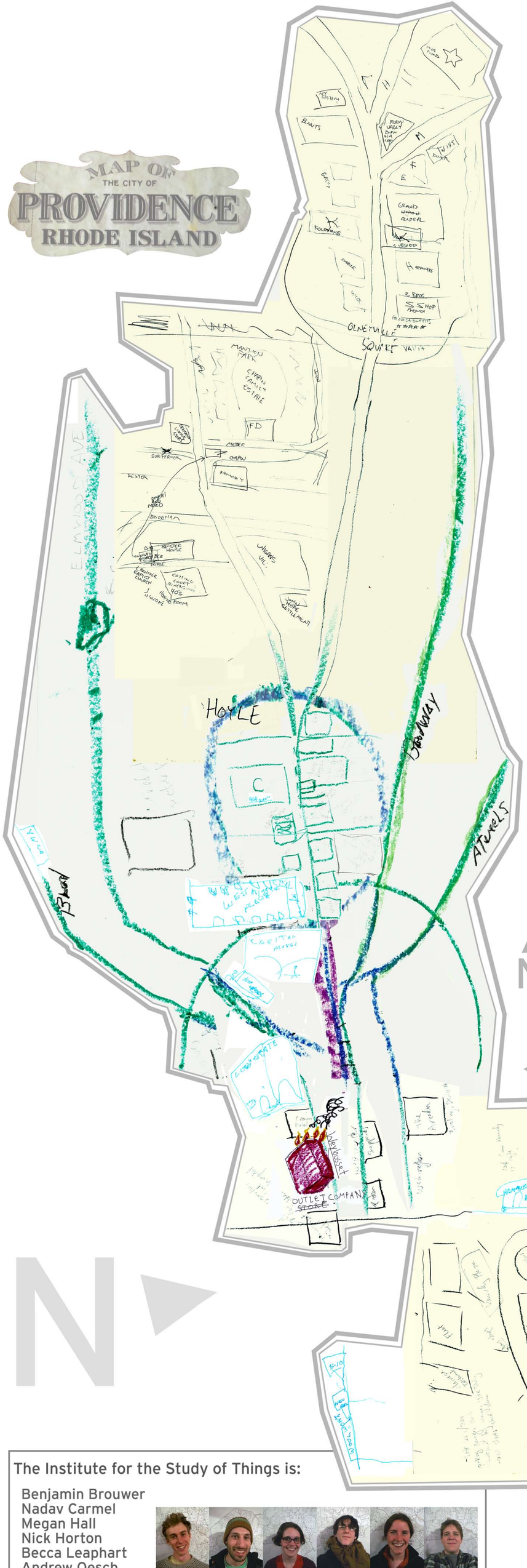
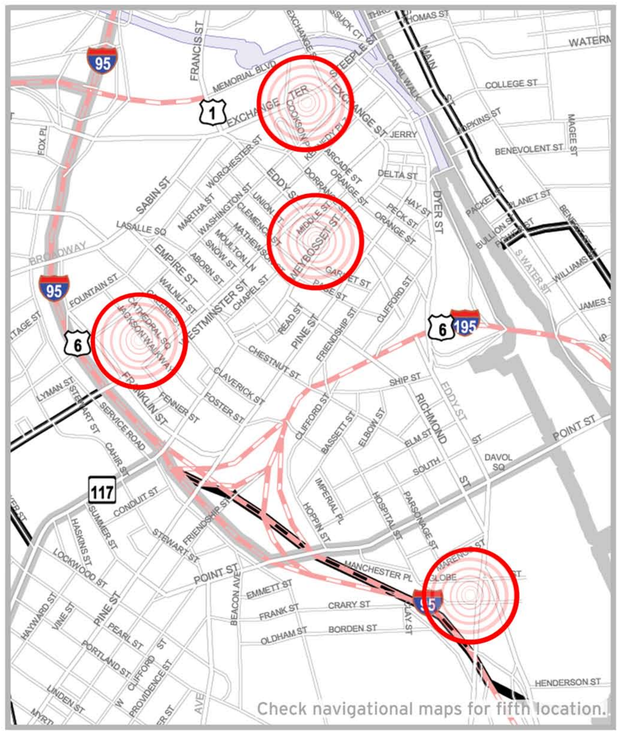
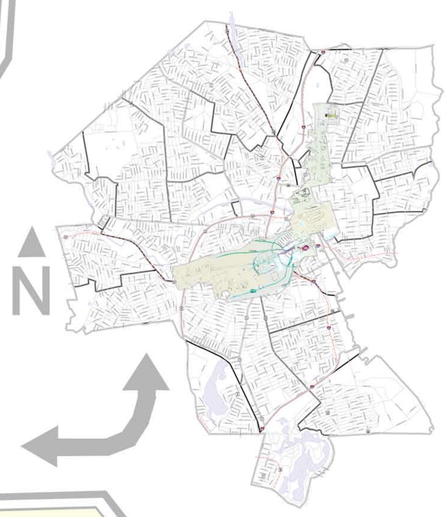
Memory Mapping Project





What you do:

Get a Radio
Take a map
Navigate to each location
Locate the transmitter
Tune your Radio to 107.7fm
Listen



The dream is to eventually collect a map and story from all of Providence residents—to amass a collection of subjective visions; to share people's dreams, disappointments, and recollections; to make a map that shows Providence through the eyes of all its residents. We imagine a map that goes beyond roads and landmarks; beyond median incomes, crime rates, tax brackets; a map that begins to embody the way this population center, with its buildings, services, and history, is viewed and carried in our heads. We are looking for the memories that imbue every alley and sidewalk with meaning.

Acknowledging that it was not realistic for a small group to interview and work with 173,618 people, we approached the project by identifying community groups that represented different populations of the city. We saw the Elderly as a group with uniquely rich memories of Providence. The prospect of uncovering complex, multi-layered narratives from people of varying time periods and experiences in the city intrigued us so we began contacting Providence's nursing homes and assisted living centers.

We began by asking participants to draw a map of places that were significant in their memories. Sometimes the participants drew their own maps; sometimes they described the lay of the land for us to draw. The process lent itself to intimate interaction. Many participants experienced frustration in mining their memories; nonetheless, they offered us a wealth of anecdotes. In later visits, we made audio recordings of the narratives that had emerged from the maps.

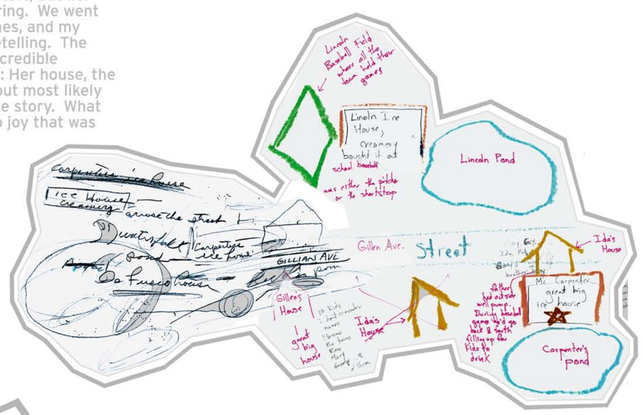
The lives of the people we encountered in our visits narrowed the focus of the project and determined the scale of the maps they drew. Most of the people we interviewed were women. Many of them had lived in one home until their late teens, married, moved to another home in the same town, or even in the same neighborhood. Their geographic memories of Providence were limited in area, but rich in detail. They scoffed at questions about where they bought food, taking for granted the family garden. The major landmarks they included on their maps were family homes, work places, churches, schools, department stores, and movie theatres. They scoured their memories to recall names of streets, neighbors and local business owners.

You have before you a collage of their drawings that together begin a new map of the city. The drawings have been arranged and layered to roughly correspond with the present layout of the city. The map indicates five locations at which you can listen to some of the stories we gathered. We hope that these memories and mapas will enliven and enrich your experience of Providence.

Helen's map created an amazing distillation of her life. She remembered two places in detail--the Outlet Store, where she purchased things, and her home on the East side, where she took care of her family. It was hard to get a sense of what else ocurred in her life that didn't revolve around those two places and those two functions, I couldn't even really get her to fill in the connections between the sites, just like she couldn't fill in the physical gap in the map between the two. They were the poles in the her life in Providence. Those two building seemed to be almost all that was left of her memory.

Upon embarking on this project one of our hopes was to provide a positive experience for our participants- an opportunity to share their stories and a patient ear to listen. This was quite clear upon hearing a story from one residents childhood home. Using her drawing as an aid, the details of her story were vivid and crisp. Her reminiscing of "the things I saw in my day", brought her voice up in revelation as she would sink back into her seat her entire self brimming with satisfaction. As she told the story she would draw each detail of geography, first their was her house, then a field, then the street, and then the pond. "In the winter they would come with greaaat big big saws and cut out blocks of ice, everyone would come and watch, ohhh it was a sight to see." She would settle into her chair once again and savor the memory. She then retold me the story, once again she drew each landmark, upon the same sheet of paper, some objects she darkened the lines others shifted over just slightly. First their was her house, then a field, then the street to Pawtucket, and then the pond. Again in the winter they would come and cut the blocks of ice, and again it was an amazing sight. Her revelry did not diminish. She retold the story, and redrew the drawing again and again. With each successive retelling the drawing amassed a new layer of winter and it began to blur and slightly distort, but her oral narrative remained clear and unwavering. We went through this loop possibly six or seven times, and my interest actually grew deeper with each retelling. The drawing that emerged was exquisite, an incredible visualization of the geography in her head: Her house, the field, the road, the pond. I am uncertain, but most likely she was unaware of telling and retelling the story. What riveted me to her story was her deep deep joy that was connected to this distant time and place.

Irene was confiding to me her story of the truant officer that had caught her skipping school when her visitors arrived. We looked up to see them standing across the dining room, a man and a woman, waving to Irene to join them. The furrowed look of concentration vanished from Irene's face as she slapped her knee and exclaimed, "I practically raised those kids." She reached for her walker, and made her way across the room. I wavered about whether to follow, then mustered the courage and gathered her maps together.
The woman jumped at the opportunity to see the maps. She affirmed the locations of places Irene remembered, and Irene nearly cried laughing when the woman read to her the notes I had taken about her playing hooky. Irene's male visitor didn't say a word. Absorbed in his map, he didn't crack a smile when Irene repeated her tale of truancy, or respond when the women asked him to remember details they couldn't. He did not lift his eyes from the map until finally he turned to me and said, "It's a great prompt for memories." He slid the maps closer and began to describe the map to me, as though he'd drawn it himself. Irene and the woman stopped talking to hear his version of the stories, but he seemed hardly to notice. His memory was sharper than Irene's and I worried that she would take his corrections personally. But then his eyes landed on the soap house. His narrative came to a halt. He ran his fingers over the symbol on the map. "What's this about a soap house?" he asked, addressing Irene for the first time. Irene smiled and repeated "the soap house" as explanation. The man turned to me and shook his head, but the woman jumped in.
"I remember the soap house," she said, "It wasn't around when we were kids, but I remember stories."
"The soap house" Irene repeated, reclaiming the map from the man. "Our house used to shake on the nights when they'd crush the bones for the soap. It was awful, but they had to do it. Great soap." The man nodded, and we all turned to Irene for the rest of her story



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