MAPPING HOME

Communities discover that the language of cartography speaks louder than words

By Adrienne Mason

A new invitation to map a "cherished place" for an art exhibition on the southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia launched Briony Penn on an unusual cartographic journey. For the artist and geographer living on Salt Spring Island, the project became a personal quest to document all she could about Fulford Harbour, the area that her family has called home for three generations.

Penn spent two intensive weeks walking Fulford Harbour's back roads — armed with a journal and a large base map — and talking to old-timers and neighbourhood children. She took notes on the flora and fauna and dug up early accounts by surveyors, settlers and Salthnch elders. The result: an elegant water-colour map peppered with illustrations and local lore that ranges from the practical to the whimsical.

Penn's cartographic portrait of her community shows where calypso orchids grow under the "dappled light of the forest" and the pond where the roughshinned newt, a small salamander, breeds in April. It offers one resident's tongue-in-cheek wisdom on regional diversity: "There are differences between those growing up on Beaver Point and those on Isabella Point. Maybe it's so do with whether you woke up facing east or west." And a young botanist's account from 1865 leaves no doubt about what he thought of this new frontier: "The settlers of Salt Spring have no ambition except a log shanty, a pig, a potato patch, a blackjack (Indian woman) and a clam bed."

It is an eclectic and intimate view of Fulford Harbour, as only its residents could offer. Indeed, grassroots mapping such as Penn's is part of a growing worldwide movement to record the sights, sounds and poignant moments that breathe life into every community. Maps created by citizens vary from simple pencil sketches to computer-generated portraits and are as distinct as the communities from which they emerge. But they all share an essential ingredient: the community voices expressed on these documents fire the imagination like the town's best storyteller. "Mapping is a visual language that once upon a time we collectively gave away to so-called experts," says Doug Ackerley, adjunct professor in the School of Regional and Community Planning at the University of British Columbia. "We are in the exciting process of reclaiming this language back."

The notion of community mapping is rooted in aboriginal tradition at Salt Spring Island. Penn's cartographic journey began with a walk in the woods with local elder Eliza Seer, who brought to the project an array of plants and seeds. Pen

Briony Penn's illustrated map of Fulford Harbour, B.C. (2004), reads like a personal diary of the Salt Spring Island community. The artist's musings — on the origin of the names Reginald Hill and Isabella Point (1850s), for example — are sprinkled among stories gleaned from residents young and old.
cultures, says Aberley. Well before European explorers sailed to arctic shores, Inuit built scale models of their hunting and fishing grounds using sand and stones. Other aboriginal peoples carved or painted representations of places on birchbark or tree trunks. But a Scot named Patrick Geddes is credited with pioneering community mapping in the Western world in the 1890s. As a boy, Geddes gained an appreciation for place from his father who brought him along on a 200-mile walk through the southern Highlands. This helped shape his belief that ordinary citizens should be involved in community planning and that town maps should be based on natural and cultural features rather than arbitrary boundaries. Outraged by British academia for his radical ideas, Geddes moved to India where he proposed plans for some 50 communities.

In British Columbia, where this popular approach to map making is spreading faster than a rumour, communities are using the vernacular of cartography to challenge development proposals, support native land claims, alert people to sensitive bird nesting sites and migration routes, or simply highlight the characters of place. A woman living in Vancouver's rough Downtown Eastside, for example, has drawn a shocking portrait of her neighbourhood by marking with a red cross the streets where women have been murdered.

With more than 20 years of experience as a town planner and advocate of community mapping, Doug Aberley has seen how the process of map making has moved people and communities beyond the culture of complaint. "Mapping," he explains, "becomes a powerful tool that people can use to express their perception of what is happening to the land and to themselves." These pages tell the story of how B.C. communities are translating their common knowledge into maps like no others — maps that speak volumes about their homes.

Adrienne Maks is a writer living in Tofino, B.C., who has participated in her village's community mapping project.

SOS SHOREBIRDS

Marg Stewart, a 20-year resident of Tofino, B.C., used to run through flocks of shorebirds that gather on nearby Chesterman Beach (above left) to "enjoy their lovely symmetry of flight." That was until she and others living in the Vancouver Island village learned that the surrounding beaches and mudflats are the second most important migration area in British Columbia for shorebirds migrating from Ecuador to northern Alaska, such as western sandpipers, semipalmated plovers (top) and marbled godwits (above).

Residents concerned that joggers, cyclists and unleashed dogs disturb the birds decided two years ago to draw a map showing critical shorebird habitat (detail, left). Posters based on the maps were put up at village businesses and public access trails to Chesterman Beach. They have made a tremendous impression: people are asking questions about the birds and attitudes are changing. "I have noticed more people stop and look at the birds, then sit quietly around the flock," says Stewart, who walks Chesterman Beach daily. Tofino now celebrates the spring arrival of the birds with an annual Shorebird Festival.
FROM DOODLES TO TREATY TALKS

Tleel-Waututh First Nation member Michael George (bottom, in black) confers with his cousins, elders Iggy and Richard George, on the historical uses of a new provincial park bordering Indian Arm, north-east of Vancouver. The band is compiling an atlas of its traditional territory with the help of Doug Aberley (at the boat’s helm), an adjunct professor of community planning at the University of British Columbia. Now comprised of 40 maps, the atlas is an evolving chronicle of the community. Elders sketch “doodle” maps, such as this one of the lower Indian River watershed (outer), as they recall stories. Other band members add their anecdotes, photographs and illustrations on topics as varied as sacred sites and historical changes in land occupation.

The atlas has become a valuable tool in the band’s treaty negotiations with the provincial and federal governments over a 1,865-square-kilometre territory that includes parts of Vancouver. George and Aberley have used it — scribbles and all — in discussions with government and corporate officials. “Not only are we getting reactions that this is a unique approach to the treaty process, but the feedback is that this may be a new approach to planning,” says Aberley.

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