

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SCHOOL
 ANTH480|SOC1480
 IN-CLASS WRITING EXERCISE
 PLACE-WRITING 3

Every method shapes what you can see. Walking a neighbourhood gives you heat and noise and the feeling of a block changing underfoot. A photograph gives you a static picture. Google Street View gives you something different again: a continuous, navigable image of the street, recorded at intervals, stored over time, and available from anywhere. As a tool for neighbourhood ethnography, it has genuine affordances that complement in-person observation, and one of the most powerful is largely invisible until you know to look for it.

Most Street View locations carry a layered image archive. When clicking on “see more dates,” a slider in the interface lets you move backward through the years and see what the same corner looked like in different years. Buildings appear and disappear. Storefronts change hands. This makes Google Street View not just a tool for virtual observation but a tool for temporal observation.

KEY CONCEPT | THE VISUAL ARCHIVE
 In Place-Writing 1, we used the concept of the palimpsest to describe how place carries layers of use, displacement, and memory that remain legible beneath the present surface. Google Street View’s historical image archive makes this layering directly observable for some public streets. By moving the time slider, you can see (rather than only infer) what stood here before, what has been built over, what has persisted through years of change. This is also a form of remote ethnography: using digital tools to observe a field site from a distance, across time. John Postill (2017) argues that remote methods can produce genuine ethnographic insight, not merely a substitute for presence. The historical archive goes further: it gives you access to moments that in-person observation never could, because those moments are already in the past.

Use Street View as a two-layered observation tool:

TWO MODALITIES OF OBSERVATION	
OBSERVING THE CURRENT IMAGE	OBSERVING WITH THE HISTORICAL ARCHIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 👁️ The built environment: storefronts, signage, housing stock, infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🕒 What businesses or institutions have come and gone on this block
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 👁️ Land use and spatial arrangement: how commercial, residential, and green space sit next to each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🕒 How the use of a particular lot or building has shifted over time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 👁️ Physical traces of previous use: painted-over signs, altered façades, remnant structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🕒 The layer that produced those traces: what the space looked like before it was covered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 👁️ Who is visible in the street, how the sidewalk is used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🕒 Whether the visible population or the character of street activity looks different across years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 👁️ Scale, density, and the relationship between buildings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🕒 What has been built, demolished, or renovated, and roughly when
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 👁️ What the neighbourhood presents to the street 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🕒 What it has stopped presenting, or what used to be there to see

THE TASK

Navigate to a specific location in your community partner's neighbourhood using Google Street View and spend time moving through it. Treat it as a virtual walk: observe the built environment, note what catches your attention, follow what seems interesting. Pay attention to storefronts, land use, signage, spatial arrangement, who is visible and where. Take notes as you go.

Then choose a spot where something caught your attention (a storefront, a corner, an empty lot, a building that looks like it has been more than one thing) and use the time slider to find an earlier image of the same spot. Go back as far as the archive allows, or find a year where something looks noticeably different.

Write a short scene that draws on both moves: what you observed as you walked the street, and what the historical archive adds to or changes about what you saw. Let the change (or the persistence) surface through specific, concrete detail: a surface, a sign, a structure, a use of the space. Use the discipline from Place-Writing 1: history arrives as texture, not preamble.

Target: ~200 words | Stay at ground level

REFLECTION

After you finish your scene, take five minutes to respond to the questions below. Notes are fine.

01

What specific detail—a surface, an object, a sign—carries the most temporal weight in your scene? What does it hold, and why does it hold more than the other details around it?

02

What questions does the archive open that it cannot answer? What would you want to observe in person — or ask someone — to follow up on what you saw?

03

What does moving between two images of the same spot let you see that a single visit—in person, on one day—would not? What specifically does the archive make available?