

# The cultural potential of the spaces we inhabit

Ahead of the Cultural Mapping conference organised by the Valletta 2018 Foundation, TEODOR RELJIC speaks to researcher and conference participant Dr Nancy Duxbury about her expertise in the emerging field of cultural mapping, and how it can be applied to the Maltese scenario

**How would you describe cultural mapping to those unfamiliar with the concept. What would you say are some of its most salient concerns and priorities, and how would you say they can have a direct benefit on our understanding of public and cultural spaces?**

Cultural mapping can be described as a set of approaches or methodological tools to involve communities in the identification and recording of local cultural assets, with the implication that this knowledge will then be used to inform collective strategies, planning processes, or other initiatives. These participatory and interdisciplinary methodologies enable processes to articulate and record and thus “make visible” the multi-layered cultural aspects and meanings of a particular place, both tangible and intangible. Cultural mapping promises new ways of describing, accounting for, and coming to terms with the cultural resources of communities and places.

Leading approaches to cultural mapping today acknowledge the shifting and fragmented nature of many communities and aim to reflect and privilege pluralistic local knowledges, perceptions of importance, and ways of understanding. Extending from this, they also aim to draw connections and articulate relationships between people and place, culture and nature. This work aims not only to document and preserve this information but also to catalyze and propel place-embedded cultural traditions and knowledges into the future, constructing the scaffolding for pluralist cultural sustainability.

**How ‘transferable’ are the tools of cultural mapping? Could you apply certain basic tenets of cultural mapping to any country or location?**

Cultural mapping is transferable to any size of community and different approaches have been applied in a diverse array of settings internationally. Cultural mapping guides have been produced in countries as diverse as Canada, New Caledonia (for south Pacific islands), Thailand, Brazil, Kenya, and South Africa. The cultural mapping approaches adopted in each place have been adapted to the purposes, needs, and specific realities of each place. Attentiveness to local distinctive characteristics and issues, and the multiplicities of perspectives, histories, and knowledges that give meanings to a place are at the core of contemporary cultural mapping approaches.

**What are some of the main challenges when it comes to executing effective cultural mapping, and communicating this to the more general public, especially given how it’s a relative new discipline?**

As an emerging field, it is being built up through an array of methodologies and approaches. It is a field that is informed by multi-disciplinary research and schol-



Dr Nancy Duxbury

arly innovations, evolving cultural planning practices, modes of artistic inquiry, and technological advances. Thus, is it not a singular “entity,” and approaches will differ in the techniques employed and the purposes of each project, as well as the degree to which community members are engaged

in processes and how they participate. The projects are very much created to fit particular purposes and circumstances. For example, communities have traditionally focused on mapping tangible and “locate-able” assets and features, but have increasingly found that important intangible dimensions of place must also be included in cultural mapping exercises, and are experimenting with different ways of capturing and communicating these stories. The outputs of most cultural mapping processes are linked to a geographical map, but not always. Sometimes the information compiled is best communicated in other ways, for example, directories or inventories, graphics, books, audio and video works, or even 3D models!

**What drives your interest in Culturizing Sustainable Cities? And how do you think the concepts therein could apply to a space like Malta, with its small size and lax attitude towards environmental concerns?**

While levels of evident conviction may vary, I believe communities of all sizes are concerned with

their future sustainability, typically anchored in environmental concerns but also in a more holistic and multidimensional ways incorporating economic, social and cultural aspects. However, giving the pressing environmental issues today, in policies and investment programmes to support sustainable cities and communities, the focus has been primarily (often exclusively) on environmental issues and concerns – often positioned as technical, top-down problems and solutions.

My interest in ‘Culturizing Sustainable Cities’ is aligned with citizen-driven actions in co-creating their future cities, and the role that cultural and creative initiatives can play in connecting people with place and the stewardship of their local environment.

It also recognizes artistic projects to address environmental issues, and efforts of planners to incorporate cultural dimensions within community sustainability plans.

Culture’s place within processes to design and develop more sustainable cities and communities is not yet widely understood

and thus often marginalized. Yet a wide range of experimental initiatives can be observed in both policy/planning and cultural spheres, contextualized amidst growing concern about the need to go beyond “creative city” intercity competition or to invent strategies to involve artistic-cultural actors in fostering more sustainable cities.

I want to learn from the many varied projects and planning experiments underway to that are advancing these practices. How can we build more culturally and environmentally sensitive sustainable cities? What artistic and policy/planning practices should be considered to inform the design of symbiotic in situ systems of arrangements to catalyze and build this environment?

*The conference Cultural Mapping: Debating Spaces and Places will be taking place on October 22 and 23 at the Mediterranean Conference Centre, Valletta. For more information log on to: [www.valletta2018.org/cultural-mapping-debating-spaces-and-places](http://www.valletta2018.org/cultural-mapping-debating-spaces-and-places)*

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