

May 17, 2014

Glenn Gordon
Principal / The Public Art Group
Regina, CA
GlennwGordon@gmail.com

Abstract

As Greg Baeker writes, “Cultural mapping is a community-based and community-driven process of identifying, recording, and valuing local cultural assets, including both tangible assets (assets that have a physical presence) and intangible assets (the stories, traditions, and histories that make up our unique identity)” (Baeker, 2010).

Identifying and presenting such a wide range of cultural assets in a geo-spatial and interactive web format first requires that attention be paid to the real people (the assets) behind the data surveys. Equally, it requires an understanding of what hard technologies will support this rather soft process. Furthermore, in order to insure a successful outcome, it also requires community "buy in." Who defines and manages this complex process, establishes the parameters and parses the data for what is truly useful? While it requires a strong team and to drill down through the layers of material, it is the project manager, who insures an engaged community, a smooth process and delivers the product.

According to Baeker, “The problem in municipalities is not the lack of information on culture. Rather, it is that information is collected by different people, for different reasons and exists in different locations” (ibid, pg. 46) How is data cleaned, consolidated, organized? Who oversees these decisions?

This session highlights the managing of a successful cultural mapping project, offers some do's and don'ts, and discusses what may be made legible through such a complex process.

Managing the Map: Getting from Here to There

Surveying the range of community-oriented and site-related artists whose work “takes region as its optic...,” (Pearson, 2010, Pg. 3) it is evident how marking or identifying a place through cultural activity creates a better understanding and appreciation of that place and its unique characteristics. While institutional cultural mapping frequently focuses on the bricks and mortar, such processes can also readily distinguish the texture of a place as well as its mere materialities. Whether the aim is to identify resources, festivals and events, increase knowledge and appreciation of a given locale or simply get a fresh perspective on social planning, cultural mapping offers an array of deliverables. The processes of achieving these are, simultaneously, as complex as they are straightforward. Having managed a number of such large-scale maps, I am eager to share the strategies of my practice.

To begin with the obvious, the success of a project depends on a defined purpose, focused project partners, community engagement strategies and a competent spatial information and data management regime. As a cultural planning consultant and former Cultural Co-ordinator of a major Canadian capital city (Regina SK), I have witnessed, time and again, how capable planning determines whether the map is useful, sustainable and contributes to the city’s processes of enriching its jurisdiction, or whether it sits on the proverbial shelf, unused and undervalued.

Taking a pragmatic approach, this paper focuses on some dos and don’ts in developing and delivering a cultural mapping project. I will augment this with some experiential anecdotes and general advice for achieving a worthwhile outcome. I have gleaned this knowledge from researching numerous mapping sites from cities across Canada,ⁱ from the Cultural Mapping Toolkit: Creative City Network of Canadaⁱⁱ and from managing cultural mapping projects in Regina (2010) and the City of New Westminster, BC (2014). In regards to the Regina website,

the City of Regina was recognized with an award from Esri Canada, a major distributor of enterprise geographic information system (GIS) solutions that takes information on spreadsheets and databases and puts them on a map.ⁱⁱⁱ

Scoping Your Project: The Three W's

At the onset of any mapping project, it is important to ask: **Why** are we mapping? **What** are we mapping? and **Who** can help us? These are the three essential questions one must ask as the manager leading the undertaking, of the multiple stakeholders involved and of the researchers and technologists that make up the team, in order to thoroughly understand the project's aims, scope and desired outcomes.

Why?: For example, is the aim to achieve a vehicle for tourism or to impress local politicians and funders with the breadth and scope of the culture of the community? In either event, there is no better way to inform and focus attention than with a well-designed, vibrant and attractive map. Is the aim to improve the networking opportunities between artists and cultural enterprises and workers or to inventory the level and diversity of cultural activity in a particular city or town? In all these cases, well-defined reasons and aims will help meet objectives even before beginning to research and develop the map.

What are we mapping? Although, there is a vast range of possibilities, it is imperative to address this simple question before continuing. Is the aim to map merely tangible assets or are the intangible community resources - the stories, histories, social heritage – also important? Mapping one is no more difficult than mapping the other if the question is addressed in advance. The stories are there, but it may take time to research and document them adequately and with sensitivity. While the challenge may be to draw these out and record them, success in this area is

just as attainable as charting the hard assets: the museums, galleries, artist workshops and festivals. Again, planning and allocating resources to achieve a productive social interface are key.

Who can help? When the answers to the first two questions are clear, it becomes possible to determine who can help in the endeavor. Local arts councils, cultural industry groups, university mapping and data collection researchers, tourism associations, granting agencies, chambers of commerce are all possibilities. Currently, the measurable value of culture, its economic, educational and community impacts, are becoming increasingly identified and appreciated. Not surprisingly, when the ball begins to roll with such projects, many people and organizations will want to contribute. The challenge is to harness this energy efficiently and effectively. I propose five steps to accomplishing a good result.

Step one: Creating an Inventory

An immediate outcome of the process of cultural mapping is the creation of an inventory of assets. It is not advisable to limit the reach of the inventory to just those assets that fit under a specific organization's mandated definition of culture. While, for example, a tattoo parlor may not qualify for municipal arts funding, the workers employed there self-identify as artists and their industry certainly is a creative one. It is advisable, at this point, to gather as many assets and as much contact information as possible under broad categories. While basic information like name, address or email contact is important, a lot of detail is not necessary at this juncture. Data collectors draw this starting inventory from various sources: granting agency mailing lists, libraries, artist registries, industry membership lists, heritage designation bylaws, and tourism event listings. Furthermore, it is surprising how many hitherto ignored cultural assets are discovered using the always reliable "walk about." This is a good vehicle for involving the community by using student researchers and community volunteers. The inventory, usually produced in an Excel spreadsheet format, is an early project deliverable with real and immediate

value. For example, the results can guide decisions in regards to category creation, perceive trends, and activity levels and gaps. In mapping Regina SK, for example, early inventory statistics indicated that the city had 25% more creative industry assets and 50% more cultural organization head offices than our nearest civic competitor. These two statistics alone captured the attention of Regina politicians and the municipality's economic development office and both became early supporters of the project.

Of course, every community is unique, but each inventory effectively breaks down along the following lines: individual artists, venues, cultural industries, or creative organizations, heritage (i.e. built and social), festivals and events, public art and monuments. Some communities struggle with whether to include, for example, natural heritage features (e.g. a shore line), religious organizations or sports festivals. While I suggest more assets make a better map, it is useful to establish a filter whereby the ability to deny, for example, a strip club that advocates to register as a creative industry, is available. Once the detailed asset survey phase is underway, these categories can be broken down further using subcategories or key words. Ideally, it is desirable to allow respondents to self identify within the survey categories. So, for example, if the category of Religious Institution is not assigned, a church can still self-designate as a heritage property, a performance venue or as a significant piece of community history. Of course, it will be necessary to filter the final results. By way of a cautionary tale, on one occasion, an arts council sent me its entire mailing list to be included in the inventory without filtering it first. About 30% of the assets listed were individuals or organizations not actually located within the parameters of that city but who, nonetheless, wanted to be on the mailing list. To avoid such situations, when building an initial inventory, filter carefully but err on the side of listing as many local assets as possible.

Step Two: Using the Community Survey

The next step is a detailed survey of the identified community assets through a process, which details of the aims of the mapping project. This is accomplished through direct contact with designated individuals and organizations using electronic or regular mail to extend an invitation to participate. It is important to be clear in articulating objectives, identifying how the individual can participate and what information each is being asked to provide. It is generally necessary to supplement this invitation by advertising on partner web sites, through industry newsletters and the array of other available communication vehicles. Projects with significant budgets and ample timelines may complement this awareness campaign with staff visits to community meetings and arts events.

Citing the City of New Westminster's cultural map as an example of good practice, we opted to set up a temporary (6 months) project / survey website and drive target audiences towards it. A survey web form in MyLSQ, the world's second most widely used open-source relational database management system,^{iv} was put in place that enabled data to be collected and immediately categorized, thus saving significant time and effort. The survey web site format conveyed a professional interface for visitors and minimized the time and effort required of each respondent.



1. New Westminster Survey Site

While it is important that the survey reflects the specific circumstances that the map is designed to address, in my experience, it should accommodate both descriptive details of assets as well as geographic locations. Nonetheless, for privacy and security reasons, some artists prefer that address points be left off the map. Indeed, this approach could defeat the very purpose of the exercise, which is, or should be, to both visually present the scope and range of cultural activity and its intensity across a given area. However, there are quite legitimate reasons for avoiding addresses. For example, an artist might want to be identified as a woodworker in the creative industry category but not want to provide the location of her well-tooled studio. Such cases necessitate a location filter in the survey function. However, not all mapping softwares exhibit this level of sophistication. Hence, developing a good communication with the project's mapping technologist is vital from the onset so that the survey information can respond to and accommodate such variations in data presentation.

Furthermore, the format of the survey itself can serve to control how detailed information, such as addresses, are submitted. Precise control in this area minimizes the data-cleaning phase of the project. For example, in the New Westminster mapping project, survey respondents were allowed to enter addresses in any way they liked. After the fact, this required a painstaking and timewasting cleaning of the data to conform addresses to the format that the Geographic Information Software (GIS) program could read. For example, the system was not able to recognize "Apt. # 104- 100th Street": it could only read "104-100 St.". Similarly, as the design of the survey web form can also include sub-boxes to drop down or pop up as the cursor travels over the map to reveal further information (seating capacity, food services, number of volunteers/employees etc.), it is vital to insure that the data is correctly formatted at the initial level of the survey to avoid endless data cleaning at a later date.

While the inventory has provided a mental map of the cultural profile of the community, the detailed survey start to form the geo-spatial platform through the identification of physical

attributes and their locations. The location of the assets is realized primarily through an x/y coordinate being placed onto a mapping platform or software program. This coordinate is often drawn from the address provided in the survey, but, as many assets don't have a listed address (e.g. public art, festivals etc.), it is difficult to easily position them on the map. In such cases, it is helpful to find a volunteer or employ a researcher to enter data from non-respondent assets such as public art and heritage property. The descriptions for such non-address assets may be found on existing web sites, but it is important that the GIS technologists understand that, like it or not, they will have to manually map the asset onto the map. Everyone must be flexible to accommodate these variables.

Inevitably, time must be budgeted in the process to allow for back filling assets that have been missed. If, after considerable research, the community inventory suggests 650 assets, but the survey response has achieved only 350 responses, it is obvious that some significant resources have not been fully identified. For example, the staff of a major art museum may have forgotten to answer the survey. In these circumstances, the data must be drawn from the institution's web site and entered on its behalf. This back fill may also require a process of fact checking and interviews to ensure reliability of information. This requires staff and resources that may not have been in the initial budget.

At this point in the process, a second level of data cleaning is necessary. Asset descriptions may have to be edited to a manageable length – I suggest 250 words. Each entry must be proofed for grammar, veracity, images must be uploaded and social media links and URLs verified before sending it on to the GIS people. This is a time consuming effort best managed by students or volunteers who, by now, are working up to a high standard and understand fully the expectations for accuracy and precision.

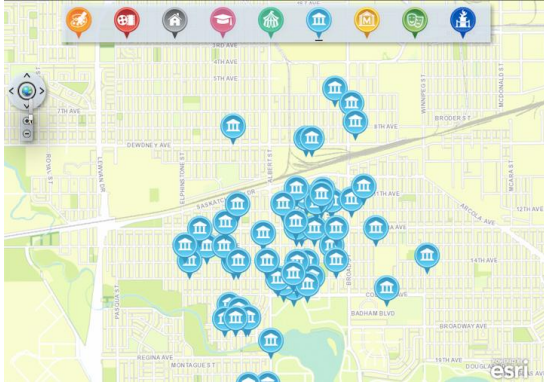
Step Three: Building the Map

As noted, to insure the project's success, it is essential to synch the survey's intent with what the map platform and GIS software are able to accommodate. The discussion regarding this compatibility must occur very early in the project planning stage. That being said, mapping software offers a degree of flexibility and can produce a variety of visual results. However, because we are all accustomed to Google Maps™, it is sometimes difficult to accept the different looks available through software programs used by municipal technologists who are often tied to particular systems. As cultural maps are increasingly hosted by local civic or tourist entities that can provide the service at minimal cost to you, but significant staff costs to themselves, a cultural mapping project is often tied to the available GIS mapping software and the look of that software.

At the end of the day, the completed mapping project consists of an interactive GIS map and an asset directory complemented by a Web site that allows easy access and navigation. Culture maps, accessed through a web portal, generally feature: a) an introductory "splash" page that leads to; b) an interactive map with pop up bubbles describing specific assets; c) further links to social media and an infinity of URLs and; d) search functions that show the asset both in a directory and also located on a map. The database, resulting from the survey, populates the info bubbles, while the GIS/Web program allows visitors to search categories, keywords and to navigate around the site.

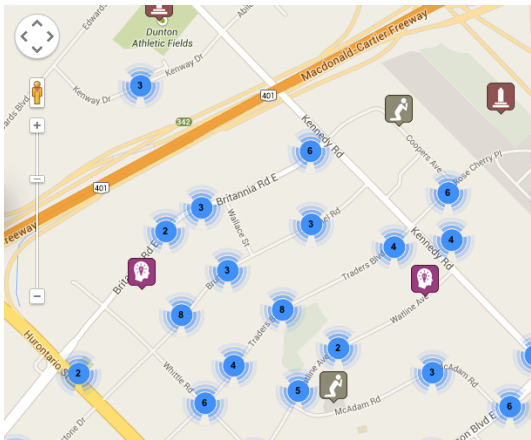
Step Four: Web Design

In the process of finalizing the map, important design elements to consider are the size and colour of the location indicators. Icons that are too large may block the map underneath (Regina SK).



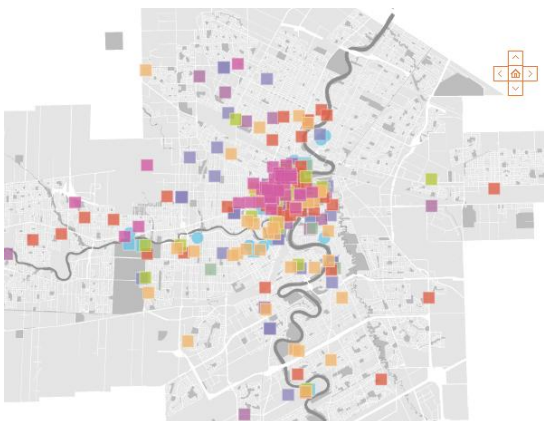
2. Regina SK Cultural Map

Clustering markers (Mississauga ON) help solve this problem and aid with navigating around the map as it is less cluttered.



3. Mississauga ON Cultural Map

Using different icon colours, but the same form, has its own merits and challenges (Winnipeg MAN).



4. Winnipeg Cultural Map

In addition to the splash and map page noted earlier, the web site should feature: a) information tabs such as “Terms and Conditions” and “Browser Restrictions and Requirements;” b) a variety of images representing cultural activity; c) links to partner web sites; d) sponsor credits; e) other helpful information such as “Contact Us,” “How to Use this Resource” etc. and finally; f) a search function to seek out individuals, key words and categories.

Step Five: Insuring Maintenance Protocols

Once the site is up and running, the map and web support function requires ongoing evaluation and maintenance. It will be necessary to state clearly and publically that the map will be refreshed periodically with up-to-date information. However, as the addition of new categories will require additional GIS resources, this promise should be carefully considered before making the commitment. Creating new links to other partner sites and community organizations should also be pursued regularly. A yearly formal evaluation process should be undertaken with representatives from each significant category (artists, cultural industries, heritage organizations, public art creators) to assess the site’s functionality and community value. In addition, there should be an annual internal review of the web site and mapping function with relevant staff.

Conclusion

This paper is based on a basic five-step process to realizing a cultural mapping project. While it may sound easy, it is anything but. Scoping and designing the project, consulting with community partners, building inventory, creating the survey, cleaning data, testing, testing and more testing, launching the project in well considered phases, creating communication strategies, developing the mapping platform and web site – all are complicated, time consuming and expensive. I recommend scheduling a 12 to 18 months timeframe to bring the project to conclusion. In the best practice research I have seen and in my own experience, the cost for such projects range from

\$40,000 to \$250,000 in Canadian dollars – a lot of money for smaller communities in times of restraint particularly towards the arts. Nonetheless, it is not impossible to take the first step knowing that much of the inventory information already exists and is readily available in some format. Most urban centres have significant web site and mapping services that can be accessed and adapted. Volunteers, community partners and funding agencies quickly realize the value of mapping local cultural resources and presenting the data in a user-friendly, interactive format. If there is a will, there is a way.

Finally, I believe that cultural maps locate and connect and promote resources and ultimately increase public awareness and support of those assets so integral to identifying who we are. Whether hand drawn, digitally formatted or, indeed, performed, maps have always been good at helping us find the way in an increasingly complicated world.

ⁱ City of Regina <<http://culture.regina.ca>> (19/05/2014)
New Westminster <<http://artscouncilnewwest.org/mapping/>> (19/05/2014)
Winnipeg Arts Council <<http://winnipegculturalmap.ca>> (19/05/2014)
City of Guelph <<http://culturemap.guelph.ca/splash>> (19/05/2014)
Arts Council of New Westminster <<http://www.artscouncilnewwest.org>> (19/05/2014)
Mississauga Cultural Map <<http://www.cultureonthemap.ca/mapcms/com/index.html>> (19/05/2014).

ⁱⁱ Cultural Mapping Toolkit: Creative City Network of Canada.
http://www.creativecity.ca/database/files/library/cultural_planning_toolkit.pdf (19/05/2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ Esri Canada <http://www.esri.ca/en> (19/05/2014)

^{iv} <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MySQL> (19/05/2014)

Bibliography

- Baeker, Greg. (2010). *Rediscovering the Wealth of Place: A municipal cultural planning handbook for Canadian communities*. Ontario: Municipal World Inc.
< <http://kingsculturalmap.wordpress.com/cultural-mapping-context/>> (19/05/2014).
- Pearson, Mike. (2010) *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*. University of Exeter Press, pg. 3.