"Urban Tapestries for me is like 'Scent of a City'. It's people 'leaving', 'smelling', 'hearing', and possibly even being led to 'tasting' a city. ...It's intuitive, unobtrusive (if you are using it publicly) and actually quite playful."
Priya, December 2003

"It really brought home to me the reality of day to day life for myself and others... So, from that perspective, I guess UT gave me a greater sense of empathy for my fellow human – a heightened recognition of the fact that we are all the same, but all unique with our own view of the world. So 'yes' my sense of community was affected in this way and I think its left me more likely to listen to others. I certainly also feel like I know London more: its people and streets."
Barry, July 2004

"It expanded my sense of who was out and about in London and made me feel more connected to different kinds of people... Kids and people with kids aren't part of my immediate circle in London right now since I mostly interact with other students who are generally childless. I liked the insight into different experiences of London, the living-in-London-with-kids experience vs. my living-in-London-as-a-student experience."
Jenna, July 2004

"Other people's pockets intrigued me. Fun, zany or informative, or even downright lies. My favourites were places that revealed little moments in other people's lives. It made you look at the people around you and feel like you were only one or two links away.... Following a single thread means often following a single personality."
Pascal, December 2003

"I think I was surprised at how useful I find UT. I found an amazing number of uses, from the incredibly practical to the revealing and curious to the utterly pointless."
Celine, July 2004

"Once I was out on the street I had lots of ideas about the trails I wanted to leave – landmarks around, my mood, my engagement with the environment stimulated lots of thoughts. I wanted to capture these with image and sound as well – a picture of now."
Anne, December 2003

"I created threads about sensory experiences in the city...the smell of the flower shop, or the warmth of the cafe. These are probably the most basic of thoughts, but these aspects were the first to catch my attention while walking around. I enjoyed reading other peoples threads. I often wonder what other people are thinking about, if they observe the same things as I do when I am walking around. There is a very personal aspect of reading other peoples threads and that makes the experience really great."
Jennifer, December 2003

"... it will be fascinating to see what virtual geographies might emerge, overlaid on our cities, and whether, like the geographies we have in our heads and trace in our journeys, they gradually eclipse the physical ones from which they spring."
Ant, December 2003

"It changed my experience of my environment – without consciously trying, I became much more aware of things around me. I enjoyed being able to share my experiences – normally, such passing thoughts would be forgotten or would seem insignificant by the time I had someone to share them with, but they make sense within the context of the environment. My content was affected by an awareness of people reading them in the future – it was different to if it was just a personal device. As well as the official accountabilities of not writing anything offensive, there were much more subtle accountabilities to future readers – writing something that is sufficiently interesting and relevant."
Rebecca, December 2003

"I am a local and so I was intrigued to see how people were approaching spaces I am familiar with. I found the narrative aspect fascinating and compelling"
Luci, December 2003

"[I experienced] increased confidence in getting around London although also a greater awareness of exactly what a pain it could be to navigate on crutches. Much greater sense of belonging... I think it would be a wonderful thing to play with when ill – reminisce, allow you to live vicariously ... I think it's probably improved my memory! When I try to remember what I've been up to for the last few weeks, I just start to think about the map."
Celine, July 2004

"I became particularly aware that I normally treat this area as a thoroughfare and therefore miss the fascinating architecture. Also, it is a part of the city that deserves more interest. Perhaps the point also that modern life does not encourage us to be present to the environment one travels through, whereas using the iPaq encourages one to absorb more from the surroundings and appreciate details that you can then inform others about or share in their delights and discoveries."
Stewart, December 2003

"I can see people making packages, or topic-based maps, that others could subscribe too. I'd love to see someone with an interest in public typography treating this kind of system as a weblog, for example. "
Matt, July 2004

"I did the trial with a friend, we found it was a very absorbing social experience – a collaborative effort not at all isolating... I can see that it would give new dimensions for experiencing locations. In the past I have travelled a lot on my own, it would have been good to be able to connect to human experiences of some of the places – a beyond the guide book sort of thing. It would also be a way of reinforcing my own memories of little things from places I have been to..."
Janet, December 2003

Public Authoring

What defines a city? It's not so much who creates or builds the city – it's who creates the understanding of the city. Who is the author of its composite façade, as filtered through the collective understanding of its inhabitants?

Traditionally, an elite of architects and planners have monopolized the mechanisms that contribute to this group understanding of the city, as they build the monuments and thoroughfares that they insist constitute the dominant notion of what 'London', 'Paris', or any other city might be. But just as reliably, a counter-tradition of critics have offered their own attempts to shape a different urban reality. From Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress* to Baudelaire's flâneur, to the dérive of the Situationists and the social experiments of Mass Observation, these interventions in the city have had as their goal the breaking of an ironclad monopoly on the psychological definition of the city. Daniel Defoe, Walter Benjamin, Humphrey Jennings, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have issued similar theoretical challenges, attempting to redefine the notion of urban space, and how, by whom and for whom it is produced. Yet all of these attempts at expanding or reforming authorship of the city have invariably been elite, top-down notions: suitable primarily for the educated and literate populations of the city, and even then only possibly relevant to those cognizant of – and sympathetic with – these invitations to a broader authoring of the city's face.

From the ground of the city – from the viewpoint of those whose lives are actually lived in its midst – there has also always been a corresponding counter-trend to elite authorship of the city. Far from the monuments, boulevards and fashionable districts of the elite, life in all its messy splendour goes on and leaves marks on the built environment in its wake that rarely fit into tidy planning categories.

Michel de Certeau was instrumental in highlighting and celebrating this invisible authoring of the city that takes place through the routines of daily existence. Graffiti and flyposting continue to leave marks, if not on the built environment per se, then on its façade that it presents to us daily. Yet none of these efforts have consistently managed to leave a persistent, visible impression on the cities in which they arose.

At Proboscis we took this background as the start of our research and asked ourselves two questions that followed from it:
- What happens when people are invited to share their knowledge and experiences of specific places in their locality?
- What tools and practices can we design to help create an open, persistent field in which this knowledge and experience can be placed?

Those were the implicit research questions that led to our development of Urban Tapestries. Our goal became the design of toolsets and skillsets that will allow people to annotate the spaces and places that they inhabit and pass through every day. Our premise is that, given half a chance, lots of people would like to 'leave their mark' on the environment in some way – whether that means leaving notes for friends, devising their own walking tours, developing in-place information resources, or any one of dozens of other possibilities.

A key issue for developing this sense of personal agency will be our changing perception of citizenship and its role in how we construct our identity. Is it an attribute bestowed upon us by the State and government according to our place of birth or sworn allegiance? Or will it become something we assert through practice and inhabitation, through participation in community life? The impact of the revolution in communications has been to shift our perceptions of space and territory so that we are no longer defined or our horizons limited by the (particularly nineteenth century) concept of nationhood. Our sense of where, to whom and what we belong to alters too. In an age of conflicting loyalties and populations that are less and less ethnically or religiously homogenous, this presents a major problem to the traditional apparatus of power, yet offers extraordinary possibilities for individuals and communities.

Our intuition suggested that the best path toward enhancing the geography of the city necessarily involves designing the means to enable contributions from a wide section of the population. We believe that the future for our society lies in broadening the capabilities of its members to be actors, agents and authors, not merely consumers of a culture created by others employed in the 'culture industry'. We call this practice 'public authoring' and the addition of a new, virtually permanent layer of the environment the 'public knowledge commons'.

Transdisciplinary Collaboration

Proboscis developed a transdisciplinary approach whereby the entire team was involved in each task area – learning from each other's knowledge and experience not just by observation but by collaborating together. By combining skills and expertise from widely different backgrounds we add distinctiveness and freshness to established practices. This also creates a strong group dynamic and energy that supports individual efforts within the team.

We learned how to question and challenge many of our own assumptions and the conventions that drive our practices day to day. The benefit of this was to force us to rethink many of the familiar themes and ideas of location based services, spatial annotation, ideas about location, technologies and research methodologies to use and ways of engaging the public with our ideas. The transfer of skills and knowledge within the team was very high, in a way reflecting the wider aspirations of public authoring as a social and cultural practice.

Bodystorming

Proboscis uses a technique called bodystorming to rapidly iterate and test our ideas with other people. Bodystorming transforms abstract ideas and concepts into material forms and situations to reveal the kinds of relationships that occur in the social and cultural interactions between people, places and things.

For Urban Tapestries playful bodystorms were developed which engaged people in the broader social and cultural issues, revealing the tensions and pleasures of rules and constraints in everyday life. Props were made such as large floor maps (using maps from a variety of sources); pre-authored threads to suggest possible types and styles of annotation; Post-It notes as the authoring tool; and customised Urban Tapestries eBooks to annotate each participant's threads.

The experience offers a gentle, non-technological introduction to the concepts of public authoring, provoking and cajoling unexpected and unintended ideas. It creates a collaborative framework for testing our own assumptions and preconceptions about public authoring and social knowledge – about what happens when ideas become technologies, practices and relationships. Bodystorming allows us to ask questions in an open and co-creative environment where the participants own their own experiences.

Experimental Ethnography

Drawing from theories of everyday life and urban space, researchers at the London School of Economics developed an experimental ethnography as a method for investigating the relationships between communication technologies, users and the socio-geographic territories around them. In June 2003, nine respondents participated in playing with an early Urban Tapestries prototype; this research explored what they did, their technological identities, relationship to place and the meanings they generated, as well as indicating the social opportunities and costs associated with Urban Tapestries. What makes this ethnography experimental is the juxtaposition of its aim to capture the relationship between present and future uses of technology, and the passage of that relationship. It aimed to capture the fluidity of technological change and the fuzziness of objects, machines and media as they feature in the daily round. The research provided many insights into the complexities of relationships not only to technologies but to place, social and economic contexts.

Prototypes

Proboscis developed and tested a series of experimental prototypes in 2003 and 2004 to help explore and understand scenarios of use and the emergent possibilities that this new form of communication and marking of space implies. The system uses a client/server model, with location information and content being held on a server and uploaded or downloaded to client devices on a request basis. The system is designed to be platform and device agnostic – with different kinds of location sensing technologies, devices and software platforms able to interact with the server to create or browse local content.

The Urban Tapestries system enables users to create relationships between geographic places through the creation of *pockets* and *threads*:
- Pockets are the relationship a user makes to a specific geographic place (with an accuracy of 1 metre square) and contain the media the user chooses to associate with that place (such as a story and/or audio file and/or a picture).
- Threads are the thematic relationships between pockets and geographic places, and can vary from the practical, 'Fair Trade Goods Sold Here' to the personal, 'My Favourite Bars & Cafes'.
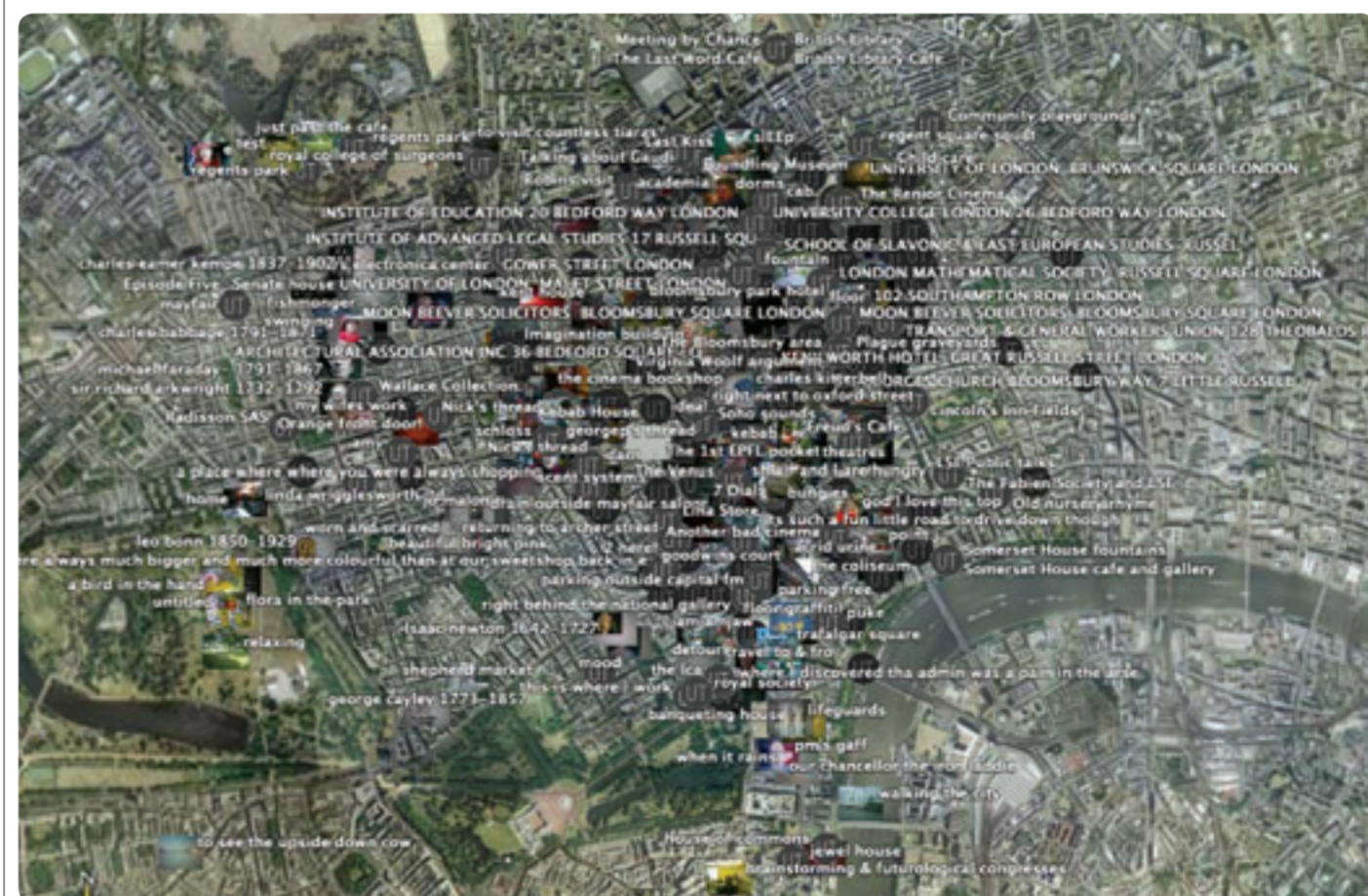
PDA
The initial prototype was designed for HP iPAQ PDAs using an 802.11b (WiFi) internet connection and was used in the first public trial in December 2003.

MOBILE PHONE
In partnership with France Telecom R&D UK, Proboscis developed and tested a client for Symbian 'smartphone' (Sony Ericsson P800/900) connecting to the internet via a GPRS network in 2004.

Trials

Proboscis has run two prototype trials in London to demonstrate the system and understand more about how and why people would use such a system for annotating space and place. The first trial in December 2003 used the initial PDA and WiFi prototype and had 100 participants, each borrowing a device for up to 2 hours and using it to annotate and explore the district of Bloomsbury in central London. Proboscis installed and maintained an 11-node WiFi mesh network covering local streets and public parks in the area to support mobile annotation with the devices. The second trial used the Symbian mobile phone prototype running over the Orange GPRS network and covered 36 square kilometres of central London. Proboscis loaned devices to 11 members of the public for one month to see how people might begin to use the system over time. Up to 15 other users from within Orange and France Telecom R&D also took part in the trial. Evaluation of the results from the trial has been extremely important in refining and developing the concepts of 'public authoring' and spatial annotation, as well as improving the usefulness of the prototypes.

WEB BROWSER
In October 2004 Proboscis released a Flash-based web viewer for accessing and browsing the content added to the system during the trials.

RSS FEEDS
Proboscis created RSS feeds for individual authors and threads, as well as a custom feed generated from a location within the trial area defined by the user.
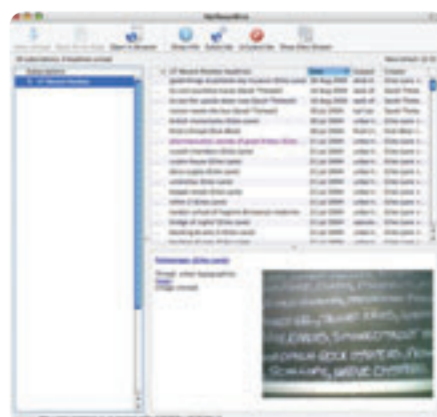
SOCIAL TAPESTRIES

Urban Tapestries
public authoring in the wireless city

http://urbantapestries.net
http://research.urbantapestries.net
http://urbantapestries.net/weblog/