

It seems to me, that if your going to offer showing a property on Google Map, and offer it to be blurred there should be a way to reverse the process. Especially if it was done in error. My daughter blurred my property without consulting with me, and you don't offer a remedy this is not professional.

## Abstract

This thesis will aim to define blur, to analyze it both as a technological and physical sensation. The text is a high-speed drive through an archive of screenshots, just as any good road movie it is a bildungsroman of blur. It will start with a personal exploration of the outdoors and indoors of Street View and move towards blur as a form of social and technological interaction, then as a privacy matter, and end as a design tactic.

Blur as fog and abstraction, as censorship that does not erase but rather underlines and showcases the subject, as an object, as a meme, as a remix of imagery, as a post-human that lost its glasses, as an unprofessional mistake made by Google, as a screenshot that tried to capture time in its pure visual form but failed because time went on and the Wi-Fi went off, as something that will take ages to load, as a gap that could not be left empty (because what would be there instead?), as the back of a protestor, as the Huawei P10, as Barbra Streisand.

Keywords: *Blur, Censorship, Google Street View, Barbara Streisand's effect*

## I overslept again...

It has happened so often in the past few weeks that I do not even bother to come up with an excuse for why I am late to the course. The course on representation in architecture takes place on Mondays, which also explains the problem of waking up on time. I plan to just enter the room silently, quietly apologize and hope that no one will notice. On my way, I ask a friend what the assignment is so I do not trouble the tutor with that question. "Google Street View" is the response I get. He explains to me that we have to create a series of images gathered from Street View, resulting in a collection of narratives that reappear on the map. As an example he shows me 10 images of dogs. After biking for 40 minutes from home to the academy, going for a walk on Street View is an exhausting experience. I go left, right, straight, left again.

I have never been to New York, but I always wanted to. Teleportation is an appealing concept for a low-budget student. Street View has brought us as close as we could possibly get to it. Discovering New York seems like an option for the duration of the course. I cruise down the wide spacious streets, looking for any interiors I could visit. After several minutes of just clicking the arrow until I reach the end of the street, I discover a record shop I can finally enter. Checking out a record

according to the Street View privacy policy. The main advice given by users is "You might want to think long and hard before you report". Blurring is the easiest way for Google to escape lawsuits that it might incur due to privacy concerns.

In 2007 Google started looking into opportunities to bring Street View to Europe. Privacy laws were challenging due to the differences in the European privacy policies. Google was asked by the Article 29 Working Party<sup>2</sup> to set limits on how long it would store the original unblurred images. After the highly sophisticated blurring technology is applied, Google must ensure that the unblurred version is never made public. The retention period of unblurred material was set at twelve months, and Google has one year to rectify mistakes in blurring. So your beautiful face may be kept unblurred



Street View, screenshot of 44 William St, New York, 2019.

store feels like a typical thing any visitor would do in the U.S. The shop, called Academy Records, is on E 12th street in Manhattan. It has quite good reviews and a 4.5 – star rating which feels like a decent choice. When I enter, there is no one at the counter, and one customer seems to be waiting for the staff member to arrive. The shop is relatively empty—only three people standing around, looking at the vinyl albums. Every person's face is blurred, the regular Street View experiential After looking around for a couple of minutes I decide to leave. I only have 15 minutes left to finish collecting images for the assignment series. On my way out, I see a guy sitting at the counter and talking on the phone, perhaps with a customer. Before going outside, I quickly look at the wall to my left, which features an enormous long frame containing multiple albums and a mounted poster reading "Welcome to Bob's party house you mothers". By now accustomed to seeing so many blurred faces on Street View, I do not immediately notice that most of the portraits on the album covers are also blurred. I end up visiting four more record shops all around New York. I even find a blurred sculpture of Elvis Presley.

Blur is a natural condition for the humans appearing on Street View. In 2008, when Google launched Street View in Europe, many people were excited to see the Google cars on the streets and even posed before them with the hope of being captured.

When traveling through space on Street View, blur simulates Google's image database for faces and blurs them, which results in false positives like the blurred faces on album covers.<sup>1</sup> It is more convenient to blur everything rather than fail to blur someone's face by accident, which

would pose more privacy problems. Day after day, the computer algorithms struggle to recognize faces that were not captured by the camera in a straightforward manner. Blur is not perfect; it makes mistakes and has its flaws. Imperfect software confuses a poster with a human yet again...or maybe the face detection suffers from pareidolia...

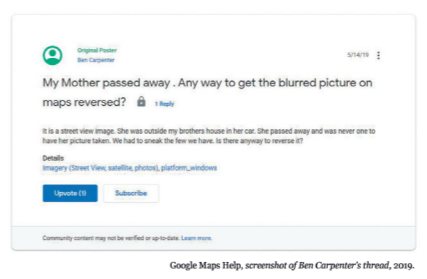
When traveling through space on Street View, blur simulates Google's image database for faces and blurs them, which results in false positives like the blurred faces on album covers.<sup>1</sup> It is more convenient to blur everything rather than fail to blur someone's face by accident, which

lacks information, fails to recognize patterns, and therefore fills up the void of recorded data. Blur fills in the digital gap, and provides a possibility of what could potentially appear in place of the emptiness. Maybe this is the creative expression of the technology, or a representation of what teleportation would feel and look like.

In the two seconds after you click the navigation arrow, Street View appears as an oddly realistic computer game, a primitive digital environment or a highway scene shot in a retro-futuristic aesthetic. The highway is passed at the speed of light. At the end the realistic documentation of the street transforms into a rendered road movie.



Street View, screenshot of Academy Records, 415 E 12th St, New York, United States, 2021.



Google Maps Help, screenshot of Ben Carpenter's thread, 2019.

for a whole year. This request resulted in images being permanently blurred on Street View. The permanence of blur is an issue on many levels, ethical,

technological, and personal, but the most frequent concern seems to be economic: How to sell a house that does not appear on the map, how to

prove its existence and legitimacy?

Many blurred property owners complain about future clients or renters not being able to see the house on Street View and therefore questioning their property's legitimacy. Tony Webster has written in the forum that blur draws more attention to his house, which is contradictory to his privacy interests.<sup>4</sup> He also reports the effects of blur on his interactions with maintenance or gardening contractors, who sometimes fail to show up. Nobody has time for questions. The representation of the house has to be clear and accurate. Other complaints arise from Street View images that present outdated information. Tiffany Robertson placed a request to have the current Street View of her house taken down because new landscape work had been done around the house since the displayed images were taken.<sup>7</sup> Her real estate

agent suggested contacting Google since new clients would not be able to see the currently accurate depiction of the house. They would miss out on the beautiful new garden. Blur does not prohibit the house from being sold, it just slows down the process and causes some inconvenience. Street View, envisioned as an easy and effective tool to showcase property and make it more accessible, struggles to catch up with time and high resolution. Times where images have to be more accurate and sharp because the innovations in camera technology make it possible, and therefore obligatory. Houses are being sold here and now.

Google Street View should perhaps consider streaming streets live.

Lauracea's house does not appear as a house anymore in the present, past or future. The blur permanently pauses its existence in

the blur follows every move you make with geometric precision. It floats like a screen that triggers you to keep on following the blur, like a billboard, but if you could move around to the other side, there would only be another blurred rhomboid.

Blur2008 shifted from a blurred plane, to a fog that followed the silhouette of the house, to a very soft haze that looks like steam coming from the manhole covers in New York.



Street View, screenshots from of Lhaanmerweg street, Naarden, North Holland, 2021.



Street View, screenshot of 150 Argentinische Allee, Berlin, 2008street, Naarden, North Holland, 2021.

## Poetic Lauracea Terms and Conditions

"Please note, however, that once Google blurs an image, the effect is permanent. If you submit a request to have your house blurred from Street View imagery, all historical and future images of your house will also be blurred."<sup>3</sup>

Poetic Lauracea is a Google account that I discovered in the Google Maps Help community, one of the Google forums where different users discuss issues concerning blur policies.<sup>3</sup> She complains about the permanence of the effect. To talk about blur means to talk about those that request its presence and those that want it to be reversed. The Google forum is a community of blurred property owners reckoning with Google's privacy policies. While the forum is created as one of the procedures to communicate users' concerns to Google's help center, it also fosters conversations between users facing similar issues—a "rich experience for community conversations". These conversations are rich indeed. They vary from demands to unblur properties that have been blurred by mistake, to a son's request to unblur the face of his deceased mother who chose to never have her picture taken, but ended up being captured on Street View unintentionally.<sup>4</sup>

If you submit a request to have your house blurred on Street View, all historical and future images of your house will also be blurred,

digital space and slows it down in the real world by turning it into a blurred abstraction that is still clear enough to be recognized but too blurry to be sold. It becomes one of the many houses that invite the question, "Why is this entire house blurred out on Google Street View?" Blur feels like a screenshot of the past that is disappearing over time due to a bad internet connection. Almost as if someone tried to capture time in its pure visual form, but failed because time went on and the Wi-Fi went off. The house stands alongside the blurred faces, faces on the album covers, human faces, dogs, cows, statues, but the house remains the only (nonanthropomorphic) "object" in the collection of blurs. The only object without a face per se.

I hope that Poetic Lauracea still managed to sell the house.

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Frome, "Street View Revisits Manhattan." The official blog for Google Maps, May 12, 2008, <https://maps.googleblog.com/2008/05/street-view-revisits-manhattan.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Google Maps Street View, "Google-Contributed Street View Imagery Policy," Google, 2021, <https://www.google.com/maps/community/privacy-policy/>.

<sup>3</sup> Google Maps Help, "Welcome to the Google Maps Help Community," Google, 2021, <https://support.google.com/maps/community?hl=en>.

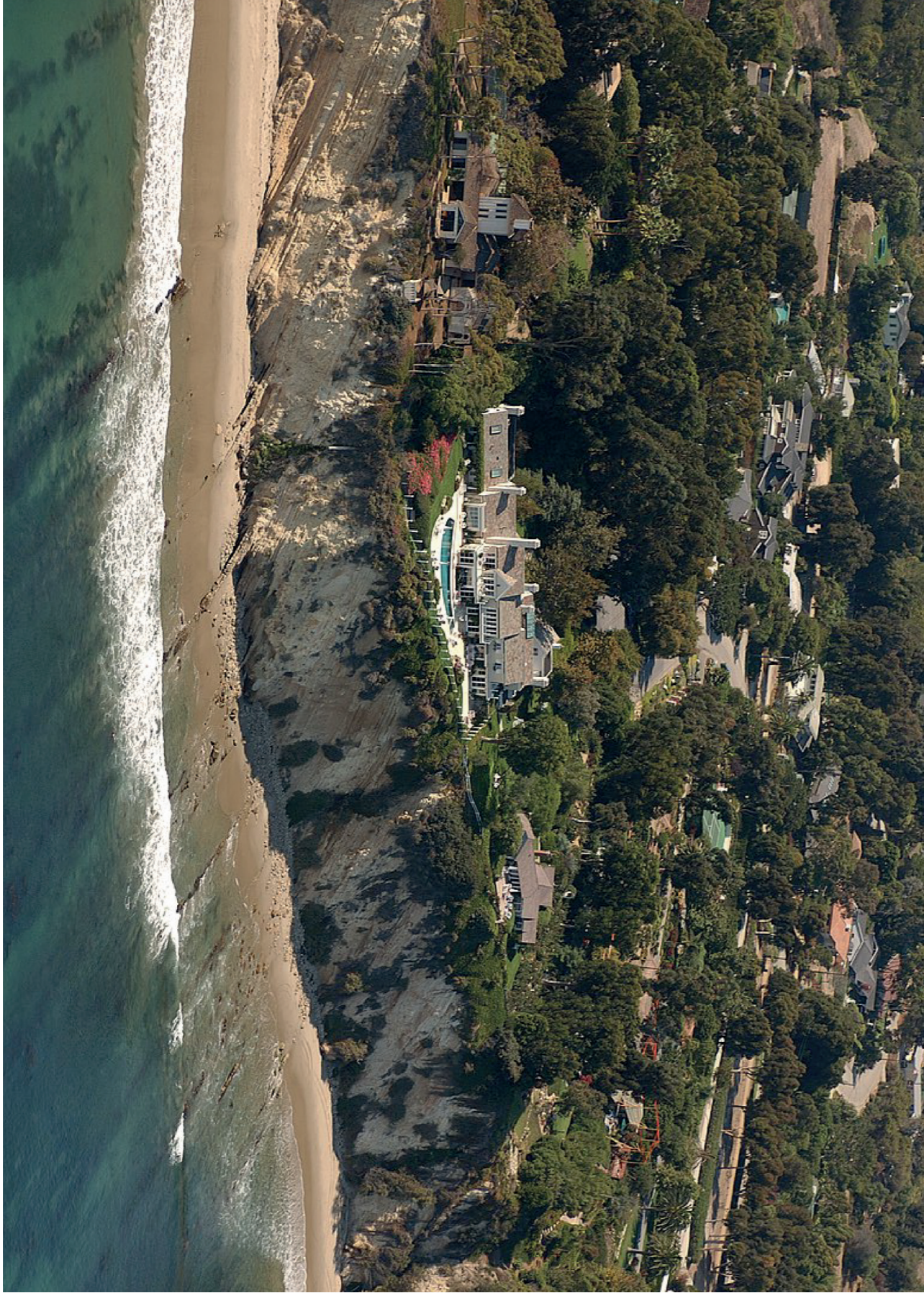
<sup>4</sup> Ben Carpenter, "My Mother passed away. Any way to get the blurred picture on maps reversed?," Google Maps Help, May 14, 2019, <https://support.google.com/maps/thread/6095823?hl=en>.

<sup>5</sup> The Article 29 Working Party, brings together representatives from all 27 European Data Protection Authorities<sup>2</sup> Google Maps Street View, "Google-Contributed Street View Imagery Policy," Google, 2021, <https://www.google.com/maps/community/privacy-policy/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Webster, "How to Blur Your House on Google Street View," Hacker News, 2020, <https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=24461779>.

<sup>7</sup> Tiffany Robertson Robertson, "How Can I Remove Google Map Photos of My House?," Google Maps Help, May 15, 2015, <https://support.google.com/maps/thread/6123610?hl=en>.





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