

Pastiche— A Collective Composition of New York City

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PROJECT DATE 2009 (v. 1.0a)

KEYWORDS *Collective consciousness, data visualization, gestalt, information art, interaction, interpretive, typography, mapping*

ABSTRACT The city is a composite of impressions. Beyond the built environment it is a constantly changing pastiche of associations and experiences—not just of the people who inhabit it, but of the larger community. New York City embodies two realities: the reality of the physical environment, and the reality of the *idea* that the city and its diverse neighborhoods signify. Inseparably intertwined, these two realities continuously inform each other. *Pastiche* is a dynamic data visualization that maps keywords from blog articles to the New York neighborhoods they reference. The results are geographically positioned and navigable. Keywords surround their corresponding neighborhoods and are assigned based on relevance. The result is a dynamically changing description of the city formed around individual experiences and perspectives.

Conceptually, *Pastiche* is a parallel experience of the city, a map that not only documents, but suggests action. It is a public counterpart to the private physical architecture of the city. Its source is an aggregate of individual blogs; *Pastiche* is a system that anyone has the ability to contribute to. It defines a new kind of public space, while both proposing an experience and inviting comparison. Through the use of *Pastiche* one situates oneself in relation to an impromptu community formed around the idea of New York, and relates one's own perspective to a large, collective subjectivity.

DOCUMENTATION

Pastiche resulted from the desire to visualize impressions of New York City and to create a new map of the city from these impressions. We asked ourselves what an alternate view of New York would look like—a view not defined by the architecture, but rather by a collective *attitude* towards geographic areas of the city. This might lead us to view these areas differently, and to better understand what defines them. The project was a collaboration between Christian Marc Schmidt, an interaction designer and media artist, and Ivan Safrin, a software and game developer. Creating a reference to the architecture of the city through typography, in contrast to the actual built environment, was a critical objective for the piece. We saw *Pastiche* less as an objective, neutral analysis, and more as having a particular attitude towards the information it conveyed. We allowed the formal idea to drive the visualization—from the interaction paradigm to the way information was presented.

Pastiche was also intended as a study in the relationship between writing and the urban environment. Our experience of cities is, to a large degree, shaped by the texts and discourses describing them. A source of inspiration came from the semi-autobiographical early work of novelist Paul Auster, relating to his adolescent experience in New York, as well as James Sanders' analysis in *Celluloid Skyline* of how cinema represents New York City and through this process influences not only our perception of the city but also its architecture. We were also influenced by: the mapping studies conducted by Kevin Lynch and documented in *The Image of the City*, the psycho-geographic experiments of the International Situationists, Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*, and recent projects involving mapping and information visualization by Christian Nold and Jonathan Harris.

While the formal idea of the piece took shape early on, finding the appropriate expression came from working with the data. The idea to use keywords resulted from pragmatic concerns around legibility in regard to longer text passages, while the focus on specific neighborhoods, in turn, resulted from the higher probability of finding content written in reference to neighborhoods (rather than specific addresses or streets and intersections). Over the course of several weeks we refined the algorithm to produce more meaningful keyword results, after which we began viewing the information in a spatial context.

To construct the visualization we identified the geographic center point of each New York City neighborhood from an existing map of the city. We used these as anchor points for neighborhood labels. From these cen-



All figures: screen captures taken by authors

BIOGRAPHIES

Christian Marc Schmidt is a hybrid interaction/graphic designer with a focus on the design of quantitative information. Having worked at the design consultancies IDEO and Pentagram, and currently an interaction designer at Microsoft, his experience spans the fields of information design, interaction design, and media installation. He honed his interest in working with information in the Communication Design program at Parsons School of Design in New York, and while pursuing his master's degree in graphic design at Yale University. Christian's approach is parametric and content-oriented, often resulting in the design of adaptive frameworks. His work has received recognition from organizations such as D&AD, the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), the Society for Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD), Communication Arts, Print Magazine, and the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA). Christian has taught in the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at New York University and was a visiting critic in the graphic design program at Yale.

Ivan Safrin is a Russian-born software developer and independent video game designer living in New York City. Combining his in-depth technical knowledge with a passion for game and information design, he strives to create novel and playful applications. He currently works as a senior developer at R/GA New York where he develops interactive experiences for Nike.