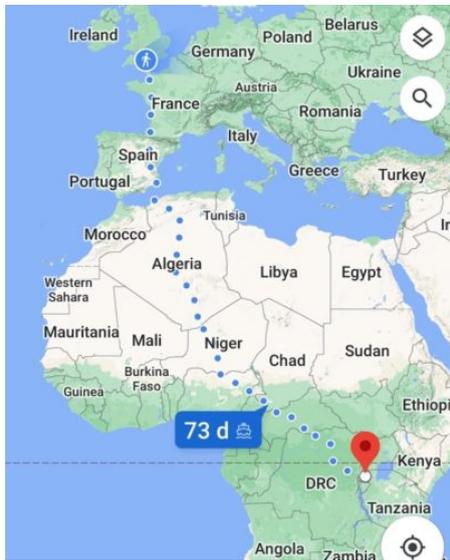




Understanding Places from a Distance

Written by **Dr. Paula Callus** (University of Bournemouth)



It would take 59 days and 20 hours to walk from Pristina to Kigali, and 73 days to walk from Bournemouth to Kigali. I wanted to measure this time as a poignant reminder of distance as experienced through the new lens of personal movement through space during the pandemic. The limitations that have been imposed upon modes of travel often limit our experience of spaces to the local (if not the personal) and for the most part journeying through these spaces by walking. In stark contrast, the modus operandi of a not so distant past, saw taking a flight, train or even driving to and

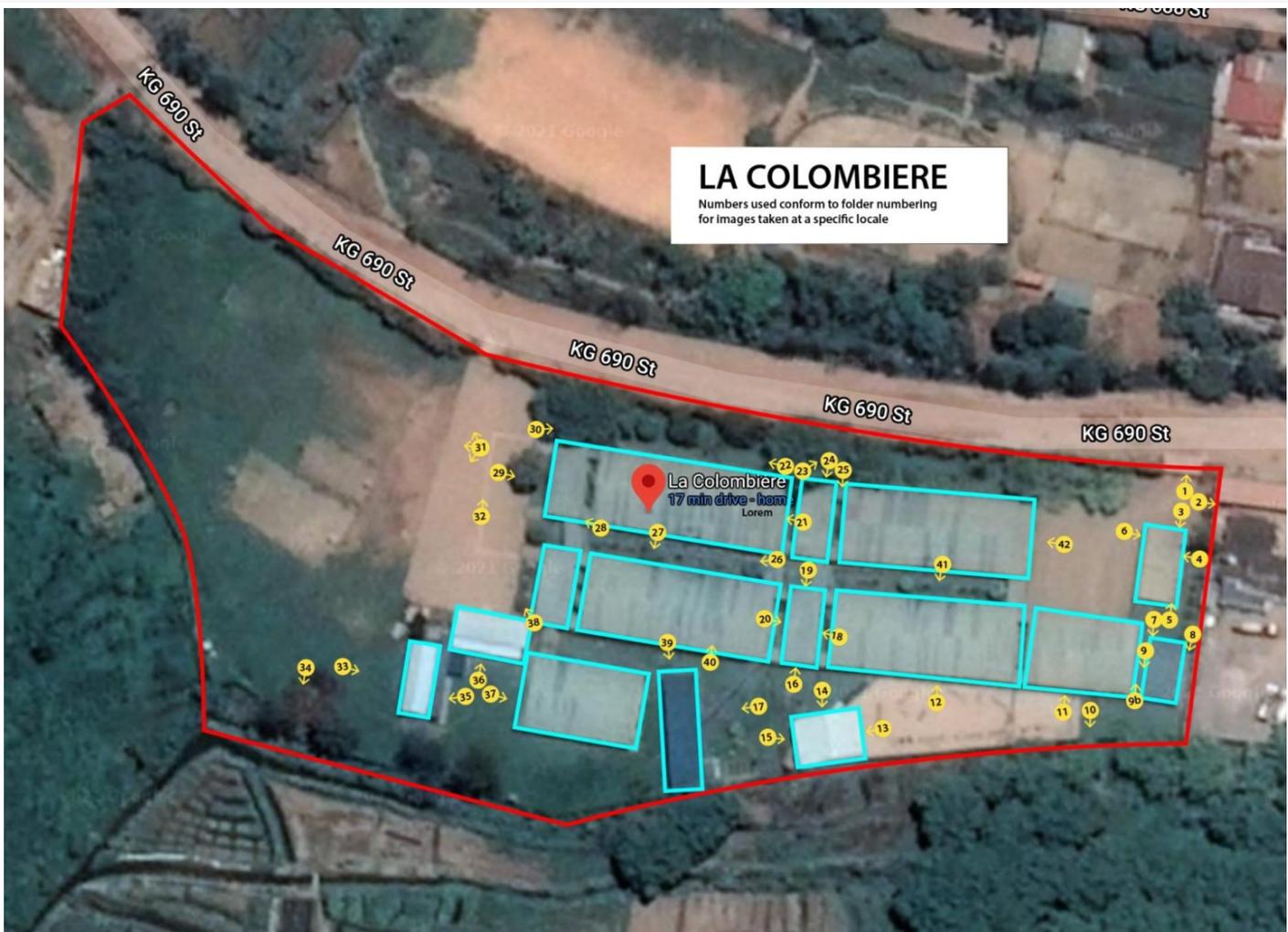
from places as the norm and both time and distance compressed with such ease. The [ReSpace](#) project has from its inception been concerned with place, location, site, and space and movement to and from places both at a local and transnational level and responding to these spatial restrictions has been the team's greatest challenge.

The project was originally conceived of shared experiences of various sites of significance in both Rwanda and Kosovo through which we would collectively investigate shared and contested memories and histories. The project set out to investigate how concepts of space could frame arts-based participatory methods to encourage the youth of a post-memory (Hirsch, 2008) generation in Rwanda and Kosovo to reimagine specific sites of memory and the dominant narratives that emerge from them. These participatory methods were phenomenologically connected to responses to space/place and designed to be contemporaneously explored by participants from Rwanda and Kosovo together.

Therefore the restrictions in travel and movement across spaces during the COVID pandemic presented the project with a unique challenge – how could we understand a place from a distance? How could we experience a site whilst being geographically distant?

How can we share that experience with peers in different locations? Was it possible to use available digital technologies to facilitate telepresence – ie. the feeling of being there?

In each country, the team of academics and students selected local sites of significance to visit; the Hertica House and Dordona Theatre in Kosovo, The Gisimba Memorial Centre, and the Colombiere School in the wetlands in Kigali, Rwanda. They would each visit their local sites and run a series of site surveys using methods from across disciplines – artistic, architectural and anthropological. In Rwanda these would take place as a series of walks between the different sites, connected by the fact that they lie in the wetlands. What became apparent as each of the teams explored these places was that communicating the experience of space with others needed to move beyond descriptive accounts, testimonials or scattered photographic imagery. The remediation of place through a screen required complex constellations of information to be represented: maps, photo documentation, panoramics, video-walkthroughs, 360 videos and 3D CGI reconstructions were some of the visual aids used to make the 'strange familiar'.



La Colombiere Site Documentation Reference Map: Alfred Muchilwa

The feeling of being there' (Heeter, 1992) is a critical aspect

of experiencing space, and here the project is currently exploring using VR headsets to establish whether this improves one's feeling connected to a place (albeit a remediated digital version of it). However, whilst this responds to the question of 'immersion', it doesn't address the need for immediacy and affect through shared experience in the present. In response to this, using personal mobile phones, a series of Instagram live conversations between people in the UK, Kosovo and Rwanda have facilitated the closest thing to experiencing a site together. As Hardley (2020) states "Mobile media's capacity to facilitate co-presence combined with geolocate functionality imbue mobile practices with a hybrid sense of locality and placemaking, combining our experience of physical place with online networked information." With this in mind, for the past two weeks every Saturday (April 2021), we agree to go on a walk with our colleagues in Rwanda using Instagram as a platform. We are able to talk to them as we see what they see in situ. We are able to ask them about the high-rise buildings we see on the horizon, where one site is situated in relation to another. We are able to understand the topology of the wetlands, the flora and fauna, see the footprints of a church or school that was there in the past but is no more, and catch a glimpse of the communities that live in these spaces.

References

Being There: The Subjective Experience of Presence

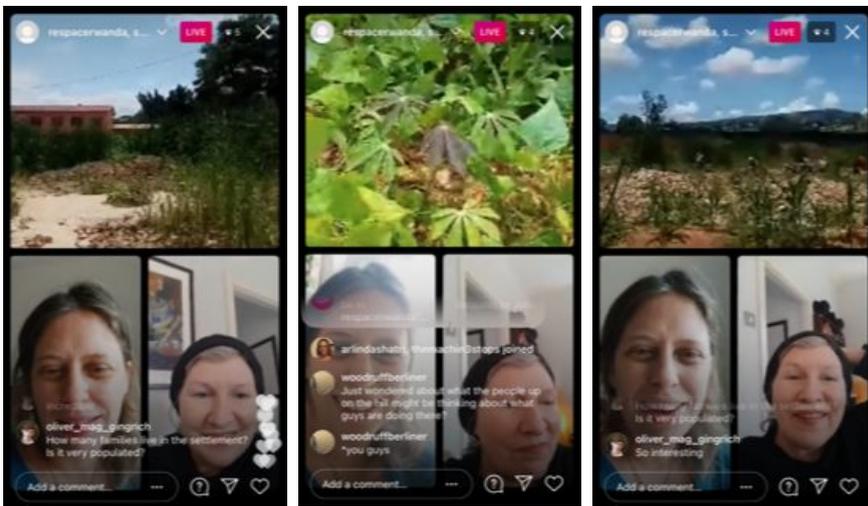
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TAGS: 360 VIDEOS DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES KOSOVO MEMORY RWANDA SPACE UK



Student Sketch on Location at the Hertica Museum, Kosovo



**CHANGING
THE STORY**