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The cool, creative mapping lounge

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The cool, creative mapping lounge

Abstract

This case study outlines a methodology that combines vox pop style interviews, hand-drawn maps and specialised computer mapping techniques to produce a three-dimensional representation of a city's cultural vitality - as judged by its residents. In 2009, CAMRA researchers conducted a 'mapping lounge' at Wollongong's largest annual festival, gathering stories and maps that identified over 2300 cool and creative places, spread across the city. The data revealed the localised nature of 'creativity', and the value of small-scale, decentralised cultural infrastructure.

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This case study outlines a methodology that combines *vox pop* style interviews, hand-drawn maps and specialised computer mapping techniques to produce a three-dimensional representation of a city's cultural vitality – as judged by its residents. In 2009, CAMRA researchers conducted a 'mapping lounge' at Wollongong's largest annual festival, gathering stories and maps that identified over 2300 cool and creative places, spread across the city. The data revealed the localised nature of 'creativity', and the value of small-scale, decentralised cultural infrastructure.

The Cool, Creative Mapping Lounge locating community perceptions of cultural vitality

WHY

In the decade since creativity has been 'discovered' by urban planners, much of the focus has been on the private sector, on transforming traditional arts into businesses and on the so-called 'creative class'. Fringe groups, amateurs, community non-profit collectives and unusual forms of creativity are often missing from analysis and from creative city visions. One of the objectives of the CAMRA project was to document what local voices felt was important for cultural planning, and to do this by experimenting with different methodologies within research partnerships. Our team of

researchers from the University of Wollongong wanted to explore how ordinary people across a medium-sized, regional city – Wollongong, NSW – felt about the place in which they lived, and what this meant for cultural planning.

Stretched thinly along 60 km of coastline, Wollongong challenges standard models of inner city bohemia/outer suburban domesticity. It has 75 suburbs – from ex-coal mining villages in the north, the CBD with university in the centre, and the steelworks and low-density post-war suburbs in the south. There is a roughly north-south socio-economic divide. How might the cultural vitality of the city be perceived by its residents? How might we plot the *geography* of creativity in the city?

WHERE



WOLLONGONG CITY COUNCIL

Size

714 km²

Remoteness

Inner regional/ Major city

Location

Illawarra region of NSW,
80 km south of Sydney CBD

Population

202,000
283 people per km²
Australia's ninth largest city

Centres

Wollongong City, with smaller neighbourhoods of Helensburgh, Coledale, Thirroul, Corrimal, Port Kembla, Unanderra, Berkeley, Dapto

Industry

Manufacturing, education, research and development, coal mining, tourism, port activities, health and community services

Demographics

predominantly working class, lower socio-economic status (with pockets of wealth) and high levels of multicultural diversity

To explore this we conducted a 'mapping lounge', which combined qualitatively rich data from interviews with quantifiable data derived from hard-copy paper maps.

HOW

to do community cultural mapping

Over the course of a year, research plans were negotiated between university researchers and cultural planners at Wollongong City Council. It was agreed that the research method needed to be, first and foremost, a public one – with profile, simplicity and accessibility. Collaborating cultural planners wanted a method sensitive to community needs but that delivered 'hard data'.

The mapping process involved two stages: a community-based data gathering exercise (at the annual Viva la Gong community festival), which used conventional and easy to deploy mapping techniques (based on paper maps); and a second stage, which required specialist expertise and more technical computer mapping methods to draw together and analyse the resulting data.

In the lead up to the festival, glossy postcards were distributed to libraries and cafes, and were printed in newspapers etc, promoting the upcoming 'mapping lounge'. The postcards were designed to advertise the key research question in a fun and engaging way and to alert people to the possibility of having their say via a variety of means: either by coming along to the festival stall; attending a focus group day; or contributing online.

Stage 1: The Mapping Lounge

- At the festival, our team consisted of five CAMRA researchers. Our stall was very basic, consisting of a tent and tables, which helped create a feeling that this was a community (rather than a university or local government) run exercise. We had initially hoped to have lounge chairs and draped curtains but the reality of the logistics made this impossible.
- We had already sourced a basic map of the Wollongong City Council region from Council, which showed suburb boundaries, a few of the major roads and the names of prominent physical and cultural sites. This map had been photocopied in black and white and now sat as a stack of A3 maps of Wollongong, at the ready.
- Two different coloured Staedtler highlighters were used to draw on the maps in response to the two interview questions asked – blue for answering 'Where is cool Wollongong?' and pink for 'Where is creative Wollongong?' (Those colours subsequently worked well in terms of readability when the maps were scanned in.)
- Festival attendees were asked to spend a few minutes of their day to record their views about where 'cool' and 'creative' Wollongong was in their city. They did this by drawing on the maps and describing in words these locations and associated activities, which we recorded on MP3 Dictaphones.
- The conversations were conducted as *vox pop* style interviews. Participants were

encouraged to think laterally, and they were free to answer as briefly or as comprehensively as they wished. Many conversations lasted 10, 20 even 30 minutes. At the end of each recorded interview, participants were asked to record their age, gender and place of residence on the map. Very few people said no, and most were very positive about the exercise. Over 200 people participated, individually and in groups, producing 160 map interviews.

- Attendance at Viva la Gong represents a broad demographic of the Wollongong community and, in approaching prospective interview participants, CAMRA researchers ensured that that diversity was reflected in the respondents.
- After the event, a blog and Facebook page were established, which allowed people to continue sharing their views on cool and creative places in Wollongong.

Stage 2: Analysis

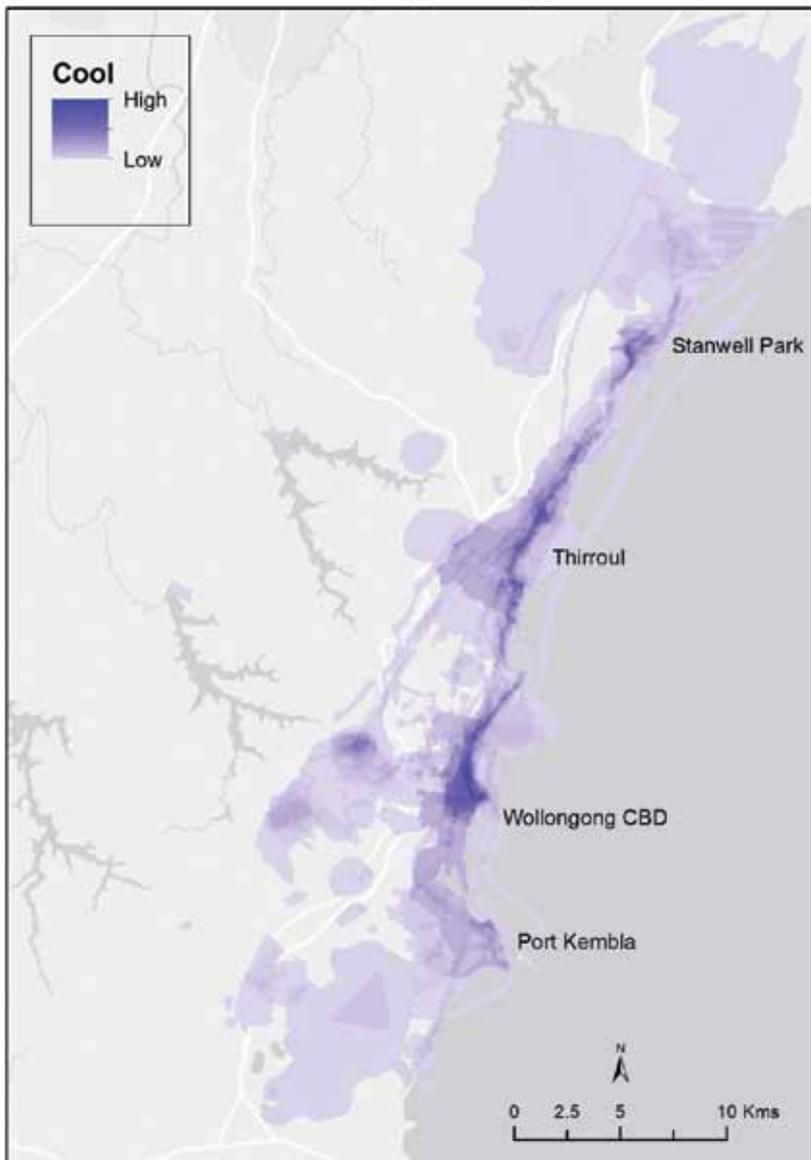
- By the end of the day we had a kilo of A3 maps and nearly half a gig of MP3 recordings – a very large dataset!
- While the technology was kept very simple on the day – paper maps, recorders – we chose to use a sophisticated digital mapping methodology to convert all the data into a digital form for collation and analysis. This meant a high degree of back-office processing afterwards, scanning and digitising all the hand-drawn maps.
- The digitised maps were then combined for analysis in a Geographic Information System (GIS). All the scribbles and markings made on each individual map were traced into the GIS and coded as either ‘cool’ or ‘creative’.
- To find the places that were the most often responded to,

all the markings made by the participants were overlaid in the GIS onto a single mapping frame and concentrations were revealed. A 3D visualisation of the data was produced, with peaks forming around the most frequently mentioned places. Converting the hand-drawn maps into this digital form allowed the GIS analysts to zoom around the map, highlighting the most popular hangouts and hear accompanying audio.

- This second stage of the research represented a considerable investment in time, expertise and equipment. ArcGIS software was used (\$20,000 licencing fee), although less expensive options such as MapInfo and free GIS systems (QuantumGIS) could be used. As well, the equivalent of a month’s full-time work was required to process and analyse all 160 maps.



Participants highlighted ‘cool’ and ‘creative’ Wollongong on the maps



Respondents' views on where is 'cool' Wollongong

OUT COMES

From that one day, we collected 2355 drawings of 'cool' and 'creative' places on the maps – an average of 14 per map. There were over 50 hours of recorded stories. The maps provided a detailed geographical representation of grassroots cultural activity in Wollongong, and while there is an obvious concentration of activity in the city centre, there is another, substantial, and decidedly *suburban* geography of creativity, with its own peaks, troughs and plateaus.

Creative places were often identified as those locations with high-profile cultural institutions such as the art gallery, performing arts centre, and entertainment centre in the CBD, as well as the 'arty' northern beachside villages. However, there were also numerous examples of everyday creativity (more often the 'cool' places): buskers, choir groups, community gardens, markets, fire-twirling, the local hardware megastore (specifically, its paint aisle!), scrapbooking, the Nan Tien Buddhist temple, bike tracks and even a Doll Club. Also ever present was the landscape: beaches, headlands, scenic lookouts – spaces of everyday engagement with nature.

The above results have implications for cultural infrastructure provision: there is evidence here that a distributed model that spreads funding across a range of grassroots community institutions, groups and infrastructure such as community halls and youth music centres would be an effective way to encourage vitality and creativity.

Equally, the results show how standard conceptions of 'creativity' barely capture what is possible – and are even confusing for many. Local pride in otherwise plain suburbs was a consistent counterpoint to the idea of creative cities as 'exceptional' places. By relaxing tight definitions of 'creativity' and 'creative industries', we opened the way to a jumble of responses – but from this stem opportunities to rethink the way cultural planning is practiced.

Finally, the festival proved to be an excellent location. Participants included whole families, retirees, students, farmers, motorcycle bikie gang members, Buddhist monks – Wollongong is the site of Australia's largest Buddhist temple – steelworkers and well-known members of the Aboriginal community. The youngest participant was 8; the oldest 80. About two-thirds of participants were women.

Reflections

The maps literally ‘stopped people in their tracks’ and many initially struggled to think of what places were cool or creative. But as they got going, people were soon talking freely, constantly using the map as a visual prompt. The hard copy maps – as a tangible, solid instrument – greatly assisted the expression of detailed and insightful comments about place.

Staff needed to be trained in ways to help coax people along who were having trouble answering the questions. Using the right language was crucial: for instance, ‘cool’ was especially problematic for older people. Instead, we substituted it with ‘fun’, ‘happy’, ‘exciting’ and ‘where do you spend your

spare time?’. A degree of flexibility was needed on the day – we found some people were more comfortable working in groups or couples rather than on their own.

The greatest challenge to rolling out such a project elsewhere are the technical GIS skills needed to conduct a similar analysis to that used in the Viva la Gong mapping lounge. Although the backend processing in this case went down a technical and expensive GIS route, other more ‘low-tech’ means for collation and analysis do exist. For example, listening to the *vox pop* interviews whilst looking at the relevant maps would allow for simple tallies and graphs to be produced about prominent places

that featured in the data. Webmapping sites such as Google Maps or Google Earth can be used as an interface to visualise and feature the most prominent sites. Webmaps can be easily marked up with pushpins and pop-up boxes that detail text, audio and video content, and are easily shared through embedding in websites or across social media. Furthermore, coding *vox pop* transcripts and looking for common themes amongst respondents does not require much in the way of software beyond a word processor. Skills in qualitative data analysis remain beneficial to this method.



A film of the Wollongong mapping methodology
<https://vimeo.com/77756380>

CAMRA Project introduction to Mapping Culture
<http://camra.culturemap.org.au/page/mapping-culture>

Gibson, Chris, Brennan-Horley, Chris, Laurenson, Beth, Riggs, Naomi, Warren, Andrew, Gallan, Ben and Brown, Heidi. 2012. [Cool places, creative places? Community perceptions of cultural vitality in the](#)

[suburbs](#)’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol 15, no 3, pp. 287–302.

Look to sites such as <http://walking-papers.org/> for easily printable maps of your local area.

Create a Google account to access the ‘my maps’ feature in <http://maps.google.com/>

Download QGIS, a free GIS package for Mac or PC

From this stem opportunities to rethink the way cultural planning is practiced

Chris Gibson
& Chris Brennan-Horley





A map interview at the 2009 Viva la Gong Festival Mapping Lounge

