

SHELTER: AN ATLAS

Edited and produced by Alicia Cowart, Charles Drucker, Darin Jensen, Kristin Scheel, Maia Wachtel, Mattie Naythons, Michelangelo Bonfiglio, Nic Reale, Paul Rogé, Sapna Thottathil, Susan Powell, and Sydney Johnson

Guerrilla Cartography, 2023

182 pages

Paperback: $40.00, ISBN 978-0-9884272-5-9
Hardcover: $80.00, ISBN 978-0-9884272-5-9
eBook: **Free to download**

Review by: Lucy Haggard

Food, water, shelter: three non-negotiable needs of every living creature. The interdisciplinary group Guerrilla Cartography covered the first two topics in books published in 2013 and 2017, respectively (*Food: An Atlas* and *Water: An Atlas*). The group's third volume, *Shelter*: *An Atlas,* was published in 2023 (though dated to 2022) and largely follows the same format as the previous two, with a handful of loosely defined chapters categorizing the dozens of maps and graphical layouts included in this glossy, square-paged anthology.

Though the various entries share an overarching conceptual theme, their locations, specific topics, and aesthetics vary widely from page to page. To be sure, it's impossible to comprehensively map the concept of "shelter" around the world, but even so, the book's survey of the subject feels incomplete and imbalanced. A disproportionate number of maps focus on California's Bay Area, for example. While this is an area of perennial conflict between housing affordability, availability, and accessibility—making it rich in case studies and relevant data—the emphasis is likely also a product of Guerrilla Cartography's base in Oakland. The book's map of contributor and supporter locations reveals that most of the maps in the book come from contributors in North America or Europe, with a handful from East Asia, South America, and Australia. Unlike previous Guerrilla atlases, Africa is quietly blank.

Reading *Shelter* is akin to perusing an exhibit on the subject in a geographically inclined modern art museum. While you can help support their efforts by purchasing a bound copy, Guerrilla Cartography also publishes all their atlas content online, for free, for perusal by curious readers at their leisure. In some ways, the compilation might have been better if it could be experienced and explored in an interactive exhibit, with more content to help the reader to understand how each of the submissions relates to others in the context of the overall topic, and to experience the artistic approaches to some of the submissions in a more engaging way. Many of the contributions bring artistic or avant-garde approaches to cartography and spatial analysis. Perhaps the most unique is a cartographic piece of jewelry: *Oakland Redevelopment Map #1 – Downtown Oakland* (82; Figure 1). This creation maps the impact of racially and economically motivated "redevelopment" projects on Oakland, California.

> In the 1950's–1970's eminent domain was used to acquire and clear many mixed-use blocks in the downtown core. Considered a blighted neighborhood by the Oakland Redevelopment Agency (ORA), it contained largely working class and minority residents, as well as their businesses. The ORA would forcibly remove both to allow for large-scale new construction projects meant to recapture business and shopping revenue lost to suburban white flight. New double blocks were created, which would eventually contain the outdoor mall, hotel, convention center, high rise offices, government buildings, and BART station that

© by the author(s). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0.

we see in downtown Oakland today. (82)

Creator Kasey Smith represents the downtown street layout as a delicate grid of fine silver and gold jewelry chain. Streets and intersections (and with them, histories) that have been erased by the ORA are rendered in gold, while those they deemed worthy of preservation are represented in silver. The resulting necklace portrays a city layout of grace and contrast, made all the more alive by both the topological changes revealed by the ghostly restoration of the erased streets, and the street fabric reshaping that occurs when displayed on different bodies. In a similarly artistic vein is the cartographic art piece titled *Shelter of Man* (32–33) by Catherine Gates. This triplet of diptychs—subtitled *The Elements*, *More Than One*, and *Context In Defense*—portrays the interplay of shelter and settlement in natural, clustered individual, and social systemic habitats under the influence of "natural topography and manmade geometry" (33). While not explicitly depicting a particular location in the world, the multiple angles presented combine with the clean, earthen aesthetic to create a feeling of timelessness in how humans protect themselves from and within the world.

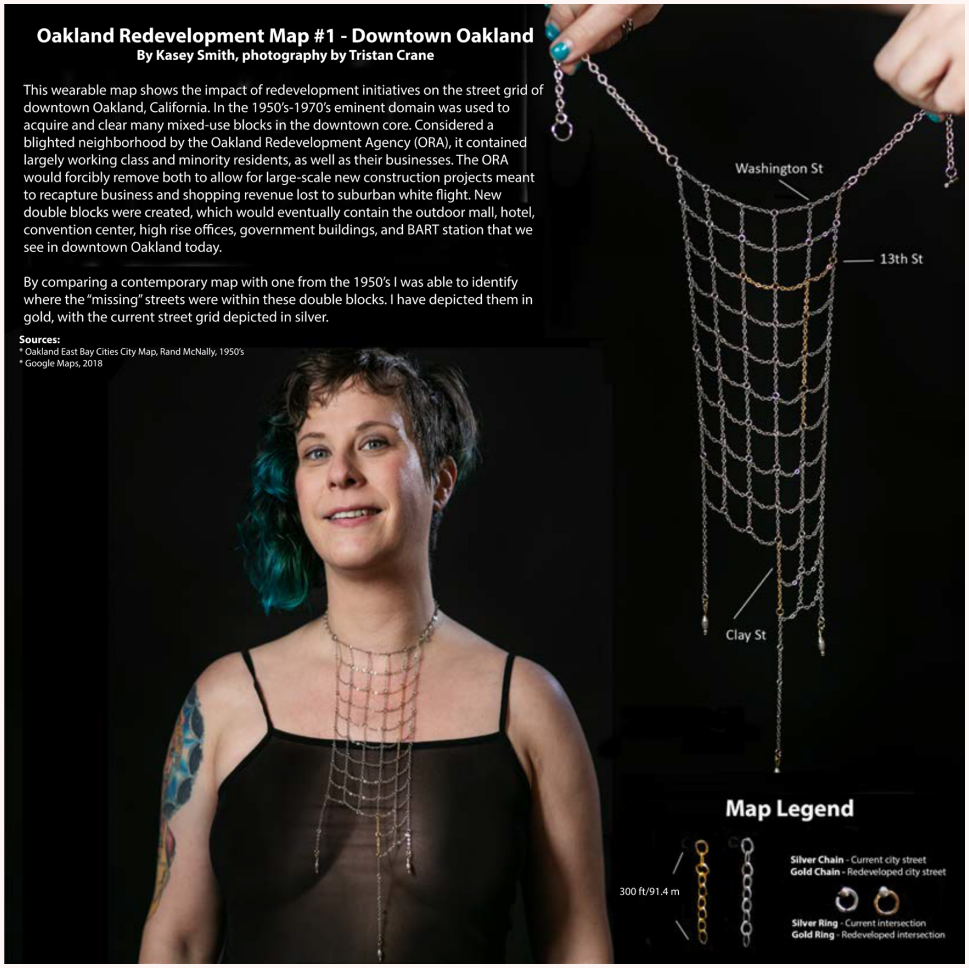


Figure 1. *Oakland Redevelopment Map #1 – Downtown Oakland.* Kasey Smith. Oakland, California, USA.

Besides artistic and individual explorations of the concept of shelter, the atlas also features community-driven projects. While not always the most visually pleasing, I found these to be the most compelling, likely because the priorities and voices of the community in focus illuminate the lived experiences, values, and needs of real people that are often absent from cold, hard data. A fantastic example of this is in the community-driven *Map of Wood Street Commons* (53) from Oakland, California and its accompanying essay, "Shelter—Proposal to the City of Oakland" by Clancy Wilmott (52–59). This mapping effort occurred in hopes of securing municipal support to make permanent an ad hoc cooperative community that had coalesced in an otherwise undesirable part of town. The map itself is simple, visually inspired by the sort of schematics issued by architectural/planning/development commissions, yet its intent contrasts starkly with those same bodies of power. Its backstory, laid out in an accompanying essay, frames the project around the desires of those who commissioned it, and their relationship with the entrenched formal structures of land ownership and jurisdiction. Among *Shelter*'s many community-led submissions are three of particular note. The first is a map highlighting transphobic violence across Lima, Perú—*TRANSitar Lima*: *Mapa de violencia transfóbica* (39; Figure 2)—using labels of what creator Ale Sotelx calls "testimonial drawings" of the experience in question. The second is an intercultural mapping project with young migrants in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina—*Interculturality as Shelter* (36)—where participant-chosen intercultural locations—the bus station, the school, grandma's house—are mapped alongside quotations from participants. The third is Nicole

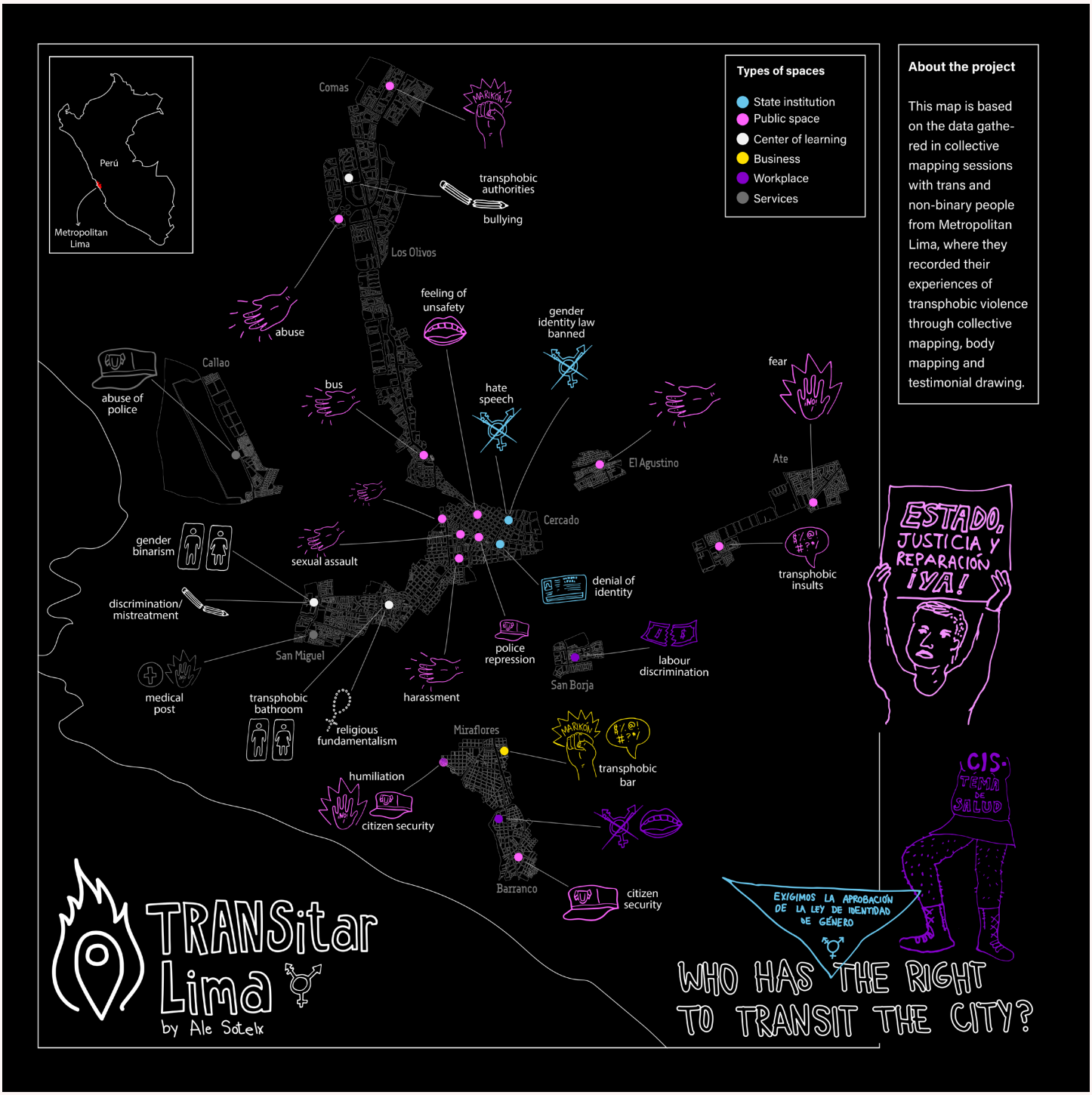


Figure 2. *TRANSitar Lima: Mapa de violencia transfóbica.* Ale Sotelx. Lima, Perú.

White's map—*Can You Stay?* (100)—of quantitative and qualitative survey responses from residents of communities in southwestern Nova Scotia to the question "Is it sustainable for you to keep living where you're living now?"

Of course, there are a few maps in *Shelter* that exemplify the best of traditional cartography, which is to say that they are both beautiful and clear in their message. Alison DeGraff Ollivierre's contribution *Bicknell's Thrush* (143), about the migratory patterns and varying threats to the species' summer and winter homes along the Atlantic seaboard, is both clear and clever in its use of color and layout. More simple in some ways and more complex in others, Molly Roy uses her submission *Mansions //// Shanties* (73) to draw in geographic and pictorial relief the contrast between the world's most expensive domiciles

and the world's most populated slums and informal settlements. On the more analytical side is a stellar layout by the Feminist Mapping Collective (92) that uses proportionally sized half-circles to juxtapose US Census counts of vacant housing units with point-in-time estimates of sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations in twenty-five major US cities. When the map's title explicitly asks *Can We House Those Experiencing Houselessness?* the map provides both a short answer—"Absolutely YES"—and a longer, more nuanced one supported by other data on the page.

However, few submissions are this direct in helping the reader understand the map's purpose and how to use it going forward. Some of these maps suffer from an overload of data—more are not necessarily better, especially when the relationships between data sets are not explained clearly—leaving the map's meaning ambiguous at best. Other maps lack a substantive conclusion at all, at least one discernible from visual inspection. In both cases, these problems can be traced to the way the data are displayed, to the way the included data sets interrelate, or to some combination of the two—and sometimes the data sets do indeed speak to each other in some relevant manner, but that conversation may not be inherently spatial in nature. This was the case both in a map about luxury student housing distorting affordable rental availability in Athens, Georgia (68) and a map (74) purporting to explore the relationship between residential home lot sizes and repeat burglaries in selected neighborhoods in Miami-Dade County, Florida, by perplexingly conflating geographic correlation with confirmed causation. Maps like these serve to remind us all that just because data exist with spatial components, it doesn't always mean that geography is a significant factor.

In many ways, *Shelter* is a lesson in cartographic intentionality. In theory, every cartographer gives careful consideration to both the explicit and implied message of each element of their map. In practice, even when mapping a topic or location where power and equity are at the forefront of the conversation, many of us choose elements out of convenience, familiarity, speed, or some unexamined assumption. Many mapmakers included in *Shelter* challenge us to question what constitutes a cartographic expression of justice through their choices of composition, organization, symbolism, data, and more—whether that's labeling "south" on a compass rose instead of "north," or choosing equal-area projections for global extents. Others, still, stretch established cartographic conventions even further; for example, the (clever? confusing? bizarre?) distortion of the geography of the eastern border of Vermont (essentially, the track of the Connecticut River) to graph the—mostly falling—fluctuation in the non-White population of the state. Very little about this map, *Vermont's Great Retreat* (89), is immediately obvious: that the filled line graph area is supposed to be recognized as the (rotated and distorted) shape of the state is only one.

Clearly, not all contributors to *Shelter* have had cartographic training—at least one explicitly tells us so while explaining the backstory of their map—and this creates an evident divide between the maps that begin with cartography in mind, and the ones for which cartography is an afterthought. Many of the maps have visually assaulting color combinations, low graphic resolution, or a number of other aesthetic choices that detract rather than contribute to the message the map is attempting to convey; and more than a few submissions border on the cartographically questionable. One map, *Living conditions in Lombardy during the COVID-19 lockdown* (116), depicting the size and local context of housing units in that region of northern Italy, chose a monotone gradient to demonstrate contextual land cover/land use classes. It creates an illusion of relative value between the classes that feels neither relevant to the map's story nor accurate as a method for displaying qualitative data in a non-comparative way.

Another map, *Rough Shelter* (99), about poverty and unhoused shelters in Athens, Georgia, feels simply too visually overwhelming. The layout collages a map of the urban area of Athens—one overloaded with several layers of poorly distinguished data (per capita income annual growth rate 2018–2023, streets with sidewalks, watershed boundaries, and whatever "UGA" might be) of no immediately obvious pertinence, alongside nearly identical green cross symbols for (likely pertinent) hospital emergency rooms and homeless shelters—with a floating inset map of poverty in the southeastern USA; one of those occurrence-sized word salads with no identified source; and some random photos of woodland rubbish. The base map is not rendered any clearer by the Athens neighborhood labels that fill the neighborhood areas and occlude several of the data layers. On top of it all, the entire composition is overlaid with a scribbled red line that seems to lack any geographic significance, but that does succeed in

obscuring almost everything else on the page. The only clue seems to be the subscription: "The REASONS given to rough SHELTER are LOST data, disconnected from reality. . . [*sic*]."

The organization of the collection feels somewhat arbitrary: there's an entire chapter, titled "Pandemic! Shelter in Place," devoted to maps at the intersection of shelter and the COVID-19 pandemic, but there are also pandemic-related maps outside of that chapter. The same is true with maps about unhoused communities and the "(Un) sheltered" chapter. The dedication of six pages to an interesting narrative about the well-being of rescued macaques in Vietnam seems inexplicable—there is no visual component that even remotely resembles a map; the text is mostly about the psychology and sociology of these complex primates; and it is only tangentially about shelter. The essay's placement at the end of the "Pandemic! Shelter in Place" chapter—although its listing is segregated from that chapter's entries in the Table of Contents—and before the "Shelter of Nature—Nature of Shelter" chapter also raises the question: to which does it belong? This would have been a good place for the editors to have included an introductory/explanatory note.

Unquestionably, Guerrilla Cartography has pulled together an impressively varied range of maps in assembling *Shelter*: *An Atlas*. Paging through the volume, I find myself concurring with Nat Case's review of the previous Guerrilla Cartography project, *Food*: *An Atlas*. While the idea of a thematic map compilation conveying an overarching narrative about an essential aspect of living is admirable, *Shelter* just doesn't live up to the task. The wide variation in clarity, text size, image resolution, supporting map furniture—and sometimes even the coherence—of the submissions raises questions about the publisher's inclusion criteria and editorial policies. Few maps had any discussion of method or process—either alongside the maps themselves, or as part of the "Process" or "Map Notes" sections of the book. Not everyone, of course, can succinctly describe their process—their map is their expression—but might this have been something with which Guerrilla Cartography could have assisted? If—as I suggest—*Shelter*: *An Atlas*, like *Food*: *An Atlas*, fails to hold together an overarching narrative, it might be better seen as a snapshot anthology of activist activities—where Guerrilla Cartography is simply assembling a collection rather than curating an exhibition. While that represents a more modest and limited aspiration, it is arguably an equally valuable one.

As Case noted in his review of *Food*, it appears that most of the submission creators for *Shelter* are globally privileged, intellectually employed individuals or groups (for the record, I count myself among this cohort). The atlas comes across as partly attempting to be an academic publication (one map references lyrics to a famous Rolling Stones song with the citation of "M. Jagger, K. Richard [*sic*]/ 'Gimme Shelter'," which feels hilariously stuffy), but its artistic and grassroots inclusions pull it toward being a politically active text. While there is surely a Venn diagram between these two genres, the book ends up short of offering enough of a tangible "so what?" for either group to take with them. At its best, *Shelter* and other topical anthologies like it serve as a time capsule, reminding (some of) us how things were previously and what was most actively on (some of) our minds and in our conversations, and a documentation of the disparate efforts of the many whose activism would quite likely otherwise be lost to human memory.