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We sat down with MAP co-creator Morgan Smith to talk mutual aid, appolition, and fighting COVID evictions

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This new feature will have you paying attention to attention differently.
Can apps save us? MAP thinks differently

BY ASHLEIGH KING

The COVID-19 pandemic is showing no signs of slowing down nearly ten months after initial quarantine. To add insult to the injury of state failure thus far, the very spaces needed to quarantine are at risk of being taken away for many Americans. I sat down with Morgan Smith, one of the co-creators of the Mutual Aid Project, more colloquially known as MAP, to discuss what the project has meant beyond cute mapcons in the midst of a looming eviction crisis.

Can you give me a rundown of MAP for any unaware readers?

What is a mapcon? So, the Mutual Aid Project was originally inspired by the NYC’s Worst Evictors Project. We wanted to design an intervention for the impending lift on eviction moratoriums across the nation and considered how we could speculatively push the Worst Evictors Project. We decided to pair the concept of an evictor map with mutual aid to facilitate direct, collective action by community members around landlord abuse. Since the Worst Evictors Project defines “worst” by quantity, we turned to prioritizing narrative tools instead. MAP combines mutual aid and landlord mapping through map icons, or mapcons, and map layering. On the Narrative plane, tenant MAPpers, MAP users, facing abuse from their landlords in the form of legal and nonlegal evictions can mark with a mapcon that they are in need of help. This qualitative and context-rich approach informs the mutual aid side of the project. Through these narratives, MAPpers, with goods and services can combat the resource constraint which a landlord bases their ability to be exploitative. On the Resources plane, MAPpers can share resources like food, health services, abolitionist tools to forge communities, childcare, you name it. You can literally name it.
An app certainly wouldn’t have been the first tool that I’d turn to back in March, but I also wouldn’t give credit to the app alone, if at all. People are turning to their own community with MAP. In the original spirit of mutual aid, MAP combats evictions as a response to lack of necessary resources from state failure by relying on “people [to] take responsibility for caring for one another…”[1] MAP democratizes access to resources because they are provided by the community, not by any special function of the app. Power dynamics are flipped because communities are participating in bottom-up strategies, again, not by any special function of the app. The community is protecting one another from policing and surveillance, not- [a head raise by Smith prompted me to follow]

By any special function of the app.

Exactly! The neighborhood map plane design was intentional in this regard: not only do evictions normally take place in a neighborhood—maps also

With the “Choose Your Own” mapcon.

Exactly. The regular mapcons are a pretty expansive list of landlord hazards and resources, but we couldn’t categorize every landlord abuse tactic or tangible resource, and even more so for intangible goods and services. We prioritized basics and necessities, but with the understanding that different communities and neighborhoods should be able to define this for themselves as well. The “Choose Your Own” mapcon allows MAPpers to share specific skills and resources that meet their community needs—a reminder that cash poor communities are nonetheless empowered in terms of goods and services. My favorite part of this mapcon is that it pushes the project to encompass more than just survival. MAPpers can share beauty and creativity as well.

Do you find it odd that amidst a historical, global event like this pandemic that people would be able to turn to an app?
demonstrate the community that an individual is situated in. This isn’t just a charitable donation. It’s a commitment to your community. An app won’t save us, but we can save each other.

This, coming from one of the designers of the app herself?

Of course, it’s not the technology itself that makes this project imaginative. Moreover, we co-designers see ourselves as facilitators rather than experts.[1] We don’t even use any kind of predictive algorithm that tracks user’s data because MAPpers don’t need to be told what they need. The Narrative plane makes sure that needs in the community are known to resourced MAPpers, and we trust that community members will do the work. Inspired by Appolition, we firmly believe in this “growing movement toward divesting resources from policing and prisons and reinvesting in education, employment, mental health, and a broader support system needed to cultivate safe and thriving communities.”[2]

It’s also important to point out that it’s not just a MAPper’s resources that are valuable, but their attention as well. By turning our gaze to landlords, there is an element of peer and social pressure that comes into play. We hope that they won’t be willing to be as punitive as we expose their tactics through tenant MAPpers’ narratives. And this isn’t just dissemination of “deficit narratives”—we are careful that tenants control their narrative so that a larger story about power is unveiled about the tenant-landlord relationship.[3] We want these narrative tools to be a mobilizing factor by using data visceralization, or the integration of affect into data visualizations. It’s one thing to see a red mapcon, it’s another to understand the narrative there. We want tenant MAPpers in need to feel that they aren’t alone, and just as resourced MAPpers should feel empowered to engage in direct action.

But what happens when the kindness of strangers turns hostile?

We take this very seriously. Racism and bigotry are antithetical to MAP: it “robs us of our relationships, stealing our capacity to trust one another [and] ripping away the social fabric.”[1] Moreover, we know “neutrality is no safeguard against discriminatory design” or outcomes.[1] We thought the best way to avoid colorblind design of MAP’s regulatory framework was to ensure democratic oversight. We wanted people familiar with the context of their community to be involved in these decision-making processes. We provide tools for oversight and transparency
for community regulation rather than top-down regulation that can’t understand the nuance of the community in question. When MAPpers submit an issue flag for review, our moderators responsible for adjudicating flags receive content warnings in advance of any graphic or offense complaints. Our moderators employ restorative justice techniques to resolve conflict, but that certainly doesn’t mean we will look the other direction when MAPpers are subject to racism or discrimination. Unlike other app companies that seek profit from the attention economy, we use a non-profit business model that invests back into services for community members and well-compensated content moderators.

But surely, you’ve considered people also taking advantage of MAP resources.

You’re absolutely right. This was a moment where I took a lot of joy working with co-designers from all walks of life. Mutual aid projects are not a site for means testing. If we tried to delineate those who deserved help, this would, despite our best intentions, categorize a group of people who weren’t deserving of help. Not only is this categorization harmful, but to employ means-testing would require us to collect more data on MAPpers. Tenants are surveilled by their landlords enough as is, and this kind of data collection would exacerbate the paradox of exposure, “the double bind that places those who stand to significantly gain from being counted in the most danger from that same counting (or classifying) act.”[1] MAP uses straightforward consent agreements with explicitly stated, singular used for data. Mutual aid is about creating a counterpublic, which “occupies and reclaims] dominant and state-controlled public spaces while strategically using enclaved spaces.”[2] “[Not] all manner of gettin’ free should be exposed,” so we want to protect MAPper privacy from an already encroaching surveillance state.[3]

How does MAP affect the future of mutual aid projects?

I hope that MAP offers a helpful adaptation to the future of organizing with mutual aid, but this work is certainly not new and I would be remiss to not take this opportunity to “[give] credit where credit is due.”[1] The Detroit Community Technology Project, whose mission is “to use and create technology rooted in community needs that strengthens neighbors’ connection to each other” was integral to this project, especially the addition of the MAP Advisory Council (MAPAC).[2] The Council trains new MAPpers about the power of data, surveillance, and goals of common accountability with technology. I see this as one more step in the direction of developing “technology with emancipatory ethos.”[3] This requires that what we design, regardless of our impact, prioritizes impact on the communities that we employ this technology. I could think of more adequate group designers than community members trained by MAPAC to take over and continue this project in the future.