



Urbanistica n. 131

September-December 2006

Distribution by www.planum.net

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The project Parish Maps in West Sussex

Kim Leslie

Firstly to define the term 'parish map' as we in England understand it. This type of map might otherwise be called a 'community map'. Different words but they mean the same thing. Parish - or community - maps are defined by the following characteristics:

- They are made by local people who know all about where they live. They are not - in most cases - professional cartographers, professional environmentalists, professional planners, professional architects, professional artists, professional historians, professional naturalists.

- They are amateurs. Their skill is that they know about living in their community, they know its details, its everyday life and about its main features. Significantly they are residents with their own skills and knowledge, with their own feelings about where they live.

- They are about local identity and local distinctiveness, about the features which make one place different from any other, the features that make it special.

- They record three types of information: The Past, The Present, Wildlife.

What is unusual about these maps is that they show parishes through the eyes of local people. Unlike other maps usually produced for official, business and legal purposes, these are essentially democratic expressions of what people think about the place where they live; they are value judgements about the importance people attach to features within their communities.

They record psychological, emotional and social values. This is what makes parish maps such an important environmental, sociological

and historical record of our time. They are the bottom-up view of the local world. They have the potential to involve people in an active way as participants, rather than spectators.

Importantly the parish map is an ideal way to define and strengthen local identity. Its various elements come together to create a place with a unique identity, a place that is special and different from anywhere else, making a place that is 'somewhere' rather than 'nowhere'. Parish maps are 'place-makers'.

Parish maps have the potential to link together all aspects of a specific territory. So these are maps with very different, but interconnected, layers of information.

They thus emphasise the unity, or wholeness, of a place within a distinct geographical setting.

Some benefits of making parish maps

In England these maps can be a potential source of evidence for planning decisions. New legislation - the Planning and Compulsory purchase act 2004 - is putting an increased emphasis on the need for community engagement in the planning process. In the past there have been opportunities for the public to comment on planning matters, but new requirements now mean that planning authorities must prepare a Statement of Community involvement to demonstrate that consultation has taken place at each stage of policy development. To do this planning authorities must prepare a series of documents that detail, inter alia, the nature and extent of the community involvement and engagement techniques used.

One of the policy documents available for consultation is called the Parish plan, an action plan for the future based on the views and opinions of the

local community. These plans can include parish maps. What is so useful is that the maps can sum up, for an outsider (i.e. a planner or inspector), the feel for a place. From just one sheet of paper - not a long report - the outsider can learn instantly about the place, about its characteristics, its local identity, what the people treasure most about its distinguishing features as seen by local people. The parish map can be a bridge carrying local perceptions into the technical world of the planner.

Since speaking at two other conferences in Italy - in Turin in 2002, and Biella in 2003 - several initiatives have followed with the sharing of information about the west Sussex Parish Maps project with:

- Ecomuseums in Italy - Ecomuseums and parish maps are both about local identity. Indeed they have been called 'identity museums' by Giovanni Pinna in *Ecomuseums in Europe: What they are and what they can be* (Ires, Turin, 2000), p. 5. The involvement of a local community with its ecomuseum is a strong element in the museum's success. Community maps, following the west Sussex example, are being made in Italy to involve and strengthen the bonds between people and these museums.

- The International Cooperation for Development - through the University of Turin - has been supplied with information from West Sussex in working on a project in the Cape Verde Islands to help build identity amongst local people for which it is planning to use parish maps as a tool.

- The World conservation union working through The Theme on indigenous and local communities, equity, and protected areas (Tilcepa) has expressed an

interest in community map making for Community conserved areas, and is liaising with west Sussex. This work is about giving protection to indigenous and mobile peoples and their lands. The role of community map making in engaging with local people is on Tilcepa's agenda.

- Kobe in Japan was devastated by an earthquake in 1996, creating enormous losses and the need to rebuild. A European firm of consultants based in Belgium has been involved in 'participation planning' to ensure that the views and feelings of local residents are taken into account in the city's reconstruction. An important tool in this approach is in community-made maps to discover what local people remember about pre-earthquake features and want to carry over in new plans for their homes and neighbourhoods.

- A leading influence in this field is Guan Ursi from Belgium who has created a new word for parish or community maps. He acknowledges the debt to the English - Common Ground - type of map and has been to West Sussex to research how these maps are made. He calls them 'softmaps' which are about feelings and attitudes about a place, as distinct to what he calls 'hardmaps' which are official maps about the facts of a place, indicating the state of the land from a surveyor's, planner's and geographer's view. This is what he says about softmaps: Neighbourhood people 'could draw the buildings and spaces they know [...] People could write down the happenings that take place every month or year at their marketplace. They could mark the important items of their street, the beautiful old trees that bloom every spring, the old factory where their grandparents used to work, the bridge where their

kids are meeting their friends. It would be a map with tons of sociological information about the neighbourhood. It would reflect social behaviour, psychological links and attachments, schizophrenic situations and anthropological expressions that residents carry in their minds and hearts [...] His book is called Softmaps: A Planning strategy for complex societies and hazardous areas (unpublished draft, UrG Consultants, Kobe, Japan, 2001).

There is enormous scope in this approach to planning if people are to have a say in redevelopment after a cataclysmic tragedy. There are implications for using these methods for engaging with dispossessed peoples in the aftermath of the recent Asian Tsunami disaster in late 2004.

Notes

1. The article is an abstract of the participation that Kim Leslie presented at the international Seminary of study "To know technician and to know premises for the construction of scenes of plan" (Genoa, 18 february 2005). Kim Leslie is director of the west Sussex Parish maps project in England in which over 100 parishes have been recorded by 2,500 volunteers. The west Sussex project set out to create a record of the county, parish by parish, for the millennium period around the year 2000. Common ground's website: www.england-in-particular.info

2. The idea of these parish maps was originally devised by the environmental organisation Common ground in the mid 1980s. The original project took four years - from 1998 to 2001 - producing a total of 83 maps and involving at least 2000 volunteers. Since the millennium other parishes have wished to make a map and so the project continues today. Now over 100 parishes are covered by these maps which have involved 2,500 volunteers in their production.