

## MAPPING AND MEMORY: CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOGEOGRAPHIES

Joan Gibbons. Birmingham Institute of Art and Design. UCE Birmingham

This paper is obviously not about maps in any conventional sense but about alternative processes of mapping and orientation in the urban context. I do not intend to go into the cultural politics of maps or cartography at any great length, just to remind us that traditionally maps have served the interests of political and economic dominance in one way or another and that a journey through the urban landscape usually means orientation according to landmarks that are often monuments to dominant values/ideologies past and present. What I do want to stress however is the relationship of mapping to memory - that maps are essentially mnemonic devices, whether they masquerade, as in conventional cartography, as objective forms of retrievable data, or, as in the mapping projects I shall be discussing - they are openly concerned with the retrieval, recording or even the production of subjective memories.

The term psychogeography has come to stand for this sort of subjective, often more experiential mapping. As is now well known, the term was coined by the Situationists, who drew their criticisms of conventional cartography and their ideas and practices concerning a radical reconfiguration of the city directly from the Surrealists. The Surrealist's *Map of the World*, 1929 is the seminal example of politically alternative mapping, with the placing of the Pacific Ocean at the centre, flanked by Russia, China and a rather large Alaska –then the diminution of Europe, the complete absence of the US and the labelling of the South American continent as “perdu” or lost. This alternative mapping of the world is a clear exposé of the ‘slipperiness’ or compromise of data of any sort, official or alternative – the non-neutrality of maps. Alongside the remapping of the World, the Surrealists also reconfigured the city in their literature, as in Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*, 1926, which privileges the ‘non-places’ of the flaneur and “a geography of pleasure” (for example, the shop displays in *Le Passage de L'Opéra*) or Breton's *Nadja*, 1928, the account of his obsessive roaming of Paris in pursuit of the sort of elusive love or erotic longing that he later recounted in *L'Amour Fou*, 1937. The memories generated by “a geography of pleasure” are not only subjective but essentially somatic, and in this, can be aligned to with championing of involuntary memory over voluntary memory as in the famous case of Proust's Madeleine.

The Situationists conflated the political imperative behind the Surrealist Map of the World and the subjective imperative Aragon and Breton's walks in Paris in the development of a psychogeography which entailed both a remapping and re-experiencing of the city that subverted prescribed or pre-constructed ways of experiencing or knowing the city and replaced them with more open, creative ways of negotiating the urban landscape. Key concepts in Situationist psychogeography were: *derive* (drift) – the unplanned journey and *detournement* (diversion/re-routing) - by extension, the surprises that the unplanned might bring.<sup>2</sup> A recent example of the pursuit of the surprising and the unexpected through psychogeographic walking projects is in the use of algorithmic programming by the Dutch artists' collective, Social Fiction, who have devised a number of applets upon which a walk can be based, one of which is based on the Fibonacci system that, when followed to its logical conclusion, “soon becomes surrealistic, if not downright

---

<sup>2</sup> Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999) 17-19, 108-110.

absurd.”<sup>3</sup> True to the tenets of psychogeography, the emphasis here is on exploration, the production of new experiences, new knowledge, rather than a reliance on prefabricated data.

The three main examples of contemporary psychogeography that I want to foreground clearly hark back to Situationist practices, but their social agendas are more evident and the outcomes of the urban wanderings that they propose incorporate memory more consciously. These are *Urban Tapestries* (Central London, 2002-4), *[[[Murmur]]]* (Toronto 2003) and *One Block Radius*, (New York, 2004). *Urban Tapestries* is research project which was conceived and realised by Proboscis who describe themselves as a creative studio and think tank for culture.<sup>4</sup> The studio, led by Alice Angus and Giles Lane, does not make any claim to public art, but, for me, their work qualifies, defined as it is by Proboscis as creative practice that is played out with public participation in the public arena. There are other Proboscis projects that I could have selected, the ongoing *Topography and Tales*, for instance, which incorporates storytelling and memory as devices to study the relationships between people, language and identity (one of their ‘liquid geography’ projects - about boundaries and borders) – or the ongoing *Social Tapestries*. However, *Urban Tapestries* is the one that has been most rigorously documented and evaluated.

The project is firmly rooted in the notion of public authoring – enabling people to become authors of the environment around them:

Like the founders of Mass Observation in the 1930s, we are interested creating opportunities for an "anthropology of ourselves" – adopting and adapting new and emerging technologies for creating and sharing everyday knowledge and experience; building up organic, collective memories that trace and embellish different kinds of relationships across places, time and communities.

Using a combination of geographic information systems and mobile technologies, the idea was that participants could ‘annotate’ their responses to a designated area of London. Through wireless technology, these annotations were shared with other participants. Participants could “embed their own content into geo-specific locations” out of which threads would emerge to form “an organic, accretive tapestry”. The feasibility of the project was tested through a number of preliminary bodystorming experiments in which groups either annotated large scale maps of their neighbourhood (floor maps or table top) with post-its. The participants in the public trial were issued with PDAs, (HP iPAQs) through which they could annotate their responses to Bloomsbury – an area of London that Proboscis considered heavily weighted with cultural baggage in the form of blue plaques and association with the Bloomsbury set. This was then repeated in a field trial covering a larger area of central London, this time using Sony Ericsson P800 mobile phones (loaded with *Urban Tapestries* software and connected to the Orange GPRS network or General Packet Radio Service (high speed nonverbal transmission of info – supplements SMS). For Proboscis, these technologies provided a platform that “enabled people to better define their own sense of place and space,” a platform that could enable them to maintain a sense of presence, could reinvigorate the public domain and augment and assist in everyday life. They also note the potential for generating collective memory out of this shared knowledge – some of which is, of course, already reported in the form of memories of the area.

*[[[Murmur]]]* is essentially an archival project that demands the information retrieved is site specific – you hear the story at the original location of the events or experiences that are recounted. It was conceived by Shawn Micallef, James Roussel and Gabe Sawney and began in 2003 in Toronto’s Kensington Market. It was dedicated to collecting stories from the residents of the area and disseminating them publicly through the use of mobile phones. The installation of the

---

<sup>3</sup> [www.socialfiction.org](http://www.socialfiction.org)

<sup>4</sup> [www.proboscis.org.uk](http://www.proboscis.org.uk)

project consists of street signs in the form of green ears that display a telephone number. Upon dialling the number, you are given a story about each part of the neighbourhood.

We've gone around and recruited people, regular Torontonians telling their stories about places and in those places we've put up signs so that you can kind of walk around the neighbourhood and hear those stories as if you are standing right next to the person. So, it's like taking a tour of the city, but from a really intimate point of view.

While personal, the stories contribute to Toronto's identity and are meant to add "yet another layer to the city."<sup>5</sup> By dialling into a *[[[murmur]]]* story, the participant steps out of his/her daily routine or planned journey and sees the city from another point of view. Writing for *eye weekly*, Abigail Pugh has noted the stories are often low-impact, dealing with 'small' events or occurrences, said to range from "historical to hysterical, from embarrassing to esoteric"<sup>6</sup> It is "not a majestic, feel-good, technicoloured moment, but simply a sense that this is a human being, like me."<sup>7</sup> As with *Urban Tapestry*, the *[[[murmur]]]* project privileges the public authoring of the site or place and as James Roussel has put it, "offers an alternative, one-a kind, popular mythology of the city at a citizen level."<sup>8</sup> It also serves as an agent for the retrieval, collecting and sharing of memories associated with particular places and, in this, remaps the city.

As in the previous two projects, *One Block Radius* simultaneously entails the retrieval and production of data<sup>9</sup> This data is again subjective, as is the mapping of the block that emerges from it. The project involves a detailed psychogeographic mapping of an area between the Bowery and Christie Street, Stanton Street to Rivington Street, which forms the block where the New Museum of Contemporary Art is to be relocated in New York, and, indeed, the project had the support of the Museum (initiated by Christina Ray and David Mandl of Glowlab, a Brooklyn-based artists' collective). The idea was to produce a guidebook of the area or block that would be as detailed as a city guidebook. In other words, the scale of the location was much smaller and the density of information much greater – and, of course, of a different order to the tourist-type information given in city guidebooks.<sup>10</sup> The information is again based on personal perspectives – the workers, residents, children, street performers and the architects of the New Museum and is recorded in a variety of ways, field recordings (smells as well as sounds), video, interviews and blogs. As Jonah Brucker-Cohen writes for Rhizome:

The project is a vivid example of psychogeographic cartography, where objects in urban spaces (such as fire hydrants, signs, graffiti) are documented and placed on an evolving map that reveals the emotional character of the city. The website also includes audio and video interviews with residents and the New Museum's architect. Since museum construction begins later this year, *One Block Radius* could be the last collective reminder of a neighbourhood in temporal and physical transition.<sup>11</sup>

For me, all three of these projects immediately call to mind Walter Benjamin's thoughts on memory and history and the methods he used to chronicle his native city of Berlin. In advance of contemporary thinkers such as Andreas Huyssen and Pierre Nora, who note the shift from history

---

<sup>5</sup> Gabe Sawhney in Abigail Pugh, "Flaneur by Phone: the [murmur] project brings cellular psychogeography to the Annex," *eye weekly*, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2004, [www.eye.net](http://www.eye.net).

<sup>6</sup> (Sam Thompson "[[[murmur]]] Whispers Sweet Something in your Ear," *SceneandHeard.ca*, Vol 05 issue 6, September 22, 2005, [www.sceneandheard.ca](http://www.sceneandheard.ca)

<sup>7</sup> James Roussel in Pugh, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> [www.oneblockradius.org](http://www.oneblockradius.org)

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, speaks of producing this kind of alternative map of the city in "Berlin Chronicle" in Michael Jennings et al, eds. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 2, 1931-34*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Harvard University Press (The Belknap Press) 2005) 596.

<sup>11</sup> [www.rhizome.org](http://www.rhizome.org)

to memory in contemporary values, Benjamin privileges knowledge or data that has been retrieved subjectively, rejecting official versions of history.<sup>12</sup> For Benjamin the archaeologist-historian's task was to retrieve or 'redeem' the commonplace, the everyday and the unremarkable. In effect a form of what Susannah Radstone has called memory-work.<sup>13</sup> I see this sort of memory-work as akin to Freud's notion of dream-work, an aspect of which is the processing of the events and emotions of the day for relegation to the unconscious - except that memory-work retrieves from the unconscious and takes experiences and emotions that have been stored back to the realm of the conscious. For Benjamin, the metaphor of excavation is important for this kind of memory work, in which memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but the medium of that which has been known or experienced, the soil that has to be dug and turned over. Importantly, this act of digging not only reveals deeper hidden strata, but also necessitates a renewed awareness of the strata that first had to be broken through.<sup>14</sup>

So it is with the three projects that I have described. Stories have been excavated and told, but in the doing of this, the site of the stories has been 'redeemed' and places have been mapped in new and unexpected ways. The relationship between site and memory has become more elastic and the sites of memory have become situational and dynamic. As de Certeau has observed, it is not so much the city itself, but the people of the city - those that travel through and interact with the city, that are not only the repositories of knowledge, but also the 'actualisers' of the city. They may be walking along routes that have been mapped out by city maps, but these paths and trajectories can only ever refer to "the absence of that which has passed by" - for de Certeau, the editing procedures of city maps are little more than a way of forgetting.<sup>15</sup> The knowledge produced or unearthed is often unashamedly personal, subjective and experiential - and rightly so for, as de Certeau also notes, the stories told (rumours) by the media are far too pervasive (and persuasive) and take ownership and status of information away from the individual, the family or the neighbourhood.<sup>16</sup>

To conclude on a slightly broader note, memory is one of the most vital of our faculties, the apparatus that allows for recognition (re-cognition) without which the powers of cognition itself remain transient and unframed. However, memory is never just a straightforward process of recording in case we forget and, even in the best equipped of minds, it can be a slippery mechanism. It can be both elusive and intrusive and we can rarely be completely sure of its fidelity to the events or facts that it recalls. Given such mutability, it is not so much the reliability or fallibility of memory that is at stake today but the way that memory is harnessed and deployed in the negotiations of life, from the little moments and events of the private and the everyday to those 'grander' moments and events of formalised and public occasions. The claims that are made and the stories that are told in the name of memory can alter people's understanding of the world and, of course, alter the ways in which they act in or upon that world.

The three psychogeographic projects that I have flagged today represent alternative ways of negotiating the city and ways of bringing the personal and the public together. The difference between this type of mapping and conventional city maps can be likened to the difference between voluntary and involuntary memory. As Mary Warnock has noted, Proust characterises

---

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 6-7 and Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations* 26, Spring 1989, 18-20.

<sup>13</sup> Susannah Radstone ed. *Memory and Methodology*, (Oxford and New York, Berg, 2000) 9, 11-13

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," ca. 1932, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, op cit, 576, see also "Berlin Chronicle," *ibid*, 611.

<sup>15</sup> Michel De Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London and Berkley: The University of California Press, 1988 c.1984) 91-110.

<sup>16</sup> Giles Lane, *Proboscis Cultural Snapshots Number Nine: July 2004, Social Tapestries*, ISSN: 145-8474 [www.poboscis.org.uk](http://www.poboscis.org.uk)

voluntary memory in terms of the production of images or 'snapshots' of the past which are literally superficial and only convey the appearance of things, events or experiences.<sup>17</sup> Far more meaningful, on the other hand, is the sort of unsolicited recall sprung by the involuntary memory, as produced, for example, by the randomly encountered taste of a Madeleine, which calls up an assemblage of sensation and emotion:

For me, voluntary memory, which is, above all, memory of the intellect and of the eyes, gives only the appearance not the reality of the past. But when a smell or taste, rediscovered in totally different circumstances, reveals the past for us, in spite of ourselves, we feel how different this past is from what we thought we remembered, and what our voluntary memory painted for us, like bad painters who have their colours but no truth.<sup>18</sup>

Now, there are, as Felipe Fernandez-Armesto has shown, a number of ways of apprehending the truth that can be linked and mobilised in relation to one another and in varying combinations to assist in what he terms our, "unwavering search for signs to match reality" (phenomenological truths, doctrinal truths, logical truths, empirical truths).<sup>19</sup> Myself, I prefer the sort of 'truths' that have been excavated by *Urban Tapestries*, [[[murmur]]] and *One Block Radius* where the signs, representations and memories are produced by the actual owners and users of the city - a of mixture of truths, but attained primarily through sense perception, intuition and empirical knowledge.

---

<sup>17</sup> Mary Warnock, *Memory*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1987) 91-95.

<sup>18</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Remembrance of Things Past (A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, 1909-1922)* vol 1.

<sup>19</sup> Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Black Swan Books, 1998) 223-227, 229.