

ADDRESSING THE UNADDRESSED

ALISTAIR MACLENAN LOOKS AT A SYSTEM THAT GIVES EVEN THE HOMELESS THEIR OWN ADDRESSES

Not having an address does not mean a person is homeless. Slum dwellers around the world may have a house but the location of each of their ramshackle shelters is indistinguishable from their uncomfortably close neighbours.

That lack of an identifying address brings with it a host of problems that those who live in more conventional and comfortable surroundings may overlook. Technology has made for a more mobile population than ever before, but some institutions still insist that their customers have a certain permanence that they can rely upon.

Banks and governments are two examples. Without a permanent address, it is difficult, if not impossible to open a bank account, so where do you keep the little money you do have safe, if your house doesn't have windows or a front door? Equally, without a permanent address, it is difficult, if not impossible, to apply for or receive government financial support. Although, without a bank account, where would you keep the money safely if you could?

Even if you ignore the obvious and significant health implications of living in a slum, the problems of not having an address are evidently self-multiplying.

Recognising this has driven many companies, non-governmental organisations and charities to develop a range of solutions to the problem – with varying degrees of success.

Addressing the Unaddressed is a not-for-profit that has the idea, drive and partners to be more successful than most.

It recently won a gold award in the Global Good Awards' technology category, as well as being one of 10 finalists for the LinkedIn 'Compassion Award', so it appears that other people would support that view.

The brainchild of Alex Pigot, the driving force behind a successful Irish mass-mailing company, and his partner, Tina Roche, Addressing the Unaddressed is a very simple idea – the best ones always are.

A representative from ATU visits each shelter and explains to the people living there how the process works. There is rarely resistance, since the residents have lived with the disadvantages of being unaddressed and are happy to embrace change.

The location of the house or shelter is then measured within an accuracy of 1m. When some houses are no bigger than the size of a single bed and the next living space is only a metre or two away,

that level of accuracy really matters.

But GPS locations are unwieldy combinations of latitudes and longitudes, so Addressing the Unaddressed converts them into a unique string of 12 letters, numbers and a plus sign. Read from left to right, each pair of letters or numbers further narrows down the accuracy of the location – the first pair provides narrows down the location to a square roughly 100km by 100km.

Many people may have missed Google slipping out the 'Plus Code' add-on for Google Maps – the company has a history of very soft product launches – but it does exist and these 12-character codes uniquely identify a point on a Google map.

So, when printed out and attached to the outside of wall, those same 12 characters uniquely identify a point on the Earth – they are an address.

And it is an address accepted by the banks and governments of West Bengal in India, where Addressing the Unaddressed has already provided more than 100,000 slum dwellings in Kolkata with their new plaques.

It is a simple idea where the end-user's needs – real not perceived – are the driving force. We could with more of that in this industry.

Alistair MacLenan is founder of the geospatial B2B marketing agency Quarry One Eleven (www.quarry-one-eleven.com)

