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Editorial

Spatial Humanities and Contemporary Geographical Approaches

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Abstract: This Special Issue of the European Journal of Geography emerges from the engaging conversations and inspiring work shared at the Spatial Humanities 2024 Conference in Bamberg. It brings together nine original contributions spanning historical geography, urban geography, heritage studies, and geography and education. Through GIS, deep mapping, digital archives, and participatory methods, these studies reveal how spatial thinking and geospatial technologies enrich our understanding of places, histories, and human experiences. Together, they highlight the growing value of spatial humanities in bridging disciplines, telling new stories, and reshaping the ways we explore the world.

Keywords: Spatial Humanities; Digital Humanities; Geography

1. Introduction

The conference Spatial Humanities 2024 held at the University of Bamberg, Germany, in September 2024, explored the contributions of geospatial technologies, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), to humanities research, show-casing how these approaches and methods expand knowledge within and beyond the digital humanities. This Special Issue explores a variety of themes presented at the conference, focusing on the interaction between spatial humanities and contemporary geographical research.

Spatial humanities is a branch of digital humanities employing geographical data and geospatial analysis, an increasingly established scientific approach in researching historic maps, texts and quantitative data that can be georeferenced (Bodenhamer et al., 2010). Over the past two decades, large and comprehensive online and free-to-access archives and collections of digitised historic maps have become available through web-mapping applications, often involving proprietary and open access GIS as well as visualisations in various computer languages or bespoke interfaces. GIS in particular allows scanned maps to be stored, retrieved and compared to each other spatially and temporally, as well as in relation to other geospatial data sources, such as aerial photographs and satellite images. Proprietary and open-source GIS tools offer powerful means for visualising how landscapes change over time, becoming a well-established methodology in archival research, archaeology and urban morphology, amongst other fields. This Special Issue brings together nine original articles that explore the rich and evolving intersection of spatial humanities research with the historical and temporal exploration of particular places.

2. Contemporary geographical research

Geospatial technologies have undoubtedly become integral to spatial humanities, extending beyond historical analysis to encompass urban studies and human experiences. Conceptual tools such as GIS, deep mapping, and locative media uncover the complex relationships between place, movement, and perception, challenging static representations of space. These interdisciplinary methodologies are explored in three articles in this Special Issue, offering fresh insights into urban transformations and educational contexts while reshaping our understanding of place. Heyne et al. (2025) introduce a novel digital application (LitSpatz[1]) that merges storytelling with geographical education through virtual and on-site literary walks in Bamberg, Germany. Designed for primary school students, the app fosters text comprehension, spatial and affective perspective-taking, and reading motivation. It addresses the gap in research on how young learners internalize spatial narratives, offering a multimedia, geolocated story experience. Their pilot study revealed that the studebts experienced high levels of enjoyment and motivation, while uncovering complex relations between empathy, transportation, and comprehension. Despite challenges in broader implementation, LitSpatz stands out by bridging spatial humanities with educational technology and geography, offering a promising approach for immersive, place-based digital learning in diverse contexts. Kiminami & Dunn (2025) explore how the recently pedestrianised Strand in London has evolved into a "humanised" space through the

[1] More information about the LitSpatz app is available here: https://www.uni-bamberg.de/bildungsforschung/litspatz/

lived experiences of its users. The authors employed a deep mapping approach that merged GPS tracking with qualitative interviews to reveal how people co-create spatial meaning and emotional geographies within transformed urban landscapes. They investigated how street furniture, digital locative media, and architectural landmarks shape pedestrian behaviours, drawing attention to the intangible labyrinths of movement and memory. Their study bridges spatial humanities and urban geography, offering a participatory, multilayered understanding of placemaking and their findings highlight the potential of deep mappingas both an analytical tool and a design strategy in contemporary urban studies. Taking a wider perspective, Salimi et al. (2025) focus on contemporary heritage management using GIS. Their research presents principles and considerations for bridging traditional heritage management practices with contemporary participatory methods towards inclusive, informed, and sustainable conservation efforts. They evaluated five case studies from Iran, USA, Finland, Egypt and Spain that utilized GIS in participatory planning processes, highlighting participatory mapping as a means for capturing diverse perspectives from different social groups on heritage values and priorities. They conclude that participatory mapping with GIS enhances inclusivity in heritage management and supports community-driven initiatives for urban heritage preservation. Their research contributes to the growing body of literature on the intersection of spatial analysis and participatory conservation in heritage areas, demonstrating how geospatial technologies can be employed towards integrating heritage values, facilitating community engagement, guiding effective conservation strategies and prioritizing development measures.

3. Historical geographical research

Spatial Humanities approaches can support "detective" type of research helping us understand retrospectively the detail of historical processes and outcomes. Geospatial methods and tools can be used for in-depth analysis of historical phenomena, social, political and cultural practices in different chronologies, such as Medieval, Modern and Contemporary Periods. They can also be articulated with other methods and tools from the broader field of the Digital Humanities, for example, related to data management and textual analysis, among others. Four such examples of historical research are included in the current Special Issue, discussed here in the chronological order of their temporal focus. Vargha & Eichert (2025) introduce the RELIC project[2], focusing on its methodological approach to study the Christianisation of rural East-Central Europe from the 10th to the 12th centuries, particularly looking for evidence in the transitional cemeteries. OpenAtlas was used for historical, archaeological and archival archaeological data aggregation and management. Combined with GIS-based tools it enabled the deep mapping of the population's ecclesiastical network and the Christianisation process, concluding it was not homogenous or monolithic, thus refuting the historical narrative. Instead, it was the result of a confluence of centralised norms and complex local adaptions to the political and religious changes. Regional historical diversity, local agencies, ecclesiastical and political powers influenced this heterogeneity, unveiling differences and patterns, how historical phenomena affected local church networks and their relation to power centres, and unveiling local strategies and initiatives from various political settings. Social networks, underlying local, institutional and popular class strategies, are also studied by Paulino (2025), focusing on abandoned children between 1871 and 1900 at Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa, the institution responsible for the guardianship and tutoring of these foundlings in the Portuguese capital Lisbon. To analyse the provenance of the abandoned children and their spatial distribution when raised by external "wet nurses" (women hired to suckle the infants), the problem-solving GIS-database SIGMA and geographical data from institutional reports were used, enabling an accurate representation and deep mapping of this historical practice. Since the available data concerns the period following the children's anonymous abandonment, and the institution would only receive children from the Lisbon area, the children's provenance was mostly related to Lisbon city. Following their entry to the institution, the foundlings were sent to be raised by external wet nurses and teachers of crafts, distributed to rural and small urban areas outside the big city in the hope that these children would have good chances of family integration. GIS was used in this archival research to reinforce historical arguments, overcoming limitations with imprecise historical records by using SIGMA, defining geographical networks and strategies, as well as studying a marginalized population, whose path would be difficult to follow otherwise. Fretwell and Schmidt (2025) present a comparative study of restoration ideals for post-war urban spaces in Richmond, Virginia (USA) and Hamburg (Germany). They studied how public urban park creation, often presented as inherently beneficial to the public by planners, government officials, and stakeholders, served to enforce prevailing social and political norms by excluding unwanted visitors and fostering specific codes of conduct. More specifically, the construction of Chimborazo Park in Richmond displaced and excluded an African American (Black) community during the aftermath of the Civil War, while the Alsterpark in Hamburg was created within the city's post-World War II greening initiatives that included forced expropriation of affluent landowners and subsequent regulation of park activities and behaviour. Their spatial humanities approach furthers the historical investigation of planning histories by critically examining patterns of displacement, exclusion and social control in sites of contestation and ideology during moments of societal, political and social reform.

4. Diachronic geographical research

In many cases, spatial humanities research involves the combination of archival sources across time and space, over many years, sometimes over centuries and occasionally in different geographical contexts. Taking a comparative perspective, Morenets (2025) analysed the evolution of the smellscape concept, having as its primary source three travel writings that mention olfactory senses. Combining spatial analysis with textual analysis, the three sources cross the Medieval Era and the Early Modern Period: The Travels of Sir John Mandeville (1357–1371), An Itinerary Written by Fynes Moryson (1617), and The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation by Richard Hakluyt (1598–1600). They demonstrate that the smellscapes concept is rooted in the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods by collecting c. 300 olfactory mentions by word search using selected smell-related synonyms and applying close reading techniques and textual analysis methods. They argue that smellscapes are the unity of a smell's location, individual interpretation and interactions with surrounding smells, tracing chronologically the smellscape's development and potential theoretical applications by extending contemporary ideas of the concept to the medieval period and the Enlightenment. Moving on to the materiality of urban environments, Horn et al. (2025) undertake a diachronic analysis of historical buildings in Tel Aviv (Israel) through the digital municipal archives. Their research addresses the inconsistent key events in buildings' lifecycles by introducing an ontological dating formulation of major construction activities starting with the building permit as the most common, reliable, and consistent indicator of a building's age. They analysed 28000 building files consisting of 5.3 million digitised documents spanning over 100 years (1920-2020) combining permit data with taxation and construction completion documents. This allowed them to predict the "birth date" and subsequently the

[2] Further information on the ERC-StG RELIC project is available here: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101115501

ages of all buildings and generate detailed diachronic maps of urban growth that support our understanding of urban transformation dynamics. Van Wissen et al. (2025) comment on the research potential of the 5000 early modern Dutch maps from the 17th and 18th centuries in the GLOBALISE project[3]. This widely available rich dataset has been further enriched with annotations and metadata following the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) standards, directly linking the maps to their digital representations from the various collection-holding institutions. The annotations, consisting of toponyms and geographic features, allow for the exploration of understudied historical regions, encouraging collaborative refinements and allowing the wider research community to build upon this work. Their commentary offers an excellent example of spatial humanities resources combining historical cartography with computational tools to empower large-scale historical and geographic research.

5. Editorial reflections on the Special Issue

The call for this Special Issue was published in advance of the Spatial Humanities conference on the EJG (26/04/2024) and conference websites with the original intention to publish the articles online near or just after the conference. However, the response was relatively low due to the timing of the call in Spring/Summer 2024 for a conference taking place in early Autumn 2024. Subsequently, we advertised the call at the conference itself and via email to all the conference participants/presenters, followed up with personalised email invitations to 43 conference presenters and co-presenters of 28 conference papers that we deemed to be relevant to the call for the Special Issue. The nine contributions published here come from 21 authors with near gender parity, representing ten countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the USA, and others. The authors reflect a healthy mix of experience, ranging from senior professors and established researchers to PhD candidates, Master's students, and professionals. While all articles speak to the core theme of Spatial Humanities, they also connect with other subdisciplines , such as Historical Geography (4 articles), Urban Geography (4), and Geography & Education (1). The peer-review process was thorough yet efficient: two articles were accepted after one round of revisions, six after two rounds, and one after three. The time from submission to final acceptance ranged between 50 and 153 days.

This issue offers a diverse and engaging collection of work that demonstrates the growing importance of spatial thinking across both the humanities and the wider field of geography. We hope that by publishing this Special Issue we highlighted the links between spatial humanities and geographical thinking, practice and scholarship, while sending a strong message to scholars that the EJG welcomes spatial humanities submissions.

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[3] More information about the project is available here: https://globalise.huygens.knaw.nl/