

Empathy Walks: Amplifying layers of the city

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You don't need to be a voice for the voiceless. Just pass the mic.

Su'ad Abdul Khabeer

Empathy Walks is not designed to speak for different communities but to be used as a tool and a civic platform from which diverse voices can be heard directly by other people and planners. Empathy Walks connects people and organises narratives and cartographies so that they influence transformation and interactions in the city.

Creating Alternative Cartographies in Empathy Walks

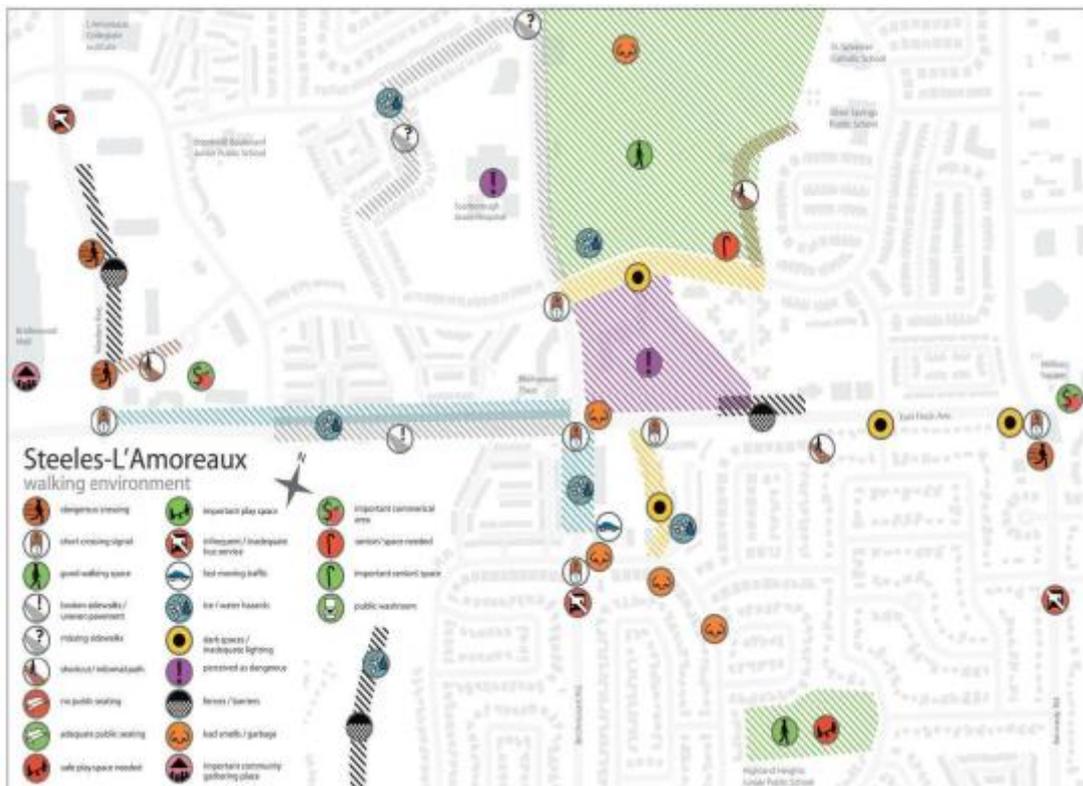
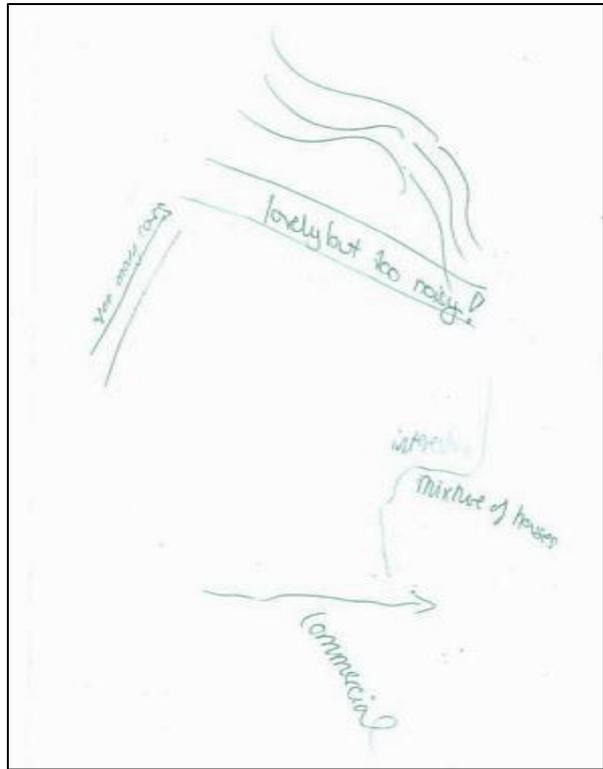
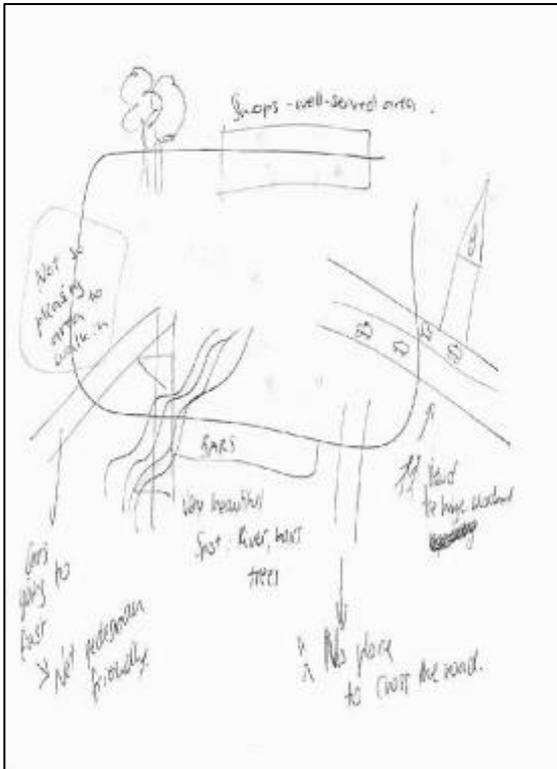
To enrich the experience and generate knowledge and data for future actions, the walks include mapping tools that are used by participants at the different stages of the walking project.

Walk leaders are people experiencing unfavourable condition in the city - migrants who need to find ways of belonging to the city, precarious workers who see their work places disappear. The walk leader is invited to share their daily walkabouts with unknown people so that they can build empathy. The walk leader uses mental mapping and affective maps as tools to co-create the route with the Empathy Walks team before the public event day. Before the walk, members of the team walk with the walk leader to co-create a route. The route is created with mental mapping and walking. Mental mapping allows the senses to predominate in the approach to space, revealing perceptions, temporalities and meaningful places. This stage is structured using a questionnaire to cover different ways of connecting with places and to understand personal attachments to places.

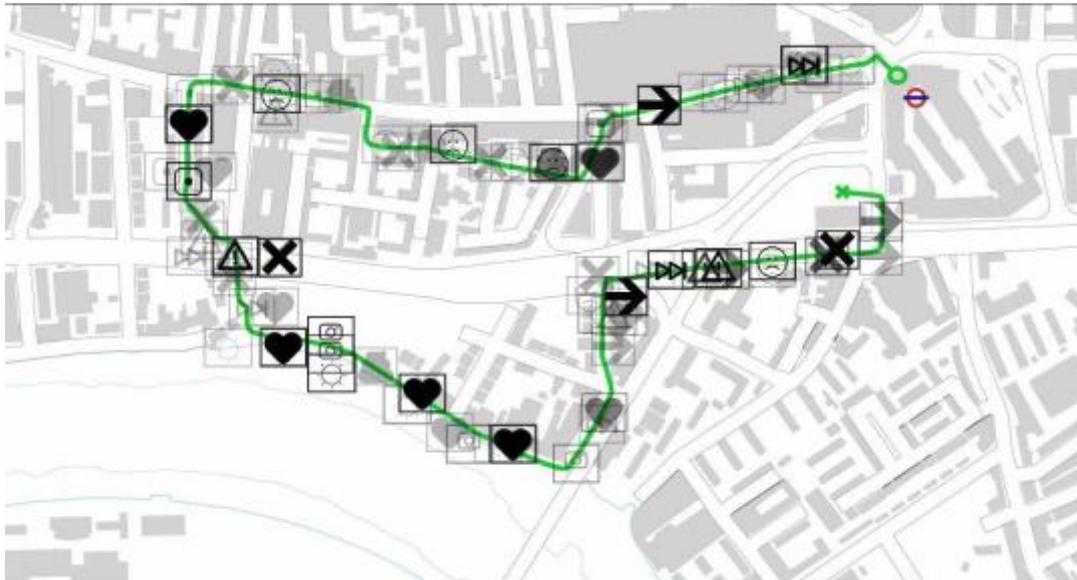
During the walk participants are given an OS map to annotate their own maps, also creating a sensory map, inspired by Jane Jacobs Walks, a Canadian NGO which has done projects with notation sensory maps to understand the territory.

This methodology provides participants with simple icons that represent feelings, which people can then annotate on the walk route map to indicate their feelings about geographical locations. The icons may represent noise, danger, comfort, surprise, beauty. They help participants to reflect on how they feel while walking other people's paths and listening to their narratives.

After the walk, the maps are analysed and layered in order to support and enrich empirical and local knowledge. This exercise allows connections and patterns to be found in people's sensations and experiences and in the personal layers of the city such as places of belonging, places of conflict, social and work places.



Jane's Walk Annotation Map



An annotation map overlaid to identify patterns of feeling



Summary of the methodology

There is Nothing Here

On Saturday 1st of July we organised a walk entitled 'There is Nothing Here'. We followed the steps of Christian Spencer Davis, who works in an industrial estate along Camley Street, in Cedar Way, north of King's Cross. The name of the walk questions and invites critical explanation of the way the area around King's Cross is commodified and regenerated through planning. Upmarket apartments and student accommodation have been built as part of the new cultural quarter around Granary Square.

Christian (the walk leader) started the walk with a telling anecdote. When he visited the marketing suite for the up-market apartments around the new Gasholders Park, Christian introduced himself and his workplace just located a few yards north-west. The agent's reaction was "*Oh there? I thought there was nothing there*". This starting point and Christian's walk are an invitation to explore the construction of the neighbourhood and its identity. By designating Cedar Way Industrial Estate as brownfield land, ready to be redeveloped, the planning system built the belief that there was nothing going on beyond the master-planned elements of King's Cross. The rigid limits of the exercise of master-planning influence people's spatial representations dramatically. Beyond the new and flashy version of King's Cross, a whole world seems to crumble and disappear. It is the old world, seen as empty, obsolete, ready to be redeveloped.

Following Christian's daily route, the participants were invited to explore the sensorial elements of the industrial estate and discover the richness of activities happening there. The narration created understanding of hidden and subtle realities in the area. The walk took 45 minutes, gathered a group of 10 people and finished at a local pub, creating an opportunity to stimulate informal interaction and share thoughts about the area.

A participant wrote the following reaction after the walk was completed:

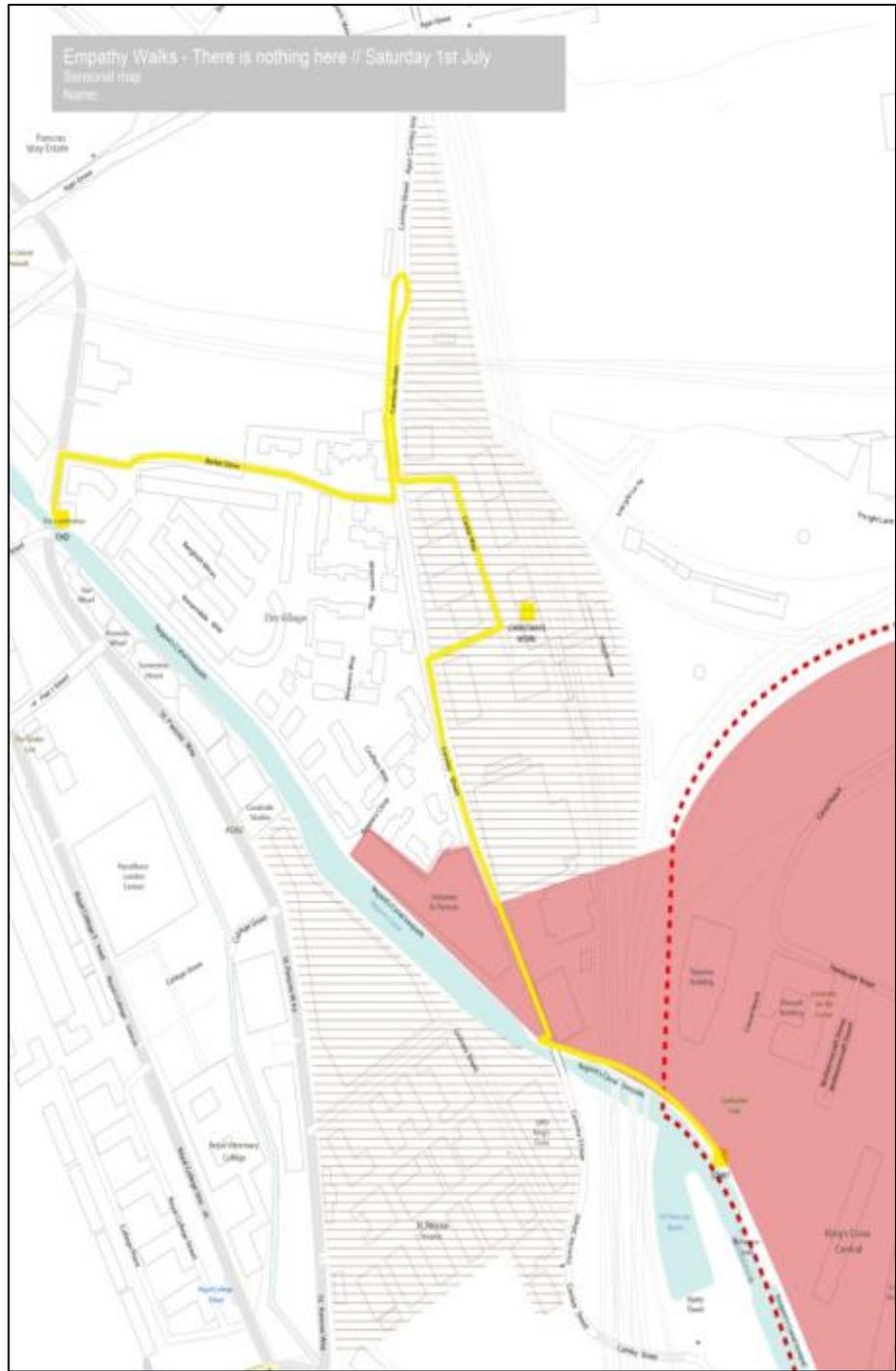
I was surprised to see the wide variety of exciting businesses on my doorstep. I felt a bit ignorant and enlightened. I think it would be a real shame to lose the fishmongers, butchers, car shops. Favourite spots were the Elan Muesli building with the fruit trees, and learning about the heating ideas for housing above the meat and fish businesses, using the unwanted heat to warm the houses.

What worked well and what didn't?

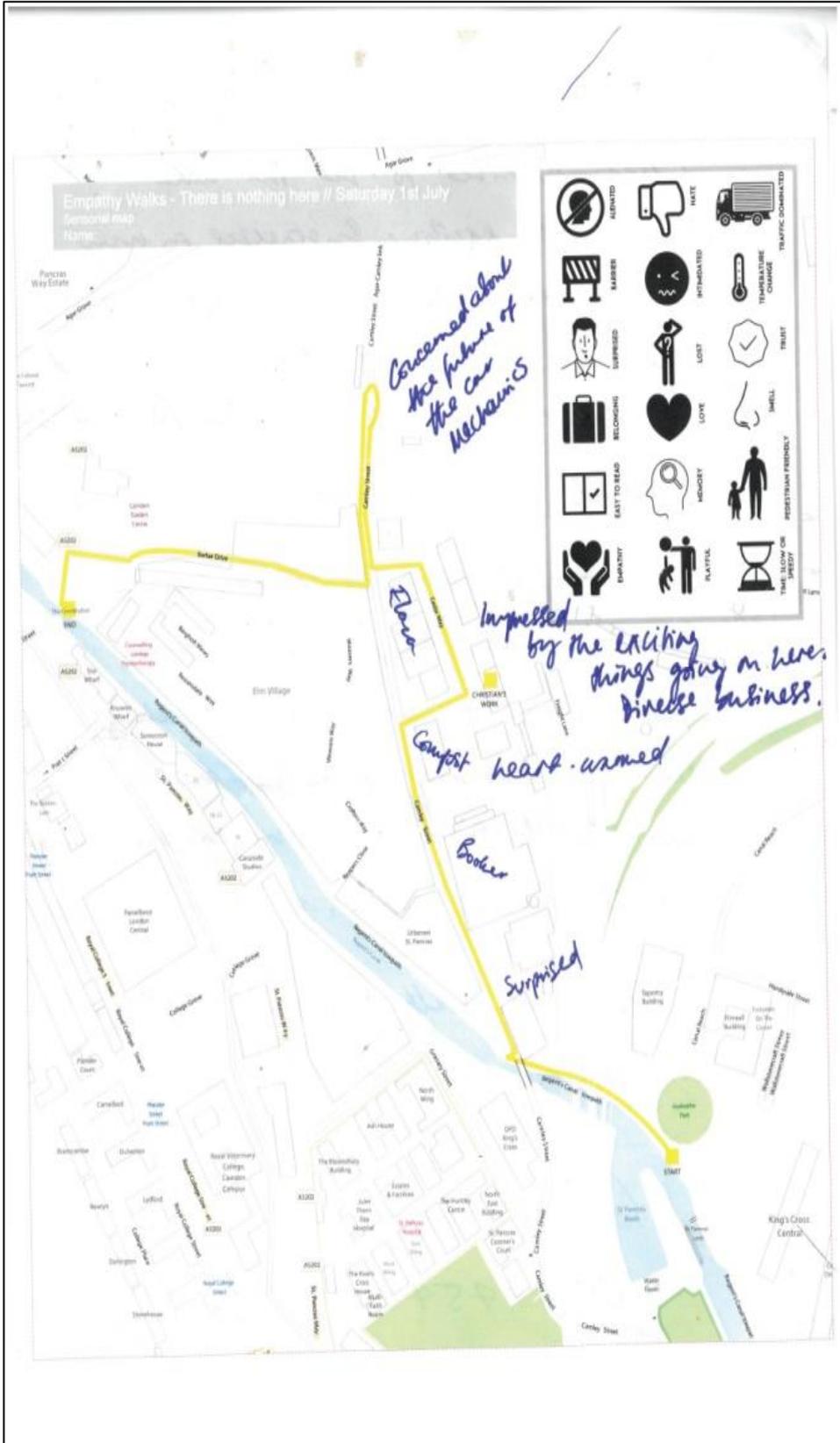
The small sized group allowed a good level of interaction between participants, and the equipped and narration where effective. Finishing the walk in a format of one hour and at a social place (here, a public house) made for good group dynamics and interesting conversations.

Annotations on the map need to be made easier and the icons simplified.

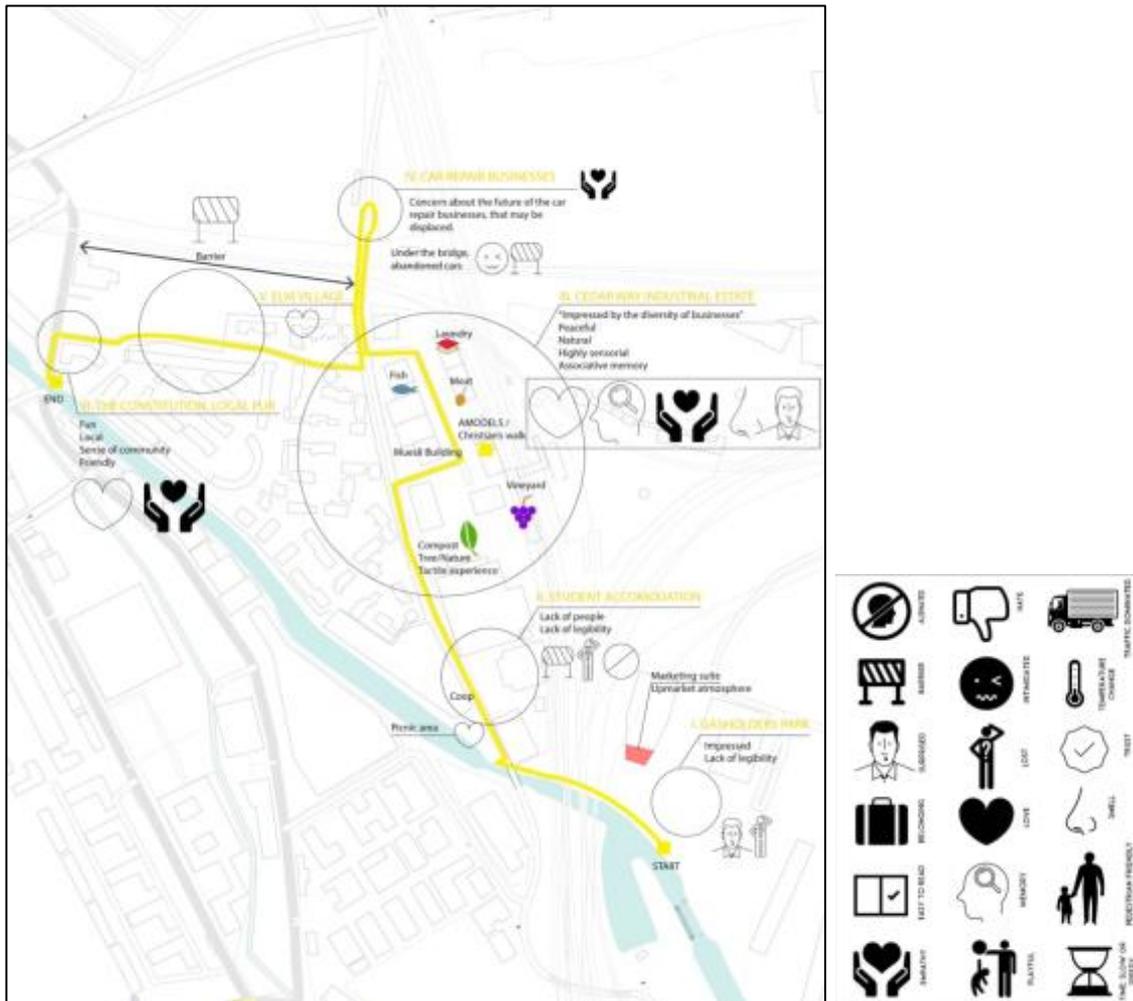
Finding walk leaders is another challenge. Not everyone is confident at public speaking, especially within communities that are disadvantaged. Therefore working closely with pre-existing community groups is an asset to empower people in sharing their stories and walkabouts.



Context map: the new King's Cross versus the old, shown as brownfield



A map annotated by a participant.



Layered participants map, gathering the different reactions to the walk and annotations. Large icons gather reactions that have been shared between the participants

From this experience, it is possible to discover different layers and perceptions of the spaces. This is done by overlaying the walkers’ sensory maps with the walk leaders’ affective maps, to show how personal experience has affected the participants’ perceptions of the area. Other benefits from stimulating people by empathy mapping include:

- It brings people closer together in a fun and simple way
- the mapping invites people to reflect on their experience of the spatial qualities of their environment.
- The mapping work is a way for ordinary people to reflect on urban design, by providing accessible tools to actually analyse the built environment. Empathy Walks can help people to understand about urban design through their everyday stories.
- The walk and the mapping work are enablers that turn jargon and abstract concepts into tangible realities.

Maps are the crucial tools and product from the walk to be used for studying an area, discovering its different layers, measuring empathy from an individual and collective perspective. Overlaying those fine-grained maps with formal maps and big data maps such as Greater London Authority and planning policy maps complements cold data with warm data.