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## Cellphone Diaries: Mobile Technology and Self-Authored Digital Videos in Asset Mapping

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*The Cellphone Diaries project engaged African-American residents of historic South Park East Raleigh, North Carolina in the use of “smartphones” to document places that had meaning for them in Chavis Park. Chavis Park is the green heart of their community, and is undergoing rapid change. The project was a component of an effort by North Carolina State University investigators to support a neighborhood revitalization framework organized around a community vision plan. Cellphone Diaries attempted to 1) train residents in the use of smartphone digital videos for individual on-site asset mapping, and 2) compare the results of individual on-site smartphone based approaches to concurrent multi-disciplinary engagement efforts including individual off-site interviews and off-site community workshop approaches. Results reflected differences per engagement method in place descriptions, including place-based narratives prompted by on-site interaction through smartphone use.*



**Figure 1.** A photomontage representing the simultaneous experience of Chavis Park today and in historical narratives (Image credit: Kiddee Chaeroenpanitkul)

Mobile technology is facilitating different forms of social interaction. From social media and photography to navigation and music, people are increasingly reliant on devices to document and share interactions between each other and with the physical environment. Yet, access to mobile technology remains uneven, and in some cases, inequitable. Although the overall trend in the United States is increased access to mobile technology and wireless networks by most, “The New Digital Divide” still disenfranchises communities of color, especially African Americans, by limiting their access to the fastest equipment and networks (Crawford, 2011).

However, African Americans are among the fastest growing users of mobile technology.

African Americans use mobile technology for texting and web use more than White Americans (Smith, 2010). Additionally, people of color disproportionately use digital photography and videography on mobile devices in coordination with social media websites (Smith, 2010). The explosive rate of use is tied to an aspect of “The Digital Divide”; communities of color experience a disproportionate lack of access to the Internet via desktop and laptop computers and therefore use mobile devices as their primary Internet access (Smith, 2010)

While communities of color are enjoying increasing digital community access, they are also facing increasing threats to the physical places where they live. A primary threat to communities of color is gentrification, the cyclical process of city investment and disinvestment. Gentrification has historically displaced communities of color who lived near urban centers. In economically challenged areas, city policies and resources designed to revitalize places and attract new development has too often failed to effectively engage existing residents in the change process, and resulted in a wide range of economic and social forces that remove existing people of color (Fullilove, 2005). The legacies of previous eras, including Post World War II Urban Renewal (also known as “Negro Removal”) policies, remains in the living memory of senior residents of urban communities and a fear of potential dislocation can prompt adversarial relationships between residents, city officials, and other redevelopment interests (Thomas, 1997). In rapidly changing places, where long-time residents are facing increased redevelopment pressure, there is an increasing demand to document assets that can be used to protect community-defined neighborhood characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to present findings from a case study using mobile technology to identify community-defined places, as well as an assessment of mobile technology-based results in comparison with other concurrent community documentation methods including workshop based processes, archival research, and individual interviews. The findings offer implications for future mobile technology-based work.

### **Asset Mapping and Mobile Technology**

The literature on the role of place attachment in community identity is well established (Tuan, 2001; Buttimer and Seamon, 1980; Relph, 1976) Where one lived, especially in the pre-World War II era, had a tremendous impact on one’s sense of identity and connection with community (Hayden, 1997). In some cases, artifacts of place (buildings, streets, landscapes) served as important shared symbols of community identity (Hayden, 1997). There are many vehicles for canonizing these physical artifacts and protecting them through policy. However, in situations where the social interactions and stories lack physical evidence to convey community identity to the place, fewer tools are available to document community-defined meaningful places. These place-based narratives still matter to many urban communities of color, and changes in the physical community can sometime threaten these stories.

Can mobile technology assist in documenting place-based narratives? Historically, separate technologies (now combined in mobile devices) have been used in community engagement processes, especially asset mapping. Asset mapping is a community development tool that engages existing residents of a place in documenting community areas of value (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Asset mapping tools pioneered the inclusion of community strengths that were not physical artifacts; social networks, organizational capacities, and local skill sets all qualify as assets. Asset mapping works from the assumption that “needs-based” community development work favors the power, resources, and

interests of the hierarchical structures in part responsible for the challenges facing communities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). By empowering communities to self-identify their assets, and build from their self-identified strengths, more sustainable community-defined solutions emerge.

The asset mapping process extends from advocacy planning and participatory design in the 1960's (Sanoff, 2000). Participatory video, a tool used in advocacy planning which empowers community members to co-author and co-produce videos with an investigator describing their places from their points of view, is one of many processes that emerged from the advocacy planning era (Lunch & Lunch, 2006). In some ways, participatory video provides insights on community perceptions and attitudes that face-to-face workshop settings, typically off-site from the study area, cannot (Evans & Forster, 2009; Dennis Jr., Gaulocher, Carpiano, & Brown, 2009; Crampton, 2009). Advantages to these community documentation processes include co-authorship between community residents and outside investigators, skills development through exchanging new methods, and concretizing the community process in products for inclusion in future work.

Given these precedents, how do results from the use of mobile technology assisted processes compare to other engagement and asset mapping processes? How can they enhance engaged work with communities of color? This paper presents an overview of ongoing research using mobile technology to enhance the community engagement and design process.



**Figure 2.** An aerial view of South Park East Raleigh in relationship to Downtown Raleigh and area landmarks (Image credit: Downtown Design Studio)

### The South Park East Raleigh Neighborhood

The context of the study was South Park East Raleigh, a historic African American community in North Carolina. The study was conducted during the spring of 2010 in coordination with several concurrent community empowerment efforts. The South Park East Raleigh Neighborhood Association Preservation and History Program (SPERNA) emerged as the community partner in the work. South Park East Raleigh emerged in the early 20th



century on the southeastern edge of Downtown Raleigh, and is a state-designated historic district. SPERNA's Preservation and History Program was formed to improve the documentation, interpretation, and protection of the community's rich heritage in light of the potential threats of gentrifying forces. Using the "Top" Greene Community Center as a base, residents began to collect and store numerous artifacts ranging from newspaper and yearbook pages to clothing and photography. Through the exchange and accumulation of artifacts, the group understood that many of the stories prompted by the artifacts involved shared elements of social interaction. And in many cases, there was no evidence in the existing built environment of these traces of symbolic community identity. Additionally, SPERNA and other neighborhood stakeholders were interested in revitalization, but redevelopment approaches that responded to the existing symbols of community identity.

SPERNA partnered with the City of Raleigh and with North Carolina State University (NCSU) to create a multi-disciplinary and multi-year community design process. Facilitated through the university's Downtown Design Studio, the process used community vision workshops to identify, analyze, and prioritize community assets, as well as proposed private development and public infrastructure enhancement opportunities. The resultant community vision plan would be used to organize resources and policy to revitalize the neighborhood in strategic ways.

### **Concurrent Strategies for Asset Mapping**

The vision-based process was located in a local community center, held in the evenings, and reliant on maps, aerials, and digital presentations. Some challenges with this process included the variables present in asking community partners to recall community characteristics, and the abilities of facilitators to accurately translate community feedback. For community partners to fully participate, they needed to possess the skills to read diagrams, verbally articulate issues, and be willing to share their perceptions in a group setting. Additionally, community partners needed the ability to recall qualities of places while being away from those places (in the off-site workshop).

Concurrent to the visioning process were two multi-disciplinary engagement efforts. Graphic designers led archival research and compiled historic photos, maps, and other documents. The process included gathering artifacts from both stakeholder and state archives. Key community partners directed the selection of artifacts, and the eventual archive gave participants an emotional connection to elements that described the experiences of the place. This was invaluable for supplementing the limits of what could be interpreted or observed on-site. However, challenges with this process included the accumulation of an archive that was largely reflective and personal, and in some ways difficult to connect to present day on-site situations. Other than key community partner awareness, there was very little guidance in connecting artifacts to the geographic places they represented.

Sociolinguists led one-on-one-interviews, conducting over 60 open-ended interviews with community partners in their homes. The interview process began with loosely framed questions, and then prompts to continue on identified themes. Interviews about living in the neighborhood were invaluable to the broader effort, and paralleled observations from community design and graphic design. The open-ended interviews allowed for participant self-pacing of stories, and flexibility in constructing narratives. However, similar to the graphic design process, off-site recollections were limited. At times, it was difficult to connect to geographic locations. And in some cases, activities and events were not connected

to actual locations, making it difficult to relate to current day situations.

Community design, graphic design, and sociolinguistic place-based narrative efforts provided rich and useful narratives. However, each approach presented its own challenge to locating stories in place. These challenges served as the impetus for a landscape architecture study; how does mobile technology assist in geographically placing narratives, and enable using the actual site as the prompt for stories?

### **Cellphone Diaries**

NCSU faculty and students facilitated a mobile technology component, dubbed Cellphone Diaries. Cellphone Diaries had two project objectives; 1) train residents in the use of smartphone digital videos for individual on-site asset mapping, and 2) compare the results of individual on-site smartphone based approaches to concurrent multi-disciplinary engagement efforts including individual off-site interviews and off-site community workshop approaches.

Smartphones are equipped with Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and anything documented at a location receives a coordinate that can be used to link the phone to a location. With a mobile device, a person can mark locations and add content.

Smartphones are enabled with digital video recorders and allow for participatory video methods. The devices provide the ability to compose visual narratives of places including the use of motion, and audio tools to enhance the documentation of a place. In contrast with a static image or text, video provides a range of potential affordances to viewers wanting to understand a place; those who need to hear someone speak can pay attention to the narration, those who need to see imagery can focus on the visuals. Additionally, participatory video enables the viewer to experience indirect cues associated with a place; sounds, lighting, seasons, etc. Where participatory video was historically cumbersome (requiring equipment and training), mobile devices are now equipped with digital recorders that are simple to operate.

City of Raleigh activities concurrent with the study prompted a shift in the focus of the project. Initially, the project intended to engage senior African-American residents of South Park East Raleigh, NC in the use of smartphones to document places that had meaning for them throughout their neighborhood. However, the City's proposed relocation of a historic Carousel in Chavis Park prompted community protest, and the desire to communicate neighborhood place values to prevent the proposed relocation. SPERNA was interested in overlaying the goals of Cellphone Diaries with the activist-driven agenda to better document components of place in Chavis Park, and so the focus of the study was shifted to Chavis Park.

### **Methods**

Participants in the project (n=17) were recruited through contacts made during the community vision workshop process. All participants were community residents who participated in two other efforts designed to document their stories about place including one-on-one home-based interviews, and off-site community workshops. Project participants were trained in the use of smartphones and loaned identical smartphones to shoot and narrate on-site digital videos of places that had meaning to them in Chavis Park.



**Figure 3.** Community resident in smartphone training session (Image credit: The Author)

A local mobile service provider donated seven smartphones for the study. Investigators developed a training protocol for phone use. The protocol included testing the phone's capabilities in digital video and GPS, as well as programming the phones with a "one touch" video upload feature. Participation in the training protocol was required to use the mobile devices.

Graduate students were trained to serve as Tech buddies; assisting participants in the technical execution of their work. Participants were given one week to complete their work. All videos were uploaded to a server and linked to an online map. NCSU faculty and the principal investigator performed content analysis on all videos (n=58) coding the locations, views, and durations of each digital video and accompanying narrative. The content analysis revealed several key themes described in the results section of this paper. NCSU faculty and the principal investigator compared digital video themes with the results from one-on-one home-based interviews as well as from off-site community workshops. Findings from the videos were checked against archival research including reviews of historic plans, maps, articles, and photographs.

### **Results**

"Ok, we're at...I'm actually facing across the street...it was a street-from the merry go round...and there was an Olympic-sized pool there...but they've made some modifications, some changes. Now this part I don't really recognize. The playground and all that, it was not there."

-Excerpt from Cellphone Diaries entry at historic entry to Chavis Park

Overall, the videos revealed varying degrees of orientation and disorientation in Chavis Park. For some participants, the Cellphone Diaries project prompted their first critical looks at the park in a long time; for some, they had not been to the park since childhood. On-site place-based narratives had a range of durations due to the time it took to explain memories triggered by being in a place, as well as disorientation about the locations of historic elements now absent from the current park. Participants juxtaposed their recollection of park activities and experiences with what was currently visible.

For example, today, much of the urban fabric surrounding the historic Chavis Park entry has transformed with declining urban fabric and inconsistent use of the entry path. Archival research and review of an aerial photograph taken in 1959 revealed that the historic neighborhood entry to Chavis Park was a street connected to the intimate grid of the South Park neighborhood. The entry was easily accessible and visible from as far away as nearby Shaw University. After a park renovation in the 1970's, vehicular access was removed from this area of Chavis Park, and replaced with a newly constructed entry from nearby Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. The boulevard is a large and busy urban arterial and is not pedestrian friendly. There are no front doors facing the boulevard. The current pedestrian park entry is a winding path that bears no resemblance to the original neighborhood-oriented entry.

Content analysis identified a series of themes common to the digital videos recorded. However, a dominant theme emerged that was directly related to the concurrent Carousel relocation issue; the Carousel was in fact the last trace evidence of the original "Heart of the Park". Resident outrage over the proposed relocation of the Carousel was in part due to the perception that the last remnant of their sense of place would be removed.



**Figure 4.** This is an image of an area in Chavis Park identified in Cellphone Diaries as "The Heart of the Park". The existing Carousel (right) was in a tent at the time of the park's founding. Nothing else remains from the original site plan (Image credit: The Author).

### **The Heart of the Park**

"It would be the evening and we were not supposed to come down, but you can imagine these 6 year-old girls, and some boys too...slipping down here and squeezing through the crowd to see the best dancer dance. It was a dancer called Rubber Legs, and he always had a crowd around him..."

-Excerpt from Cellphone Diaries entry at historic heart of Chavis Park

On-site narratives tended to continue on themes for longer periods than similar narratives documented through off-site processes. For example, many participants in off-site workshops discussed the historic Heart of the Park where people gathered and engaged in



a wide range of activities. But it was not until 6 participants independently documented the space and shared their stories that the programming and life of the “heart” was made clear. Immediately over a bridge linking the historic neighborhood entry to the park was a critical mass of elements including an historic Carousel, a “piccolo” (or “jukebox”), a dance platform, a concession area, an Olympic-sized pool with changing areas, and a miniature train. Many participants shared stories of their experiences in this space. Billy Eckstine, who made frequent tours through Raleigh with his jazz orchestra, used the Chavis Park pool. A local dance show was recorded on the nearby dance platform and the local hero “Rubber legs” was the one to watch on the show.

The Carousel (the only historic resource on the national register in the place) is almost identical to the one in nearby Pullen Park, a whites only leisure park during Segregation. The concession and changing areas were places where young people could get internships and earn part-time work during summer months; opportunities that no longer exist in Chavis Park. Although leisure was the main focus of Chavis Park, other socio-economic structures existed that enabled a full range of community life.

Today, the only remaining structure from the “heart” is the Carousel. There is no trace evidence or interpretation in this area describing the economic, social, and cultural roles of the place. A large concrete plaza, a play area, and a large parking lot are all that cue users and visitors to use the space. Archival research revealed that the amusement structures referenced in many participant videos were removed by the city due to dwindling park resources, and lack of maintenance. The level of park infrastructure in Chavis Park was seen a duplication with similar resources in nearby Pullen Park, and the city decided to maintain Pullen Park as a “regional park”, while transitioning Chavis Park to a “neighborhood park”. This transition, ironically, was in response to Desegregation, and a city policy that no longer supported a “separate but equal” park planning approach that historically supported “black parks” and “white parks”.

### **Chavis Park: Neighborhood or Regional Park?**

Although legal Segregation was outlawed several decades ago, South Park East Raleigh residents still don’t view Pullen Park as a regional resource for their use. They do not feel included in that place. Through the study, it was revealed that because of other forms of perceived inequality (broader discrepancies in the allocation of resources to, and access to power by African Americans) community partners still felt the effects of discrimination. In their opinions, Raleigh is in some ways just as segregated as it ever was. And the lack of recognition of basic inequality, reflected in the inequitable distribution of investments in places like Pullen and Chavis parks, was evidence of continued challenges.

“What I remember most about the picnic areas of course are the picnics, but most of all people came from rural areas all around, black people from all over, all different counties and everything would come here to picnic on Sunday.”

-Excerpt from Cellphone Diaries entry at Chavis Way in Chavis Park

Contrary to the negative connotations of separate black and white parks, community partners took pride in the role Chavis Park played in the local, regional, and even national African American community. Athletic fields at Chavis Park were the origins of many regionally famous football and baseball players. Church revivals, picnics, and other social

events involving African Americans from across North Carolina were common in the Jim Crow Era. National performing acts and tours frequently stopped in Raleigh, South Park East Raleigh, and Chavis Park and considered the area “safe harbor” when moving between Atlanta and Washington DC.

And Chavis Park played a significant role in the development of several national organizations, most notably the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In an impromptu set of videos shot within view of nearby Shaw University, two participants recounted the role their brothers played in informal meetings in the park in the formation of the coalition of Shaw students that eventually led to the creation of one of the premier Civil Rights Era student organizations.

“I’m trying to see why they are going to move it (the Carousel) cause they said it’s deteriorating down here. Where? And they’re closing down? What are you doing?”

-Excerpt from Cellphone Diaries entry questioning a city staffer at the Carousel

Concurrent to the period of the study, participants joined other community residents in resisting a city-authored proposal to relocate the Carousel to the Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard edge. From the city’s perspective, the move was logical and economically defensible. In its current location, the Carousel was “buried” in the community and not visible to the casual passerby. This hurts its visibility and potential profitability. But from a community point-of-view, the proposed relocation of the Carousel meant the removal of the last evidence of the heart of Chavis Park. At the same time, the Carousel at Pullen Park is currently being renovated and remaining in the same location it has enjoyed since Pullen Park’s founding. Above and beyond the financial logic of relocating the Carousel at Chavis Park, defending or rethinking the last trace evidence of an essential space there remains a contentious divide between city and community.

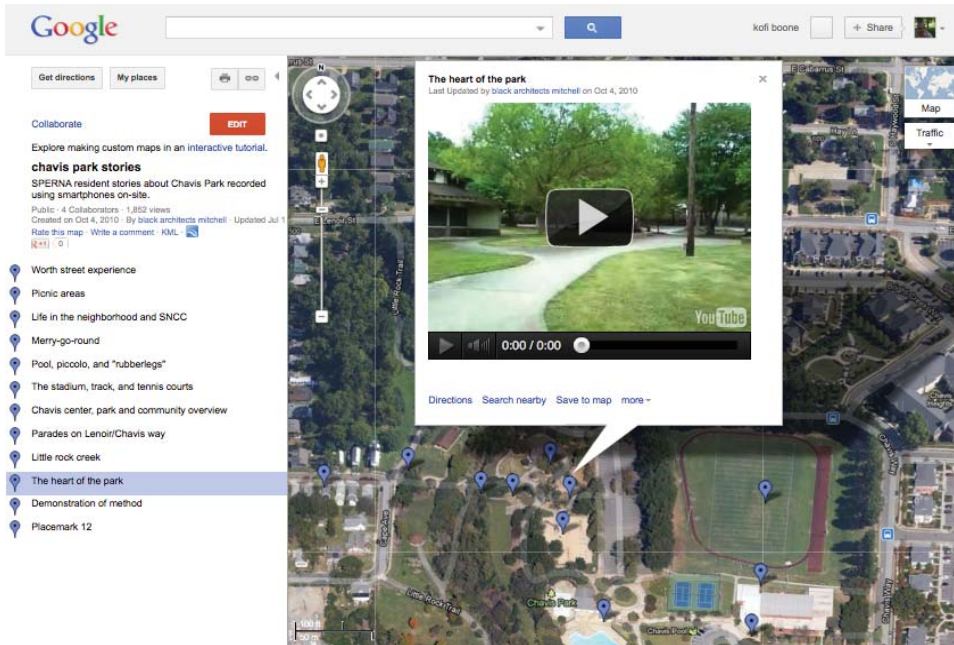
## Discussion

The project began to establish and evaluate training residents in the use of smartphones for individual on-site community asset mapping. However, the project also revealed many challenges and issues. Although most of the community partners owned and used cell-phones previously, none had smartphones, and none had used the digital video and upload features prior to the study. Although fully engaged in the training workshops, connected to Tech buddies, and possessing the training brochures, there was still a great deal of confusion. Since the completion of the study, none of the participants report using phones to document their places.

More trials prior to working on active data collection in the park may have improved the process and led to increased usage of mobile devices after conclusion of the study. Additionally, reviewing videos prior to locating online maps may have provided some indirect feedback to participants about the quality of their work.

Individuals while on-site creating videos communicated through their products that qualities of the place acted as prompts enriching and extending narratives. In some cases, seeing a reference to something visible on-site sparked a connection and discussion that did not occur with off-site methods. In other cases, the recollection of one event in the landscape led to references to other, not so apparent events. This was especially valuable in areas lacking trace evidence of any previous events or structures.

An unanticipated outcome of Cellphone diaries was the enhanced visibility and utility of the digital video products when compared to other engagement efforts. In the case of Cellphone Diaries, oral histories were communicated beyond the direct participants in the Vision Plan effort through an online map, YouTube videos, newspaper articles, a public radio talk show interview (Stasio, 2011), and a City sponsored gallery show (City of Raleigh, 2010). The social perception and ease of access to digital video medium has increased awareness and attention to the people and issues in South Park East Raleigh. People who were not initially interested in the community stories were interested in the technology and that became a pathway for increased awareness. The videos exist online and can be viewed and shared in the absence of the investigators or project facilitators. The online map exists and people can construct their own virtual tours of the area prior to visiting, or in reflection after going to Chavis Park.



**Figure 5.** Screen capture of Google online map linking cellphone diaries to locations (Image credit: The author)

Community partners felt a sense of validation that their place was being described in their own words. In future steps, it will be useful to track who is using the videos and online maps, how they are using them, and if the participants continue to document their places in this manner.

Cellphone Diaries present the potential of a decentralized asset mapping process utilizing technology increasingly in the hands of many community stakeholders. This could enhance community engagement process by offering non-workshop-based means of providing information for design efforts. With improved training protocols, stakeholders could provide a self-paced and poly-vocal interpretation of places. These are dynamics that are difficult to achieve in traditional workshop and interview practices. Being on-site

can prompt narratives not possible off-site, and the stories can be immediately mapped and made accessible to stakeholders, designers and planners to enrich community design decision-making. Further research is necessary to test the approach in diverse ethnic, age, gender, and class situations.

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## **About the Author**

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