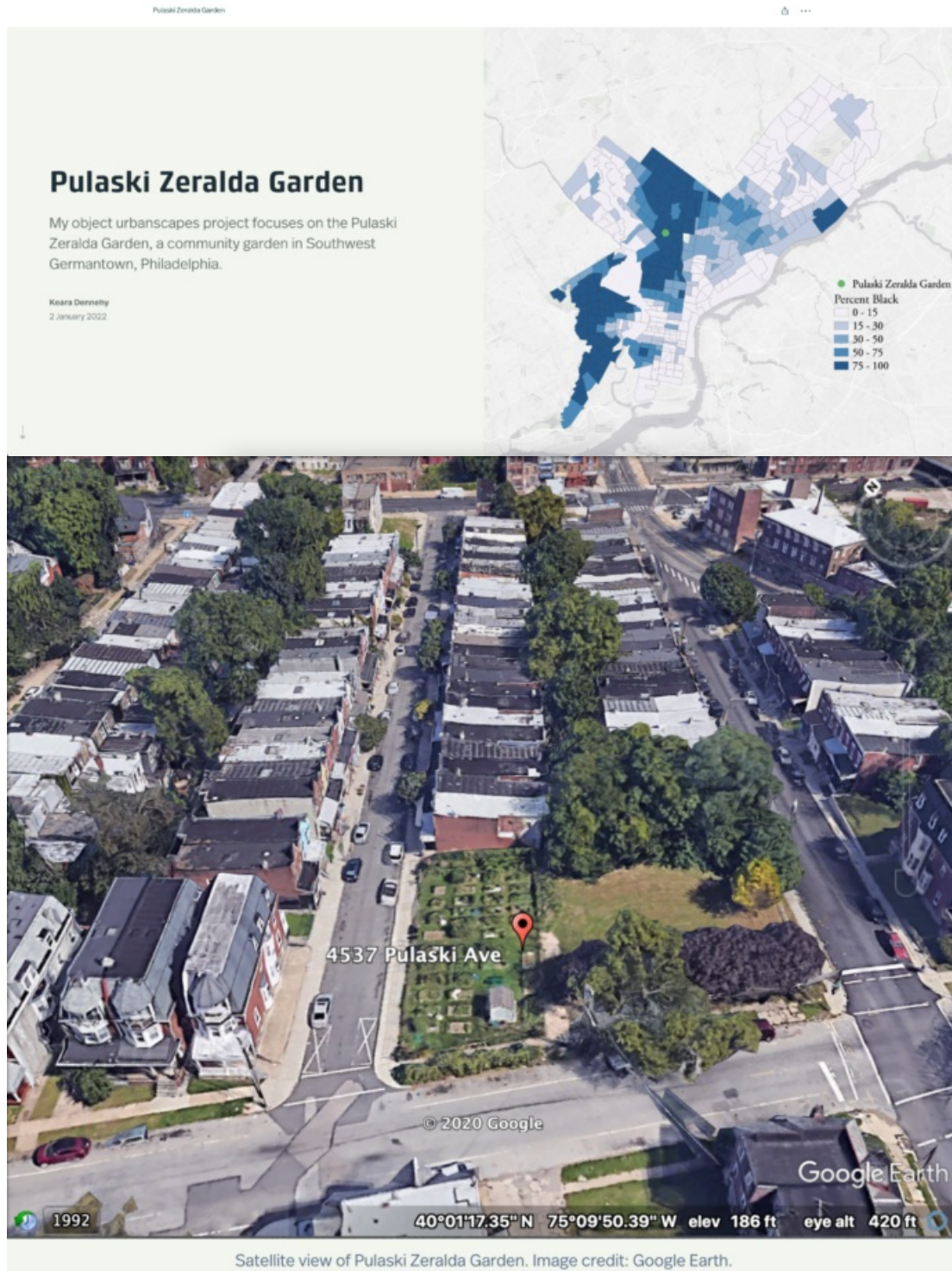
Food & Urban Social Injustice

Richard Lai  
November 2020



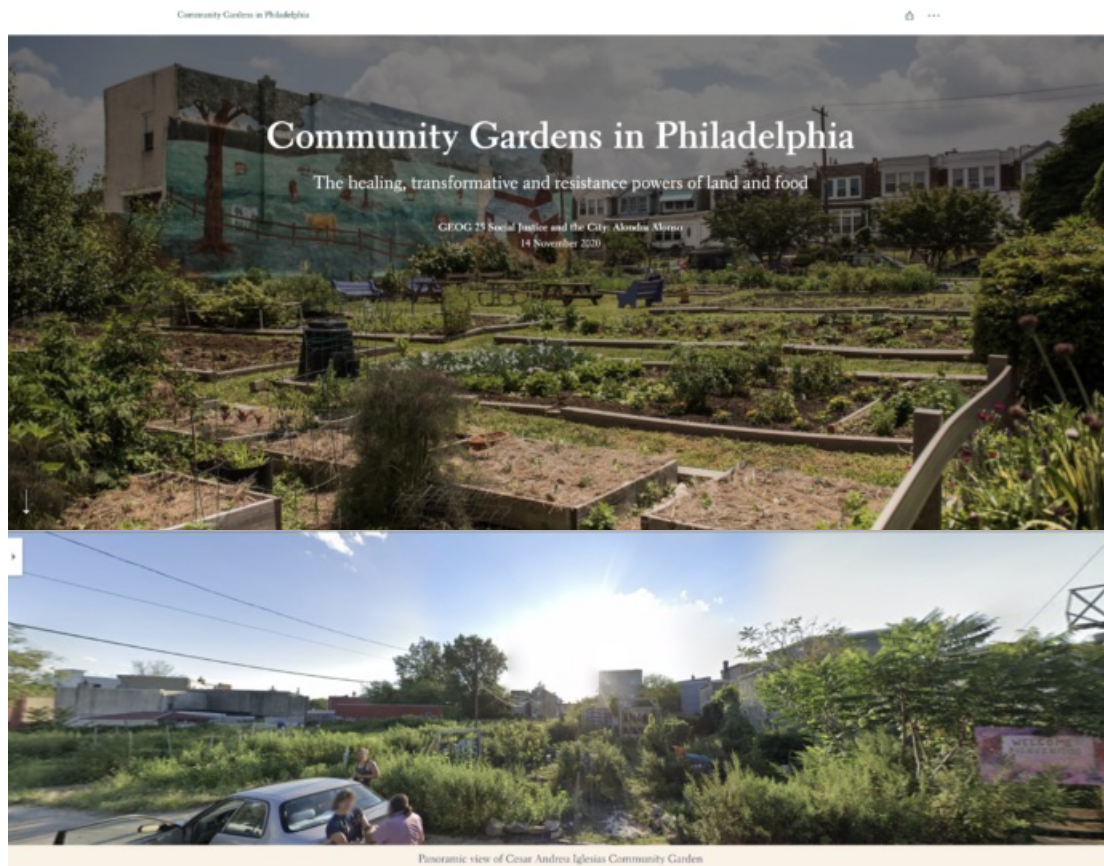
Richard Lai looks at food in Philadelphia (top). He observes how, in areas that lack access to produce and healthy protein sources (which can be correlated with demographics along the lines of race and class), the entry of healthy food options can often serve as a mirage (bottom-left). This is because these (non-packaged) healthy food options are often expensive and unaffordable for those who live in these neighborhoods. He juxtaposes these mirages with local food organizations and their efforts to increase residents' access to healthy products (bottom-right). Here, while the visual serves as an entry point to investigate food security, more careful and critical attention paid to what we see is significant in challenging initial assumptions. Project link [here](#).

**Lesson 2.** Claims over justice involve making the absence of desirable resources visible through a local politics of dissent.



Caption: The satellite image above is of the Pulaski Zeralda Garden in Philadelphia (bottom). Dennehy observes (and confirms with other data sources) that this garden exists as an outlier within an otherwise dense, (de)industrial neighborhood lacking plants and trees. The analysis of this image and the associated project (top) reveals that these empty lots of land in disinvested neighborhoods are reclaimed by neighborhood residents and converted into sites that hold meaning and utility. As such, identification of visually contrasting land use can provide an entry point into analyzing community efforts to regain the right to city space. Project link [here](#).

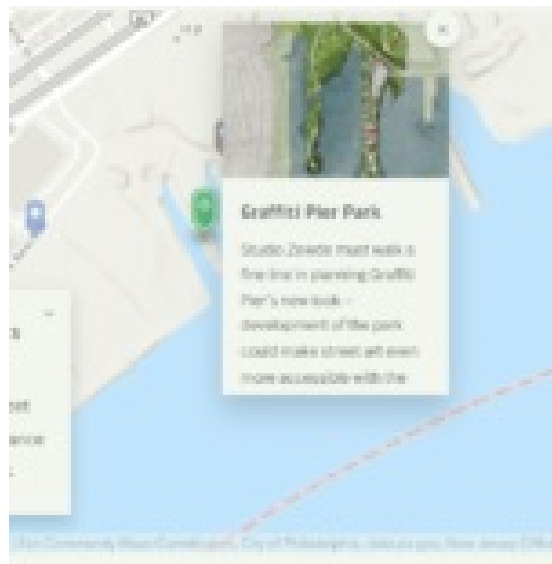
**Lesson 3.** Subversion always involves reclaiming visibility, but its maintenance requires a certain degree of invisibility.



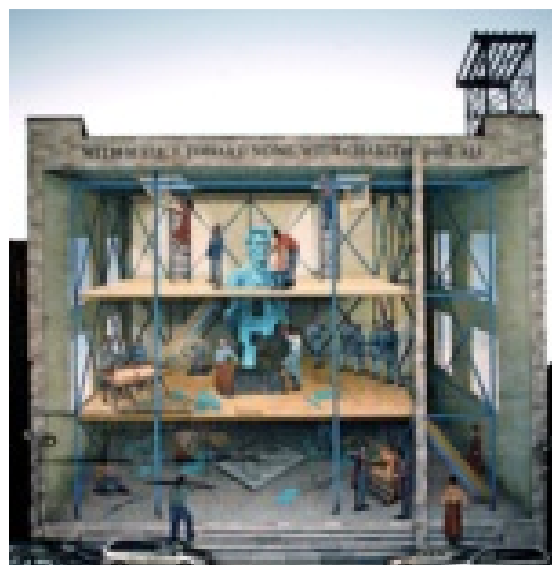
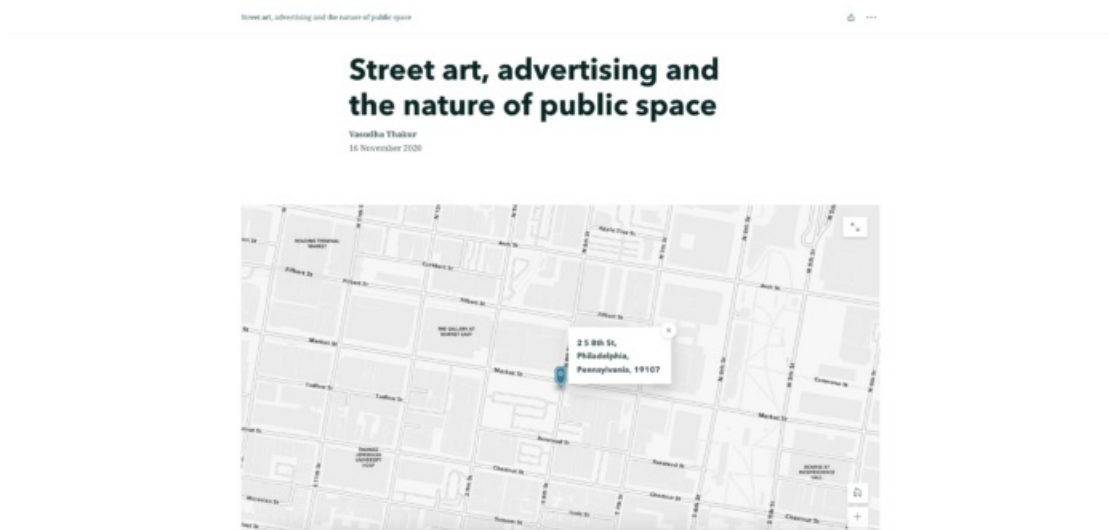
Caption: Alondra Alonso's project (top) examines the urban development pressures faced by reclaimed community spaces, such as Cesar Andreu Iglesias Community Garden (bottom). Here, the local fight over city space is waged alongside organizations that support community self-determination. For example, SoilGeneration seeks to protect community gardens given their significance for groups who have been historically marginalized and dispossessed from their ancestral land. As Alonso highlights, striving to gain such visibility and related advocacy is especially crucial given that once gardens come into fruition –the land gains hypervisibility and faces the threat of gentrification and incorporation by the state. Project link [here](#).



Emma Ginsberg's analysis (top) of Graffiti Pier (bottom-left) zooms in on this much beloved tourist spot at the fringes of Philadelphia. With the closing of a coal pier in the 70s, this site became a space for community leisure, and where artists produced artworks. The creation of such space hinged upon its neglect and invisibility within the city. Ginsberg explains that the growing popularity of Graffiti Pier has attracted investment at this site, as indicated by the pins on the satellite image and the accompanying visualization of upcoming development (bottom-right). These developments include a housing complex and a public park. There is a fine line to walk here, however, with hypervisibility increasing the possibility of surveillance, greater policing of the predominantly Black community who uses the site, and the sidelining of graffiti artists who made this space popular in the first place. As in Alonso's project, the visual identification of unique, reclaimed lots and landmarks provides an entry point to question the differentiated valuation of community spaces, and associated struggles over ownership and permanence. Project link [here](#).



**Lesson 4.** Subversion is at its most successful when communities can become visible on their own terms.





From left to right, the series of images above show graffiti, murals, and advertising (middle). The visual line separating these is often captured through an imagined aesthetic sensibility. In terms of stakeholders, these urban art forms often have different funding mechanisms – the first being self-funded, the second often through the state (in the case of Philadelphia), and the third through private companies. Such variation, as Vasudha Thakur’s analysis (top) shows, can importantly capture how spaces of graffiti and sometimes their styles are appropriated through state mechanisms, whose commissioning of murals can lead to an increase in property value and are correlated with the accompanying gentrification of poor neighborhoods.

Thakur also explains how commissioned art is used to paper over existent injustices and social inequalities, as well as the use of art (in this case of graffiti) to counter such erasures. Here, a mural of Frank Rizzo (bottom) – who served as a police commissioner and mayor in Philadelphia – was defaced several times for his purported racism, homophobia, bigotry, and police brutality. Here, a close visual inspection of the same object across time reveals how a city wall becomes the battlefield between the city government and disadvantaged groups in the city. The battle is visible, but the actors are not always so. Project link [here](#).

Findings from student projects presented above reveal that the visual and its entangled power dynamics are a cornerstone in identifying state–community relations and their spatial manifestations. Looking at spaces ranging from food deserts and community gardens to sites of graffiti and murals, the projects that come together to structure this essay provide lessons on how communities are made invisible within state–led urban development imaginaries. These lessons also make visible the situated ways in which communities reclaim and produce urban areas as they carefully negotiate the spectrum of invisibility and hypervisibility; whether it takes the form of alternative visualities that counter hegemonic visions, or strategically deploying invisibility as a subversive mechanism. Moreover, the projects demonstrate that these seemingly polar extremes are

often co-constituted. Together, student visual stories demonstrate how, when combined with critical analysis, digital visual methods can elicit such relational dynamics and lay bare the need for and avenues to achieve the right to the city as a grounded political project.

## References

### References

Alves, Jaime A., 2014. From necropolis to blackpolis: Necropolitical governance and black spatial praxis in São Paulo, Brazil. *Antipode*, 46(2), pp.323–339.

Balzarini, John E., and Anne B. Shlay. 2016. 'Gentrification and the Right to the City: Community Conflict and Casinos.' *Journal of Urban Affairs* 38 (4): 503–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/juaf.12226>.

Doshi, Sapana, 2019. Greening displacements, displacing green: Environmental subjectivity, slum clearance, and the embodied political ecologies of dispossession in Mumbai. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 43(1), pp.112–132.

Harvey, David. 2008. 'The right to the city.' *The City Reader*, 6, 23–40.

Ramírez, Margaret M., 2020. 'City as borderland: Gentrification and the policing of Black and Latinx geographies in Oakland.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38(1), pp.147–166.

Wherry, Frederick F. 2011. *The Philadelphia Barrio: The Arts, Branding, and Neighborhood Transformation*. University of Chicago Press.

## Authors



### **Karen Paiva Henrique**

Assistant Professor » University of Amsterdam

Karen Paiva Henrique is an Assistant Professor in Governance and Inclusive Development at the University of Amsterdam. Her research and teaching focuses on human–environment interactions, uneven urban development, and the climate crisis. Her current projects investigate the un/just implications of climate adaptation across the urban South, the role of power in shaping resilience as concept and practice, and everyday decision-making in the context of compounding crises. Her ongoing collaborations include explorations on critical visual methods and storying geographies. Dr Henrique received her PhD from the University of Western Australia (2020) and MArch from the Pennsylvania State University (2014). She was a contributing author for the IPCC *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 °C* (SR15).



### **Aparna Parikh**

Assistant Professor » PennState College of the Liberal Arts

Aparna Parikh is a feminist urban geographer whose work focuses on gendered dimensions of urban environmental belonging in South Asian cities. Parikh's ongoing projects in Mumbai include feminist investigations of indigenous urban worlds and on housing challenges in light of authoritarian vegetarianism in India. She is also involved in collaborative projects on urban climates and on critical visual methods. Her work has been published in *Gender, Place and Culture*, *cultural geographies*, *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *Environment and Planning C*, *GeoHumanities*, *Environment and Planning D*, and she has chapters in *The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender* and in *Suffragette City: Women, Politics, and the Built Environment*.