Excerpt from

EVERYTHING SINGS: Maps for a Narrative Atlas by Denis Wood

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DENIS WOOD EVERYTHING SINGS

MAPS FOR A NARRATIVE ATLAS

SECOND EDITION



INTRODUCTION

When I encountered these maps of Boylan Heights years ago, what I first loved was how impractical they were. Most maps are entirely about doing a job. They are dull salarymen who clock in early and spend their days telling you where stuff is with unrelenting precision. They never vary an inch from these appointed rounds.

Not these maps. One of my favorites, Pools of Light, is a dreamy rendering in blurry white circles of the light cast by street lamps. Even if you were in Boylan Heights on a dark night and badly needed to find a street lamp, it's hard to imagine how this map would help you. For one thing, you'd need to get under a street lamp to read the damn map, and once you'd accomplished that, well, you'd have achieved your goal, wouldn't you?

Granted, the map that's dotted with jack-o'-lanterns indicating which houses set them out for Halloween—another favorite—could conceivably be a guide for neighborhood toughs on an unusually thorough smashing binge. But how likely is that? What kind of ten-year-olds would have the impulse to kick in a few pumpkins and also have enough of an OCDish drive to decimate every single one that they'd consult a map?

These maps are completely unnecessary. The world didn't ask for them. They aid no navigation or civic-minded purpose. They're just for pleasure. They laugh at the stupid Google map I consult five times a day on my phone. They laugh at what a square that map is. At its small-mindedness. They know it's a sad, workaholic salaryman.

Their mission is more novelistic. Which I also love. What they chart isn't Boylan Heights exactly but Wood's feelings about Boylan Heights, his curiosity about it, and his sense of wonder at all the things about the place that are overlooked and unnamed.

That a cartographer could set out on a mission that's so emotional, so personal, so idiosyncratic, was news to me. It reminds me of how a recent generation of comic book artists turned that hack medium of superhero adventures into a medium of

novelistic stories drenched in feeling and personality. It reminds me of all the bloggers and tumblrs and tweeters who've taken a global computer network designed for engineers and the defense establishment and transformed it into their noisy, messy clubhouse.

And these maps remind me of all the radio stories I love most. After all, radio is mostly a boring salaryman, waking up before you and me to announce the headlines or play the hits to some predetermined demographic. Yet some radio stories elbow their way into the world in defiance of that unrelentingly practical mission, with the same goal Denis Wood's maps have: to take a form that's not intended for feeling or mystery and make it breathe with human life.

Which brings me to the oddest thing about these maps. They describe human lives without ever showing us any people. Instead, we see the underground structures that humans build for waste and the paths they make for squirrels in the sky. We see which homes have wind chimes and which ones call the cops. We see the route of the letter carrier and the life cycle of the daily paper. Wood is writing a novel where we never meet the main characters, but their stuff is everywhere. I don't know exactly how to describe the feeling that creates. It's like walking around a world that's been decimated by a neutron bomb and walking into all the houses. You miss the people who lived here, and you think about their daily routines. You can count the scraps of toast left on their plates and smell the bacon they were preparing right before they were vaporized. Their lives seem far away and utterly present, both at the same time. Which somehow makes our world seem fragile and very precious. Maybe it's just me, but that seems like the opposite of the feeling ordinary maps give us, with their rock solid facts and their obsession with street names. They make the world seem anything but fragile.

Though, of course, the world is fragile. And fleeting. And so Denis Wood's maps are a far more accurate depiction of Boylan Heights than any normal map could ever hope to be.

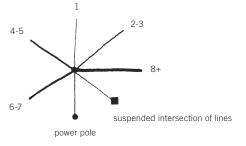
-IRA GLASS

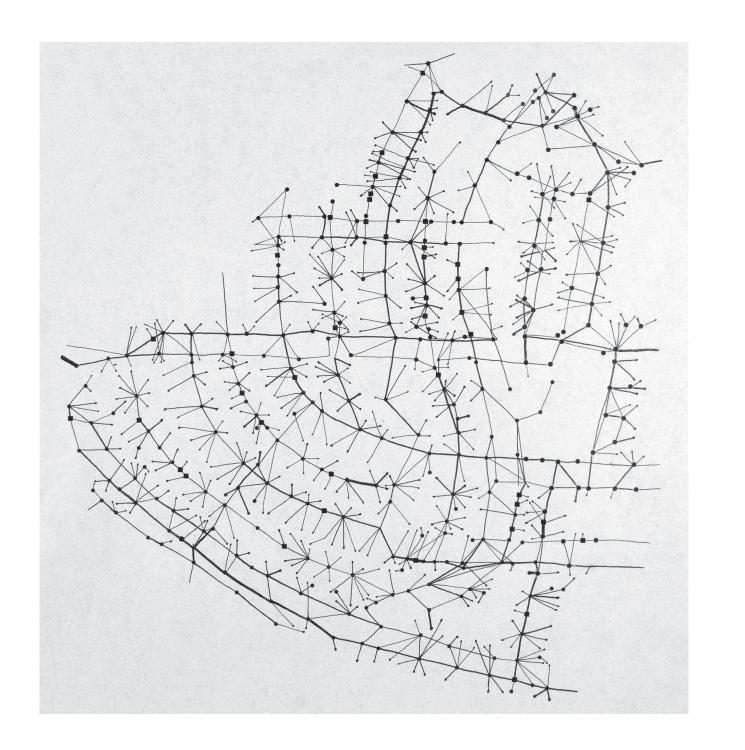
SQUIRREL HIGHWAYS

Just as pipes vein the underground, overhead lines innervate the neighborhood, electricity and information flowing out of and back into national and international grids.

Each powerpole has a birthmark, a metal tag that says who owns it—mostly Carolina Power & Light. The other utilities rent space. When all the utility lines are attached to a single pole, they stack up like this: naked electrical lines on top, copper phone lines (bundled in black, shielded cable) next, then the cablevision lines, fat, shiny, and silver.

Nervous squirrels, afraid of an attack on the ground, use the phone and television cables as highways wherever the tree canopy's broken. Birds rest on the power lines. "Man and nature, not separate"



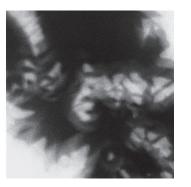


POOLS OF LIGHT

When, in the later 19th century, Americans began systematically to light their streets, it was seen as a wholesome influence to cleanliness, as a deterrent to throwing garbage into the streets under the cover of darkness, and as an inducement to leaving windows open at night for healthier sleep. People felt safer in the less dark night. Vandalism and street crime declined. It was no longer necessary to travel solely on moonlit nights.







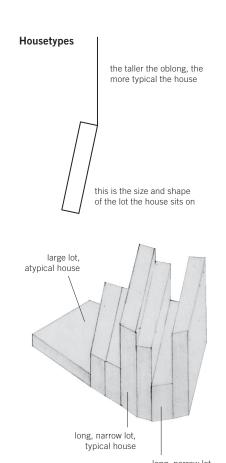


SHOTGUN, BUNGALOW, MANSION

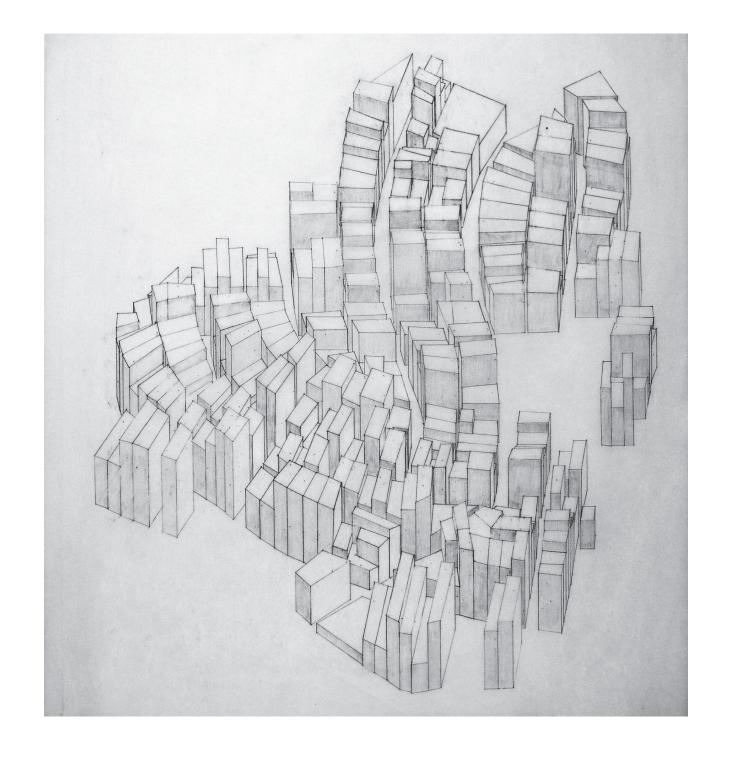
The characteristic Boylan Heights house is a mutt. Some shotgun, some bungalow, it's a white, wooden, one (or one-and-a-half) story house on a red brick foundation with a front porch and wooden railing. While there are variations and differences between the houses at the top of the hill and those at the bottom, there is also an organic coherence among them.

Kelsey and Guild's restrictive covenants endowed the neighborhood with a deep structure in the way the houses *mantle* the hillside: the mansion on top, its finial the finial to the whole hill; the stately houses around it, *solid*, but free of the extravagances of the mansion; then, as you begin to slip down the hill, houses with less *heft* until, finally, it's rows of shotgun houses on long narrow lots at the bottom. The subtle modulation between the houses along this gradient and their quiet conversation don't eliminate the distance between them, but do allow you to imagine bridging it.

The map displays the typical Boylan Heights house which we determined by analyzing a mass of data we collected on every house in the neighborhood. The tighter a house hews to this norm, the taller the oblong (whose plan indicates the size and shape of the lot the house sits on). It's easy to see that large lots precipitated distinctive houses that deviated far from the norm. The shallowness of the oblong on the mansion site marks the distance between its architected form—designed by the English architect William Percival—and those of the tall oblongs lining South Street innocent even of an architect's passing glance.

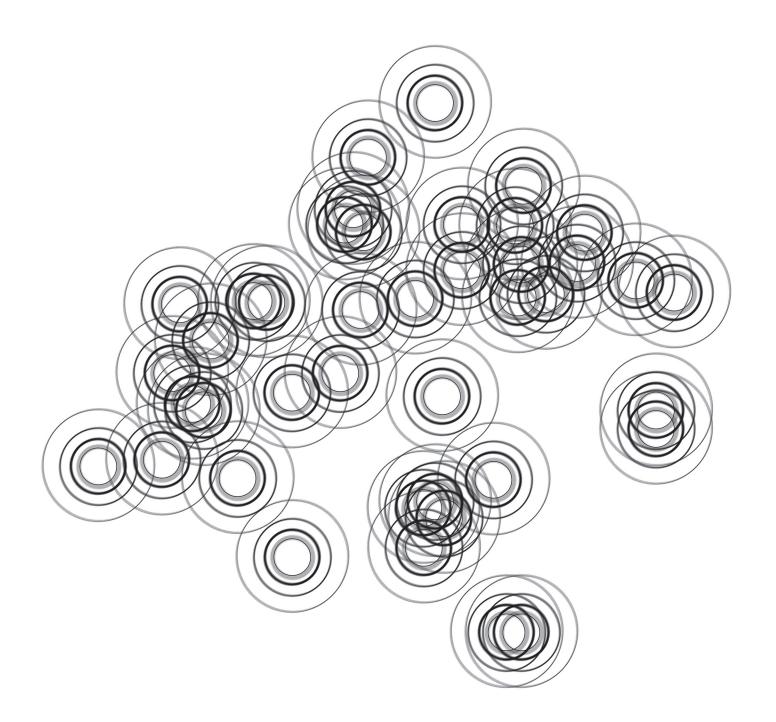


atypical house



WIND CHIMES

When we did the house types survey, we also paid attention to the presence of wind chimes. They were all over—bamboo, glass, shell, metal tubes. Depending on where you stood, the force of the wind, and the time of day, you could hear several chiming, turning the neighborhood into a carillon.



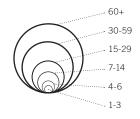
NEWSLETTER PROMINENCE

In August 1974, out of the ferment from which arose the Boylan Heights Restoration and Preservation Association, the neighborhood acquired a newsletter. Folksy and attentive to the arrival of newcomers, winners of contests, and the health of residents, it had an agenda: foster home improvement, foment interest in neighborhood down-zoning, and ultimately increase property values. Just as the popular kids appear most frequently in high school yearbooks, those most active in neighborhood "restoration" were most frequently mentioned in the newsletter. The newsletter is a record of social structure: its contents begged to be mapped.

I recorded every reference to an address or, absent an address, the address of anyone mentioned in the first ninety-six newsletters (1974-1982). The addresses referred to most often were on Boylan Avenue, at the top of the hill, where four addresses alone account for a fifth of all mentions. Frequently mentioned addresses were most likely to concern themselves with neighborhood business (hence the darker circle), no matter who lived there. During these eight years, three very different people lived at 324 S. Boylan. This address, the one most frequently referred to, held its rank independent of the occupants. In other words, it was the house, the address, the location that chose the movers and shakers, not the other way around.

Kelsey and Guild knew their stuff. Their 1907 plan didn't just determine property values, it fixed the social hierarchy. In 2010 the mayor of Raleigh and his wife, a member of the Wake County School Board, lived at 324 S. Boylan. The Representative for North Carolina House District 3 lived just a few doors down. In this case: still the same old map.

Mentions in the Newsletter



The LIGHTER the color, the more personal the nature of the reference.

The DARKER the color, the more the reference pertained to neighborhood business

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JACK-O'-LANTERNS



I rode through the neighborhood on my bicycle—it was 1982—and took pictures of all the jack-o'-lanterns. On the map, there's a jack-o'-lantern at every address where there was one or more pumpkins on the porch, and most of those porches were at addresses that were frequently mentioned in the newsletter.

