





Social Tapestries at Local Level

Research into contemporary neighbourhoods suggests that the relative weakening of local social ties (by comparison with ties made beyond the neighbourhood) is likely to contribute to neighbourhood instability, potential disorder and even anti-social behaviour. The less people recognise and interact with their neighbours, the more likely it is that they will feel vulnerable and will fear or experience crime and disorder. Social Tapestries sets out to explore how mapping and sharing knowledge and experiences within neighbourhoods and communities can help to strengthen social connections and informal social control. By working with local groups to develop powerful communication channels and ways of using information, Social Tapestries can stimulate and inspire habits of creativity and participation. These in turn can assist in transforming relationships with key stakeholders such as local authorities and housing providers.

Few people have much sense of control over the forces that shape their neighbourhoods. The buildings, streets and amenities, the schools,

transport and local economy – these factors have a powerful effect on our quality of life, and yet they are hard to influence through democratic processes. When asked to contribute to consultative exercises about their local area, people often struggle with the experience of publicly articulating their views, as well as the often unfamiliar experience of a conversation with authorities. Added to this is the frequently reported sense of exasperation for the wasted time and effort when consultations are disregarded by those who commission them or sink into bureaucratic obscurity.

But residents are expert at living where they live. Social Tapestries aims to demonstrate how people can strengthen their collective use of information and communication, in their own interests, at their own pace. Proboscis does not believe in quick technological fixes for the kinds of entrenched and complex community development issues that we encounter. We are working with local groups to develop our understanding of how knowledge sharing, mapping and public authoring can contribute to the communication ecology at local level.



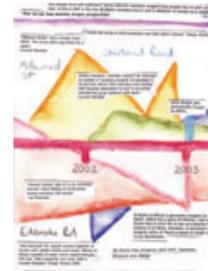
St Marks

Proboscis has worked with St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op as part of Social Tapestries to explore how a non geographically fixed housing community (transient in terms of property and membership) shares and captures knowledge. St Marks is a small housing co-op with a current membership of seventeen. It manages Housing Association properties which would otherwise be unoccupied (usually awaiting renovation, or to be sold) on a voluntary basis, providing its members with affordable short term accommodation.



Through interaction with current and former members, Proboscis has facilitated a gathering of the co-op's twenty-six year history. The resulting narrative highlights that whilst the make up of the membership and the way in which people live has changed (from large communal houses in the 1980s to mainly self contained units in 2000s) there are many overlapping themes which recur. These include the participation of members in running the co-op and decision making, the nature of trust on which it is founded and the co-operative values on which St Marks is built, which have all remained the same.

There is a real need to proactively capture and retain knowledge as most members join St Marks with little experience of managing housing and



many longer term members have recently moved on to permanent accommodation. Proboscis, working with St Marks has initiated a system for the co-op to enter 'pockets' of information linked to location via Google Earth and the Urban Tapestries platform. This will enable St Marks to build up a database of information which functions as a searchable and usable archive to inform future directions and decisions.

Havelock

Since summer 2005 Proboscis (in collaboration with Local Level) has been exploring community development and communication issues on the Havelock estate in Southall, west London. Through contact with Bev Carter of Partners in Change, who has been working on tenant management issues on the estate, we were invited to work with the Havelock Independent Residents' Organisation (HIRO).

Havelock is a spatially-defined low-rise estate comprising about 850 units, with very few facilities



apart from two primary schools, a family centre, a community shop and a small play area. Residents have been working towards a regeneration plan and are in the feasibility stage of a government funded tenant management process.



The neighbourhood lacks occasions or reasons for residents to meet up or serendipitously bump into one another for a chat. Social interaction is relatively low and many people have retreated in the face of a glowering drugs threat and unsatisfactory responses from services. Common complaints revolve around rubbish, disorder and repairs. Some of the housing is in poor condition, walls, gutters and drains are in need of repair, and rubbish accumulates in corners throughout the estate. Health problems associated with dampness and over-crowding in the flats are frequently reported.

Proboscis organised two open days in the community shop to explore these needs and concerns with residents, using a large-scale aerial photograph of the estate and tools such as StoryCubes and DIFFUSION eNoteBooks. We have since published an essay on the communication context for further work, and have begun working with residents to map environmental faults, health and housing and other data using Google Earth and Urban Tapestries in order to visualise and communicate these problems.



Neighbourhoods & Communities

SOCIAL TAPESTRIES

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Satellite imaging (Google Earth) © 2006 The GeoInformation Group

<http://socialtapestries.net/>



Weaving Threads of Engagement

To explore Social Tapestries in neighbourhoods and communities, Proboscis has mirrored the aims of the project with our own process. The creation of networks and partnerships with intermediaries and peers – in grassroots communities, civil society organisations, arts and culture, academia, business and government – has been crucial. Without this kind of collective and collaborative effort, we would not have been able to bridge these vastly different sectors, often bringing together people with diverging views and interests who would otherwise not meet. Our role as artists has been critical to this process, giving us license to act and to engage with different, often conflicting, agendas without being co-opted by any single one.

The way we work is to foster spaces of exchange, to encourage a culture of listening. How we achieve this is through our own tools and techniques of authoring and sharing – Creative Labs, Public Forums, Bodystorming Experiences, Issue Cards, DIFFUSION eBooks, StoryCubes, Cultural Snapshots and films. Many of the key issues and themes of Social Tapestries were mapped out during Bodystorming workshops and a Creative Lab held in April and September 2004. These events focused on neighbourliness, social capital in the public commons and community reportage as vehicles for imagining

how public authoring could make a difference at local level. Three main areas of benefit were identified:

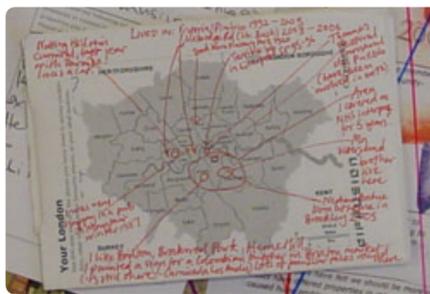
Testimony – public authoring facilitates an inscription of public space that empowers individuals by valuing their local knowledge and enables the contribution of 'testimonies' which encourage a greater sense of investment in community through participation.

Depth of Consultation – the broad catchment of opinions and input beyond the usual interest groups enables ongoing, organic and accretive consultation by and for local people, not just officials.

Visualising and Mapping Change – public authoring creates opportunities to picture and track change, enabling a greater understanding of the process, progress and ownership of change.

Public authoring was also seen to have the potential to:

- identify physical and social barriers to 'flow' within communities and urban environments
- provide a means by which people can respond to their community in their own time
- allow access to a shared history which informs the character of a neighbourhood, not simply the physical structures
- foster the sense of community by enabling threads of connections to multiply
- disperse 'social capital' across geographic, demographic and cultural barriers



- encourage 'investment' in a community to move beyond a geographically fixed mode to a more open sense of 'neighbourliness'

Making Things

Making ideas and issues tangible, graspable, helps step over many of the stumbling blocks to understanding and coping with change. Many of our tools and techniques seek to achieve this, by creating situations and experiences and using familiar materials in innovative formats.

Issue Cards

Proboscis created a series of eight cards to stimulate explorations of public authoring in different contexts. The cards describe practical situations where mobile

technology and public authoring could positively enhance neighbourhoods and communities. First used at the Creative Lab in September 2004, the most popular concept proposed local people as 'eyes on the street', helping local authorities identify and tackle maintenance and repair problems. By encouraging a two-way interaction of public knowledge sharing and action by the council, this could build up trust between citizens and local government, as well as to foster local pride.

StoryCubes

How can you hold an issue in your hand? Proboscis designed eight StoryCubes to visualise relationships and associations between *Mobility, Safety, Learning, Environment, Reportage, Memory, Presence and Participation*. Each cube has six images acting as visual clues, encouraging themed discussion without having to verbalise the underlying 'issues'. Stacking the cubes in multiple configurations provides many different points of view and unexpected connections. StoryCubes are a tactile tool which can be designed specifically in response to, or by a community to relate to their locality and local issues. StoryCubes enable a shift in the perception of scale between the individual and their locality. Subjects such as safety or the environment can seem overwhelming; StoryCubes put these issues into the palm of your hand.

