5 Transforming Narratives of a Caribbean Downtown Neighborhood: Community Mapping and "No Man's Land" in Kingston, Jamaica

David Howard

Contents

1 Rose Town: A Neighborhood Carved in Two 92
2 Mapping Community Assets and the Changing Urban Landscape 95
3 Mapping and Vocalizing "Uplift": The Community as One 99
References 101

Abstract

This chapter focuses on a low-income neighborhood in the capital city of Kingston, Jamaica, which was transformed by the act of an individual, and subsequent community-wide participation, to reclaim the residential and public spaces of what had become part of the so-called "ghetto," following four decades of political and gang-related violence. The dangerous but seemingly straightforward act of reclaiming "No Man's Land" by walking across the abandoned space between rival turf areas was a bold enactment and statement of the residents' right to the city. New urban development initiatives were supported by an active community-mapping project to repossess – psychologically and practically – neighborhood space from gang-controlled turf.

Keywords

Jamaica · Ghetto · Gang · Revitalized neighborhood

D. Howard (✉)
Sustainable Urban Development, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
e-mail: david.howard@conted.ox.ac.uk

S. D. Brunn, R. Kehrein (eds.), *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02438-3_186

1 Rose Town: A Neighborhood Carved in Two

Urban landscapes are consistently remapped and reframed by those dwelling in, travelling through and governing across city spaces. This chapter focuses on one low-income neighborhood in the capital city of Kingston, Jamaica, which was transformed by the act of an individual, followed by a residents' collective, who all sensed the need for change after four decades of political and gang-related conflict and urban violence. The innovation for change came not from municipal, state, or development agency interventions but from the determination of one woman to walk due south across No Man's Land – a swathe of two desolate streets and empty blocks of scrubland and abandoned homes, running east to west across a community torn in two by political and gang allegiances since the 1970s. That walk, and the reshaping, or reclaiming, of the public space by a private, personal initiative was made in 2002.

The neighborhood is Rose Town, once a bustling "urban village" with two schools, several shops, an inn, and importantly, daily bus services which crisscrossed the 1930s planned urban residential community. The woman is Mrs. Angela Brown, who decided one day that "enough was enough," and despite the extreme risk of walking across the physical, and dangerous, political and gang divide, she would "do the walk" (Cunningham 2011). Machado (1969, p. 138) advised the traveller, "*no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*" – there is no path, we make the road by walking, and here was a pathway being remade by an unexpected individual, at an unexpected time. Evidence suggests that sometimes the most sustainable, productive, and successful urban development initiatives occur away from and independent of formal programs to promote "resilient communities" or "sustainable living" (Hodson and Marvin 2014). These formalized urban experiments are, since the answer is never known, just a solution sought and "often financed by corporate actors that frame sustainable innovation in ecological, technical and economic terms while overlooking the social and contextual aspects of urban change" (Karvonen et al. 2014, p. 112). In the case of Mrs. Brown and her No Man's Land experimental excursion, the social context and the need for change were spotlighted center-stage.

Rose Town lies just three kilometers northwest of the historic hub of downtown Kingston, now much faded and rejected by the wealthier classes for the perceived sanctuary of uptown suburbs, malls, and offices. Despite the demise of the capital city's former harborside heart, the transition of Rose Town from "respectable" working-class neighborhood during the 1950s and 1960s to become landmarked as part of Kingston's ghetto is stark. Mrs. Brown's goal, and the task of the subsequent Rose Town Benevolent Society which she, with Mr. Michael Black and other committed residents founded in 2005, was to redraw that map, psychologically and materially, within and beyond the neighborhood. A series of subsequent neighborhood meetings and workshops generated the first community baseline survey of households in 2011 and were followed by extensive community mapping in 2015. It is this community mapping process which forms the focus below, marking the neighborhood's collective response to assess the physical, and indirectly human resources, available in Rose Town.

By the late 1980s, the community had fallen on severe times. The daily market and through-flowing buses delivering folk to and from Rose Town subsided to stillness during the 1970s, as violence between the People's National Party (PNP) in the north of the neighborhood, "Top End," flared up in unison with the similar gathering of clubs, knives, then guns to the south, "Bottom End" inhabited by Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) supporters and affiliated "rude boys" and armed gangs. The urban midriff, the small blocks along Seventh and Eighth Streets, were depopulated by the early 1980s. Before the government came to bulldoze the remnants of buildings and homes left in the newly formed No Man's Land, residents left out of fear or force, often displaced according to their assumed political affiliation. Top End was PNP; Bottom End was JLP. The line was drawn, and No Man's Land became the dominant feature of the former crisscrossed, busy neighborhood. Seventh Street was "no go." Relatives and long-term friends from the north or south were separated by this eight-block band of rubble and bush. In 2011, this belt of abandoned land spanning the middle of Rose Town covered 13 hectares and was left as an empty ribbon that constituted 164 derelict plots out of the 234 such abandoned tracts in the community as a whole (Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Extended family meetings, which would previously have meant crossing Seventh Street, were held out of earshot and sight, away from Rose Town, should any cross-political clan, kinship gathering be spotted, and an informant's role be ascribed to either party by an observer. The only surviving building in No Man's Land is the

Fig. 1 Aerial view of Rose Town in 2017, demarcating "Top End" and "Bottom End," and the cleared mid-section known as No Man's Land. The route taken by Mrs. Brown, from Top to Bottom End is marked by red a line. (Source: www.maps.google.com, with author's annotation, and inset photo. Source: base map from mapdata@2019Google)

Fig. 2 Ground level image of No Man's Land, indicating the route taken by Mrs. Brown in 2002. (Source: Author's photo)

Fig. 3 Westward facing aerial view of No Man's Land, Rose Town. (Source: Rose Town Foundation for the Built Environment)

Fig. 4 Zinc fences enclosing tenement yard, "Top End," Rose Town. (Source: Author's photo)

Hayden Building, known also as Gordon's store which operated as a barber's, rum shop, grocery, and gossip hub sufficient to rival the inn lower down on Harris Street during the 1970s. By the late 1980s, it stood abandoned, a brick and concrete shell in the center of No Man's Land with a new use for the times: Gordon's store became the de facto morgue, the resting place where by informal agreement, the corpses of victims from one rival side or the other, were left to be collected by their people, or by the police.

2 Mapping Community Assets and the Changing Urban Landscape

Extensive police and military mobilization in May 2010 to clear out gang networks, and in particular to remove the power base of the dominant don, or gang leader, Christopher "Dudus" Coke, provided an opportunity for Rose Town (Edmonds 2016; *The Gleaner* 2010). Although still present, the landscape of voluntary or forced fealty, dominance by, and to some extent dependence of the neighborhood's residents on local gangs was weakened. The lessening of gang-related violence and increased presence of security forces arguably created a space for development.

While still wary of the shadows of gang politics and relationships, residents were more able to discuss and engage when possible with organizations external to the community.

Emergence of the Rose Town Benevolent Society, as a Friendly Society and residents' association, stimulated community dialogue and charted the way for external interest in assistance with local initiatives. The landscape of local development and intra-community divisions along political and gang-controlled lines of affiliation was changing. Outside assistance primarily came at first from the Prince's Foundation, stemming from what turned out to be an opportune formal visit to the neighborhood by His Royal Highness Prince Charles in 2000.

The transformation of Rose Town's current fortunes was stimulated by an earlier neighborhood development plan generated through consultation with community members and coordinated by the Prince's Foundation in 2008, which led to creation of the Rose Town Foundation for the Built Environment to coordinate delivery of the plan (Prince's Foundation 2016). Work continues today, but the Rose Town Development Plan, updated again in 2016, placed stakeholder meetings, and perhaps most importantly, community mapping at the core of its early activities. The mapping process initiated in January 2015 enabled residents from both sections of Rose Town to work together to assess community assets, primarily to work together in small groups to look at existing land use and abandoned buildings to see how they might be developed for the communal good (Fig. 5). Mapping the materiality of the landscape together provided the grounds to reform or generate new bonds of an

Fig. 5 Workshop mapping. (Source: Rose Town Foundation for the Built Environment)

emerging emotional landscape that reconnected residents in a shared aim to work towards the Rose Town Development Plan.

The draft and finalized community maps (Figs. 6 and 7) not only reflected the spatial narratives of existing conditions in the neighborhood but also provided the sounding board for aspirations and future hopes, changing the divisive references from those of Top End and Bottom End separation and difference, to those of a reunited Rose Town, which reflected the "respectability" of the community as recounted by older residents. These elders spoke of everyday life in Rose Town during the 1950s and 1960s, with the bus routes, shops, and markets openly frequented by residents from surrounding neighborhoods. Rose Town was then a community that people came to, rather than fled from. Recognizing the space and momentum for development in a new era of relative calm following the security forces' ongoing interventions since 2010, the language of "uplift" came to be heard more. During interviews with the author since 2012, residents have increasingly referred to "uplift" as a current sense of potential, a term reflecting current buoyancy of hopeful development, while reflecting the ongoing realities of high unemployment, poor sanitary conditions, and limited basic service provision. Among the population of around 4000, only 43% of households have onsite access to private or shared toilet facilities, and 40% of households have no formally employed person in the household (Prince's Foundation 2016).

Fig. 6 Draft community mapping of communal building use by residents. (Source: Rose Town Foundation for the Built Environment)

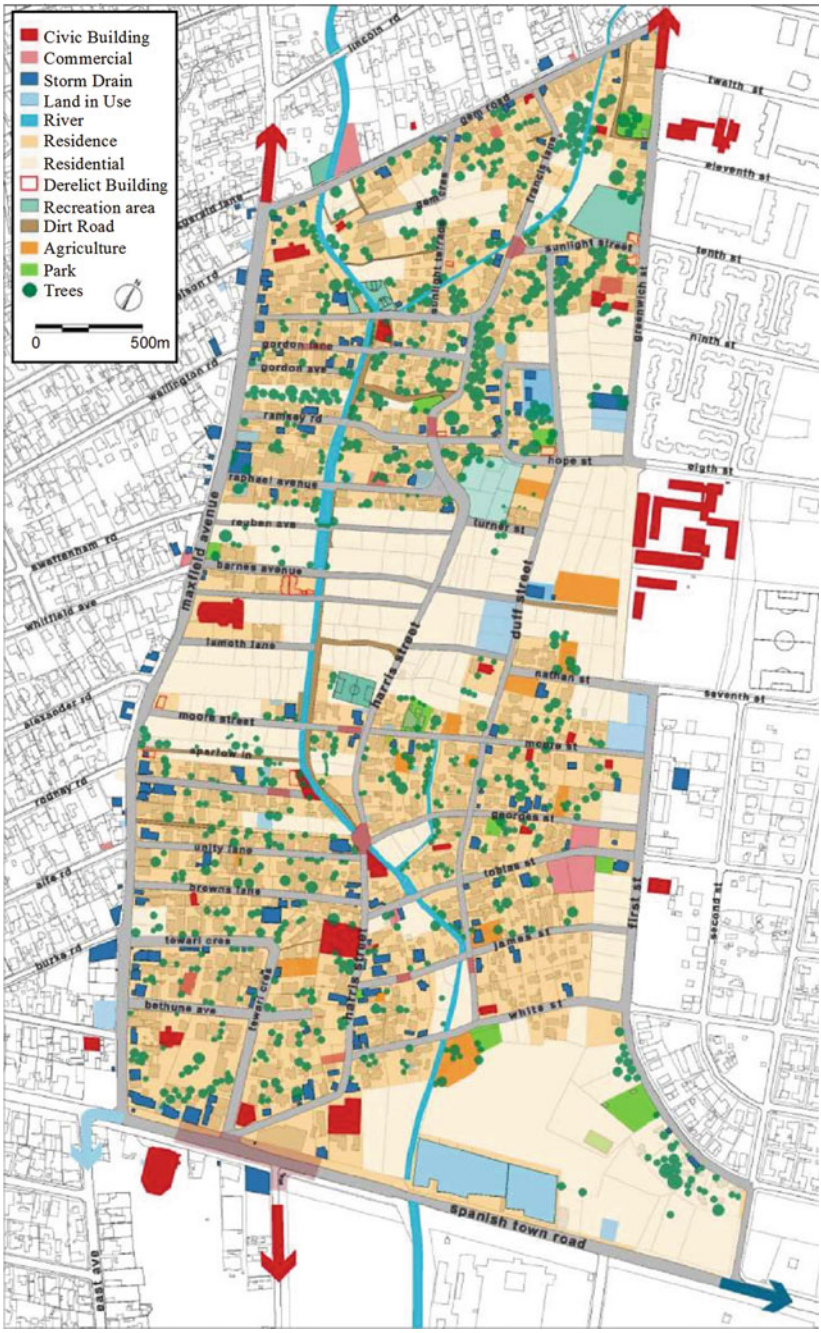

Fig. 7 Existing land use conditions emerging from community mapping exercises. (Source: Prince's Foundation 2016)

The community mapping project stimulated the perception of what might be achieved in the neighborhood. Mapping of "assets," primarily current land use and buildings, became a landmark example in the Kingston downtown area of how community-based participatory surveying can shape perception and development goals, and become a potential stimulus for individual and community empowerment (Hossen 2016; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Asset mapping provides an approach to development in which "a community explores, describes, and maps its assets and then uses these assets to develop solutions to a specific social issue within the community" (Lightfoot et al. 2014, p. 59). The community mapping initiative enabled a full survey of empty buildings and spaces, including No Man's Land, to gauge what might be reclaimed and put to progressive communal use.

Mapping activities in Rose Town have helped to redefine, or reinstate, the community boundary by providing the basis for generating a material inventory and redefining a conceptual map of the community itself. The focus on mapping assets thus emphasizes the positive potential of the present that exists, rather than beginning with a deficit-oriented development plan (Chan et al. 2014; Stack-Cutler et al. 2017; Windsor 2013). The mapping process sparked dialogue between sections of the neighborhood that had been separated for over a decade, providing a pathway to reflect on shared aims for social change, beyond the narrow aims previously made (directly or indirectly) via dominant demands for gang-related affiliation and loyalties.

3 Mapping and Vocalizing "Uplift": The Community as One

The innovation of Mrs. Brown's walk across No Man's Land not only was the first step to reclaiming the derelict space for both divided sections of Top and Bottom Ends, but her perambulatory transect, and the subsequent communal response, reshaped the rhetoric and language of community interaction and the perception of possible futures. Residents did not talk in the developmental agencies' language of "resilience" and "vulnerability" but referred to their shared emphasis on "uplift," silencing the reality of No Man's Land to discuss the deserted plots of land as a potential zone for new houses, business, monitored recycling sites, and recreational areas. The action of mapping combined with the discourse of uplift reflected the previously silenced recognition that the physical and emotional separation of Top and Bottom Ends needed to be transformed for the benefit of Rose Town residents as a whole.

Rose Town had reinvented itself and placed itself squarely on the new map of Kingston's urban "garrisons," reflected nationally as the island battled within itself during the 1980s between Cold War-fueled factions of the Jamaican Labour Party on the right and the People's National Party to the left of the political spectrum (Figueroa and Sives 2003; Gunst 1995). Following three decades of violence, and since Mrs. Brown's perambulatory intervention, and with concerted effort from residents and two local organizations, the offspring of that walk in 2002, the neighborhood has been cartographically and psychologically "remapped."

Fig. 8 Ruins of the Hayden Building in No Man's Land, 2014. (Source: Author's photo)

Arrival of external funding, attracted by the incipient activities of residents, brought financial backing and practical assistance from the Jamaican Social Investment Fund, the Department for International Development (UK), USAID, the Prince's Foundation for Building Community, and a telecommunications company.

By 2017, the maps were being redrawn again. Harris Street, linking Top and Bottom Ends was resurfaced, lined by standpipes tapping into a new water pipe. A formal land tenure program was allowing de facto homeowners to secure tenure for themselves and their families; a carpentry workshop and block-making facility had been established. One block away, also in the now traversable and irrelevantly-named No Man's Land, the Hayden Building was refurbished, refitted, reclaimed, and renamed as the Women's Enterprise Centre (Figs. 8 and 9).

Mrs. Brown's walk in 2002 had been transformative. Lefebvre (1991) proposed that the production of space should be understood as both a material and mental process, although the transition to what he termed "abstracted" space, the conception of space as a mental construct, remains always grounded in concrete social relations. Rose Town was, and is being, remapped, reconstructed, and regrounded. The residents' rights to the city (Lefebvre 1968), to their neighborhood, are being reclaimed, incrementally, but progressively and collectively:

> The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective

Fig. 9 After renovation: The Rollins Enterprise Centre, 2017. (Source: Author's photo)

> power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is . . . one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (Harvey 2008, p. 23)

While isolated gang activities show signs of returning in early 2018, Rose Town has revealed the importance of independently initiated, community-directed action for small-scale urban transformation. Effective infrastructure arguably forms the backbone of a resilient city (Amin 2014). In Rose Town, the new roads, standpipes, and buildings mark the material transition, but it was a woman, and the people dwelling in the shared space following her, who resisted the *status quo* of normative everyday violence and stepped out for change and a new social landscape.

References

Amin, A. (2014). The machinery of urban resilience. *Social Sciences, 3*(3), 308–313.

Chan, K., Evans, S., Ng, Y., Chiu, M., & Huxley, P. (2014). A concept mapping study on social inclusion in Hong Kong. *An International and Interdisciplinary Journal for Quality-of-Life Measurement, 119*, 121–137.

Cunningham, A. (2011). 'Enough is enough!' Rose Town benefits from the courage of one resident. *The Gleaner,* 29 June, B8.

Edmonds, K. (2016). Guns, gangs and garrison communities in the politics of Jamaica. *Race and Class, 57*, 54–74.

Figueroa, M., & Sives, A. (2003). Garrison politics and criminality in Jamaica: Does the 1997 election represent a turning point? In A. Harriott (Ed.), *Understanding crime in Jamaica: New challenges for public policy* (pp. 63–88). Kingston: University of the West Indies Press.

Gunst, L. (1995). *Born Fi' dead: A journey through the Jamaican posse underworld*. Edinburgh: Payback Press.

Harvey, D. (2008). The right to the city. *New Left Review, 53*, 23–40.

Hodson, M., & Marvin, S. (2014). *After sustainable cities?* London: Routledge.

Hossen, M. A. (2016). Participatory mapping for community empowerment. *Asian Geographer, 33*, 97–113.

Karvonen, A., Evans, J., & van Heur, B. (2014). The politics of urban experiments: Radical change or business as usual? In M. Hodson & S. Marvin (Eds.), *After sustainable cities?* (pp. 104–115). Abingdon: Routledge.

Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Evanston: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University.

Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lightfoot, E., McCleary, J. S., & Lum, T. (2014). Asset mapping as a research tool for community-based participatory research in social work. *Social Work Research, 38*, 59–64.

Machado, A. (1969). Proverbios y cantares (XXIX): Campos de Castilla. In A. Machado (Ed.), *Antología poética*. Madrid: Biblioteca Básica Salvat.

Prince's Foundation. (2016). *Rose Town, Jamaica development plan*. London: Prince's Foundation for Building Community.

Stack-Cutler, H., Schnirer, L., & Dare, L. (2017). Engaging populations living with vulnerable conditions in community-based research: A concept mapping approach to understanding positive practices. *Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 601–616.

The Gleaner. (2010). All-out war. *The Gleaner*, 1.

Windsor, L. C. (2013). Using concept mapping in community-based participatory research: a mixed methods approach. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 7*, 274–293.