

Visualizing and Communicating Neighborhood Identities

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INTRODUCTION

Cities are often advertised as places made up of many unique and authentic neighborhoods. They are promoted as places that offer a choice of neighborhoods that are distinct spatial and social areas with diverse communities. Yet, as cities evolve and are revitalized, often under immense development pressure, many become victims to standardized planning and design strategies that disregard much diversity that the neighborhoods may possess. These processes erode the unique sense of place and authenticity of distinct neighborhoods, as well as the diversity within cities, resulting in homogenized and ageographic urban space. This is an area of concern for urban designers, architects, planners, geographers, historians, and several others who are interested in authenticity, place quality, and sense of place. Scholars and professionals in these fields have a host of means and methods to capture and map material and social elements and phenomena to represent the characteristics that distinguish neighborhoods from each other. These methods range from tangible and quantitative aspects of demographics and other characteristics available in census data to the various qualitative information available in the built environment, social media, individual stories, soundscapes, and many more that represent the *genius loci* or sense of place of neighborhoods. In this study, we synthesized and visualized qualitative and quantitative data and information to represent the character of each of the 52 neighborhoods in Cincinnati, Ohio. We generated a set of consistent elements to create a single postcard to represent each neighborhood. By doing so, we are able to comparatively present the individual identities of each neighborhood along with a collective identity for the city.

Abstract /

Place quality, sense of place, and authenticity are sensory, psychological, and social constructs that are perceptible in forms, activities, and meanings of places. Much of this is visible in the material culture of places—in the architecture, art, public spaces, show windows, signage, artifacts in public spaces, as well as those that are in private space but visible to the public, and more. In this project we aim to capture and communicate the sense of place and distinct quality of each neighborhood in Cincinnati, OH. Using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, we generate a set of consistent elements to create a single postcard to represent each neighborhood. The 52 cards, one for each neighborhood comparatively present the individual identities of each neighborhood along with a collective identity for the city.

Keywords /

neighborhood; sense of place; identity; authenticity; neighborhood postcards

AUTHENTICITY AND SENSE OF PLACE

A sensory, emotional as well as a social construct, authenticity can be quite simply understood in Zukin's (2010) words as "the *look* and the *feel* of a place as well as the social connectedness that place inspires" (p. 220). Although authenticity is subjective, it is made visible in buildings, objects, spaces, and other real things. In the spatial context, authenticity has several overlaps with the idea of sense of place. Harrison and Dourish (1996), capture the notion of place as the result of space that is overlaid with meaning by humans. Similar to Zukin's (2010) notion of authenticity, Canter (1991) suggests that our understanding of a setting, in essence, depends on what we *do* in places and how we *feel* about them.

Authenticity and sense of place are key concepts in urban design. Authentic places are understood as the confluence of relevant forms, activities and meanings (Montgomery, 1998; Punter, 1991) and urban designers interested in creating memorable places strive to create forms and spaces that emerge from rooted culture and local settings. In doing so, urban designers must understand the value of the context in which they operate to uncover and emphasize the intrinsic qualities that make places distinctive and authentic. The material culture of places has much to offer, as it represents the forms and activities of places. In the context of neighborhoods, there is a variety of material culture—architecture, art, public spaces, show windows, signage, artifacts in public spaces, as well as those that are in private space but visible to the public, and more—that serves as the source of understanding the authentic and unique sense of place. In this project, we aim to map and convey the sense of place of each neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio by mapping the most representative elements of material culture from each neighborhood.

SETTING

Cincinnati, Ohio is one of the cities in North America that has many distinct neighborhoods with strong identities. A city located along the Ohio river with multiple hills provides a unique geography for the neighborhoods that are built on hillsides, hilltops, and in valleys. Abundant open space, ranging from small parks to forests as well as other water bodies within the city, also provide distinct landscapes for several neighborhoods. Cincinnati is one of those cities where the majority of neighborhoods, due to their age, history, and unique character have a pattern that permits them to be distinguishable physical places. It is a place of distinct spatial geographic areas with a robust structure, a history, and a community attached to place that makes many of its neighborhoods truly unique. In addition, of the 52 neighborhoods in the city, 32 have designated business districts, ranging from a handful of shops to several city blocks, that provide a wide range of services and amenities and also lend a sense of place and centeredness to each neighborhood.

Since the racially charged civil unrest of 2001, the last two decades in Cincinnati has been a time of immense energy and newfound trust in the city that has led to the

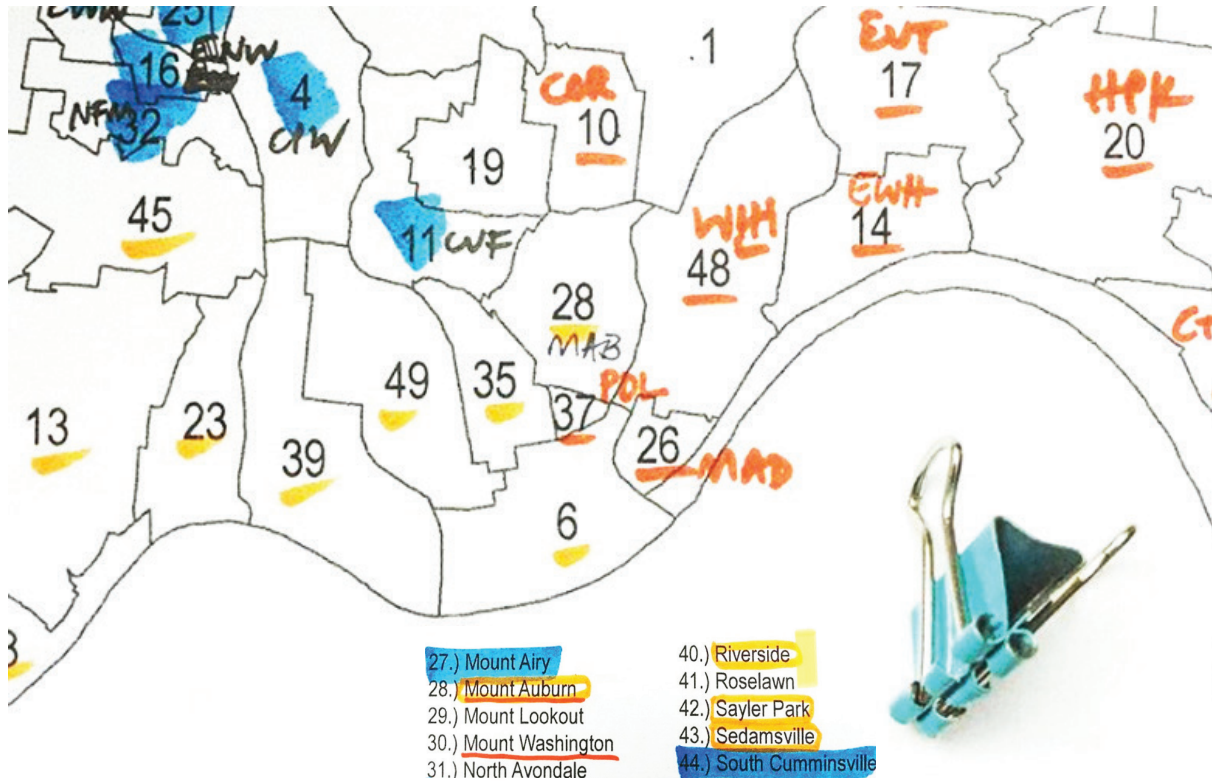


Figure 1 /
 Partial map of the 52 neighborhoods of Cincinnati, Ohio

revitalization of several neighborhoods. Once again there is the desire and promise to make the city a place to live, work, learn, play, and grow. Existing institutions are being revived and new ones established to build and strengthen community. At the same time, this transformation also results in loss of meaningful landscapes and elements of material culture that provide a sense of continuity, ownership and meaning to people, and thus attachment to their neighborhoods.

MAPPING NEIGHBORHOOD IDENTITIES

This project aims to visualize and strengthen the sense of community and neighborhood identity in the neighborhoods of Cincinnati. Our goal is to capture and communicate the sense of place and distinct quality of each neighborhood in the city. Creating

a visual and tactile set of postcards makes it easy to communicate the neighborhood’s uniqueness, individual character, and distinct sense of place not only to other residents of the city but also to the residents of the neighborhood itself to help them understand the uniqueness of where they live (Figure 1).

Each postcard is a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data and information that represent the character of each neighborhood in Cincinnati. This information is distilled into a set of consistent elements that consist of a photograph, data, and a narrative. One face of the postcard is a photograph that represents a unique but representative image of the neighborhood. This photograph may be a beloved business, a mural, a historic building, a marker, or a street scene. On the other side are four text elements that represent the neighborhood. These include a three-letter abbreviation of the neigh-

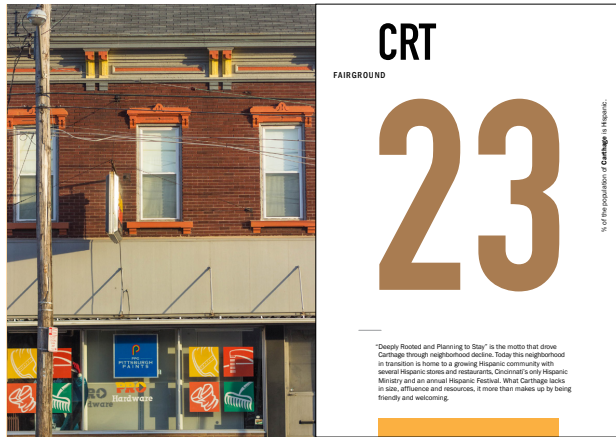
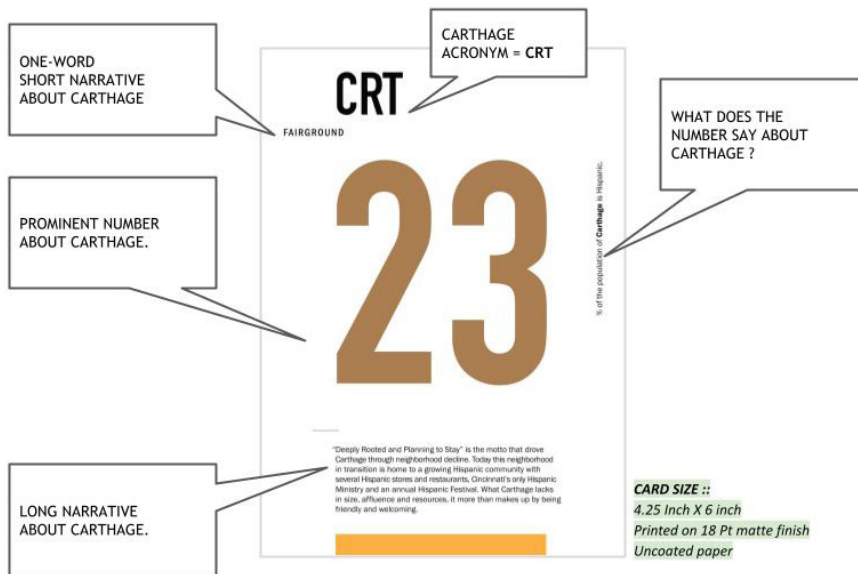


Figure 2 /

The design and components of the neighborhood card



borhood name, one word that represents the neighborhood to many people (crowd-sourced from students at the University of Cincinnati), a short paragraph discussing a unique historic or demographic aspect of the neighborhood, one prominent number that represents the neighborhood and an explanation of that number (Figure 2).

The photographs of material artifacts were taken by the two authors and another member of the project team. The data and information on neighborhoods were obtained from the City of Cincinnati, 2010 US census data, ESRI Forecast 2017, ACS Estimate 2011–15, Cincinnati Area GIS (CAGIS), Neighborhood Community Councils websites, Zillow, Trulia, Downtown Cincinnati Inc., Walkscore.com, and websites of specific organizations, such as the Cincinnati Observatory and Spring Grove cemetery.

Figure 3 /

A wide range of visual material culture of the neighborhoods make up the neighborhood cards.





AVD 30	BOH 20	CAL 12	CPW 03	CRT 23	CLF 11	CUF 47	COH 07	CTS 01	COR 26	DTN 66	EEN 07	EPH 50
EWH 75	EWV 41	ENW 95	EVT 04	HRT 02	THT 22	HPK 40	KHT 07	LWD 48	LPH 48	MDV 14	MLV 40	MAD 43
MAR 53	MAB 27	MLO 01	MWS 09	NAV 40	NFM 15	NSD 01	OAK 10	OTR 89	PDH 47	PDL 56	PLR 18	OGT 02
RVS 30	RLN 08	SPK 45	SDV 02	SCV 09	SFM 79	SGV 04	WLH 29	WEN 81	WPH 07	VRH 72	WWD 10	WNH 41

Figure 4 /

The fronts and backs of all the 52 neighborhood cards

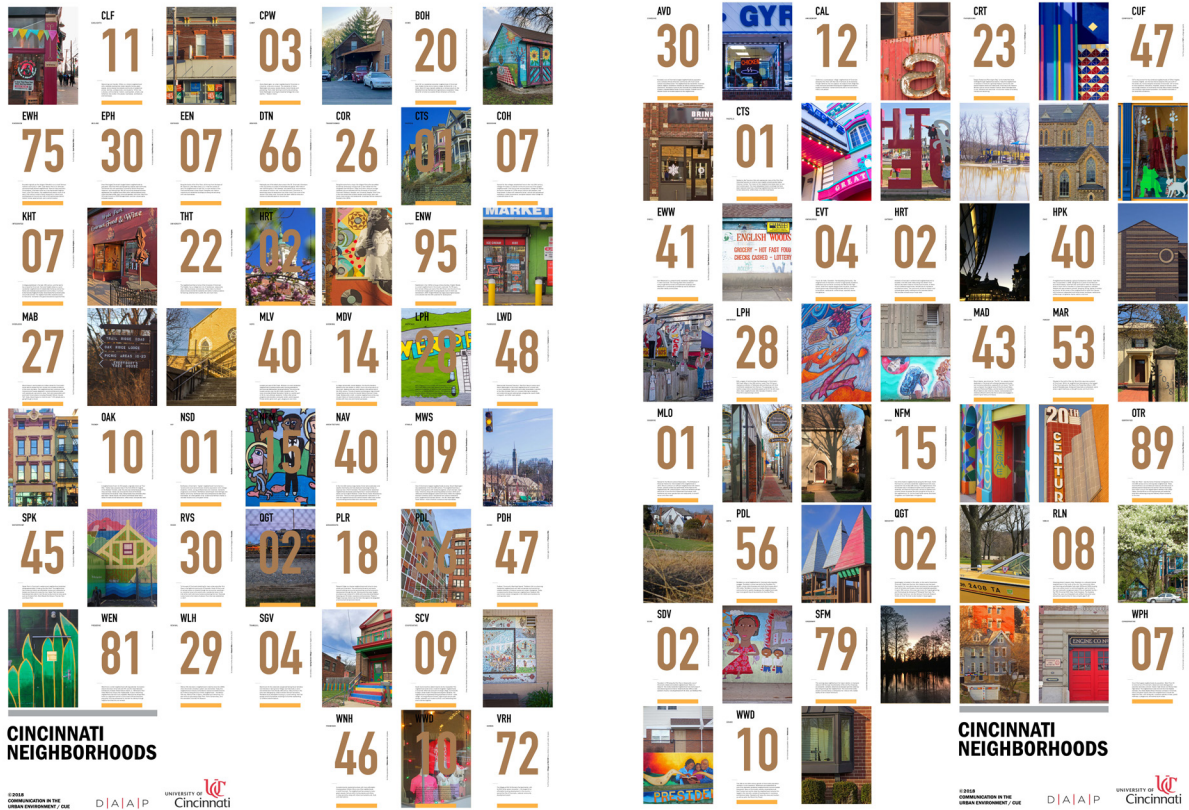


Figure 5 /

Posters displaying the 52 neighborhood cards

Figure 3 showcases the wide range of visual material culture that represents the 52 neighborhoods and Figure 4 and 5 display both sides of the cards showing the range of characteristics and circumstances that distinguish the 52 neighborhoods. The collection of postcards comparatively presents the individual identities of each neighborhood and also a collective identity of the city.

We began this project on neighborhood identities by asking “how can we create an artifact to visualize and communicate neighborhood identity?” As we visited each neighborhood, developed a sense of place for each, collected data and information we learned about the unique places in the city, as might be expected. But we also learned about the vast disparities, sometimes in neighborhoods adjacent to each other. As we con-

ceptualized and finalized the postcards, we also started to experiment with the possibility of creating a new set of postcards that explore the interactions to create a dialogue between residents of neighborhoods that are starkly different from each other often within the same part of the city (Figure 6). We expect to use these as artifacts as learning tools for residents of the city.



Figure 6 /

Creating a dialogue between neighborhoods by overlapping neighborhood characteristics in one card

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