Jon Jablonski is the director of the Library’s new Interdisciplinary Research Collaboratory, the digital scholarship center at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Collaboratory provides access to a wide variety of analytical software and services, including support for quantitative and qualitative data analysis and visualization.

Jablonski is also curator of maps, spatial data, and the world’s largest collection of aerial photography in an academic library. The airphoto collection of 2.4 million images shows a comprehensive view of the development of the California landscape beginning in 1927. The paper map collection specializes in global base mapping, and contains more than 300,000 maps.

As a human geographer, he has been examining the massive changes in China’s urban landscapes and economy for the past ten years. In 2007 he was awarded the U.S. Department of Education’s Foreign Language Advanced Study fellowship to study the Chinese language at Peking University and conduct fieldwork in provincial libraries looking at the human aspects of cultural heritage cyberinfrastructure. In 2011, he taught library and information science as a Fulbright Scholar at Wuhan University’s School of Information Management. That year, he also began working with the owners and users of Chinese picture book libraries—part of what he calls the Chinese early childhood industrial complex. Since then, Jablonski has visited more than 30 libraries in seven cities. He has interviewed the owners of these entrepreneurial libraries, read books to groups of children, and led discussions with parents and grandparents about how to encourage an early love of reading. This work builds knowledge of how Chinese middle-class families struggle to negotiate contemporary life inside of an authoritative one-party political system.

Perspective

As we learned in the first spatial search meeting, the phrase has many different meanings—from the cognitive behavior associated with navigating our surroundings, to the engineering and design tasks associated with describing documents using their spatial semantics—and many points in between. And around. And there it is: spatiality is even embedded in language.

As I write this position paper, I am keenly aware of how much humanity depends on all these definitions. I’m traveling in China, a country where I speak very little of the language and am functionally illiterate. Yet every city is navigable thanks to how human beings have built the environment. The design of locations like train stations and airports is optimized to help me navigate easily. My past experience, along with thousands of years of human practice, allows me to move freely through the cityscape. With a smartphone, for the first time ever, I am not even bothering to write down my destinations before leaving my hotel. My paper notebook has been relegated to a storage place for my American SIM card. Instead, I have four global maps of various levels of detail,
accuracy, language, and usability. Each has a blue dot that shows me my almost exact location—regardless of whether or not I know where I want to go. The only piece of analog technology I carry is a magnetic compass, because the arrow on the blue dot tends to get confused.

Spatial search is something I do continuously while traveling. One extended example. With a couple hours to kill this morning, I glanced at the map and noticed a park nearby my hotel. Chinese parks are generally walled off, with only one or two entrances. On past visits, if I saw a park in a guide book or on a paper map, I would set off with a carefully planned itinerary. If I arrived at the park, as I did today, but could not find the entrance, or even figure out if what I was looking at was indeed the park (signs are often in calligraphic characters that are unrecognizable to my eye), I would often abort the trip. Today however, I could zoom and see that the entrance was a narrow choke point between two buildings.

Thanks to the blue dot, beyond the park I found a farmers market and a lunch spot—purposely place between the park and a housing development. In the library, classification systems arrange materials by topic in order to facilitate exactly this sort of serendipity. After lunch, instead of retracing my steps back to my hotel, I was able to make a wider circle and find an open air gathering spot for dog and cat breeders.

We continue to search for the equivalent of the blue dot in the electronic library space. We have built a huge complex of buildings, but struggle to help our users navigate it. We have access to tens-of-millions of electronic documents, but lack an overarching navigation structure. For all of our sophistication, we still force our users to navigate our information spaces with multiple organization schemes, conflicting ontologies, and clunky interfaces.