

SOCIAL TAPESTRIES

public authoring and civil society

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researching, developing and facilitating creative innovation



Social Tapestries: public authoring and civil society

'... the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly... it is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the surest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.'

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations*

Introduction

Social Tapestries is a two year research project developing experimental uses of public authoring* to demonstrate the social and cultural benefits of local knowledge sharing enabled by new mobile technologies. These playful and challenging experiments will build upon the Urban Tapestries** software platform developed by Proboscis and its partners. Through collaborations and partnerships with other civil society organisations we will address situations in education, social housing, community arts and local government.

The mobile landscape is changing. Slowly, inexorably there is a shift away from the distinctive differences between voice and data, between circuit switching and packet switching.

Our telephone lines are no longer just peer-to-peer devices, connecting us individually to another person, but open up a broader vista of multi-party communication via the internet, video conferencing and instant messaging. Mobile phones too are beginning to offer more than just voice communication and SMS texting – video calling, online banking, m-commerce and media streaming are all in their infancy, but never-the-less here.

How do we map and make sense of the social tapestries which make up the warp and weft of our daily lives, interweaving with others belonging to the people we share our environment with? What is the future for these mobile data possibilities? How will people take them up and why? Who chooses what content can be accessed by mobile devices? Where can the mobile service providers learn from their past, and the last decade of growth in the internet to understand what their customers want (or might want) and how they can provide it?

The Social Tapestries experiments aim to explore how users might engage with mobile location-specific content in the context of 'civil society', building prototypes of such uses to test and understand them. It aims to outline some of the applications for public authoring that could enhance our understandings of our neighbours and our social and cultural environment. This essay outlines some of the ideas and practices that inform this project, sketching some of the rich cultural history of how artists and designers interpret and use the city as a medium.

Psychogeography & Situationism

It is probably impossible (if not, perhaps, unthinkable) to be an artist or designer using the city and its fabric as one's medium not to take the twin pillars of psychogeography and Situationism as key reference points on one's map of historical contexts. And of all the iconic images of psychogeography and Situationism, probably the most well-known has to be Asger Jorn and Guy Debord's 1952 *The Naked City*. In the words of Simon Sadler,

'Its arresting, matter-of-fact design simultaneously married the loss of old Paris, prepared for the city of the future, explored the city's structures and uses, criticised traditional mapping, and investigated the relationship between language, narrative, and cognition.'

Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*

Homage to psychogeography and Situationism has been sufficiently paid elsewhere in the many



Asger Jorn & Guy Debord, *The Naked City*

manifestos, articles, essays and books that populate this field of activity not to repeat here. However it is now with the emergence of mass use of mobile network communications that we may begin to see the practices of an educated and urbane elite translate into the practices of everyday life that the French philosopher, Michel de Certeau, so elegantly elucidated in his eponymous book. de Certeau's analysis was not limited to middle-class bourgeois society and its preoccupations, but sought to understand broader and wider activities of how people live in and with the city, its architecture and the systems that govern it.

Inspired as much by the actions of the Situationists as by writers and theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau and Kevin Lynch, Social Tapestries and the platform we have built to support public authoring and spatial annotation (Urban Tapestries) are an attempt to investigate how we may intervene, as artists and designers, in the development of mobile communications. Our interventions seek to create opportunities such practices to find a place among the bland, often banal, content and services offered or proposed by the network service providers as they try to maximise profits from a twenty-first century technology using a nineteenth century model.

'If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.'

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" in Illuminations

The Storyteller and the Flâneur

These two archetypes have come to dominate the discourses of urbanity over the last generation or so and point to an essential difference of approach to the city. Benjamin classes the Storyteller as coming up from the artisan class – referring to how stories were often told both to mirror the rhythms of craft-based work and to relieve the monotony. But even in his day there was a perception that this was being lost. Who today would expect to be able to devote part of their work day to telling stories? Even those who attempt to use new technologies (such as weblogs) to relieve the monotony of work may be dismissed by their employers (the recent case of the US Senate intern, the Washintonienne, comes swiftly to mind). In our age of time management studies and the relentless drive for efficiencies in the total cost of employment such side activities, whilst socially and personally constructive, are unlikely to be encouraged.

The Flâneur, on the other hand, is aloof from the business of the city – merely a voyeur, or perhaps the *Ur*-consumer of our contemporary age. The literary Flâneur is invariably male, rich, educated and disdainful of entering into the melee of urban life, preferring to observe from the vantage point of the cafe. Where he does wander into the streets it is as if moving through a dream, disconnected from reality, untouched by the passions of the mundane, seeking pleasure in the snippets of life cast off by people as they pass him.

Is the Flâneur truly the archetypal urban dweller we wish to model ourselves on? Perhaps a sidestep back to the Storyteller offers a counterpoint to this, blending the pleasures of anonymously soaking up the ambience of the city, with that of re-telling its stories to others. Other equally valid archetypes can also be proposed – for instance, the cook and the gastronome – which again tease out differences between those for whom culture and creation are an everyday practice as fundamental as the preparation of nourishment, and those for whom it is to be savoured but do not partake of the process of creation. A disjunction between those who make culture and those who merely consume it.

'In the flâneur, one might say is reborn the sort of idler that Socrates picked out from the Athenian marketplace to be his interlocutor. Only, there is no longer a Socrates. And the slave labour that guaranteed him his leisure has likewise ceased to exist'

Walter Benjamin, "Beaudelaire" in The Arcades Project

These are not either/or choices or positions to adopt, merely possibilities for roles we may wish to entertain. If the city can be seen as a tapestry, with each person's experiences interwoven through each others' to create the dense and vivid weave of the cloth, then we may wish to think of our practices of inhabitation and marking of our sense of place like recipes. Passed from person to person, each time mutating a little to suit the preferences of each cook, recipes are like the stories told by storytellers. The arts of storytelling and cooking flower with the judicious addition of local colour, the personal preference for one spice or condiment over another that transforms a story or a recipe from becoming stale with repeated use to extra-ordinary and rich with every telling and tasting.

Agency and Authorship

'... stories are becoming private and sink into the secluded places in neighbourhoods, families or individuals... while the rumours propagated by the media cover everything...'

Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City" in The Practice of Everyday Life

As we move into a new century, new paradigms of communications are beginning to take hold. The range of sources of information have multiplied exponentially with the arrival of satellite communications and the internet. No longer are we reliant on a single or limited number of sources that define our understanding and opinions, but we may gather information from a heterogeneous collection of places. Although much of it is the same, we now have at our disposal an unprecedented ability to see from other perspectives, through different eyes.

Not only that, but it is two way: people *do* wish to comment, to communicate their interpretation of events, to participate in the culture they are part of. I believe that this radical shift in information flow and control away from large institutions (both public and private) to ordinary people could have a profound social and cultural impact on the uses and implications of wireless and mobile technologies in daily life, as well as social and community relations. Urban Tapestries is designed to provide an experimental platform to open up and explore this opportunity both critically and creatively. Social Tapestries aims to implement scenarios in order to explore these implications on how we take part in and build a better civil society.

I believe that the future for our society lies in broadening the capabilities of its members to be actors, agents and authors, not merely consumers of a culture created by others employed in the 'culture industry'. The control of information and communications has long been understood to shape how societies develop and behave; using network technologies to gather, create and share knowledge at grassroots – no matter how informal – offers the possibility of profound changes to the way in which we engage with our environment and the people who inhabit it.

By making available simple tools of authorship and communication (which are also asynchronous and anonymous) to people going about their everyday lives, it is possible to imagine a rich and vibrant culture of exchanging stories and local knowledge, where our sense of how we value our neighbours is derived from the richness of the knowledge we all share. Urban Tapestries is built on the notion that these network technologies should enable communication between people at all levels, and not be forced into the straitjacket of consumption and consumerism – repurposing the print and broadcast media created and designed for a different age to sell as 'high-value' location-based content.

If, as is so often claimed, content is king, then surely the most valuable and relevant content about local places for local people is not going to come from media companies, but directly from their peers and neighbours? And if this is the case, then surely the point of sharing such information is not to sell media content but to communicate?

A key issue for developing this sense of personal *agency* will be our changing perception of citizenship and its role in how we construct our identity. Is it an attribute bestowed upon us by the State and government according to our place of birth or sworn allegiance? Or will it become something we assert through practice and inhabitation, through participation in community life? The impact of the revolution in communications has been to shift our perceptions of space and territory so that we are no longer defined or our horizons limited by the (particularly nineteenth century) concept of nationhood. Our sense of where, to whom and what we belong to alters too. In an age of conflicting loyalties and populations that are less and less ethnically or religiously homogenous, this presents a major problem to the traditional apparatus of power, yet offers extraordinary possibilities for individuals and communities.

'Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds:

To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs.'

Georges Perec, Species of Spaces

Place, not just location

Over the last four years of researching public space through projects such as *Private Reveries*, *Public Spaces*, *Liquid Geography* and *Urban Tapestries*, we've been grappling with these issues of place and space, creating prototypes and working with people from many walks of life. Our emerging understanding of location is that it is both contingent and liquid, always in a process of becoming. It hinges less on fixed coordinates than on human to human relationships, both those that are spoken and those that are implicit and unspoken. We have come to believe that *place* is more communicative of the social and cultural construction of our environments than an emphasis on *location*, and our research and experiments demonstrate that it is as much a group or community activity as that of the individual. As such, it distinguishes between the abstract and conceptual Cartesian division of location into the grid of longitude and latitude, and the subjective, negotiated social spaces of lived experience.

'... we measure and map space and place, and acquire spatial laws and resource inventories for our efforts. These are important approaches, but they need to be complemented by experiential data that we can collect and interpret in measured confidence because we are human ourselves.'

Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place

de Certeau speaks of 'practices that are foreign to the "geometrical" or "geographical" space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions' and it is these practices which we believe are constitutive of 'social knowledges'. He describes the activities which generate these kinds of everyday informal wisdom as part of an 'opaque and blind mobility', not connected or joined up like urban planning, or even visible to the people on the street. Yet they are constitutive of the city itself, a social glue. What Proboscis is attempting to do through *Urban Tapestries* and *Social Tapestries* is to create a platform for tracing and making visible these invisible and elusive paths of knowing and sharing.

Our work explores human to human relationships structured around fluid notions of place and identity. We have focused not on delivering specific technologies but on trying to understand why people might use these mobile and pervasive, context and place-aware technologies; and what they might do with them in mundane everyday settings. Ours is primarily a social and cultural research initiative – but we also believe that the best way to understand an idea is to model it, to build prototypes to test our assumptions, and engage other people in dialogues that stretch our own perceptions and the languages used to communicate them.

Presence & Time

Coupled with this distinction between place and location is *presence*, an issue we are increasingly coming to understand as fundamental to the way individuals and groups structure their experience of inhabiting the city. Presence in the city is often marked by those still part of the living continuity of the city, yet refers to that which has passed out of existence, if not memory. What new technologies begin to offer are ways to marking the continuity of the Present as well as the Past.

Too often the concept of presence in technology is limited to immediate proximity to a person (or, more accurately, the device they are using). But presence has much richer connotations. Not only people, but places and things have presence too, and our sense of presence may be focused as much on somewhere we are not physically present as by what is proximate to our current location.

Presence is linked to time and continuity as much as physicality, and it is not hard to imagine mobile data services like Urban Tapestries becoming powerful tools for maintaining a sense of one's own presence in a place or community which is physically distant, but emotionally close. Perhaps the place a person grew up in or a community which they were once part of. Just as the telephone has enabled people to maintain links with their homes and roots across the world, so too could public authoring technologies enable people to keep abreast of what's happening in places important to them but far away, and to leave their own annotations in those places for local people still in the area or community to feel their presence (albeit virtual) persisting across time and distance. Such a practice could be thought of as an *asynchronous inhabitation* of place.

Shaping Experiences I: Architecture & Urban Planning

"space' is more abstract than "place". What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.'

Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place

Architecture and urban planning shape experiences, making paths and trajectories along which we, the inhabitants of towns and cities, are propelled. However, the flow of data in the electromagnetic spectrum of radio is able to pass through many of the physical barriers that constrain our human and physical interactions with the city. By layering our own architectures of experiences – emotions, stories, pictures and sounds – in the immanent world of data, we are able to occupy places by proxy; building our own imaginary (and yet real) cities.

Spatial annotation and public authoring via mobile and pervasive technologies make possible the 'anarchitectural' reordering of space that has previously been the preserve of artists like Gordon Matta-Clark. The possibilities for using these technologies to weave our own structures of narrative and creation through the fabric of the city, enable a radical shift of capabilities; allowing for people to become both their own urban planners, defining their own visions of the city, or as designers of new conduits for navigating urban experience.

We have the opportunity now to build in to emerging communications networks unparalleled possibilities for re-appropriating public (and private) space, changing our perceptions of 'ownership' of space and challenging conventions which traditionally bind our behaviour in relation to 'public' spaces (so often marked by a respectful silence and decorum instilled by social norms). Now we can begin to imagine such technologies allowing us to construct our own practices of inhabitation, to occupy and communicate the beyond physical limits of places, to treat the city as a kind of conversation where community and communal life begin to collapse



Gordon Matta-Clark,
Conical Intersect

physical boundaries and become structured more (for example) by emotional, spiritual or linguistic spaces.

Shaping Experiences 2: Technological Determinacy

The way location as a concept has been bandied about in the last decade suggests a specificity that in no way reflects the complex relationships to place and space which we enjoy. It seems to me that we have been collectively hampered by a discourse that revolves around technological determinacy and in itself reflects the fundamental misconceptions of location based services of the 1990s. For a long time the model proposed was just 'anytime anywhere' access to standard data services. What was missing was local context – that a location based service should reflect the place it referred to, something of the granularity of our streets and communities. Now we seem to be on the verge of a similar misconception, driven by a blinkered desire to simply lock digital content to the most banal definition of place – i.e. the longitude and latitude coordinates that specify a location.

Constitutive of this misconception is the way this model focuses less on people and more on the capabilities of devices and technologies. The 'location' is in fact no longer contingent on the subjective person but on the device which they carry. The model also assumes that such a device must belong to a single individual and not be shared by a community or part of a group activity. For instance if a person takes a picture with a device that automatically tags the image with longitude and latitude coordinates, what does this tell us except where the device was at the moment of taking the picture? The 'location' of this image tells us nothing of either the subject of the image nor of the context in which it was taken. It is limited to a single location rather than referring to a place which it might frame or be framed by. This conception of location-based media is thus static – locked to a single fixed location rather than part of the continuum of mobility and flow of urban life.

What we have sought with Urban Tapestries is to create a platform that enables a much richer definition and siting of knowledge in relation to place. We have applied concepts and practices from cartography and geography (such as defining "topographical features") that enable people to better define their own sense of place and space, and to associate media like text, images or sound with them. Our research and evaluation of the trials we've run suggests that people want to make rich and complex layerings of social knowledge and experience over the city, to connect and interweave with each other.

Our approach has been to focus on the practices of everyday mapping and sharing of knowledge and experience that occur both consciously and unconsciously. From our understanding of these forces and practices we've built a platform that supports and augments them. Urban Tapestries is designed to facilitate different types of human relationships (to each other as well as places) rather being designed according to machine or technological capabilities.

Experiments in Social Spaces

The first step in our Social Tapestries research programme is to run a two day Creative Lab exploring the implications for civil society of public authoring with partners and collaborators from the arts, social sciences, civil society, government and industry. The Lab will provide an opportunity to present our plans for the initial experiments and, to brainstorm ideas and issues across these various fields and disciplines. Proboscis will conduct a Bodystorming Experience designed to rapidly explore emergent themes using "paper prototyping". The results of both the brainstorming and bodystorming sessions will be presented to a wider audience during a public forum at the end of the two days, opening up a space for public debate.



Bodystorming Experience,
LSE, April 2004

The Social Tapestries experiments will offer a platform to devise and understand actual uses of public authoring by people going about their everyday lives. By designing and implementing a series of experiments in real world situations, Social Tapestries will aim to reveal the potential of public authoring to:

- create and support relationships that transcend existing social and cultural boundaries;
- enable the development of new social and creative practices based around place, identity and community;
- reveal the limits and potential costs (as well as benefits) that such technologies also imply.

The areas we are devising experiments for are:

- *education*: looking at how local informal knowledges can be gathered, represented, understood and shared by schoolchildren.
- *community arts and regeneration*: working with artists and arts organisations as facilitators for local communities in regeneration contexts.
- *social housing*: exploring how new forms of neighbourliness could emerge where existing physical structures (such as tower blocks) create barriers.
- *local government*: assessing the impacts on communities of locally specific information gathered by municipal and police services and possibilities for interaction.

Social Tapestries is not technology focused – it is about understanding and exploring the social and cultural possibilities that emerging technologies can be put towards. It is about speculating on how technologies can be used for social and cultural objectives, technologies whose use in a few years will be as pervasive as mobile phones and desktop computers are today. Understanding the crucial relationships between people, places and things will increase our ability as designers and policy-leaders to suggest more open and people-centric uses of such technologies. We aim to create compelling scenarios and experiments demonstrating the benefits of authoring platforms that treat people as co-creative and not just consumers.

Conclusion

In sketching out the broad aims and influences of the project I hope to suggest the enormous potential for meaningful creative interventions in emerging mobile and pervasive data systems that can challenge and advance our abilities for creating and sharing local knowledge. We can embrace the richness and complexity of the world around us and try to build systems that augment it and utilise the major infrastructures that are currently being put in place. We can build systems that encourage action, agency and authorship of the digital landscapes we are coming to inhabit, in addition to enjoying and appreciating them.

On the other hand we can follow the uncertain and binaristic trajectory of technology allowing others to determine how we interact with places and locations using these emerging systems. I fear that this will lock us into a future where, despite the increasing creative potential of technologies for people to express themselves and communicate with each other, we will be cast merely as the consumers of someone else's vision of the world. Instead of a bright future of increasing everyone's capabilities to be authors, actors, agents or even architects of their own digital landscapes, we will be confined to the choices made for us by media corporations and big businesses.

'I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted: places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin:

... Such places don't exist, and its because they don't exist that space becomes

a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.'

Georges Perec, Species of Spaces

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Giles Lane is the founder and co-director of Proboscis. He leads Proboscis' research programme (SoMa) as well as both the Urban Tapestries and Social Tapestries projects.

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