C mapping project
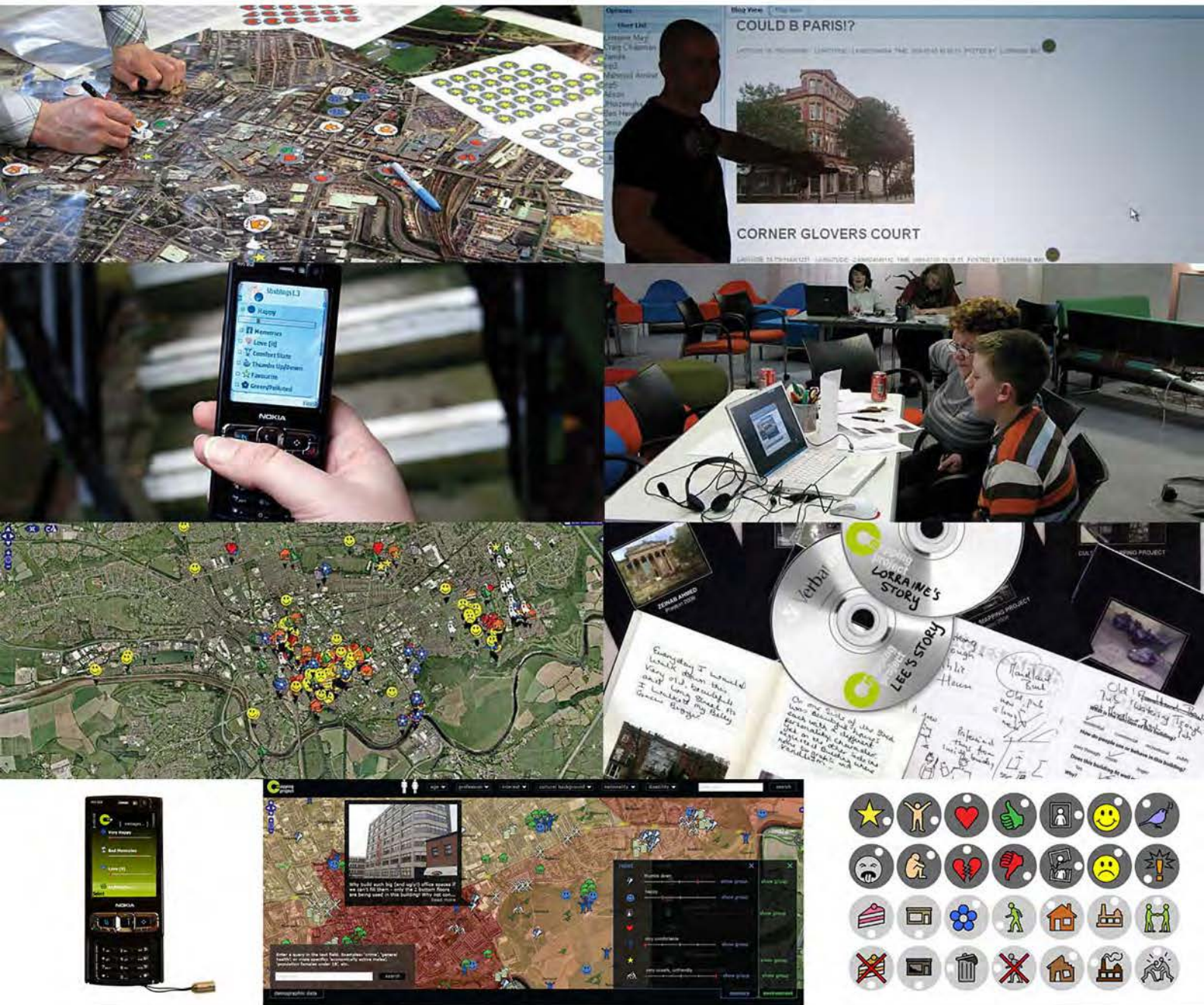
A descripton of concepts and reasoning behind the content and format of the Cultural Mapping Project
UCLan 2008 - 2010, Preston UK

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Introduction

With Lancashire's regeneration well in progress, Preston finds itself at the centre of renewal and change. Local economic regeneration through public and private investment, the growing presence of the University of Central Lancashire, globalization and expanding trans-national flows of people, money and media present new challenges to urban development and to the city's identity.)*

This tension within the definition and maintenance of identity is particularly illustrated in a city such as Preston. Despite its recent official "promotion" to the level of city, Preston still very much struggles to assert its identity in the shadow of its "big brothers", Manchester and Liverpool. In addition, Preston's traditional local identity from the time of the industrial revolution is increasingly challenged by an economic infrastructure switch to lighter, service industries, and particularly by the growth of the university as the city's major employer, bringing in thousands of multi-cultural students and a new culturally diverse workforce. Within this process, mass and interactive media have themselves changed the whole perspective of the city's population – visual identification is now formed equally through global images from television and video as through images of the personal, physical and local environment.

)* My personal interest in the Cultural Mapping project has always been driven by my fascination with regard to the parameters and pressures which define a person's identity. The identity of my own family, as with so many others, was defined by the profession and profile of my father, as a strong patriarchal figure. I grew up in the small town of Haarlem in the Netherlands, with itself a rich cultural heritage, and yet struggling to maintain its identity in the shadow of the encroaching suburbs of the omnipresent, international city of Amsterdam. A person, like a city, needs to be able to define his, her, or itself on its own terms.

Objective

This project, then, is driven on an immediate level by the desire and need to discover and record the identity of the people of Preston, with their subsequent emotional, cultural and social needs and aspirations. A city has both a physical and emotional infrastructure; the latter reflecting the fears, hopes and aspirations of its citizens. These intangible assets, created over time, make up the city's character and identity. In this project we aim to capture these intangible assets.

The next step is to interpret and integrate these "emotional" and socio-psychological data, together with more traditional "physical" demographic data to achieve a new, more socially comprehensive and inclusive approach to urban planning, regeneration and shaping of the city of the future. Herein lies the challenge. The ultimate endeavour is to provide a methodology and tools to enable the project aims to be extended well beyond the boundaries of the city of Preston.

The means

In order to achieve its ambitious aims, the Cultural Mapping Project has focused on the development of a planning tool that enables urban planners and citizens to work in close collaboration on the development and regeneration of Preston's urban environment. Concurrently the production of easy to use, creative media tools in combination with specifically designed workshop methodologies and formats enable citizens to participate actively in the sustainable urban regeneration process.

Tools and the technological base

Sandbox has developed a mobile "cultural probe" solution, which tracks volunteers from a wide variety of backgrounds and sectors. The cultural probe makes use of GPS technology and utilises the multimedia-capturing capabilities of mobile phones to allow users to upload video, data, sound and images. This uploaded data is then be embedded and displayed in a variety of 2D formats for analysis, interpretation and extrapolation.

Methodology and format

On this technology base, the cultural mapping project has developed new methodologies and formats, focused around strong principles of user-centred design, to capture, identity and examine the relationships between individuals and communities and how they locate, operate and flow through selected environments and public spaces. A framework is created which will inform and enhance planning, public engagement, architecture and development of our urban landscape, and ultimately lead to a new multidimensional and reusable planning system.

The Process

Cultural Mapping is an empirically based and iterative process, driven by User Centred Design principles, the Cultural Mapping Tool Box and a combination of workshop formats, creative and participative processes and methodologies. The following aspects have proved to be essential components of an effective Cultural Mapping process:

The narrative technique

Why use the narrative technique to elicit personal stories from participants in the Cultural Mapping workshops? The narrative is the most direct and appropriate means to enable people to express their own emotional and cultural relationship to a physical or geographical location in their environment. If asked about a street, square, or market in their city, people generally do not respond with a physical, "objective" description of the place. Rather, they "tell a story" – about a relative or friend who lived there, a memorable incident which once took place, a building which they particularly like – which relates their own very personal and subjective relationship to the location. In this sense the urban narrative is the essential expression of personal experience, emotion, memory and cultural identity with regard to the surrounding, physical environment. As

opposed to giving responses in a "traditional" semi-structured interview, Cultural Mapping participants are able to present their own frame of reference with their own "narrative response" to a situation, location or environment. For this reason, "story telling" is a basic and essential component of the Cultural Mapping workshops.

The success of story telling in the workshops and the subsequent introduction of this narrative technique into the Cultural Mapping Toolkit has serious implications for the CP process and interface. It is clearly not sufficient to merely use media devices such as mobile phones as information gathering tools. A narrative and reflective process must take place at the time of information capture; otherwise the data lacks content, cohesion and real meaning on a human and cultural level. It is exactly this 'human level' of data which will create the value in the analysis and further application of the data.

Engagement and empowerment

The focus on small personal experiences within the workshops has also significantly enhanced the engagement of the participants and indeed lowered the threshold of level of entry into the workshop. The participants are now more enthusiastic and engaged, because they do not merely "feed in" data without any clear immediate benefit for themselves, but rather have an immediate sense of strengthening their identity and their relationship to their environment and their peers within their environment. They feel empowered by expressing their feelings to others.

The physical "narrative space"

This narrative approach also explains why we place a map of the neighbourhood as a table cloth over the table which serves as a collaborative meeting and work place for the workshop participants. People usually come together to tell stories at meal times or when they are otherwise eating and drinking – over a pot of in the canteen, during lunch in the company restaurant, round the family dinner table, or next to a pub's cosy open fire. In the Cultural Mapping workshops, the actual work space – the table with physical map of the area to explored, analysed and "narrated" – is at the same time the place where the group naturally comes together to eat, drink and share stories of the neighbourhood.
From intuitive to reflective

The whole movement of the workshops is very much from a highly intuitive and personal reaction of the participants towards a more reflective, analytical and broader approach. Generally speaking, participants are not accustomed to being asked to give their opinion on their neighbourhood, nor indeed to express this opinion in the form of a story. In order to stimulate an initial response at the start of the narrative process, random photos of different locations within the neighbourhood are shown to participants. These photos act as visual aids, which "trigger" stories from the participants – about an incident, a friend, a strong feeling. Icons in the form of stickers representing such intense feelings as joy,

fear, love, and hate can also be used to help the participants to create their own "memory map" as part of the narrative process.

"Pre-reflective expression" versus "categorisation" in articulation

The use of icons to "categorise" emotions has been questioned by social psychologists involved in the project)** . If one of the strengths of the intuitive approach is to allow participants to create their own frame of reference, and react to a location or environment with "a pre-reflective experience that hasn't yet been put into words" (and hence closer to the complexities of intimate experience), why immediately try to limit this expression of emotional complexity with the imposition of simple simplified semiotic representation in the form of symbols and icons? The use of icons, however, is not intended to limit, but rather lies in the differentiated nature of the mapping process itself. Visual symbols have a powerful effect in evoking strong feelings. In this sense, visual icons are used within the cultural mapping process to "trigger" initial reaction rather than to articulate emotional complexity. Emotions are triggered visually, then articulated in greater complexity through other, complementary means. It should be emphasized that the location-based narrative process is iterative, involving periods of reflection, revisiting and sometimes amending the iconic labeling and often providing in-depth written reasoning and description for the emotions behind the icon selection via physical or online tools.

The icons bring other advantages. Workshop participants are often reluctant to express their feelings, particularly those who are not used to public self-expression. Icons provide an excellent and simple means to overcome this inhibition by "easing them" into the narrative process and through visual stimuli and a "basis for expression".

)** Professor Lynn Froggett's "Psychosocial Research Unit (PRU)" at UCLAN added an additional psychological dimension and perspective to the project by participating in the mapping exercise and providing excellent, detailed feedback.

"Qualitative versus quantitative" data

The discussion around the use of icons also relates to the issue of "qualitative versus quantitative" data in the cultural mapping project. On a pragmatic level, data needs not only to be of a high qualitative value, but also needs to be categorized to an optimum extent in order to be suitable and useful for the visual analysis and application of mass quantitative data. Only then can filters be applied to large amounts of physical and emotional demographic data, which adequately visualize, and can justly claim to represent various social groups. Discussions around the optimization of quantitative data sets (*** led to further development, differentiation refinement and of the icon "categories". This optimization process included the isolation of data sets per individual participant, the creation of icons expressing extremely strong sentiments (very good/bad), the creation of a richer data pool through word-tagging of the icons, and enhanced visual differentiation between memory (safe/good/dangerous) and environment (good/bad factory, play area) icons.

Recommendations

★ A popular event is the perfect opportunity to create interest in, and draw attention to a Cultural Mapping Project. 'Preston Tastes…' a small but successful festival which combined food tasting with memory and local tradition at the Preston indoor market, was just such an event. This was very well received by visitors, stallholders and the market management. Moreover, historically the marketplace, the Agora, was the centre of urban activity, bringing together culture, commerce, social dialogue and entertainment. Rather than studying these disparate elements independently, the market offers the opportunity to observe and evaluate these factors interacting at the same place and the same time. This facilitates create a model and/or tool that will be easily applicable to other cities in the UK.

★ People need to be trained in the art of story telling in order to create quality content, when using our cultural probes (CP). Media tools are nothing without a methodology. People can master a tool, but it does not necessarily turn them into gatherers of compelling data. To meet this need we have designed a sequence of workshops (Urban Narratives) that introduce the art of digital story telling, first person and third person, before participants can use the CP. We do not use the methodology of digital story telling as a solution in itself, but rather as a supportive tool. (See the description of the Narrative Technique above)

★ Seek partners from the local municipality and engaged community groups as quickly as possible. Through the workshops and our networks, the project has became increasingly visible. This then resulted in a virtuous circle: as the project gained visibility, more partners joined, and as the number of participating partners grew, we gained even more visibility.

★ The same rule applies for funding. Look for organizations that are already active engaged in funded activities and have experience in the funding process. Together you can seek additional funding, which cultural mapping as complementary, supporting process for their project, and vice-versa.

★ If possible, identify "community champions" within an area. These are generally very active and committed volunteers within their own community, who can promote and support the cultural mapping process.

★ Use spaces and buildings which are already being used as "social areas" within the community – community centres, parish halls, libraries, youth clubs etc. – as venues for the cultural mapping workshops.

★ Form a strong steering committee of stakeholders, which is both representative and as diverse as possible, in order to cover the various cultural needs and aspirations within the community.

★ Ensure that you have the most effective technical tools which are available (see Tools and the Technological base above).

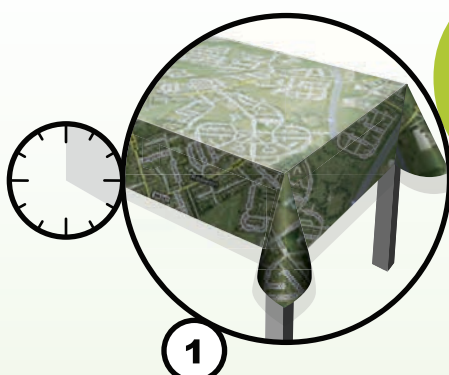Janine Huizenga, Cultural Mapping Project Coordinator, 2008 - 2010

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mapping project
workshop guide

1

Cover a large table with a tablecloth, printed with a map of the urban environment, which you will be discussing in the workshop. Protect the tablecloth with a transparent plastic sheet. In this way the map is preserved for future use. Introduce the group to the aim and methodology of the workshop, including the final deliverable: a short video of their own experience of their local urban environment.

2

Divide the participants into smaller groups and hand each group the same set of 10 photographs, which depict random locations taken from the targeted urban environment. Their task is to use these photographs to create a story. This can be fiction or fact. After 30 minutes, they present their stories to each other.
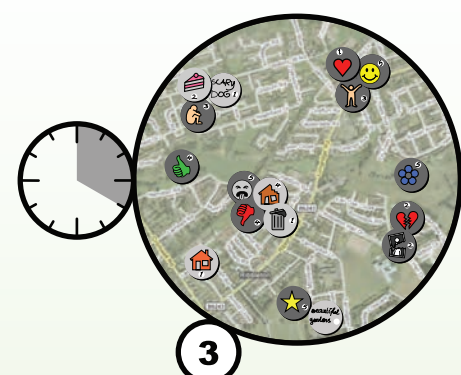
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On the large-scale printed map (covered tablecloth), participants have to 'tag' places within their neighbourhood that are important to them. Here, they can use stickers designed specifically for that purpose.
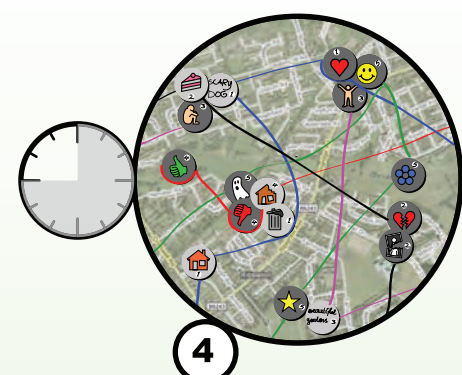
4

As the participants navigate through 'their' maps, explaining to the group why they tagged the various locations, stories 'reveal' themselves.
The participants are then asked to use a felt pen to connect the places they just have described, starting from home, thus creating a route which they frequently take.
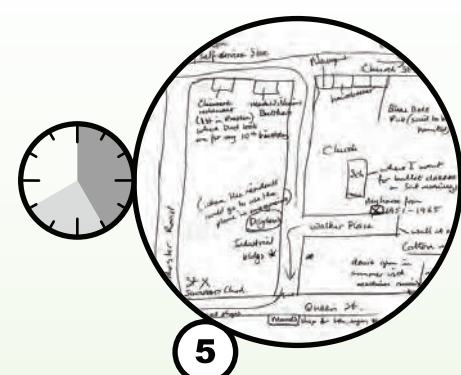
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Participants are asked to draw a simple 'mental map' of the route described in the previous activity, describing everything which they see along the way.
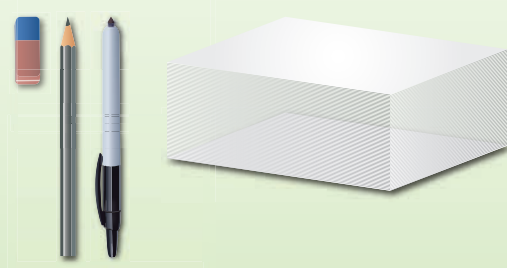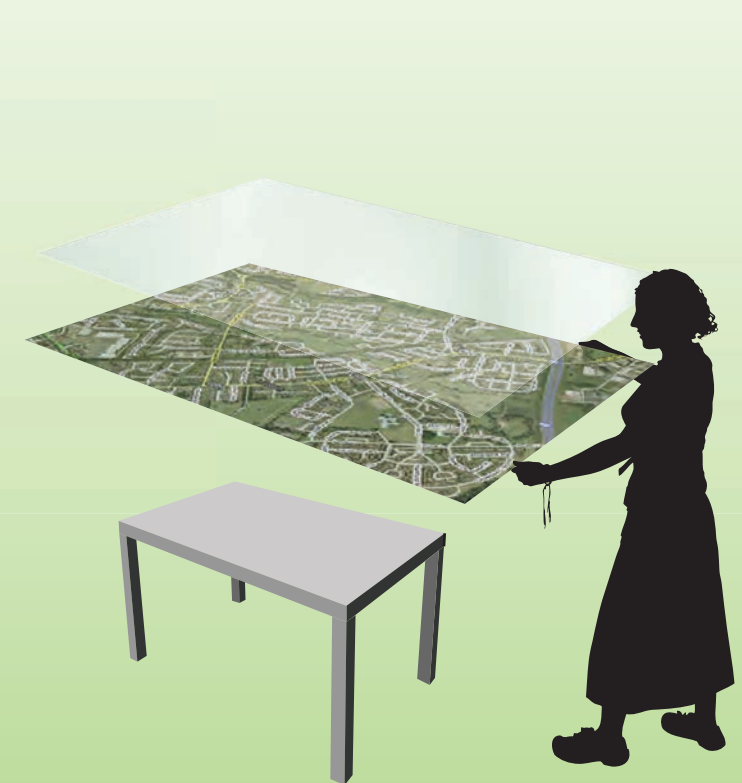
setting up   activity 1   activity 2   activity 3   activity 4
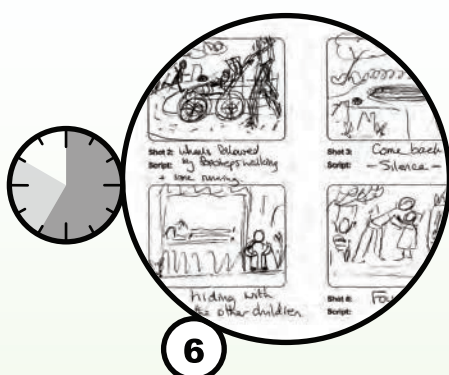
6

Participants sketch initial storyboards on the basis of their mental maps.

7

Participants are introduced to the Cultural Probe. This consists of a GPS mobile phone with bespoke application and connected blog. Using the Cultural Probe, they collect relevant data in various media formats (sound, text, image, and video) to make the storyboard 'come to life'. They keep the phones for two weeks to collect the media required to tell their stories, and store their images and sounds in an online blog.
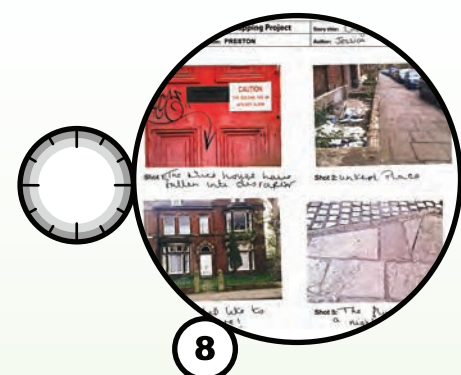
8

After two weeks, the group comes together again to present their collected media and exchange experiences. All the visual material that has been collected with the Cultural Probe is printed out. Participants then select the material which they want to include in their final, "multi-media" storyboard. At the same time, they start to write the script for their videos. If necessary, participants can collect additional sound or images by using Google or the Cultural Probe.

9

When the final storyboards are complete, and all the necessary media have been selected and arranged in sequence, the participants are introduced to 'Storyteller', a free piece of software, which is very easy to use and allows them to show their story in a digital video format.

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Participants present their videos to the group. There then follows a discussion about lessons learned, new ideas and new perspectives on their direct environment.
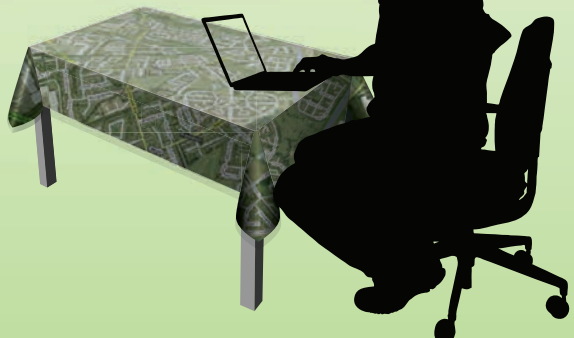
activity 5   activity 6   activity 7   activity 8   activity 9