

URBAN TAPESTRIES

the spatial and social on your mobile

Nick West



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researching, developing and facilitating creative innovation



Fig 1

Urban Tapestries: The Spatial and the Social on your Mobile

What happens when people are invited to make comments about specific locations in the city? Are there any tools that can help create an open, persistent field in which these comments can be placed?

Those were the implicit research questions that we started with in Urban Tapestries (a project by Proboscis, a Creative Studio based in London — see below for full credits). Our goal became the design of toolsets and skillsets that will allow people to annotate the urban spaces that they inhabit and pass through every day. Our premise is that, given half a chance, lots of people would like to “leave their mark” on the city in some way — whether that means leaving notes for friends, devising their own walking tours, developing in-place information resources, or any one of dozens of other possibilities. In short, we have a strong group hunch that the best path toward enhancing the geography of the city necessarily involves designing a way to allow contributions from a broad section of the population.



Fig 2

Background: the Research

As we started our research, we were technology-agnostic: the point, instead, was to see whether or not people wanted to annotate the city. To explore the possibilities of (and the desire for) such annotations, we arranged a series of “bodystormings”. During these sessions, we laid a huge map of a central London neighbourhood on the floor, gave the participants a stack of coloured post-it notes, and sent them out on the map in their sock feet to create whatever string of annotations that they might want. (Fig. 1) We found that almost every participant was interested in creating not one, but multiple annotations — and many created dozens. This was true not only among the denizens of the usual high-tech demographic, but also among multiple groups of seniors that we worked with at a local community centre. (Fig. 2) The subject of these annotations ranged from history trails (the expected) to parallel histories of World War II to bread-crumbs trails documenting the arguments one participant had with her ex-boyfriend. People created rudimentary games, architectural tours, serialised stories, spatialised poems, family histories, and a welter of other topics — the variety was frankly surprising. (Fig. 3)



Fig 3

Convinced that annotating the city would be a strong draw, we built two prototypes. Our first public trial was based on a simple authoring client running on a PDA (Fig. 4), and communicating with a database over a WiFi mesh network that we set up in a small section of Bloomsbury in central London. (Fig. 5) The weather was cold and rainy and the prototype was flaky, but we were again pleasantly surprised by the participants’ perseverance in creating their annotations. Each participant wrote their own reactions to the research process on the blog we created for them at <http://urbantapestries.net/weblog>



Fig 4

We then created a second prototype running on a mobile phone, and communicating over the standard GPRS network. (Fig. 6) A group of participants was able to reliably use this prototype to annotate a 3-kilometre square of central London centred on Oxford Circus. The software allows the creation of a text, sound or photo annotation (or all three) that can be attached to a specific address; the annotations are collected into “threads” of annotations, and each author can create multiple threads. (Fig. 7)



Fig 5

People liked using the software on the phone, and were intrigued with the idea of using the phone for something much different than their usual purposes — a new form of communication, with a diffuse, future-leaning audience instead of a singular audience in the here and now. In the process of our research, we realised that we were attempting to define the common ground between two strands of urban behaviour: the spatial and the social.



Fig 6

Spatialising the Social

The most obvious innovation of Urban Tapestries (and many similar recent research projects) is a renewed focus on the space of the city and how that space is created. In and of itself, the insight these projects bring to the production of space is not especially groundbreaking. But what does seem noteworthy is that urban annotations create space through what has previously been an entirely *social* process: the use of mobile phones. Mobiles have been a fantastic amplifier of the ephemeral and the everyday: numbers of voice calls and SMS messages continue to increase each month – and yet all of those communications are fleeting and leave no visible or audible mark on the greater metropolis. In contrast, urban annotation allows people to PHONE HOME in a concrete physical sense: if the annotations are saved – that is, if they become persistent in the same way that a school or a street or a square is persistent – then the construction of the city we inhabit gains a completely new set of authors. Nelson has his column in Trafalgar Square, Alsop has his library in Peckham, but now Rashida can tack her neighbourhood comments to her storefront on Ealing Broadway, Nigel can peg his Samuel Pepys Tour to Fleet Street – and a potential thousand others like them, the barriers of entry to annotation being much smaller than those for leaving a tangible physical mark on the city.



Fig 7

This spatialisation of the social is essentially a cloud chamber for everyday life: what was once invisible now becomes visible and leaves its trace behind. What we are proposing is no less than the creation of a three-dimensional archive for the passage of everyday life. This grand scope is not so obvious when scanning the current early attempts at annotation, with their focus on technology and tactics – the people of the city and their voices are still largely intangible in these experiments. But imagine the process 10 or 20 years down the line, where the layering gradually becoming orders of magnitude more dense than a flyposting wall could ever hope to achieve. (Fig. 8) The key here is *persistence*: the messages acquire qualities of space as they endure and accrete in a particular location.



Fig 8

The spatiality of this process seems two-fold. Some annotations will, of course, carry a specifically spatial component: "Here's where Charles Dickens lived"; "Cool, I met my first girlfriend here in Regent's Park!" Others will be ephemeral, aping the content of current conversations, phone calls, and e-mails: "Liz, call me when you see this annotation"; "MILLWALL RULES!!!" But there's an indirect spatiality at work here, too: even the most fleeting of notes becomes spatial once it is placed in a larger metropolitan archive of urban annotation. Future urban archaeologists will be grateful to find the verbal, visual and audio ephemera of our age already tagged with a geographical coordinate and awaiting their analysis.

It could be, in fact, that the availability of widespread urban annotation could actually encourage a conscious re-spatialisation of the social – in the sense that people will be more aware of their places and their placement within it if they have the ability to annotate it at will. Interestingly, in many of the currently proposed annotation schemes, each point or photo or comment is completely atomized: it stands on its own, unconnected with any other annotations. In Urban Tapestries, however, each annotation is part of a larger "thread" of annotations. As a result, it seems that Urban Tapestries draws out more annotations that are specifically *about* the city, merely by dint of the fact that creating a spatial thread of annotations forces the arc of the participant's attention to travel across the physical expanse of the city.

It shouldn't be imagined that the spatialisation of the social and the ephemeral will lock these artifacts in concrete. Obviously, there will still be stories told; graffiti scrawled; love letters, band announcements and commercial advertisements left anywhere and everywhere – and these aspects of our social communication, like our phone calls now, won't be a spatial phenomenon. But then again, the *physical* version of these same phenomena isn't truly spatial either: commercialised parts of the built environment – whether billboards or office parks – often have a similar "placeless" quality.

All we can do is point toward an antidote: to offer the opportunity for accretion, encrustation, evolution, layering, and sedimentation of life in a visible, persistent medium. The flows of everyday life exist already -- our small contribution is to point to a way in which an archive of this life can be created in the midst of our daily flows, in the hope that these flows will begin to more concretely shape the physical environments in which they take place.

In sum: the social nature of all the messages delivered via mobile phones is becoming more spatial, as these virtual messages are collected into a persistent archive and become associated with specific locations.

Socialising the Spatial

In a similar process, the elite nature of the built environment (what's the distribution of architects per 100,000 population??) is poised to become more democratic because of the *open* nature of annotation systems like Urban Tapestries. To the extent that the annotations in such a system become spatial, it makes the authors of those annotations the co-creators of a new virtual vernacular that will more and more shape the shared experience of the city.

The most salient quality of these new annotations is the fact that their predominant address may become *geographical* rather than personal. Instead of phoning a friend, we will "phone" a place as we create an annotation to it. (Perhaps these geographical points then become the implicit answer to the question so common in mobile calls: "Where are you?")

But these new bits of space will be different from the space we now know. For one thing, they are obviously not physically exclusive, since dozens of people could annotate the same spot occupied by only one physical building. For another, the actual visibility of these annotations is quite low compared to elements of the current built environment. Instead of merely directing our gaze in its direction, we must use specialised equipment, manipulated internally by complicated software, and in the end see the annotation only within the confines of the tiny screen of a phone or a PDA -- maybe less than 1% of the size of our normal field of vision.

So if we are to "see" these annotations in the same way that we see our built environment, our attention must be trained and focused; that's a tall order given the current stage of development of these tools. But the important point is that these experiments point to a potential change in the perceived topology of urban space. Not only will cities be open as they currently are to a wide variety of inhabitants and experiences, but the built environment itself will acquire exponentially more architects. The challenge is to find ways to embed cultural intelligence within the built environment -- or, more precisely, alongside and within the pathways that we traverse from day to day. These annotations will be only indirectly social: their authors won't talk directly to one another; they will leave their commentary, like urban messages in a bottle, for others to read. Their audience is implicit rather than explicit. Sociality only emerges as the result rather than being the motivating cause. The social builds by accretion, by the appearance of multiple annotations at the same place, or on the same theme. Not that this process doesn't already occur in our physical settings; but the virtualisation of the process can accelerate it greatly.

These small experiments foreshadow an open and persistent archive of the city, with each entry grounded in the geographical space that the city already inhabits. Urban annotation thus becomes a process of involution, an intensive rather than an extensive phenomenon: a potential anti-sprawl.

Urban Tapestries was conceived, initiated and led by Proboscis in partnership with the London School of Economics Media & Communications Dept, Hewlett-Packard Research Laboratories/ Mobile Bristol, Orange UK, Ordnance Survey and France Telecom Research & Development UK.

Proboscis team members on the Urban Tapestries projects include:

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You can entertain yourself for hours with the details of our research at <http://urbantapestries.net>

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Nick West is an information architect and researcher, currently enrolled in the MPhil/PhD programme in Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Nick is a Proboscis Associate and has worked on both the Urban Tapestries and Social Tapestries projects.

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