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Think Global, Map Social! Interview With Wendy Brawer And Thomas Turnbull Of Opengreenmap.Org



I talk to Wendy Brawer and Thomas Turnbull about the origins of [Green Map System \(greenmap.org\)](#) and what they to accomplish when they launch the [Open Green Map \(opengreenmap.org\)](#) in the coming months.

Also, please take a moment to appreciate how happy Wendy and the Green Map team looks in this picture. Looks like a real positive energy vibe zone.

Jed Sundwall: How long has Green Map System been around?

Wendy Brawer: I started the whole shebang back, really, in 1992, by creating a map of New York's environment. That was the first Green Apple Map. And it was really the reaction to that map that sparked the global project. And it took about three years to figure out what's the real way that a local, global linkage could work for Green Map. And it all had to do with the concept of an iconography, creating a global symbol system, so that local mapmakers could focus on issues of importance and local resources, problems, but still do it in a way that's globally understandable.

So, I brought that concept of creating a global iconography for a locally led network of mapmaking projects to the O2 global network in 1995. And that's where we've had our first conversation about using the Net for collaboration and for sustainability. Anyhow, a week later, the project was on its way. So, it was global from the get go, the Green Map. This was March of '95. It had about a dozen countries involved in its collaborative development right from the start. Took about a year to make the iconography, which was released as a font, so instead of focusing on the technology development, we focused on the people side development, the human side. And by 2000, when we became a not for profit, we had three dozen maps

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published, and we were in 100 places around the world by then.

So, it was rolling on a shoestring, and with a very small core group of people here in New York. It's really been, I'd say, the last five years that it's kind of been expanding like mad. Tom came on board, what was that?

Thomas Turnbull: 19 months ago.

Wendy: 19 months ago, so early '07. And the first project was to change [GreenMap.org](#), which at that point, we had about 390 projects. And we knew we needed a content-managed system. We knew we wanted the mapmakers to be able to tell their own stories on the website, share the news about their maps. And that took really, what about five months to get that project up and rolling? It's now got interfaces in Spanish, Japanese, two flavors of Chinese, and 100 projects have been added since then. We kept feeling we were moving closer and closer to this magic moment, where we could start to develop this interactive map making tool, the Open Green Map. So, that really got started in about December.

When you started, what was the goal? I mean, it was the Green Map, you wanted to highlight the environment, but to what end? Did you just want to highlight green areas, nature that should be preserved, that people should visit?

Wendy: Well, there's a mix of things. Sustainability includes social justice. It includes economic vitality, along with the environment. And so, we're trying to include all these things. So, the Green Map icons, which there are now 170 of, these were also updated for the third time in early '08. The Green Map icons include green living, culture and society, and nature. So, those are the three major genres of the icons. And we're really encouraging people to look holistically at their community, but there are many theme maps that have been created, so people are looking at cultural heritage, recycling, or energy issues.

Tom: I think that's just the really interesting thing about Green Maps, is that they're completely grassroots, they're completely about letting the local community map what's important to them.

I'm really passionate about food and agriculture for political, ethical, and environmental reasons. So I made a [custom Google map to highlight good sources of local food in San Diego](#). I've got all this data, and now I want to put it on your system, so that other people can add to it.

Wendy: We'd love it. We don't have a San Diego project yet. Well, we have had one, and see, this is part of the reason we created the Open Green Map. There was a San Diego project that struggled for months. They were trying to learn GIS. They were trying at the same time to gather the data, organize a community-based effort. They couldn't do all these things with the small group that they had involved. So, all the data that they did collect has never seen the light of day. And with the Open Green Map, we take out the struggle to get it online, make it interactive, design it, and even distribute it. So, we are taking out some of the most problematic and expensive steps for the local mapmakers. And, at the same time, adding this great potential for the public to come and help keep the information updated and add the connections, the visual expressions, the impacts. How did this place change their life, which is one of the unique things we're doing.

And I think I've been to the farmers market in Escondido, that's really nice. So, right, your map could be a great example of what we would call a theme Green Map. Because we're going to be building themes in, you might tag it as good for eco-tourism. I don't know about you, but that's one of the things I definitely love to do when I'm traveling, is to see the local food system.

But, your map is a great example, so here, people could come, maybe they're going to add an explanation in Spanish about what's special about this particular farmer market.

Tom: Or create some videos from YouTube showing the growing process.

Wendy: And they can give feedback to the people in the market, so maybe people learn, oh, now I can eat local, now I can eat less meat, for example. And this is something they could add right to the Open Green Map. Even if it's a small thing, it really might give a farmer a sense of how they're really impacting people's lives and give them impetus to do more, even if they're having a rough patch at the moment. Do you know what I mean?

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Right, right, absolutely.

So, we're excited about what the public can add to the mapmaker's view this way. It won't change what the mapmaker's going to say, but it will enhance it, we hope, and create a space for dialogue and exchange about each site. So, we're essentially giving each green site a social networking spot.

OK, so you see it as being another social networking tool that's centered around the maps?

Yeah.

And so, I see you're using Drupal and Google Maps?

Tom: Yeah.

And so, Google Maps obviously powers the mapping, so that people don't need to learn GIS or any of that stuff, it's fairly easy to use? And then, somehow, Drupal sits on top of that to give it social networking features, as well?

Tom: Yeah, exactly, Drupal just provides a really easy way for people to add the data and edit it and have all these different layers coming in, letting people interact by adding their own photos and videos and handling the kind of human side of things, as well. A mapmaker can invite other people to join and help look after the map and deal with any issues that people raise, and provide a platform to let people suggest other things to be added to the map.

You guys have already created other green maps. Have you seeded that information into the Open Green Map?

Tom: Yeah, we've put a couple in. The Manhattan Compost Map's the one we started with, and we're seeing other people testing it. Baltimore's got a lot of stuff in there; Rockland, upstate New York.

Wendy: There're about 35 maps started. We just opened our network on July 31st, so I think I counted seven countries, China, Canada, UK, Sweden, Indonesia. So, we already have a nice diverse mix of people using it, even in our first couple of weeks. It's not open to the public yet. We're postponing our launch date decision until our board meets on the 10th.

Tom: And the public, people can look at the website (opengreenmap.org) at the moment. It's just not officially being launched.

Wendy: Or promoted.

And you know, our maps that we've created in the past, they're on paper. So, we can pull this data that's on this very colorful map kids helped us make. This is a family-friendly view of Lower Manhattan. But, we know there's a lot of updating, a lot we need to do to get that data ready. So, we have actually been focused on building the tool, rather than getting our own maps up there first.

Tom: One really nice idea we've got for New York is to have these Open Green Map parties, where you just get a bunch of people together and then, go out with a clipboard, whatever, and spend the day, weekend, intensely mapping a neighborhood or a whole city.

That's a great idea. Then, everybody has their own little thing to add.

Tom: Exactly.

Wendy: Right, and one of the things we've done over the last year that we piloted in New York, we made modules that enhanced usage of our energy-themed NYC map, so they're really aimed at high school students looking at things, like getting around without a car, reducing waste, taking care of street trees, community gardens. So, we now have, I think it's today we're putting those modules online, so even a group using those modules could create an Open Green Map from that. So, there's lots of different ways that we see this tool working in community situations, as well as for our mapmakers.

By the way, our map projects are led by an extremely diverse group, so there're university,

younger students, there're city agencies and tourism boards, there're grassroots and established groups. There're many different kinds of green professionals now leading them, as well.

Tom: And sometimes, it's just one person in a community that's really passionate about it, like you, one person just takes the initiative and gets it going.

But then, the problem is I can't maintain it. I don't have the time, so I really want to get this out there in a place that's going to encourage collaboration.

Tom: Exactly.

Wendy: I was going to say we're building that in. So, for example, that compost map we made of Manhattan, we worked with a group that does Manhattan's composting. They're networked with the groups that do the composting in all five boroughs. So, we're going to work together in using the Open Green Map that we can invite each of those four other boroughs' compost specialists to be involved in that one Green Map. And they will help us populate the whole city's composting possibilities and keep them up to date. We also see that the public, in general, will come and help keep things up to date.

Ideally, it's like Wikipedia. And I know Wikipedia has their Wikimapia project. People are a lot more comfortable, still, editing text than they are at editing maps, messing with cartography. I'm curious to know, you mentioned governments, local municipalities. How have they responded to this sort of thing? Do they have data that's useful to you?

Wendy: Yes, and actually, for them, in some cases, the governments haven't had their first chance to really talk with community in kind of a meaningful way. Green Mapmaking helps create a common text. And whether the community comes to the city or the city goes to the community to talk about, OK, well what else belongs on this map, it really builds this nice bridge. And people find out that there are ways that they can work together to improve things across the board.

Can you tell us a bit more about your backgrounds, and how you came to work in this space?

Tom: I had had a geography degree at University of Edinburgh in Scotland, and with a freelance program, I'm working on the student newspaper there. Afterwards, some things just came together on this project, geography and the mapping, the Internet.

Wendy: And for me, I'm an ecological designer. I'm very interested in communication and this idea of getting people involved locally. And that's all I've been working on really since about '89, is really this idea of moving things forward. I've taught eco design and related topics around town here. I've done some consulting in the green world. But really, this project, there's a lot of things about maps that are very elegant and the power tools. They have a transformative effect on people. And there are very few other things we have that can do that with a single sheet of paper that really make people think differently about where they live and what they can do there. So, that's part of what drew me to this project and kept me very excited about it. And I'm thrilled being able to work, we're coming up on our 500 project mark worldwide, of communities that we've worked with. From a tiny spot and a small idea that we can empower this many people and help them think long-term about how to change the place where they're living through this process, it's fabulous.

That was beautiful. And maps are also very beautiful. For a long time, I've decorated my room with maps and my office. And it seems like with the Open Green Map, you're going to be able to blow this up even more, far beyond 500 projects.

Oh, I think it's going to be huge, yeah, and our goals include a mobile version and outside marker systems. We have a lot of possibilities that face us in the future. We really want to thank the folks at NetSquared, who helped us tremendously, just in these first few months, being on the system there, got us immediate connections to new possibilities. And then, being in California with everybody, it was great. Since then, they matched us with Michael Silverman of [Echo Ditto](#). We've met with him since, so it's been very, very helpful for us. It's been a great boost to the project.

And now, I'm going to get some help with my San Diego food map.

Right, I think it would be great. Yay!

Is there anything else you want to say to our beloved readers?

We still need lots of help, and anybody who helps with this project is literally helping communities all over the world. So, if you ever feel like what can I do, this is a way to help so many different communities thrive, and so many different kinds of environments become more integrated into people's lives. It's a good across the board, sustainability practice.

Submitted by jedsundwall on August 26, 2008 - 5:13pm

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Comments

CORRECTION

The Manhattan Complex map's the one we started with, and we try to see other people testing it.

The Map is called "Compost Green Map of Manhattan"

Submitted by [Anonymous](#) (not verified) on August 27, 2008 - 9:53am.

[reply](#)

FIXED IT!

Wendy wrote us to point that out as well. Thanks for your help!

Submitted by jedsundwall on August 27, 2008 - 6:46pm.

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