

Our Own Backyard: a Participatory Community Project

—Tammie Tupechka

In August 1996, the Institute for the Humanities participated in an important new initiative—a three-way collaboration with Britannia Community Education and the local community around Grandview Woodlands. The project, named “Our Own Backyard” embarked on a three-year long project in the Grandview Woodland community of inner city Vancouver, a neighborhood with a long history of social, architectural, business and educational change. This innovative and groundbreaking project utilized two important community education tools: community mapping and grassroots community planning. These tools were implemented with the intention of providing a space for community members to voice their opinions, ideas, hopes, plans and understandings of the increasingly changing community. This inner city community, like many other inner city communities across North America, has been faced with increased development pressure in the form of residential and commercial gentrification spurred on by the “status” of Vancouver as a world city and the pressure of global capitalism. Coupled

with this have been the continued influx of immigrants from the Pacific Rim and other areas of the world, contributing to this community’s “multicultural” compilation. As Jerry Zaslove termed it, this is a “community in rapid transition,” and therefore the innovative structure of the project as well as the uniquely collaborative



nature provided an important tool for community education and empowerment.

The project’s implementation of community mapping involved simply asking community members what they valued about the community. The form the maps took goes far beyond conventional maps, which often constrain the way we see our urban landscape. Our homes,

our neighborhoods and what they mean to us are not reflected in traditional maps that city planners and developers use. The people of Grandview Woodlands (re)appropriated the map, became the mapmakers, the image-makers, the documenters and documentaries of their place, their homes, their neighborhood. The people of this neighborhood created images that were meaningful to them in a variety of ‘map’ forms: banners, murals, photographs, paintings, drawings, collages, stories, clay tiles and sculptures. Nine themes emerged out of the two year long mapping process that was then used as the basis for a year long grassroots community planning process. Throughout the three-year project, over 2500 people participated, representing a wide range of community members from elementary students to elders in the neighborhood.

Funding for the project was received from various funding bodies. There was frequent consultation with the community by academics (Bev Pitman and Nick Blomley of the Simon Fraser Geography department) and social activists. The project was a recipient of a three-year grant from the prestigious Urban Issues Program of the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation. In addition, the project received grants from VanCity, the BC Heritage Trust Program and the Vancouver City Office of Cultural affairs.

Britannia Community Services Center provided administrative support and meeting and workshop space. The Institute for the Humanities provided grants and a research assistant for the process. The four main organizers were: Karen Martin, project coordinator and community member; Enzo Guerirero, from Britannia Community Education; Jerry Zaslove, representing the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University; and myself as a research assistant on behalf of the Institute. The project began several years earlier when Liz Root, now a city planner in Toronto, researched the possibilities for establishing a Humanities Store Front drop-in center on Commercial Drive. The project evolved into the “Our Own Backyard” mapping projects.

Five publications or “communities’ legacies” were created throughout the project: *Stories from Our Own Backyard: a history of the Grandview Woodland as told by neighborhood seniors*, was a cross-generational and cross-cultural oral history project that was started in Fall of 1995 with the grade 11 students of Britannia Senior Secondary interviewing seniors in the community concerning their experience of history in the community. This project set the groundwork for the collaborative creation of the “Our Own Backyard” project. *Our Own Backyard: Walking Tours of Grandview Woodland*, involved the creation of six walking tours of the neighborhood that highlighted the local history and contemporary issues of this community. Over 180 sites were researched and a booklet and audiotapes available at the local library were created. *A Pictorial History: Commercial Drive 1912-1954*, is a historical photograph book of the various heritage buildings on the vibrant focal point of commercial activity, Commercial Drive. These three historical books were the recipients of the Vancouver Heritage award of merit in spring of 1998. *Journey through the Neighborhood: Our Community Atlas*, is a spectacular documentation of all the maps created throughout the first two years of the project. Two full colour, fold out atlases that were created are available in the local library of Britannia, as well as 50 copies of a black and white version. The final publication was completed in 2001, and is entitled *Hopes, Dreams and Community Action*, and is a record of over 1000 community members’ participation in the grassroots planning process.

Although the major funding from the Bronfman Foundation ended in the summer of 1999, the project, with funding and participation provided by the Institute for the Humanities, has continued to contribute to the ongoing political process within this community. In spring of 2001, the mapping and planning document

mentioned above was used as a basis for a collaborative project between Simon Fraser University and Britannia Community Education entitled “Critical University,” (see the article in this issue).

In addition, I have been conducting various workshops on community mapping. For example, in April 2001 I conducted a community mapping workshop in Victoria, BC, hosted by the common ground mapping

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coalition. I was the guest speaker at this conference and the way in which I was introduced exemplifies the ongoing importance of the “Our Own Backyard” project, to both theory and practice in the Grandview Woodland community and other communities. Throughout the workshop, I was struck by the multiplicity of intended or actual mapping projects that both mirrored and moved beyond the Our Own Backyard process. I am struck by how in dissemination of information is in respect to community level work. Residents, teachers, government officials, planners, students were together in the room, all discussing their understanding of mapping. The map was a

place where dialogue could begin and differences explored by various actors coming from a range of personal positions based on class, ethnicity, age and gender. The issues that we faced in the “Our Own Backyard” project are still there, but from our experience and the different ways we have shared the knowledge—phone calls, conferences and workshops across many realms of academia, community education—seem to have helped, at the very least, different people

begin to both understand the power of maps and to discuss the politics of place. Mapping is a tool for social action and is becoming more widely known in many metropolitan areas. In addition, at a time when Universities are seeking community affiliation and seeing that they have a responsibility to disseminate scholarship and knowledge in forums for participatory action, “Our Own Backyard” provided a creative and

critical way to understand how political power and cultural forces can be represented and documented. Many conclusions can be drawn from this project and research is continuing.

