



## Emotion mapping: Using participatory media to support young people's participation in urban design



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### ABSTRACT

Young people's participation in urban design is usually either highly restricted or excluded altogether. This paper reflects on a pilot project that explored how communication technologies can be used to support young people to shape the development of their city. A research team at Western Sydney University developed an emotion-mapping platform ([invisiblecity.org.au](http://invisiblecity.org.au)) and offered creative media workshops to young people in Western Sydney's City of Parramatta to support them to explore different ways of expressing emotion through text and image. The study found that emotion mapping provides opportunities to open up discussions about affective experiences of the city that can be integrated into urban planning. However, we argue that such initiatives must overcome the challenges associated with tapping into, making sense of, and amplifying complex, dispersed and always changing everyday media practices if they are to be embraced by young people in ways that ensure they are inclusive and representative. Further, it is critical that initiatives work out how to encourage urban developers to hear and value young people's perspectives on urban environments and how they use them.

### 1. Introduction

*Everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972.

To imagine a generic city is to bring forth images of uniform high-rises, frenetic highways and crowds of workers in identical suits. To read a city's map is to follow roads and intersections and locate landmarks and places of interest. Yet cities are also spaces we experience and feel. Inhabitants hold cities in their imaginations, in their aspirations and in their memories. In this way, intangible aspects of a city can contribute to the creation of what Ben Anderson has called 'affective atmospheres': that is, 'dynamic qualities of feeling' that 'animate or dampen' a sense of ongoing life in a place (2014: 140).

In 2015, the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University was invited by the Parramatta City Council to play a role in generating conversations about Parramatta's future development. The City of Parramatta is located in Western Sydney, which has been home to the Darug people for over 60,000 years and has significance for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations. It is a linguistically

diverse, historic urban centre, approximately 25 km west of Sydney's Central Business District (CBD). The local population has a median age of 35, a figure that sits below the national average (Parramatta City Council, 2017). Parramatta has a highly diverse population: more than half its residents speak English as well as another language, and one third were born overseas. The city occupies a vital role in Australia's history as the first seat of government and is home to historic sites of national and global significance. The Greater Sydney Commission calls Parramatta 'Australia's next great city', and a '14 billion-dollar tiger economy' whose population is growing at 2.5 per cent a year: twice the rate of the State of New South Wales (City of Parramatta, 2016). The NSW Government's (2014) Metropolitan Strategy, 'A Plan for Growing Sydney', highlights Parramatta's key role in providing the homes, jobs and businesses for Sydney's future and states that Parramatta will soon host Sydney's second major CBD. Indeed, at the time of the study, a large-scale, decade-long process of 'urban renewal' had just commenced, providing a timely opportunity for residents and those who work or play in Parramatta to contribute to envisaging the emergent cityscape.

The research team responded to Parramatta Council's invitation by developing a project that was funded by the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre (2011–2016), an Australian-based, international research centre that united young people with researchers, practitioners and innovators from over 70 partner organisations to

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explore how young people's technology practices could be mobilised to support their mental health and wellbeing. The project asked what role media and technology could play to ensure the voices of young people aged 12–25 were heard in urban design and development.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of incorporating young people's voices into policy on urban development are recognised internationally among researchers and non-government organisations (NGOs) (for example, Bartlett, 2002; Bartlett et al., 1999; Collin and Swist, 2016; Vromen and Collin, 2010). In Australia, while some policy documents urge that planning processes take young people's perspectives into account, to date there has been little research that has focused on their affective responses and experiences. With this in mind, the *invisibility* project is a creative intervention designed to open up a conversation about the less visible qualities of a city: feelings, memories, experiences, emotional connections and aspirations.

To bring these invisible aspects of the city into focus, the research team developed a web-based digital platform in collaboration with a team of technologists from Ushahidi<sup>2</sup> in Kenya. The platform ([invisibility.org.au](http://invisibility.org.au)) allows young people to report, map and explain – both visually and textually – their emotions in relation to different parts of a city. When users log on, they are geo-located and then asked to respond to a series of questions about how they feel in this place, why they come here, with whom they come here, and how often. In order to capture the complexity of feeling places can generate, users can choose up to three emotions from a list of twelve. To develop this list of twelve, the team worked with a group of 28 students from Western Sydney University to refine the extensive list provided by the Circles of Emotions project (<https://circlesofemotion.org>). The *invisibility* project retains the four key categories of the Circles of Emotions framework but renamed them, with input from the students, to render them more youth-friendly and relatable.

The platform allows young people to share images of the locations they are reporting on as well as to see how the spatial arrangement of their emotions aligns – or not – with those of other participants. Users have control over how they want to view or sort this information. For example, they can choose to see only posts from contributors according to age or gender, or to view the map according to the clustering of particular emotions. In these ways, the platform encourages user reflection and interpretation. The platform also asks users to identify ways that specific places might be improved, thereby crowdsourcing information that can be channelled directly into urban planning processes. The team is currently in the process of developing a mobile app that extends the capabilities of our initial web-based platform. This app will initially be made available in English and Spanish and a number of deployments in different locations are planned (see <http://www.invisibility.org.au>).

The project was guided by research and evidence pertaining to young people's use of mobile phones in Australia. While just one in five 10-year-olds have their own smartphone, ownership increases rapidly with age: one third of 11-year-olds, over half of 12-year-olds, three quarters of 13-year-olds and an impressive 91 per cent of 14–17-year-olds are smartphone owners/users (Roy Morgan Research, 2016). The design of the intervention acknowledged that young people will likely interact with the platform on their phones while moving throughout the city. As such, the team aimed for interactions with the platform to be quick and easy, and to dovetail neatly with the ways young people use mobile phones in ambulatory settings (Devitt and Roker, 2009). Larissa Hjorth (2015: 22) argues that the use of camera-phones and related

geo-tagging practices create performative cartographies of place that 'overlay the visual with the ambient, social with the geographic, and emotional with the electronic'. Mobile phones, she says, mediate and re-present as well as reframe the experience of the urban while embedded mobile-phone practices help make sense of everyday life (Hjorth, 2015: 26).

In developing an emotion-based framework for our project, we drew upon geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977: 32) influential work on 'space and place', in which he argues that 'space' evolves into 'place' as people come to know it better and endow it with value, while places acquire greater and deeper meaning through 'the steady accretion of sentiment'. Tuan distinguishes people's experience of place into two broad categories: 'places as public symbols' and 'places as fields of care'. 'Public symbols' cater to the eye: they are instantly recognisable and command immediate attention (for example, formal gardens, monuments, public squares), while 'fields of care' often 'do not seek to project an image to outsiders' and instead come to be known after prolonged experience and therefore usually evoke affection (for example, a park, corner store or street corner) (Tuan, 1977: 412). A sense of place, Tuan argues, 'depends ultimately on the human emotions that vibrate in a field of care' (1977: 421). Thus, the team sought to assess whether emotion mapping might provide a way to highlight the fields of care recognised by young people so that they, in turn, can be acknowledged, nurtured and supported.

By supporting young people to report on their emotional responses to Parramatta, the *invisibility* platform was able to make visible their 'fields of care' and their experiences and representations of 'affective atmospheres'. Doing so raised questions about how fields of care and affective atmospheres manifest for young people. By considering affect as an outcome of encounters between bodies, places, objects and technologies, we were able to ask: What might be needed to support positive, meaningful and engaging atmospheres for young people in Parramatta?

We first examine how young people's participation in urban design and development is currently understood by policymakers and scholars. We then consider the role for participatory research and digital mapping projects, particularly emotion-based mapping, by exploring findings from other emotion-mapping research projects. Finally, we analyse findings from the *invisibility* pilot project to critique the potential of emotion mapping as an approach to support young people to contribute meaningfully to urban design and development.

## 2. Young people's participation in urban development

It is important to remember that young people are citizens too, and they are active and engaged participants in public space. Lúcio and I'Anson argue that the involvement of young people in decision-making as members of a community empowers and enlivens democratic processes (Lúcio & I'Anson, 2015). Yet conversations and planning about the design and development of cities usually take place without young people's input, resulting in policies that fail to account for the 'varied and unique voices' of young people (Robinson, 1999: 33). One reason for this is that young people are sometimes viewed as a disruptive element that interferes with adult enjoyment of the space (Travlou, 2007). This can result in exclusionary practices such as removal from shopping centres for 'spurious reasons which would not be applied to older people' (Youth Justice Coalition, cited in HREOC n.d.).

But for the most part, young people are relegated to a position of *potentially* active citizenry, despite already having both the ideas and the energy to contribute (Chawla and Heft, 2002). Joana Lúcio and John I'Anson argue that such an approach treats children and young people as passive 'bystanders', rather than active agents of democracy (2015: 130). However, Sarah Elwood and Katharyne Mitchell (2012) have pointed out the important role that geographers have played in recognising children and young people as political actors through looking at how they inhabit, negotiate, interpret and build knowledge

<sup>1</sup> This collaboration involved Western Sydney University researchers at the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS) and the School of Humanities and Communication Arts.

<sup>2</sup> Ushahidi is a website created in the aftermath of Kenya's disputed 2007 presidential election. The site is a crisis-response entity which collects reports from people on the ground via SMS, email, web apps, and Twitter in order to organise rapid response across numerous agencies. The site documents ongoing changes in the field with real-time mapping and visualisation tools.

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