Graphic Design Festival

Digital Representations of Space

As digital mapping becomes increasingly ubiquitous, **Robert Urquhart** looks at ways in which designers are continuing to push the boundaries of the original infographic.

Infographics are the darling reflex of choice for the digital designer when confronted with data; the infographic is the illustration that paints a thousand statistics and the content editors friend. But there is another direction, another route for mapping our world and, recently, there is renewed academic vigour in debating the role of the designer in bridging our digital and analogue environments.

Interaction designer Richard Vijgen hails from Arnhem in the Netherlands. He completed a project in 2011 entitled The Deleted City. A giant 650 Gigabyte file, The Deleted City is 'the digital Pompeii', a work dedicated to Geocities, an early social network settlement from the dawn of the internet, bought up by Yahoo and shut down in 2009 by which time most of the homesteaders had migrated to Facebook. As Vijgen notes, Geocities was "ten years work by 35 million people" and his use of archaeological language such as homesteaders conjours up the bridge between digital and analogue worlds as if it were manifest.

"I think the mode of translation is of increasing importance to the design practice, not only between the digital and the physical, but also within the information space itself. For me, the legacy of the digital is that it required the designer to define its spaces. The design is not merely a description of a space, but it's manifestation," explains Vijgen.

Amelia Hall, a graduate designer from Miami, now strategist for CP+B advertising

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agency in Colorado, agrees: "The way maps have taken inventory of our physical space is changing not only how we perceive space, but how we interact with it. Maps also include social and commercial data. Maps are making geography irrelevant to us. We are post-geographic." Hall completed her own investigation into her environment while at college in Miami, looking at spatial branding, a form of organic order to society in cities.

London based designer and App developer Alasdair Monk also finds salvation in order, creating a Google map page dedicated to freelancers in London who want to find somewhere to work or hold a quick meeting while they are out and about. Called Let's Meet & Work, it's purely a shared Google map page but the idea is beguiling. "I suppose the visual language that resonates most profoundly with all of us is the language of metaphor and the power it can have when conveying complex ideas and interfaces," says Monk. Explaining the interest in maps for a new generation of designers he states: "In mapping the 'map' interface whether a state of the art Apple map or tatty ordnance survey from 1987, it's a simple metaphor for the world it conveys. You can see a map of a place you've never been but the heavily metaphorical language means you can experience and create that world in your head."

Aram Bartholl takes the most familiar of recent icons in maps, the Google pin, physically makes it then drops it in the exact location you would find it if you placed the

pin on the digital map. Bartholl has brought this surreal analogue and digital vortex to bear on many cities around the world, most recently at GDFB, the Graphic Design Festival Breda, Netherlands in October. The festival also featured many other designers interested in the map as a prominent feature of design. The theme of the festival: Like, Tag, Share, was also a nod to the idea of mapping, albeit more in line with the role of storytelling.

Dutch designer and artist Martijn Engelbregt launched a thoughtful and community spirited art piece in November in the town of Tilburg called Ontsnappingsroute (escape route). Ontsnappingsroute consists of a website Google map and real life signs within the city, all of which point to escape routes from the town to the countryside. The project is in response to the town council who want to draw attention to the fact that the city is surrounded by countryside that many do not visit even though they live on its borders.
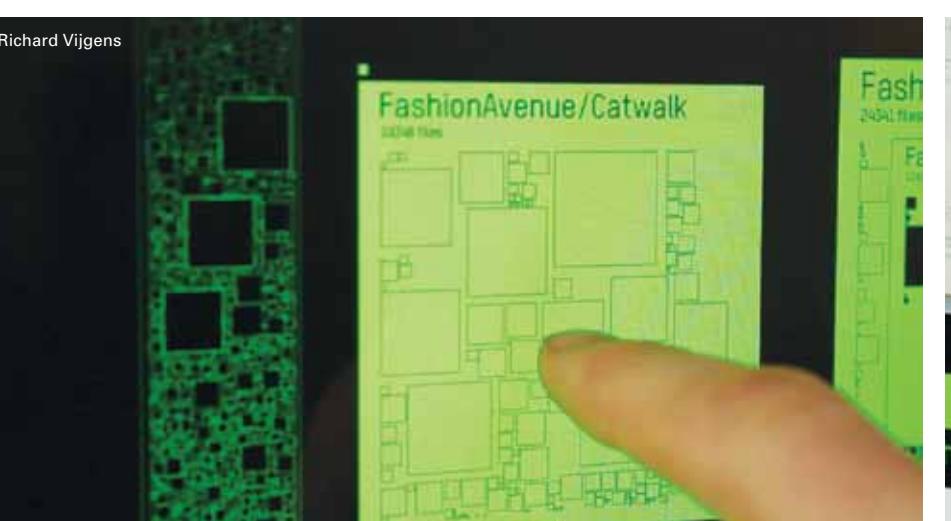
The signs point to various natural vegetation and animal life, made surreal by the juxtaposition of a train station or bus shelter. Where one would expect to find a sign to the bank one finds directions to otters instead.

Engelbregt is circumspect about the role of digital mapping, "I am afraid nobody is shaping the digital environment" he says, before adding, somewhat ominously: "The biggest problem is that the digital environment can never be beyond yesterday." Hall twists the argument further: "We map objects and spaces. We've mapped our own body's DNA. Everything is a map." ∎

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