

Pastiche— A Collective Composition of New York City

CHRISTIAN MARC SCHMIDT, MFA
& IVAN SAFRIN

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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.

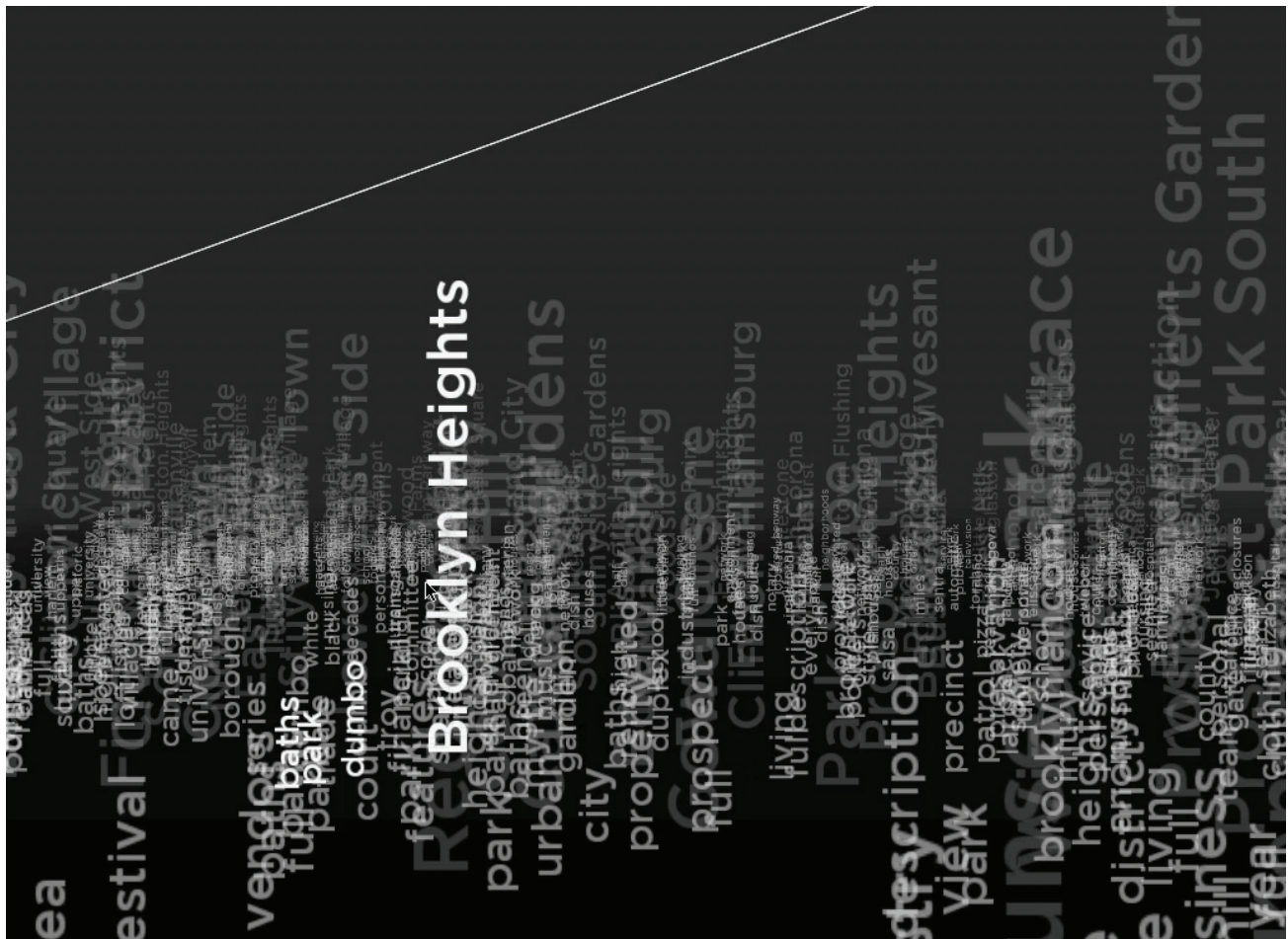
DOCUMENTATION

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-



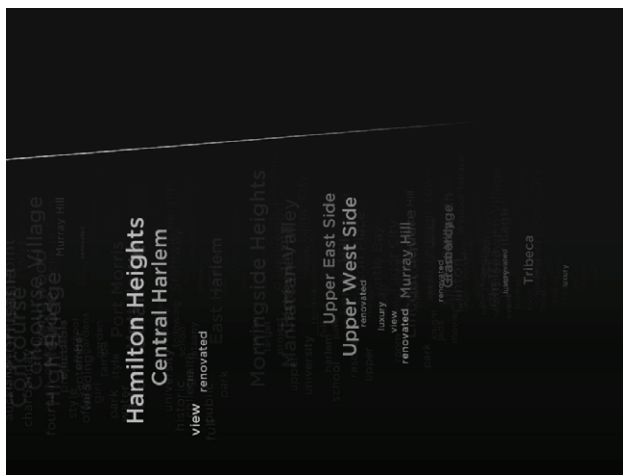
All figures: screen captures taken by authors

ter points the respective keywords were radially arranged. Both keywords and neighborhood labels orientate upwards (vertically) in an analogical gesture to the vertical architecture of the city. Since neighborhood labels were positioned in relative geographic proximity they caused the shape of the city to emerge. Because legibility within the spatial view was still a challenge, we added a list view that allowed pivoting on a particular keyword or neighborhood—this transports the user back into the geographic view centered on the selected element. Also, resulting from the desire to improve legibility, we added the ability to select neighborhoods, which in turn would highlight other neighborhoods throughout the city, related to each other through shared keywords. Though this key interaction, the entire field of text became a stage on which relationships between neighborhoods could be selectively explored.

We conceptually evolved *Pastiche* from the idea of a real-time view of the city based on impressions, to a

cumulative or historical view. This was largely a technical consideration, stemming from the decision to identify keywords based foremost on relevance, and not on recency, which generated a more descriptive set of results. The final outcome can be described more as a visualization of collective memory, rather than a real-time assemblage of impressions.

Pastiche ultimately represents a community, though relative to other online communities it is more of an abstraction, given that the keywords decontextualize from the original articles and authors. Unlike other communities, it is passive in that it does not facilitate communication among members, it focuses on the aggregate, rather than the individual. *Pastiche* allows viewers to create their own meanings and associations with neighborhoods through the synthesis of keywords and their interpretation. In this respect, viewers are challenged to understand their own relationship to this collective construct of the city.



BIOGRAPHIES

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.