

The politics of Mapping

Cartography probably conjures up images of Ordnance Survey engineers with theodolites in inhospitable parts of the Scottish Highlands mapping out the King's realm. Though a political act in itself, this endeavour to represent the world was not necessarily a force for good. When it comes to mapping out the colonial empire, cartography really becomes a cause for concern. How then can mapping be turned into that force for good?

Cartography as the combination of art, science and technology has become a chosen instrument for a wide variety of urban artists, activists and intervenors. For various reasons and in various ways they aim to represent a social or political reality in a two-dimensional way. In the discussion Public Works organised in the Stanley Picker gallery on 23 January 2008, four ways of representing the urban environment stood out from the rest: geographic –through a raster referring to the earth's flat surface; photographic –taking a snapshot of reality; diagrammatic –where the relation from one point to the other is what matters; and narrative – description through a sequence of places or facts. Different practitioners use various ways to extract data –a container concept for local knowledge, experience, convictions and histories– from users, residents, campaigners or decision makers. But how can this type of mapping become political?

First of all as a tool for expression. By making things visible, they come more fiercely into being and can enter into the public consciousness. Mapping can not only allow people to express themselves creatively, but it can also become a channel through which their political opinion can be made heard.

City Mine(d)'s publication of the MapRAC newspaper in March 2004 was a way for a number of interest groups to have their voice heard in the planned redevelopment of a 6 hectare Modernist Complex. Maprac brought together all stakeholders, from local resident over urban planner to civil servant and real estate developer, to make a state of affairs of risks and potentials. The result was published in a tabloid newspaper, and was distributed for free throughout Brussels. While the making of the map was an opportunity to bring interested parties around the table, the publication and distribution of the map raised public awareness about the imminent redevelopment of the site.

Secondly, as an initiation into new technology. Sophisticated devices allow for a quick registration and processing of data, yet their rapid evolution makes it increasingly difficult for the technologically illiterate to catch up or find a way in. Making a representation of the own living environment in these cases provides a good opportunity to combine exploration of built environment and new technology.

In the Spring of 2007 City Mine(d) organised a series of workshops in the Tottenham area of North London. In a place recovering from decades of neglect, a group of 11 year olds were trained to use digital camera's, sound recording equipment, drawing and online maps to investigate their local area. At the end of the workshop the children presented their future ideas for the park in the area, and were familiar with Flickr, Audacity and Google Earth.

Thirdly, as a way to challenge the dominant discourse. Since groups in power are also the ones who produce and spread the imagery of a city, it is a dominant discourse that gets reproduced. Efforts to also bring alternative or subjective maps of a city on the public radar are a powerful way to question the validity of that dominant discourse.

In the project Towards, Constant Recyclart, Speculoos and City Mine(d) are currently developing an Atlas of Brussels, representing various maps (real, imaginary, artistic, anecdotic,

emotional, geographical, urbanistic, amateur, professional, regional, local, and so on). The atlas collects and presents different visions of Brussels, and in doing so distorts the image of Brussels as the Capital of Europe at the heart of the high speed train network presented by the powers that be.

These are but 3 ways mapping can become a political instruments. There must be others, but these are the ones used in the works of City Mine(d). For City Mine(d) mapping often is not an end to itself, but rather a means to collect and connect with local residents and users of space. It fits into a process that leads up to interventions in public space and to the reshuffling of the power structures that shape that public space.

City Mine(d)

www.citymined.org

www.towards.be

"Mobilising Knowledge" in: UrbanBuzz, University College London

UrbanBuzz Fanzine #5 <https://www.publicworksgroup.net>

<https://www.stanleypickergallery.org/programme/can-you-show-me-the-space/> 2007