Cultural Mapping

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Cities are associated with their iconic cultural landmarks, from famous art institutions to often visited historic sites. Major cities often have several beautiful museums or concert halls; New York is known for its sheer number of venerated institutions, frequented by tourists and locals alike. However, it would be reductive and bizarre to characterize the entire city's culture based on large, well-known and well-funded places. Small galleries, warehouse performance spaces, neighborhood businesses and corner stores, public markets, and culture expressed on the streets are also essential to the city's amalgamated culture, which are found in every neighborhood, not just the ones frequented by tourists.

While a city's culture cannot be distilled to singular institutions or emblems, it is often (rightfully) difficult to parse and define, especially for policymakers and planners. However, when city and regional governments want to materially support cultural development and the arts in various forms, the question of "how" is a daunting one, especially when it is difficult to say what constitutes a cultural asset. Too often, it is easy for city officials to be prescriptive, and take a top-down approach to a planning process.

Cultural asset mapping is a way that cities and regions can understand the complex ecosystem of venues, galleries, businesses and public spaces that contribute to their larger civic culture. Specifically, it involves the representation of culture and cultural sites of value, spatially represented to an individual city or region. The National Endowment for the Arts endorses the practice in the U.S as a first step in identifying the local people, organizations, facilities, and businesses in the arts/culture/design industry.[1] Canada has also produced guidance for local governments.[2] Representations can vary; static maps, online interactive maps, and mixed media products that include spatial representation are all valid forms of asset mapping.[3] Many cities have undertaken cultural asset mapping as a starting place for longer term planning to support their cultural sectors.
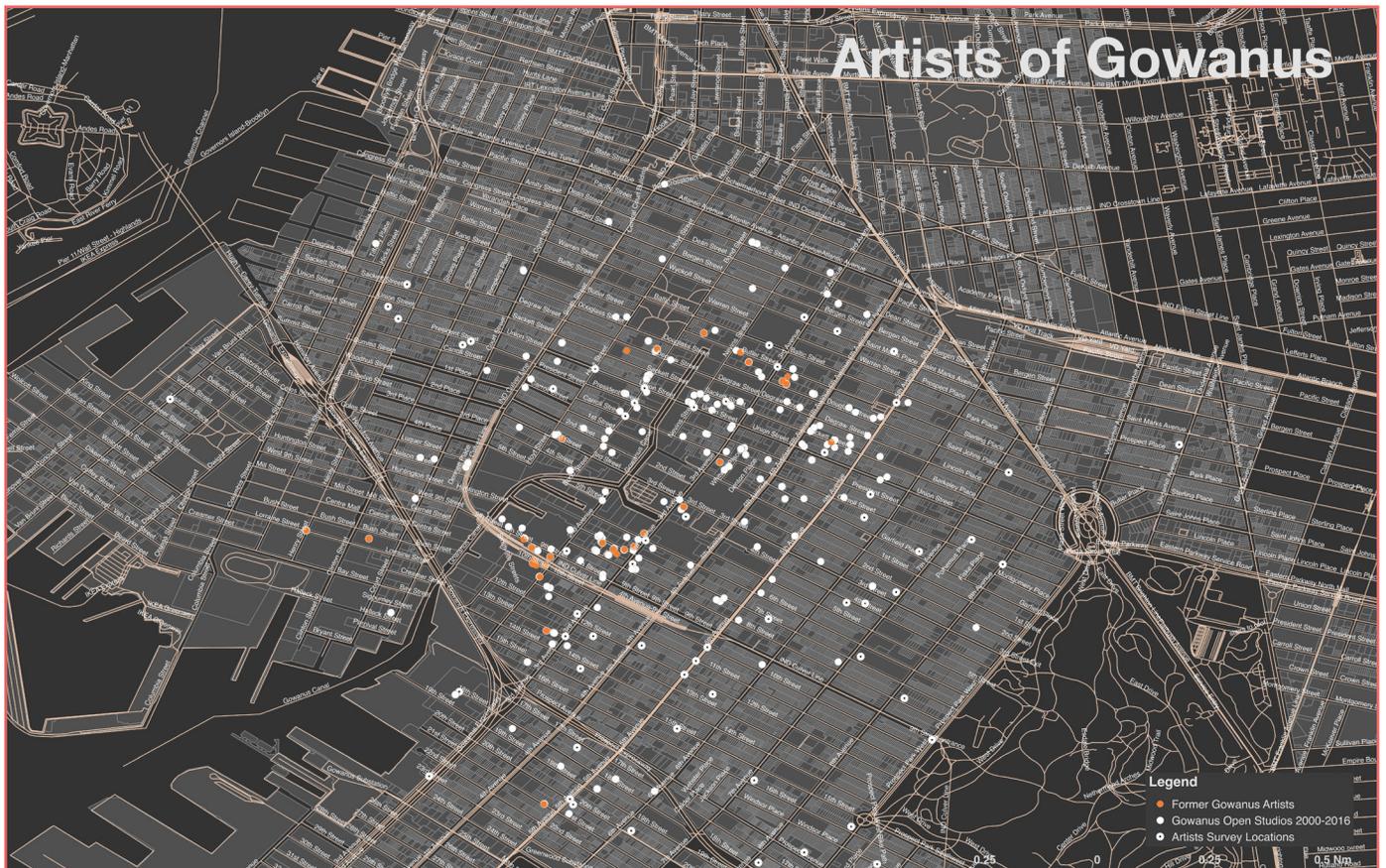
The location of former and existing art studios in the Gowanus Neighborhood of Brooklyn in 2016, compiled using a neighborhood survey and data from Gowanus Open Studios. *Courtesy of Eparque Urban Strategies*

What is the value of asset mapping?

It is a method of public engagement.

Not only is the geospatial depiction of a city's cultural resources informative, the pathway by which this product is developed often involves deliberate and purposeful community engagement. In many cases, the process of connecting stakeholders, convening residents, and working together to create a product or tool is valuable itself. In 2016, the City of Austin engaged in a cultural mapping process. The result was a database describing the multiplicity of cultural sites in the city. These data were later used to develop economic development strategies, as well as anti displacement measures. While these data were valuable, stakeholders from around the city were able to participate in the process, strengthening relationships.[4]

It is a method of ensuring equity in the planning process.

City officials may especially be concerned about arts equity – that is, the provision of resources to varying types of community assets, not just large cultural institutions. According to PolicyLink, when asset mapping is done for the purposes of making public support for the arts more equitable, it should focus "on collectivizing the knowledge and wisdom held by low–income communities and communities of color about the important cultural keystones of their neighborhoods, including places — such as barbershops, corner stores, food hubs, gathering plazas, and front porches; as well as people and identity."[5] Communities can undertake asset mapping in order to affirm the cultural and social value of often undervalued and neglected places.

"Many cities have undertaken cultural asset mapping as a starting place for longer term planning to support their cultural sectors."

It can be a relationship builder.

When this engagement process is done well, cities can connect with organizations and individuals working within the cultural space. They can establish these relationships for future information gathering or for potential partnerships and collaboration. The process itself is an essential component of asset mapping; while the final products, including a map presented in any form, reports or databases are useful, a well–managed engagement process is an end in itself.

It can spatialize assets for the purpose of policymaking and resource allocation.

Planning is a spatially–derived activity, and the projection of various sites and assets onto a spatial representation allows cities to better understand the makeup of their individual neighborhoods. Demographic characterizations may be overlaid, in addition to current city policies and future plans, including zoning maps and other representations. Beyond assisting public sector officials, it also allows the public and stakeholders to view culture relative to other understandings of place. For example, the Arts Council of Kentucky created a guide to assist cities with planning, specifically at the neighborhood level for cultural districts. Cultural Asset Mapping Project (C.A.M.P.) is part of a larger initiative led by the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events to support a long–term visioning process for cultural centers to better support performing arts, cultural production and activities. Cities should consider what level they want to conduct mapping in tandem with the overall scoping of a particular study.[6]

It is a method for collective conceptualization of culture in a city.

These assets can come in many forms. Massachusetts' Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) for Greater Boston developed a guidance document that describes the types of assets that may be considered in a mapping process.[7] They consider tangible assets on both public and private land, as well as intangible assets – stories, traditions, relationships and other contributors to identity.

Cities and regional governments can support the arts through a variety of policy instruments, from zoning and land use changes to resource allocation and programmatic support. Asset mapping provides a basis for forming policy; therefore it should be inclusive to all neighborhoods and communities to be of value. Rather than simply supporting "what is seen,' – that is, museums, opera houses and famous landmarks, cities should strive to tailor policy interventions to understated overlooked places, those that are an expression of collective identity.

Chicago Theatre Asset Map (Chicago Cultural Center, 2019)
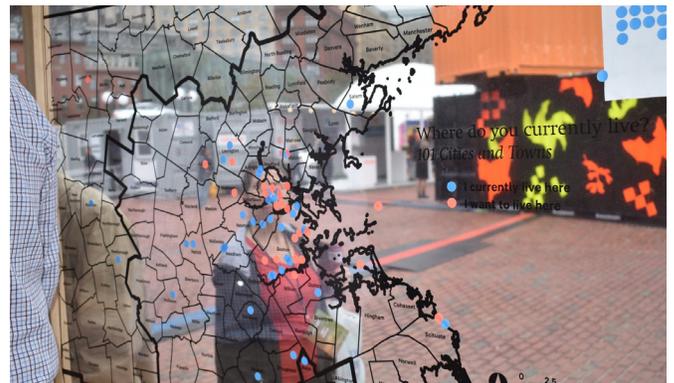
Metropolitan Area Planning Council's (MAPC) Cultural Asset Mapping Visualization

Methods

Several methods are available for planners to use to conduct asset mapping. Planners should consider the following characteristics when choosing a method for mapping, and distinguish between **data collection**, **data visualization**, and **data storage and use.** Each of these are three discrete components of the mapping process. The following questions should guide planners in choosing a method for each component.

○ **How will the public be encouraged to participate?** Practitioners should consider how they want the public to be able to add to the map, and what specific outcomes they want to come from the mapping process. Participants may be encouraged to submit information via an online platform, attend brainstorming or in-person mapping charrettes or convenings, or be long-term participants in a more involved data collection effort. These run the spectrum of low to high engagement.

○ **How dynamic and updateable should the materials be?** The answer to this question depends on the planning efforts that the map will be associated with. If the goal is to develop recommendations for specific policies and programs, it may not be necessary to update the map on a regular basis after these have been drafted unless to evaluate the impacts of these policies. If the map is to serve as a repository for art and cultural practitioners, updates will need to be made to the project regularly in order for it to be useful.

○ **What type of information is being collected? How will the map be used and who will use it?** Cities can collect information on cultural sites, such as galleries, potential studio space, existing studios, performance venues, etc. Other cultural assets, such as public art, businesses, historic landmarks, and others that may be less intuitively captured can also be included in crowdfunding or data collection processes. Maps can serve to both inform governing agencies and various stakeholders—including businesses, arts practitioners, the general public, and other invested individuals. With this, they can inform official policy, serve as a reference, or begin a dialogue for a longer-term planning process.

Once there is a clear end use of the map, the design, functionality and medium should follow. For example, the City of Oakland crowdsourced information about cultural assets and places from residents for the goal of arts equity and developing a cultural plan. Baltimore collected more specific information about individual neighborhoods, combining the cultural data with zoning and other spatial demarcations, as the purpose of the mapping exercise was to specifically inform spatial planning. New York City's Department of Cultural affairs had individual nonprofits collect neighborhood specific data, because the goal of the mapping and inventory exercise was to improve arts access in specific low-income communities.

In answering the questions above, communities should then move to decide on **collection** and **display/visualization** methods. In choosing these methods, they can then develop a plan for **data storage/further use**. Sample methods are listed below.

Methods for Collection and Visualization

In order to create a map of cultural assets, communities require data input from residents and important stakeholders—such as cultural workers, practitioners, etc. Methods can be mixed and tiered based on the level of inquiry involved; the National Endowment for the Arts notes for its Our Town program, a community-based arts program, many communities begin with electronic surveys but then require additional, deeper conversations with the community to meet project needs.[10]

o **Analog collection and visualization:** Cities can collect information through analog methods, such as door-to-door surveying or in-person listening and conversation sessions. For example the Arts Coalition of Chicago issued a call to artists to create maps following convening sessions.[11]

Sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, Project Willowbrook began with in-person convenings, which were later transitioned into work products.[12] Methods are also not limited to standard research collection. The City of Boston utilized artist-ethnographers who used their community knowledge to conduct research foundational to place-based characterization.[13] The City of Brattleboro, Vermont, created an analog map, which was a reimagination of a traditional analog atlas.[14]

o **Digital data collection, crowdsourcing and visualization** Communities can collect information via multiple methods of digital engagement. While digital methods are often thought of as lower engagement, though wider-


An example of analog data collection and visualization of key landmarks, parcels with vacant historic buildings and buildings in structurally problematic condition in Famagusta Walled City *(Source: Eparque Urban Strategies)*
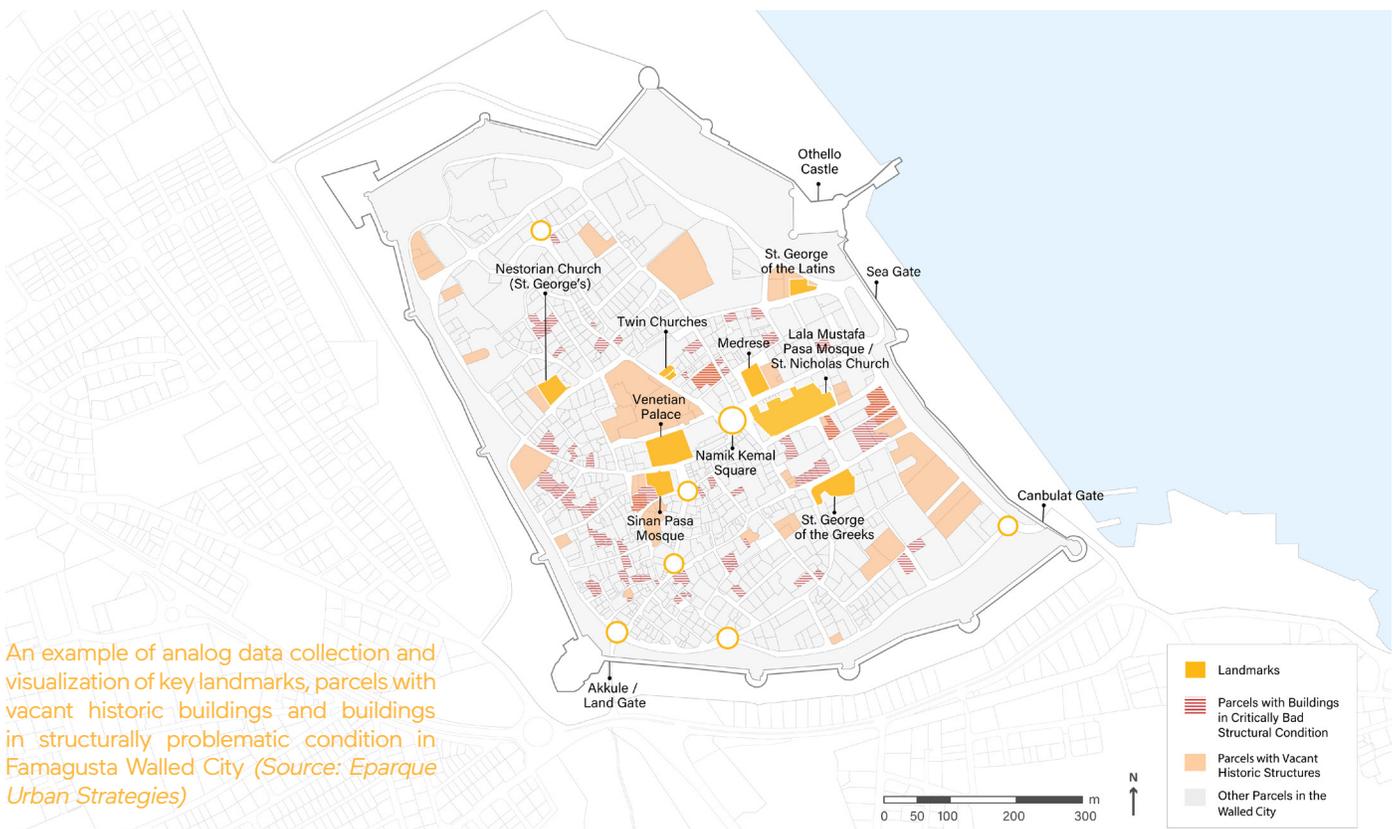
reaching because of their convenience, there is a large spectrum of engagement that follows from various methods.

○ **Electronic Surveys:** Cities can poll stakeholders through electronic surveys, and then geocode this data so that it is place-specific. This is a method of collection that may be convenient, but likely would serve as a screening step in an asset mapping process, given the relatively low engagement involved.

○ **Phone and Web Applications:** There are multiple applications that have been developed to assist planners launch participatory data collection campaigns. For example, PolicyLink recommends StreetWyze, an application where users can map locations in their individual communities.[15] ESRI has a Community Maps platform which allows users to edit local features.[16] The advantage of

these tools is that they can be utilized for efforts that are longer-term and participatory; data is also easily stored. ESRI also has a platform that allows for geocoded data via forms and photographs.[17] However, there is a learning curve, and not everyone is a digital native.

○ **Web Maps:** Communities can also use web maps in order to crowdsource information; the City of Boston did this in identifying cultural markers of interest in its planning process. Google Maps, ESRI's GIS platforms, and other mapping programs allow users to interact with existing data and submit their own. For example, Baltimore's Geoloom platform allows users to explore data and add anything they feel is missing.[18]
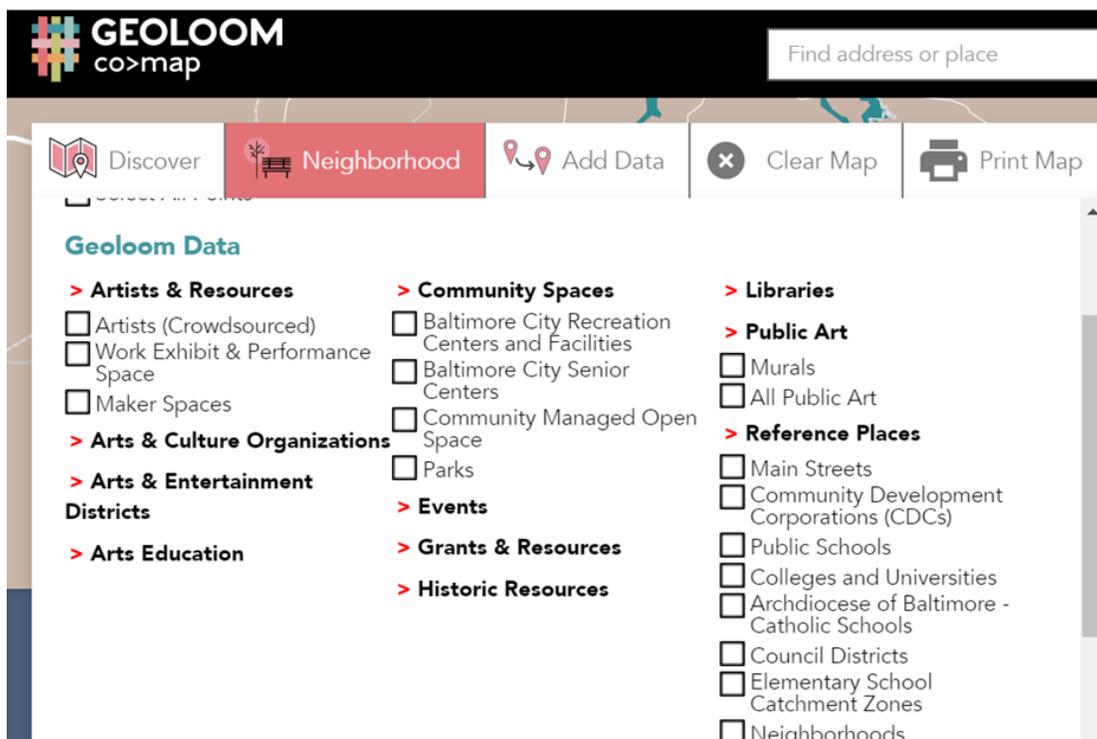
Baltimore's Geoloom platform allows users to choose which features to display.

Planning Process for Policymakers

① Identify the goal of the mapping process and how it will influence policy. Determine which police and governance processes the mapping will inform, as well as how other users outside of government are anticipated to gain value from the final product. Individuals involved with the planning and ideation of a mapping project should consider the following factors.

○ **Spatial Scope:** Is the goal to characterize arts access in a macro sense, or to understand the assets in a specific neighborhood? The goal of the effort will inform the methodology's spatial scope, and the level of detail applied to collection sites.

○ **Temporal Scope:** How ongoing is the effort? Are data being collected in order to inform a specific planning effort with a clear timeline? Or are data being collected on a continuous basis?

○ **User:** While data collected may help a government direct resources to specific neighborhoods, or enact specific spatial planning policies, it may also be of value to the public or arts practitioners to also utilize the data.

○ **Types of Assets:** What types of information are of interest to the project? A project could inventory cultural institutions, places of cultural significance that are not necessarily institutions, artist spaces and potential spaces for development. The types of assets that are included in the effort will depend on questions of inquiry.

② Determine stakeholders involved and project roles.

Beyond deciding who should be "in the room," it should be clear which actors will have influence on the final project, and in what capacity. It should also be determined how community input or data will be included in the final product, and who will make these decisions. Are community members active in the project design, or tapped for information when it is time for crowdsourcing? A more publicly involved project would ask community members and key stakeholders to assist in designing the parameters of a collection effort and the visualizations to follow, while one that is more centralized to a public agency would provide specific pathways for the public to provide input. In cases where community input is crowdsourced, it should be transparent how this crowdsourced information is streamlined, displayed and formulated into a final product and subsequent policy decisions.

③ Evaluate the technical capacity and budget available for the project. Choose a medium for data collection; understand how the collection method will relate to the visualization and presentation form.

Depending on the budget and goals of the project, the method will vary. If the effort involves open source or crowdsourced information, determine how this information will be parsed, and who will be doing this parsing. While the degree of technical expertise involved in the project will affect the final project, technical expertise and the use of various technologies does not directly correlate to the rigor or depth of a collection effort. Practitioners can decide to use a variety of collection and display methodologies, including ESRI and other GIS mapping tools. However, more esoteric and analog methods of synthesizing information also have their merits.

After completing these three planning steps, practitioners should have clear plans for collection and visualization, which reflect the policy goals of the project. They should also have clear ideas for how individual stakeholders are involved in both the collection and visualization processes, and the spatial and temporal scope that these processes will cover. Finally, they should choose a method of collection and visualization that reflects the technical capability necessitated by the project.

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