Mapping culture, creating places: collisions of science and art

Chris Gibson

Abstract

The arts have much to offer the reinvention of places: generating new forms of employment in cultural work, contributing to public culture through festivals and events, and appropriating spaces in the built environments of our cities and towns for artistic expression. Filtering artistic attempts to re-make places are three key competing pressures: first, the demands of regional development managers, treasury bureaucrats and council general managers for accountability, ‘hard data’ and measurable outcomes; second, desires of local residents, non-profit organisations and community development specialists to use the arts as a means to promote social inclusion and recognition of social difference; and third, professional concerns of artists themselves to produce creative expressions that advance practice, experiment, and/or challenge prevailing norms. Often, these pressures are thought of as irreconcilable or incorrigible. I will discuss examples from two key projects—one on using new computer mapping technologies to trace the relationship between creativity and the city, the other Australia’s largest-ever study of rural and regional festivals—that show it is possible to re-make places in creative, challenging ways as well as improve social outcomes—and even to speak to bean-counters in the language of ‘hard data’.

Keywords: regional festivals, cultural mapping, regeneration, placemaking

The arts have much to offer the regeneration of communities: creating new forms of employment in cultural work, contributing to public culture through festivals and events, and adorning spaces in the built environments of our cities and towns with expression. Filtering artistic attempts to regenerate communities are three key competing pressures: first, the demands of regional development managers, treasury bureaucrats and local government leaders for accountability, ‘hard data’ and measurable outcomes; second, desires of local residents, non-profit organisations and community development specialists to use the arts as a means to promote
social inclusion; and third, professional concerns of artists themselves to produce creative expressions that advance practice, experiment, and/or challenge prevailing norms. Often, these pressures are thought of as incorrigible.

In recent research projects I have explored whether it is possible to remake places in creative, challenging ways through culture and the arts, as well as improve social outcomes, and even speak to bean-counters in the language of ‘hard data’. These research projects span multiple fields of social sciences, humanities and creative arts, but the key approach I have brought to unite them is a geographical one. This means using a spatial perspective—focused on questions of ‘where’ and ‘why’ cultural and arts activities occur in places (and what meanings communities attach to them)—and a range of methodologies geographers have pioneered, including new computer mapping technologies and qualitative ethnographic methods.

I cannot pretend that in these projects I have been able to meet all of the competing demands described above. There is no silver bullet. However, in my experience it appears possible to speak to different audiences through research that adopts a geographical approach: addressing familiar questions of community, culture and creative expression, but doing so developing a spatial perspective that until recently sat outside accepted practices and methodologies in arts management and applied social research.

**Mapping culture**

Cultural mapping has become a popular phrase in policy circles recently. Essentially, it describes a methodology undertaken to audit whatever aspect of local culture is under the spotlight (creative industries, local community networks, relevant arts and community organisations, and so on). Cultural mapping of this sort can be useful in building up a picture of how communities operate in places, how new media technologies are accessed by communities and the functional linkages that operate within the arts and cultural industries.\(^1\)

As a professionally trained geographer, it seemed somewhat odd that in many cases of ‘cultural mapping’, *actual maps* rarely featured either in the methodology or in published findings. ‘Mapping’ instead referred to a certain kind of auditing activity—sometimes represented visually through flow-diagrams or in tables of data obtained through documenting the phenomena at hand—aimed at capturing the actors and interactions between them that constitute cultural, social and economic activities.

The absence of maps in many examples of ‘cultural mapping’ signals a missed opportunity. Maps provide powerful ways to communicate to diverse audiences—a means to represent phenomena spatially. Maps have an extensive history linked to the very course of the expansion of western scientific discovery and colonialism, but also to the building of Islamic intellectualism as early as the ninth century.\(^2\) Maps are a seductive means...
to draw the world (literally ‘cartography’); they are loaded with cultural meaning, shaped by power relations and infused with the biases and perspectives of their makers.\textsuperscript{3} But beyond their power as a discrete form of documentation, and their historical relevance as artefact of scientific imperialism, maps have more recently been explored for their potential as creative means to engage communities, to enable participatory research and to facilitate the articulation of voices otherwise silenced—especially via Web 2.0 technologies, ‘where users become part of web-enabled collaborative publishing consortia’.\textsuperscript{4} The technology enabling this kind of interactive mapping—Geographical Information Systems or GIS for short—is what sits at the heart of GPS technology in mobile phones and car sat-nav gadgets. GIS enable users to compile, store, interrogate and manipulate geographical information electronically. In a fully fledged GIS, layers of mapped data (of whatever it is one wishes to map) can be layered together much as road, rail, street name and council boundaries might all feature together in a map on a car sat-nav screen. In a fully operational GIS, the user can manipulate all those layers manually, add or delete information, tag information to geographical features, accumulate data from many sources for the purpose of analysis, or compare geographical data layers in order to answer research questions.

Historically, GIS have had high barriers to entry (cost and skills), and been the domain of environmental scientists, engineers and planners who used them to model physical environments, natural hazards, land use and property ownership. Increasingly though, researchers in the humanities and social sciences are experimenting with GIS as a tool to answer particular kinds of research questions. To work with maps, and enable communities to participate in their construction, makes possible a creative, non-verbal means to capture the richness and diversity of everyday life—hence their recent adoption by feminist ethnographers\textsuperscript{5}, community-based urban planners\textsuperscript{6}, gay and lesbian academics\textsuperscript{7}, and indigenous land rights advocates.\textsuperscript{8} Maps, in other words, have been newly re-made as ‘social and dynamic’ texts.\textsuperscript{9}

In recent projects I have sought to apply GIS to cultural research, in the context of projects with aims to understand local cultural activities and how culture might factor into strategies to regenerate communities and re-orientate regional development goals. The context is the ever-increasing popularity of the arts and cultural industries as arenas of policy-making for economic development, employment and place-branding.\textsuperscript{10} But cognisant of critiques of boosterish creative industries policy-making as being too often horribly neoliberal, and unacquainted with the texture of local cultural activities\textsuperscript{11}, in these projects the aim was to use maps as a means to engage communities. Maps became our route to capture everyday or ‘vernacular’ geographies of cultural activities. Survey and audio data generated via interviews, focus groups and stalls at festivals (for example, spoken word recordings) were accompanied by maps, drawn by research informants in their own individual way on a ‘blank’ base map.
These maps are capable of being computed spatially and presented for research and public advocacy purposes—again in map-form—accompanying analysis of interview and survey content. Maps combined with interview, survey or focus-groups results provide a conduit for communities to express views, for artists to articulate their stories about creative and intangible expressive practices. Such stories accumulate within a research project in the hope that an alternative form of data capture and communication can better integrate the arts and cultural activities into urban planning and policy-making.

**Cool Wollongong**

One example is a cultural mapping exercise undertaken as part of an ARC Linkage Project entitled Cultural Asset Mapping for Regional Australia (or CAMRA for short), which seeks to understand how communities value cultural assets in the places they live (see http://culturemap.org.au/). In this project, we wanted to know how residents in key case study towns (including Wollongong, where I work) create cultural meaning in places. We also wanted to speak to artists and creative producers of diverse backgrounds about the vernacular cultural activities taking place there (and which might otherwise be missed by formal planning and economic development strategies). Using various modes of inquiry the CAMRA project aimed to build a grass-roots picture of what might constitute cultural assets in places (thus adding to a broader community regeneration agenda).

One method developed for this project was the launching of a public campaign around one simple question—‘Where is cool and creative Wollongong?’ The campaign involved distribution of a postcard (Figure 1) designed to draw attention and pose the key research question, and to alert people to the possibility of having their say by a variety of means: by coming along to a festival stall or to a focus group day to participate in a cultural mapping exercise, or by contributing online to a blog or Facebook discussion (see Figure 2). At our stall at the annual Viva La Gong Festival—staffed by CAMRA researchers over the course of a day of the festival—hundreds of people participated, giving us a very large dataset to analyse (160 A3 maps and nearly half a gigabyte of MP3 recordings).

Overall there was a very warm response from the community, indicated by the large number of participants we recruited and the manner in which people responded. Very few people seemed uninterested; virtually no-one said ‘no’ outright when approached. Most interestingly, a kind of ‘learning curve’ was observed among many of the participants: to begin with, people struggled to think of what places were cool or creative (because it was a geographical question, not a ‘who’ type question) but, as participants started drawing on maps, ‘spatial reasoning’ started to emerge, and by the end of each interview/mapping exercise, people were freely talking about Wollongong’s sites and cultural activities using the map as a constant visual prompt. Scores of interviews that began with short and difficult answers
to our one research question ended up lasting for ten, 20, even 40 minutes. Hard-copy paper maps evidently play a role in cementing detailed spatial cognition about a place.\textsuperscript{13} Maps were initially an interruption to people’s thought processes—they caught newly recruited informants by surprise and stopped people in their tracks. But eventually maps become a solid foundation for more detailed and insightful comments than might have been the case without them (Figure 3).

**Creative Darwin**

In Darwin, I was part of another research team that sought to use a cultural mapping approach in understanding the creative industries—how they tick, where they are located and what opportunities and constraints are present in that unusual, tropical savannah.\textsuperscript{14} Our philosophy was to try and build a picture of Darwin’s creative industries from the grassroots up, based on widespread consultation and interviewing with creative workers, and then from this compile stories to communicate to policy-makers about what matters to the creative industries in Darwin. Beyond assisting the creative industries per se, the project had wider questions about diversifying Darwin’s labour market and making Darwin a more liveable place by promoting cultural vitality.

An extra difficulty was that the creative industries in Darwin are small and invisible when compared to those in big cities.\textsuperscript{15} Statistical analysis of employment in creative industries revealed a mere fraction of the total cultural activity taking place in Darwin.\textsuperscript{16} Interviewing enabled us to find creative workers otherwise ‘hidden’ in statistics, and snowballing from one informant to another expanded the sample of creative workers included. But interviews alone—qualitative conversations in narrative form—could not generate the kind of ‘hard’ data that would enable decision-makers beyond the arts sector to be convinced of the efficacy of creative industries. Mapping provided a solution.

Creative workers (about 100 of them from diverse backgrounds and fields) were interviewed about all aspects of their creative lives and pursuits, but woven into the interview were questions prompting them to draw on paper maps of Darwin: ‘where do you work?’, ‘where do you go to source supplies, meet clients, perform or exhibit?’, ‘where is Darwin’s creative epicentre—and why?’, ‘where do you go to gain inspiration—and why?’ These questions were qualitative in nature, but produced individually crafted maps of creative activity in this city that could be aggregated in a GIS to produce a single composite map showing data that appears quantitative when presented in map form. In other words, maps provided a way to quantify otherwise qualitative interview responses (‘where I work’, ‘what I do’) for communication with policy-makers and other audiences (Figure 4).
Figure 1. ‘Where is cool and creative Wollongong’ postcard campaign, November 2009
(image courtesy of Wollongong City Council and the ARC CAMRA project)
Figure 2. Cultural Mapping Stall, Viva La Gong Festival, Wollongong, November 2009.
Participants are drawing on maps and describing into a recorder where they think are Wollongong’s ‘coolest’ and ‘most creative’ places—and why (images: C. Gibson)
Figure 3. A completed map of 'cool and creative Wollongong' from one participant in the CAMRA cultural mapping exercise
In some ways the results were unsurprising: Darwin’s city centre, which has the bulk of the city’s live music venues, galleries and cafes, showed up prominently in our maps. But also revealed were patterns of activity and inspiration amongst creative workers that one simply could not glean without talking to creative workers and have them record their answers on a map. For example, the low-density suburb of Parap came through most strongly as Darwin’s creative epicentre—where creative workers in Darwin most commonly thought creative activity was centralised in the city. Parap is home to a couple of galleries and art supply stores but, crucially, it hosts a weekly outdoor market popular with arts and creative industries workers. Our composite maps presented data able to communicate to bureaucrats—in quantitative terms—the value of such a place for the city’s creative industries; its value as a site of community-building. Those qualities, which social researchers know intuitively to be valuable—that certain locations are important because of their atmosphere, their ability to gel community together—can, through qualitative interview maps, be captured in a form of data able to speak to decision-makers otherwise insistent on more mathematical forms of ‘proof’.

**Rural festivals—from obscurity onto the map**

My final example comes from an ARC Discovery Project that sought to measure the extent and significance of festivals in non-metropolitan areas. The background to the project was that there had been plenty of work done on the economic and social contributions of festivals to places, but problems persisted in several areas: a perennial metropolitan bias; a poor sense of the overall, cumulative contribution of festivals to regional economic development; and, in the economic impacts of festivals literature, a dominant, blinkered perspective reliant on monetary measures, based on sliding scales that posit massive festivals with big profits as ‘more’ successful than small community events. Our opinion was that previous literatures missed the point about how festivals could connect people within rural, often small communities, catalysing all kinds of economic relationships based on logics other than profit-maximisation (sharing resources, swapping services, in-kind contributions, quid-pro-quo relationships), and failed to estimate what this might aggregate to as a ‘sector’ of the economy when considering the breadth and diversity of all festivals in rural areas.

Driven by such dissatisfaction with the relativist and ideological shortcomings of previous research on the social and economic impacts of festivals, we sought a different approach, built on a first phase where we developed a map database of literally every rural festival we could locate outside capital cities in three Australian states (New South Wales, Tasmania and Victoria). The purpose of this was to generate an overall picture of the prevalence of festivals outside capital cities, and to enable spatial analysis of their distribution, regional clustering and differentiation. In this map database we included every festival we could find (once parameters for what
Figure 4. ‘Where is Darwin’s creative epicentre?’
Results to this question are presented here in 3D map-form, as a culmination of nearly a hundred separate interviews where creative workers were asked to identify on a map Darwin’s most creative place. The highest ‘peaks’ are those locations drawn most often by creative workers in interviews with the research team.22 (Maps reproduced with kind permission from Chris Brennan-Horley).
Local–Global defined a ‘festival’ were defined\(^{18}\)—whether small, large, obscure, bizarre. In one calendar year we identified over 2800 festivals taking place outside capital cities of the three states. We then undertook close survey analysis with help from the managers of 480 festivals, and in a third phase of research pursued detailed field work at individual festivals: the Parkes Elvis Revival Festival in New South Wales, Chillout in Daylesford, Victoria (Australia’s largest non-metropolitan gay and lesbian festival) and Opera in the Paddock in Inverell, New South Wales.

From these second and third phases it was possible to glean qualitatively the networks, relationships and dynamics that enable festivals to gel together rural communities, but also, crucially, we generated overall measures of impacts for the whole rural festivals sector. It was clear from our map database that festivals were diverse and geographically scattered throughout rural Australia (with particular patterns, such as a greater per capita concentration of festivals in the New South Wales Riverina region than in other parts—see Figure 5). Our survey revealed that the bulk of rural festivals are small, run by non-profit organisations and not principally about making money. Yet from surveys, and from close fieldwork at the selected individual festivals, we were also able to calculate impressive statewide statistics on employment, incomes and volunteerism. These statistics illustrated the point that while most rural festivals are modest, socially motivated (rather than profit-motivated) and not especially geared to tourism, their significance is worth serious recognition from governments because of their sheer quantity and geographical ubiquity.

We generated data (compiled in a glossy report designed as an accessible, public document—see Figure 6) that could convince hard-nosed economists and planners of the value of events that otherwise seem to be small or insignificant. In their proliferation, and in the extent to which they support an intricate network of related support businesses in their towns, rural festivals are a prominent feature of regional economies. Reaching this conclusion was not so much about calculating numbers of tickets sold or through multiplier analysis estimating how much money was ploughed back into the community from an individual event, but more about how, through a mapping approach, it was possible to locate events and track how they congeal across the annual calendar of activities in regions to secure a part of the local economy. A geographical perspective centred on finding and characterising cultural activities across a wider scale made such analysis possible.
Figure 5. Rural festivals, New South Wales, 2007 – by type, cumulative map
Conclusion

Much is made in academic circles of the need to be inter-disciplinary. Research aimed at engaging communities and contributing progressively to improved social relations has a lot to gain from crossing disciplinary boundaries—but, as I have sought to show here, researchers should do so from a position of methodological strength developed from within a disciplinary framework. In the examples discussed, I deployed mapping technologies from the realm of geographical sciences and applied them to cultural research questions. There were intellectual questions addressed, concerning how economic and social relations are imagined and experienced in an everyday manner; but also, beyond the university, cultural mapping has provided a means for arts and cultural communities involved in research projects to generate new kinds of data—data that can form the basis of stronger arguments about the value of their activities. The methods discussed here do not replace conventional economic modelling, community consultation or practice-based creative arts research. Cultural mapping is more a platform for integrating various kinds of inquiry—a horizontal ‘board’ onto which all kinds of quantitative and qualitative data can be pegged to suit the particular questions being asked.

In presenting these examples and exploring this method, I would not want to suggest either that cultural mapping solves all kinds of problems or is itself a ‘neutral’ method. Much has been written from a critical theoretical perspective highlighting how maps embody uneven power relationships, are central to the machinations of the military-industrial complex, and can add to the increasing surveillance of society. Acknowledging these problems is necessary, and part of a process of admission that can help transform mapping methods and make sure GIS technology is used to better ends (akin to recent strides made by feminist social scientists reflecting on the power relations that shape interviews or participant action research). The converse is also true: that GIS and mapping technologies can be instruments of democratisation, tools for political radicalisation, means to amplify subaltern voices: ‘using GIS to see the world and the individual lives within it differently, whatever restrictions current technology may place on such efforts’. What this means for the arts and those interested in regenerating community is that cultural mapping using actual maps is a method with real potential: for community groups hoping to present alternative voices to the dominant decision-makers; for experimental and avant-garde arts organisations looking to demonstrate impact beyond market indicators. Sometimes the seemingly intangible qualities that make communities work, that gel people together, that make an event or artwork successful, have a geographical dimension that can be quantified and revealed through a mapping exercise. Cultural applications of GIS make that possible.
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Chris Gibson is Professorial Fellow in Human Geography, ARC Future Fellow and Deputy Director, Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research at the University of Wollongong. He has published widely on the creative industries, urban development and popular culture, particularly in the Australian context and was chief researcher on Australia’s largest-ever survey of cultural festivals in rural communities, and has pioneered new methods for using computer mapping technology for community and cultural research. cgibson@uow.edu.au
Endnotes


18. Again, see Gibson et al, 2010 for explanation.


22. See Brennan-Horley and Gibson, 2009, for explanation and full analysis of this research question.


Bibliography


