

A Shoe In: A Youth-driven Community Mapping Project

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In the summer of 2010, the Bata Shoe Museum undertook a youth-driven community mapping project called 'A Shoe In'. Our motivation was to explore a new audience, or at least an underserved one – youth.

Through Young Canada Works, we hired Maia Rowan, who at age 19 had already had previous experience with community mapping and youth in Vancouver. Maia recruited and worked with seven young people over the summer. They met regularly, and agreed to the following statement of purpose, as found on their blog (<http://ashoein.blogspot.com/>): “We are youth ages 15-25 who are passionate about shoes, design, art and community. We are determined to explore and unveil what interests youth, and how community and arts organizations can serve youth better”. The blog was created to record their experiences over the summer.

Maia introduced the group to the concept of community mapping. This term refers to a process used to find out and record on a map the resources available in a community. For the A Shoe In project, the determination was to ‘map’ a portion of downtown Toronto, seeking out anything and everything about shoes and other information relevant for young people. The group divided up the territory and went out in pairs to see what they could find. They ventured into all of the establishments along their route, and if they chose it for the map, they enquired about hours, and other relevant information. They chose to sort their data in five categories: shoe shopping, shoe repair, museums and galleries, food, and youth hotspots. The map was posted on the blog, and printed in small, well-designed publication.

Maia also arranged three tours for the group: the shoe departments at Harry Rosen and Holt Renfrew, as well as John Fleuvog Shoes. These outings were extremely popular with the group, and there was genuine interest and curiosity on the part of the manager of each store in interacting with and listening to insights from the youth.

The youth were also given a trained to give a short guided tour of our permanent exhibition *All About Shoes*.

A launch event was held at the end of the summer. The participants invited family and friends, as well as any people they had met along the way. They prepared an exhibition for the launch – each participant displayed shoes that were special to them, and spoke eloquently about them. The map publication was explained and distributed. Finally, they each gave a tour to their family/friends in *All About Shoes* of the shoes they had studied.

Maia wanted to arrange a reward for the participants in the project, so she solicited local businesses and collected seven gift certificates from them, which were distributed at the end of the project.

This pilot project was a great learning experience to understand the joys and challenges of working with this age group. From the group's project evaluation sheets it is obvious they had a wonderful time, learning a lot about the museum collection, the nearby community, the shoe industry, and how objects (such as their own shoes) can tell compelling stories. They connected instantly with Maia, and with her leadership they achieved all of their goals. They all said wanted to stay involved with the museum. However, once Maia left and they went back to school, the considerably older museum program staff were unable to get them to commit to attend a brainstorming session to explore where to go from here. If, for example, the Museum wanted to pursue establishing a Youth Council, I expect that the museum would need to devote more resources, including hiring a young person establish it and help it to thrive.

In their evaluations, several of the participants mentioned "Have a sneaker exhibition". The Museum recently embarked upon a project to learn about, document and potentially create exhibitions and programs around sneaker culture. One of the older participants in A Shoe In, a self-professed 'sneakerhead', has already given input into this project, and we expect to continue involving him as we go forward.