

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

BULLETIN

Belle Park from the Air 1924-2024. Promotion of air photo collections for research-creation

Feature Article

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Abstract

This article summarizes a research relationship between author Francine Berish, Geospatial Data Librarian and Principal Investigators Laura Murray (Cultural Studies & English) and Dorit Naaman (Film) on a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Research Creation grant. This collaboration has afforded the opportunity to create non-traditional research outputs, including a film featuring air photos from the Queen's University Library collection and an accompanying blog post. This is a great example of how air photo collections can be used to support community projects and research more generally.

Introduction

For thousands of years, the space now called Belle Park in Ka'tarohkwi (Kingston, Ontario) was a wetland. From 1954 to 1974, it was used as a landfill and then converted to a golf course that operated until 2017. At its entrance stands an unmarked totem carved by Indigenous inmates at the Joyceville Penitentiary in 1973. The park's peninsula ends with a bridge leading to Belle Island, a known location of Indigenous remains. The park and island are surrounded by wetlands and the Cataraqui River. Belle Park is a complicated space.

In recent years, Belle Park has often been considered a "problem" and approached through various scientific, management, legal and social policy frameworks. Recognizing toxic histories and ongoing challenges, the Belle Park Project seeks to see the space as a generator of questions, relationships, and life. Principal Investigators Laura Murray (Cultural Studies & English) and Dorit Naaman (Film) hope that the work being done is not only of significance for people in Kingston/Ka'tarohkwi but also for those seeking to understand or inhabit similarly complex sites in other cities (SSHRC).

Francine's involvement in the Belle Park Project began informally, as she provided support on cartographic and geospatial matters. However, her role evolved, and she became a listed collaborator on the grant, contributing her expertise more formally to the project. This collaboration is part of an active SSHRC Insight Research Creation grant titled "A Totem Pole on a Pile of Garbage: Contending with Colonial and Environmental Violence in Kingston, Ontario" (2020-2024). The project, which is community-oriented, has encouraged the author to create non-traditional research outputs, such as a film, in collaboration with principal investigators Laura Murray and Dorit Naaman, and sound artist Matt Rogalsky. The author also published an accompanying blog post, "[The Politics and History of Aerial Photos: Introducing Belle Park from the Air](#)," to provide context about the approach and the political nature of featured air photos from the Queen's Library collection.

Data Collection Methods are Inherently Political

On a recent episode of 99% Invisible called "[the Weather Machine](#)", they discussed that many of the mathematical equations used for predicting weather have remained unchanged for a surprising number of years. Only recently could supercomputers solve the equations before the weather happened in real-time. Certain countries disproportionately hold the computing power to solve these equations and generate accurate climate predictions, and it's usually not the countries most adversely experiencing climate change. While data-sharing agreements between government organizations help create more balance, privatization could increase inequities. Similarly, those who have/collect air photos, orthophotos, and geospatial information and have the capacity to process them wield incredible power. Historically, this was the domain of government and intergovernmental organizations; however, [industry](#) has entered the arena. While the resulting data could be free, it usually isn't.

Making this film was a small attempt to subvert the military origins and capitalist functions of the aerial photograph.

"Making this film was a small attempt to subvert the military origins and capitalist functions of the aerial photograph. Dorit, Laura and I aimed to mobilize this technology in caring and non-

extractive ways, using library collections to learn or think about places and their complicated stories from literally a different perspective. Next time you visit the park, you might be more aware of how it has been changed over time – both violently by the dumping of garbage on a wetland and more organically by the abandonment of the golf course to the needs of plants and, birds and unhoused people. You might also see how this place has resisted change. It still has the same shape, it still sometimes gets overtaken by water, it still has a lot more plants than people" (from [blog post](#)).

Launching the Film

On Wednesday, June 26, 2024, at 7:00 pm, there was a buzz on Rideau Street at the Broom Factory while Laura set the stage for the screening of "Belle Park from the Air 1924-2024," a six-minute film featuring air photos from the Queen's Library collection to show the transition from wetland to dump to golf course to park (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Audience at Broom Factory Screening (June 2024). Photo by: Mehvish Rather

To get the event rolling, Laura outlined the uncharacteristically easy community-led effort to preserve the Broom Factory, an important piece of Kingston architectural history, where the screening was being held (Figure 2). At the last minute, Dorit and I decided to pull up the 1924 oblique air photo showing the Broom Factory and the nearby location of the wetland, now called Belle Park (figure 3).



Figure 2 Laura Murray introduces the film at the Broom Factory screening. Photos by: Mehvish Rather

The noticeable buzz in the room indicated that community members could have discussed this single photo for the duration of the event, but the organizers opted to go ahead with the planned film screening (Figure 2 & 3).

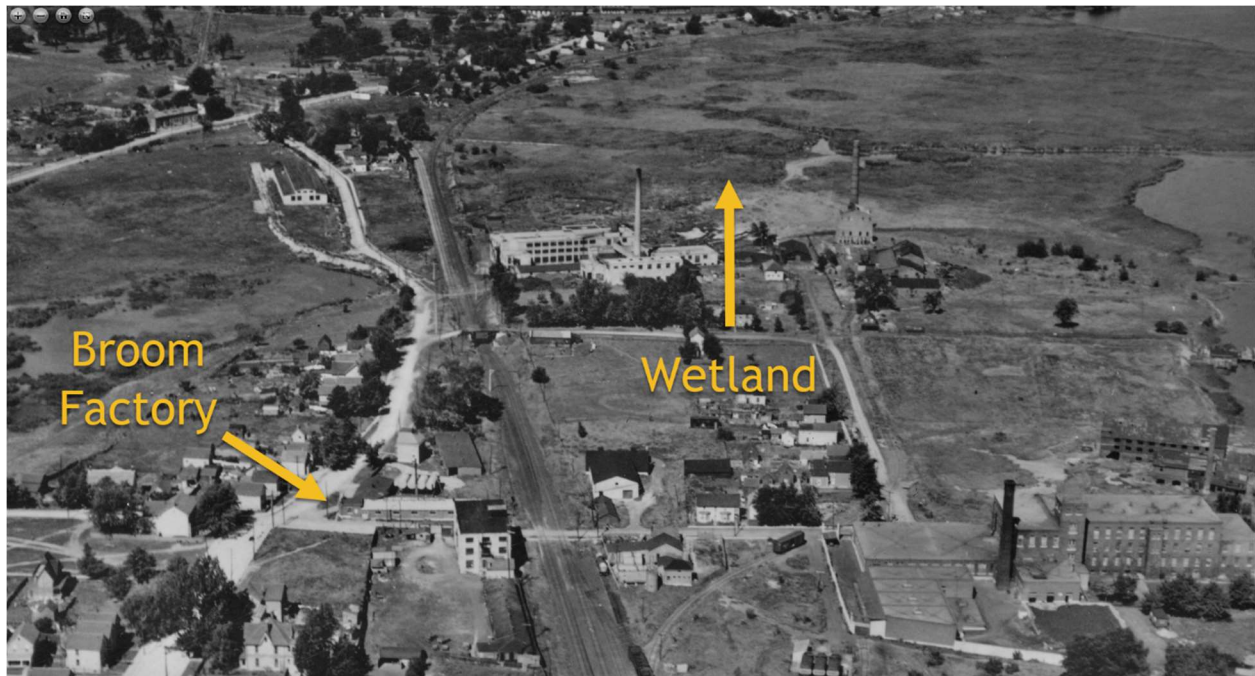


Figure 3 Oblique 1924 air photo showing the film screening venue in relation to the wetland and site of the project.
<https://digital.library.queensu.ca/kingston-waterfront-kingston-flight-line-ha22-photo-number-33>

In hindsight, if the organizers wished they could go back in time, and capture the audio in the room when the the film was aired the first time..

After the short introduction from Laura, the screening of the 6-minute film began, followed by audience discussion, thoughts, and questions, which formed the most substantial part of the event. After showing the film again, the planned programming adjourned, and a few people stuck around to ask more in-depth questions. Some participants went up to the stage to have their respective discussions (Figure 4). In hindsight, the organizers wished they could go back in time and capture the audio in the room when the film aired the first time. The room had a humming, buzzing quality, which felt ephemeral and unique.



Figure 4: Community participant gesturing at 1924 air photo following the screening. Photo by: Mehvish Rather

The film is an excellent example of how air photo collections can be used to support community projects and research more generally. The film is one of many project outputs from the Belle Park Project. Please visit <https://belleparkproject.com/projects> to learn more.

Additional links:

- Blog post <https://belleparkproject.com/blog-2/the-politics-and-history-of-aerial-photos-introducing-belle-park-from-the-air>
- <https://belleparkproject.com/projects/belle-park-from-the-air-19242024> (film landing page – with air photo listing)
- Film link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4P1d3cltN0>