

DENIS WOOD

INTERVIEW BY LAURIE BOOTH AND SARAH WALKER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAT PIPER

The process of mapping is much more than showing the beautiful artifacts of the world and our understanding of its relationships. Denis Wood describes his love for mapping and what it ought to be.

What got you into mapping?

It's a strange idea, but I never thought of myself as a "map guy" until I did an exhibition on maps, and then suddenly, people wanted me to do maps. In 1998, when Ira Glass interviewed me for *This American Life*, we talked about the maps I had been making of my neighborhood in Boylan Heights, in Raleigh. From there, I produced a book that included my maps, original map art, drawings, sketches, and the unfinished maps. Now, of course, all I do is maps.

In 1975, I was teaching landscape architecture. I was plunged into these studios, and I had no idea what to do; I knew nothing about landscape architecture. That uncertainty led to the mapping exercises that inspired my neighborhood atlas. All these pieces of my life came together in what I taught and in the maps I made. It's like these stories are all like spaghetti together. These maps were all things that I was deeply, deeply involved with, and they all led to deep maps.

What did you mean by deep maps?

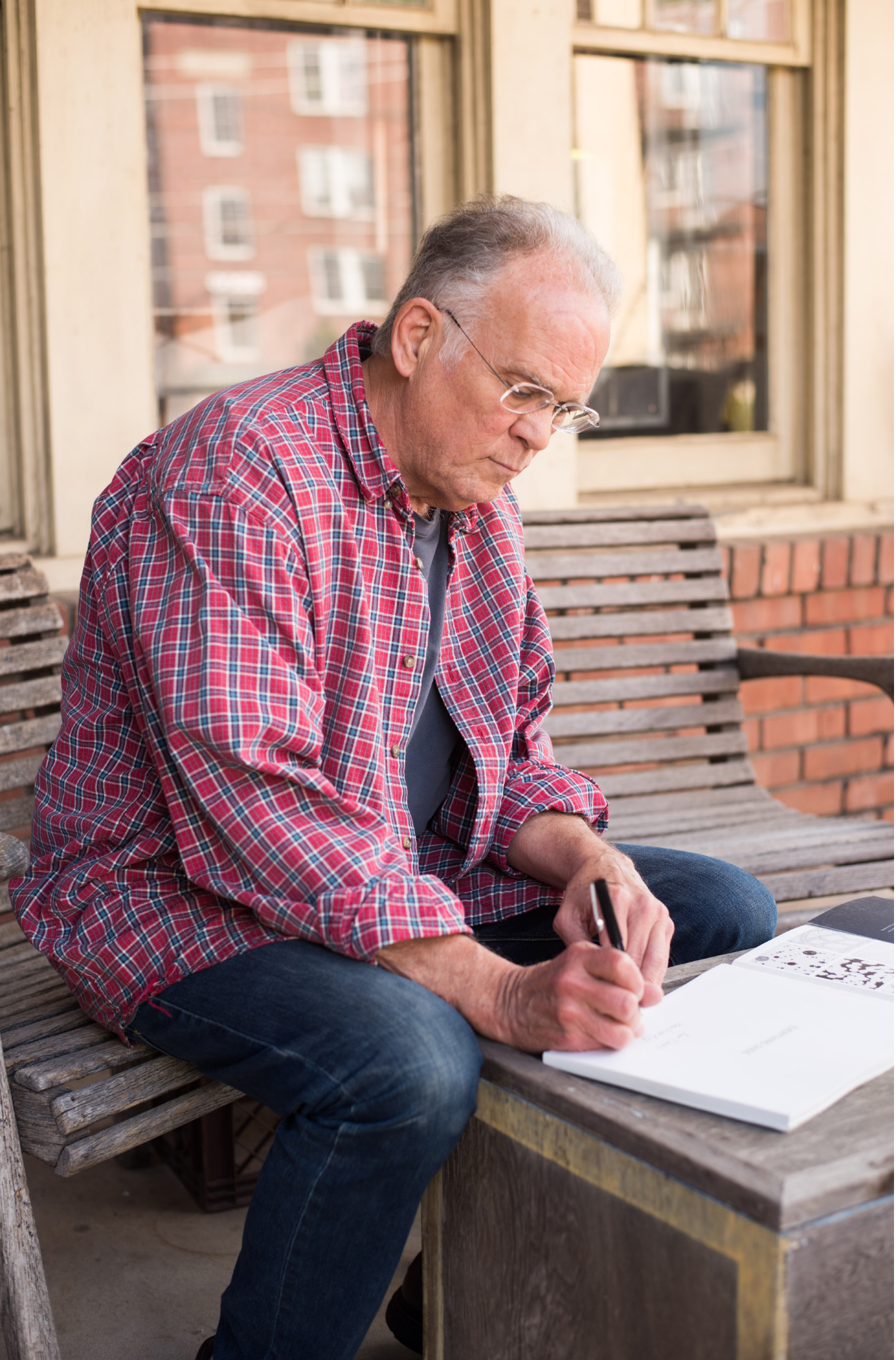
Deep mapping is about being in love. Making maps is a way of hanging onto that feeling and not letting go. That's what mapping is about: trying to recover, or hang on, or not let go of intense feelings that you are having about a place. It doesn't change you, but it's a way of trying to hang onto something that has already changed you.

How has making maps changed your view of the world?

Well I entered undergraduate school hoping to be a historian, and then added English. There was a science course required, so I took geography and loved it. I then decided to triple major in all three, and applied to all three in graduate school. While at graduate school, JK Wright came to the campus, and his book had just come out: *Human Nature and Geography*. Wright talks about 'geosophy' in the book, which he defines as the study of geographical knowledge from any, or all points of view. The idea is that all people could be geographers and create an image of the world. I asked myself, well then, why not me? Or why not me from back in the 6th grade? Why not the me who rode in the back of a moving van to Cleveland Heights, and popped out into a new world? Out of this I created a series of maps on how I came to see, to discover, to know this world.

Do you have any specific memories of making maps in school?

I went to Puerto Rico on a field course and created a project on the local music. I decided to study the songs of jukeboxes as we traveled from coast to coast. We stopped at every fifth place that we thought might have a jukebox. I noted the types of songs that were on the jukebox, creating these endless lists of completely recorded jukeboxes. We stopped a lot, and you don't go into a bar to record





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a jukebox without having a beer, and sometimes a copita of rum. A lot of rum was consumed in Puerto Rico in these little towns, and so naturally, I fell in love with Puerto Rico.

Are there any common elements that are in every map? What makes something a map?

What makes a map, a map? They're all discovering space. I think a map is a graphic artifact. I believe maps play a very profound role in our lives. Maps control borders—national borders, which are a huge topic in 2017. They control city, county, and state boundaries at all levels, all around the world. Most of the world has been mapped at this point, and they're important documents of control and oppression. They have a significant place in our lives whether we see them or not. Maps have power; they do work. They achieve things in the



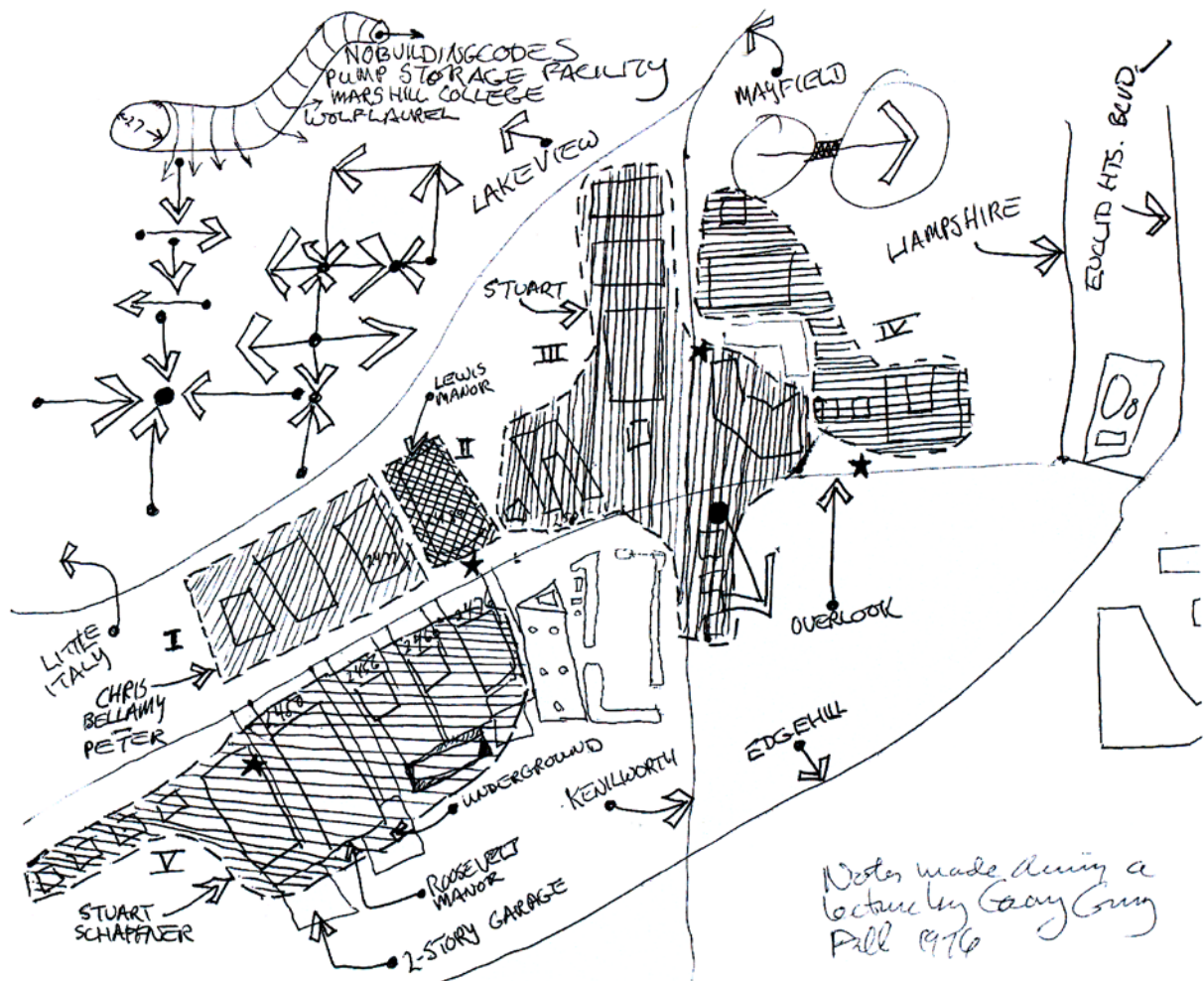
world. There is an entire infrastructure that is involved in the creation of a map idea. Maps as we know them today are about 500 years old. Humans have had the ability to make maps since they've been human.

But why would they need to? In face-to-face cultures that were local, why would you need to make a map? Everybody knew everything. I don't think maps have anything to do with knowing where you are or orientation. I'm not even sure they have anything to do with wayfinding. The story that people always tell about maps is that they are essential for wayfinding, which is complete and demonstrable nonsense. People found their way around without maps for hundreds of thousands of years. They didn't need maps! They knew where they were.

So what do maps do for us now that we did not need before?

Maps turn out to be a more useful way of managing, controlling and knowing. They are gradually incorporated into human life at all levels. Where am I? You look at your stupid Google Maps, the dumbest map ever made, and the most frequently cited, and used. I think maps are graphic artifacts that enable the control of human life by state institutions. That's why humans began reproducing maps in such huge numbers.

Then as we get the growth of literature, people start putting maps in novels. There are maps in *Gulliver's Travels*. As we enter the 19th century, maps begin to multiply madly. Pretty soon, they're in kid's books: *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*,



which spawn a gazillion other maps, and map games, and gaming crap. It's mad. Maps, they're everywhere now. In fictional, nonfictional, and, as we know, non-graphic forms. It's insane. The world has become map-obsessed.

Why do you think Google Maps is so awful?

It's so trivial and superficial. It is the ultimate superficial map. It's like saying, here's the line, and here's the rest of the world; the line goes here and the line goes there, and you can drive on the lines. Come on.

Do you think that the beauty of maps has faded? How do you try to keep that?

No, I think the beauty of maps has been constant. There have always been beautiful maps, and there have always been ugly maps, in the past and in the present. I don't get off on these decorative printed maps of the 16th and 17th centuries. Yeah, some of them are wonderful things, and I actually owned a couple for a long time, but they're not beautiful maps. They're not half as beautiful as a good USGS topographical sheet. Well, as good as

USGS topographical sheets used to be when they were printed on lithographic presses, they're not like that anymore. They're all printed on demand.

Do you prefer the old style of printing maps versus today's super digital process?

Clearly, USGS topographical sheets were meant to be reproduced lithographically. That's how they were made. That's how they were envisioned. I think there is a union in the way maps are produced that results in a kind of integrity in the product that you don't have anymore with digital printing. There are maps that were created on a computer, and printed on a lithographic press in China, so you can make great stuff with any medium, but you can also make trash with any medium. We've been making great stuff and trash at the same rate.

What do you envision the map of your life to look like? Do you think each person has their own map?

If I were thinking about my life, it would have to be some kind of time-space diagram. For mine, the trip to Mexico, then I stay in Cleveland forever...



for 22 years. I go out west with my grandparents when I'm nine, and did the grand tour of the national parks in the west, skipping California.

Do you feel that maps need to be a movement through space and not just someone's mentality over time?

Well that's a whole other thing isn't it. That's the metaphor. There's ideas like 'think about your body as a map', etc. They generate these strange, interesting things. I think maps are about locating things in space. There are metaphoric maps, like the map of marriage, the map of my life or the map of like things, but I have a problem thinking about them as maps, rather than as biographies.

You talk a lot about how you deeply study something. What would your advice be, for students, in how to become deeply involved and deeply connected to place?

One of the things I have been arguing is that the places that lead to the deepest maps, are the places where you live. If I were to tend to a place, I would want to spend an awful lot of

time there. I would want to live there and have a bunch of routines that would move me through that environment in a constantly changing way. You have to pay attention to your environment well and have curiosity. Adults today, who sit in their houses watching TV all day, will never have a deep connection with place. It's cruel to say. But it takes more determined work. You have to want to turn over rocks. ■

Denis Wood taught design at North Carolina State University's College of Design for over twenty years. He curated the Smithsonian's The Power of Maps exhibitions in the early 1990s, and wrote the popular The Power of Maps (1992) that accompanied it. An artist, curator, and mapmaker, he has written more than a dozen books on topics ranging from his living room (Home Rules, with Robert Beck, 1994) to the history of the land (Five Billion Years of Global Change, 2004), but mostly about maps (including an innovative text, with John Krygier, Making Maps, Third Edition, 2016). His atlas of his neighborhood, Everything Sings, will be coming out in an electronic edition.

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