BOOK REVIEW

Artistic Approaches to Cultural Mapping: Activating Imaginaries and Means of Knowing, edited by Nancy Duxbury, W. F. Garrett-Petts and Alys Longley, London, Routledge, 2019, 325 pp., 43 B/W Illus., £ 105.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781138088238, £ 39.99 (eBook), ISBN: 9781315110028

This book examines, and demonstrates, how cultural mapping techniques can be applied via a range of artistic forms and practices across different social, cultural, political and geographical contexts. It is a theoretically informed collection of articles dealing with the relationship between people, place and culture. The leading theme is the potential of practice-led research carried out by artists in exploring and articulating these connections. Most of the writers are artist-researchers themselves, representing choreography, performance and scenography, among other fields, often with an ethnographic twist.

The articles build upon presentations at the conference *Mapping Culture: Communities, Sites and Stories* held five years ago at the University of Coimbra where Nancy Duxbury is based. She is one of the most prolific scholars currently developing the cultural mapping approach in an international network. In 2015, Duxbury edited with William Garrett-Petts and David MacLennan the book *Cultural Mapping as Cultural Inquiry* (Routledge), and the following year she and Alys Longley edited a special issue of *City, Culture and Society* (2016). The latter was based on a 2014 conference under the theme "Mapping cultural intangibles". The current book continues on this topic, focusing on the promise of artistic research.

In addition to the editors' introduction and a roundtable discussion coordinated by Garrett-Petts, the book contains 15 individual articles that are divided into four sections: Contextual terrain, Self and place, Community and place, and Cultures of place. Including the editors, there are 24 contributors. As it is impossible to give each article its due in a short review, I have chosen to position the book and define its contribution to the field of cultural mapping, and I will also point to some problematic issues in this overall excellent and inspiring publication.

Cultural mapping is today both a planning and development tool and a form of research; it is essentially interdisciplinary, participatory and place-based. As a community engagement technique for recording and representing local characteristics, cultural mapping has existed in some form since the 1960s, and it was endorsed by UNESCO in the 1990s as a method for safeguarding cultural assets. It has served in creative industry programmes as well, thanks to its power to reveal community resources and build connections that can be harnessed. The book at hand represents the recent development in cultural mapping toward a critical research approach, as a part of which it is adopting new methodologies, perspectives, objectives and partners.

In the service of planning and policy purposes, the cultural mapping of a locality tends to be limited to tangible resources that are readily definable and quantifiable. Against this background, *Artistic approaches to cultural mapping* emerges as ambitious and radical. First, the authors have chosen to tackle the challenging intangibles, and second, they suggest that these may be accessed through practice-led, creative research. Aided by artist-researchers, cultural mappers now wish to explore and articulate that which has remained indescribable, ineffable and unutterable. The logocentric model of scholarship is questioned in favour of

alternative forms of discourse; the intangibilities may, for instance, be explored and expressed via performance. The target is set at the most elusive qualities: subjective, affective, intuitive, ephemeral, ambiguous, fragile, liminal, emergent, contingent, and so forth. Moreover, an embodied, relational, plural and open-ended conception of knowledge is advocated.

Taken as a whole the book succeeds in making a convincing argument to the effect that intangibilities are fundamental for our understanding of the "most precious idiosyncrasies of place", to use Davisi Boontharm's (p. 65) phrase, and that artistic research offers a valuable tool for catching and expressing them. As Paul Carter (p. 52) formulates in his article, places are ultimately "poetic constructions". Deep mapping with the body and knowing through walking seem appropriate ways to comprehend our encounters with places. Some articles in the book even manage to arouse kinaesthetic memories of moving in specific localities.

However, the qualities that make the book pertinent to art and research after the social and spatial turns may be its weakest point in the context of public planning and development practices, where cultural mapping usually operates. As Paul Carter (p. 57) points out, "it is unusual for planning agencies to embrace poetic logic". Even though the idea is not to replace the existing practices but to complement them, collaboration may be difficult due to completely different viewpoints and languages. Supporters of more conventional views have another idea of rigorous research and valid data, and they will ask if the findings are generalisable. Planners will also be at loss with the ambiguity and fluidity, and the lack of measurables. As Kathleen Irwin (p. 131) notes in her article, "soft mapping" produces sentiments. She continues: "What we map is not buildings and monuments, but the ephemera that make a community unique –" (p. 132). The challenge is how to make the "felt senses" of place usable for public policies.

The book relates to the ongoing discussion about hybrid or new artistry, i.e. the use of artistic expertise in non-artistic surroundings. However, in places it appears that the authors have an uncritical trust in the powers of artists, who can help us see and think differently and imagine possible futures. Craig Saper (p. 254) for instance talks about "the often spiritual or visionary sensibility of the artists"; the enigmatic "artistic sensibility" appears in many other chapters as well. While artists evidently could play a much wider role in their communities than they do today, it does not necessarily come naturally to them. Neither are all of them inclined to working collectively and for extra-artistic purposes. As Shannon Jackson points out in the roundtable discussion, artists may resist new ways of working and they would require special training to function in crossover situations. What's more, they need ethical commitment to remain true to the community's sensibilities and needs, as cultural mapping demands, instead of pursuing their own agenda.

Cultural mapping is about investigating and expressing communal connections to place. The danger is that when an artist does the mapping without engaging local people, as seems to have been the case in some of the book's projects, the outcome may become deep but private and singular. Such a "map" may still resonate with others and evoke memories and imaginaries, but the methodology has not been inclusive, as would be expected in cultural mapping. Cultural mapping on the whole builds upon the idea that the process itself is important and may induce change in social structures. Therefore, artists need to work with communities all the way through projects.

To conclude, the approach presented in the book has great prospects. The few shortcomings have already been recognised by the authors and will surely be addressed in the future. There is no doubt that *Artistic approaches to cultural mapping* can be recommended as essential reading for researchers and practitioners in many different areas, such as community art, cultural policies, urban planning, social pedagogy and professional facilitation.

References

Duxbury, N., Garrett-Petts, W. F., & MacLennan, D. (2015). *Cultural Mapping and Cultural Inquiry*. New York: Routledge.

Longley, A., & Duxbury, N. (2016). Introduction: Mapping cultural intangibles. *City, Culture and Society*, *7*, 1–7.

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