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Mapping Nottingham's identity

A case study on critical pedagogy

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Synopsis

Mapping Nottingham's Identity is a research project based on the collaborative re-imagination of public spaces in Nottingham (UK). Participation lies at the heart of this project; there is no agenda or predetermined outcome. We offer an inclusive and flexible platform to listen, discuss and share di¬fferent points of view and engagement with Nottingham. Our practice, facilitated by Nottingham Trent University, is based on mapping, an essential tool to discover and to present visually how people understand and feel about places and their connection with the community. We have used this method in different contexts and with diverse audiences, outside of the traditional university classroom, to encourage a multidisciplinary and multi-layered account of these places. This critical pedagogy aims at promoting an exchange whereby each stakeholder has something to learn from and to share with others. The idea of "Heritage" is challenged by the concept of "community heritage" and belonging.

Key words: Mapping, participation, community heritage, belonging.

1. Introduction

In June 2016 Nottingham Trent University started a community engagement project, Mapping Nottingham's Identity (MapNotts), which aimed at understanding perceptions of belonging at different locations within Nottingham. The first output of this project, run in collaboration with community stakeholders, was to map Carrington neighbourhood through the eyes (and pens) of the users of the space. This exercise brought about a very interesting understanding and analysis of the locality, as well as the identification of a number of public and semi-public spaces. In June 2017, and a s a result of the analysis undertaken in 2016, a steering group was formed to promote the improvement of public spaces in Carrington, including the Architecture Subject Group and volunteers from Nottingham Trent University, CTARA (Carrington Tenants and Residents Association), Hosta Consulting, Double T, Nottingham City Council and Marsh:Grochowski Architects. This group is facilitating a dialogue with the community in order to explore the potential of public spaces in Carrington.

The focus of MapNotts Phase 2 was to facilitate public consultations, which will ultimately improve Selkirk Way, an underpass that connects the inner centre of Carrington with one of its main commuting arteries and boundaries, Mansfield Road, as a new contribution to 'community heritage'. We conducted a number of focus groups, observations and interviews to get a better understanding of the area. The findings informed the development of four design concepts, including a greener boulevard; framing and sheltering; materiality and the plaza. Ultimately, the designs provided by the Architecture Subject Group at NTU were driven by a desire to make the underpass a destination rather than a connecting path.

The aim of this paper is to present a project born within the community, facilitated by academic stakeholders, applying theoretical concepts, participatory methods and co-design to revitalise the sense of belonging of the neighbours of Nottingham.

2. Main methodology: critical pedagogies and participatory methods

Mapping Nottingham's Identity revolves around participation, co-creation of knowledge and co-design. The main methodology has been discussed in an article in 2017[1], which explores the main tools used in Phase 1 of the project, displayed at Nottingham Central Library (September 2016). In this paper, however, we will explore the main tools used in Phase 2, which formed the core of a second exhibition at the same venue, in December 2017[2] (Fig. 1).

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[1] Author., 2017. Creative practices and public engagement. Journal of Artistic Research (JAR) [online], issue 13 [accessed 04 April 2018]. ISSN 2235-0225. http://doi.org/10.22501/jar.147814.
[2] MAPPING NOTTINGHAM'S IDENTITY, 2016. Exhibition [online]. [accessed 04 Abril 2018] Retrieved from: http://mapnottingham.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/Exhibition.

Figure 1.

MapNotts follows the ethos behind Participatory Action Research (PAR), whereby researchers and participants analyse a problem together, hoping to find an action that ultimately improves the situation[3]. Moreover, this approach eliminates the hierarchical differences between researchers and the public, shifting the ownership as co-production of knowledge. In order to ensure this methodology is fully embraced, PAR must include reflection as an essential part of the research, in order to learn from the experience, and influence future developments[4]. In the field of architecture, participation has been understood through different approaches and levels of contribution (information, consultation or decision stages), and at different moments of the process (design, construction and post-completion), including different stakeholders (client, user or general public)[5]. The main difference between these possibilities of participation resides on how it is valued: Participation as an 'end' or as a 'means', raising the value of the built product[6]: "Participation effectively addresses this gap through involving the user in the early stages of architectural production, leading to an environment that not only has a sense of ownership, but is also more responsive to change"[7].

2.1. Monopoly Board

Inspired by the Glossopoli project, led by Prof Martin Philips[8], this tool allowed visitors to assign value (emotional) to places they identified as relevant in Nottingham (Fig. 2). There is a clear correlation between these images and the postcards.

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[3] KINDON, Sara, Rachel PAIN and Mike Kesby, 2007. Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods. Connecting people, participation and place. Oxon and New York: Routledge. ISBN 10: 0-415-59976-8.
[4] Ibid.
[5] JENKINS, Paul, Leslie FORSYTH, 2010. Architecture, Participation and Society. Oxon and New York: Routledge. ISBN 10: 0-415-54724-5.
[6] Ibid.
[7] BLUNDELL JONES, Peter, Doina PETRESCU and Jeremy TILL (eds.), 2005. Architecture & Participation. London and New York: Taylor and Francis. ISBN 0-415-31746-0.
[8] GLOSSOPOLI, University of Leicester [online] [accessed 04 Abril 2018] Retrieved from: https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/geography/redundant-content/research/old-research-older/projects/ConCom/glossopoly

Figure 2.

2.2. Draw a postcard of Nottingham

Visitors were encouraged to participate by creating their own postcards: "How would you represent your Nottingham to your family and friends?" (Fig. 3). The results show how the majority of the participants drew a popular landmark, as a stereotyped image of Nottingham.

Figure 3.

2.3. Intangible heritage

Participants shared their knowledge of memories, traditions and local legends (Fig. 4).
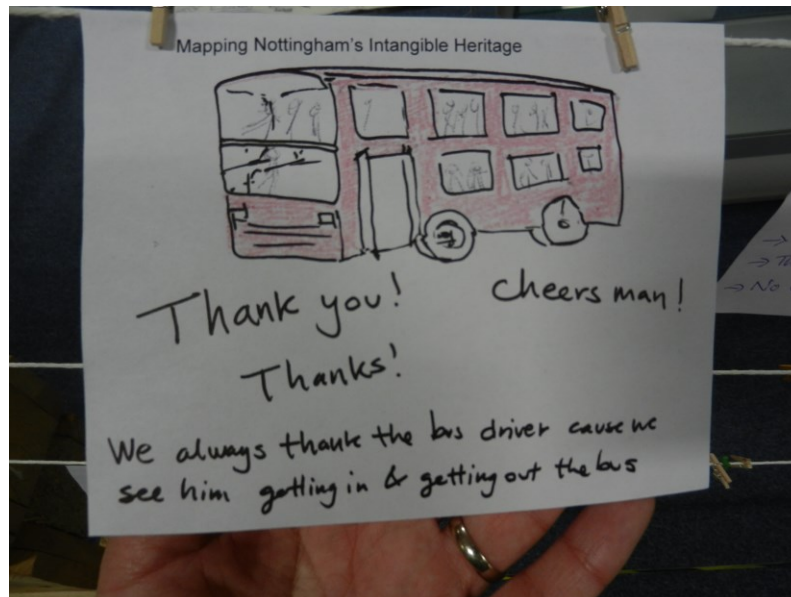

Figure 4.

2.4. Collaborative Mapping

This method enabled participants to decide what should be included, and to negotiate their contribution in the context to the drawings already done (Fig. 5).

Figure 5.

3. Conclusions

The aforementioned methods of participation and co-production of knowledge have enabled a more emotional connection to the built environment, as well as a sharing of experiences and memories with those who took part in the workshops, as well as those who have seen this exhibition in other locations (UK, Cyprus (Fig 6), online). This data is helping us to approach the built

environment and its heritage from a bottom up approach, reinforcing the importance of co-production of knowledge. The postcards keep helping the development of personal strategies to identify value within communities, and the collaborative mapping continues to provoke discussion between stakeholders, challenging ownership and sense of belonging (Fig. 7).

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

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BLUNDELL JONES, Peter, Doina PETRESCU and Jeremy TILL (eds.), 2005. Architecture & Participa-tion. London and New York: Taylor and Francis. ISBN 0-415-31746-0.

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Biography

Ana Souto. Ana plays a key role in the development and leadership of the research modules on undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Architecture. She supervises doctoral students, and is the course leader of the Professional Doctorate in the College of Arts, Design and the Built Environment.

Ana's research interest lies in architecture as a cultural manifestation of national identity. In this context she dealt with the search for national identity in post-revolutionary Mexico, and the connection between identity and architecture in the pavilions built for the 1929 Iberoamerican Exhibition in Seville.

Ana is currently involved in an interdisciplinary project which deals with ideas connected with identity, memory and culture, using a participatory methodology. This project aims to show the role of culture (with a special emphasis in art and architecture) in promoting a connection between current issues of our times and the past.