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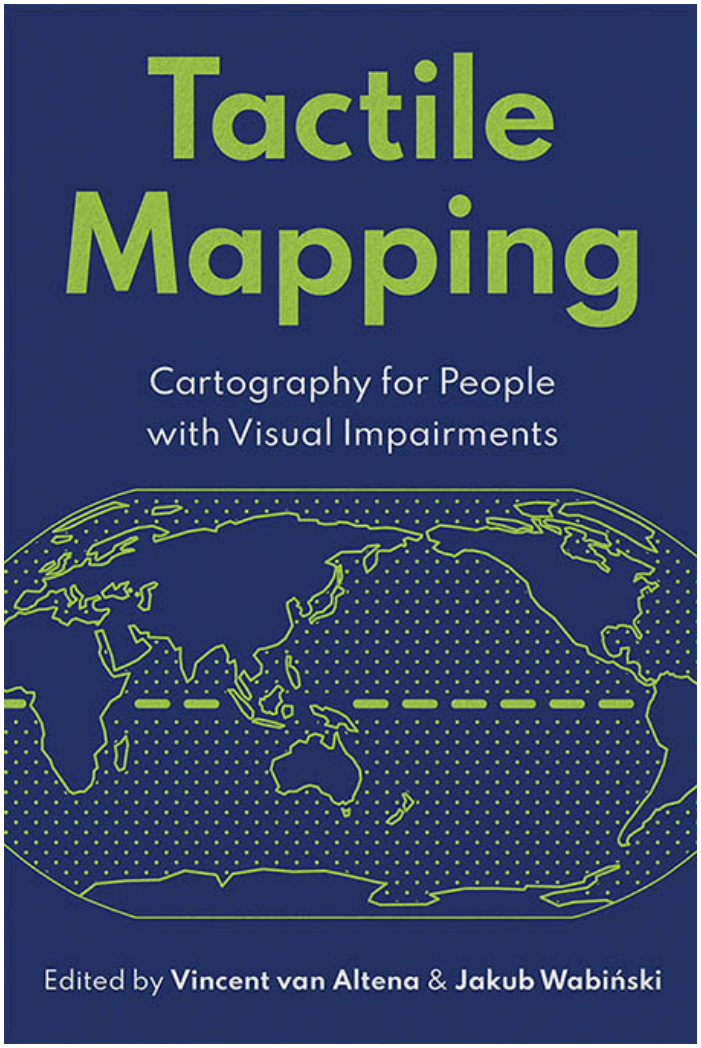
Book review: Tactile Mapping: Cartography for People with Visual Impairments

reviewed by sam hidde tripp



van Altena, Vincent, and Jakub Wabiński. Tactile Mapping: Cartography for People with Visual Impairments. 1st ed. Redlands: ESRI, Incorporated,

2025. 275p. $54.99. LC: 2025935165 ISBN: 9781589488359

Maps are inherently visual; or so we have assumed. *Tactile Mapping: Cartography for People with Visual Impairments* is a collection of chapters, case studies, and personal stories that ask the reader a simple question that comes with a lot of answers: how do you read a map when you cannot see?

While there have been instances of tactile maps for the visually impaired as early as the 19th century, many of these tools were reserved for the wealthy until very recently. Relief maps can give the reader a haptic (touch-based) element, making the experience multimodal and more holistic. However, relief maps fail to take into account the political or social aspects of the map. They raised areas are haptic elements for a visual reader and still leave out vital information to someone with visual impairments.

The chapters are highly variable, embodying the variety of needs of people with visual impairments, but also highly specialized. The book is therefore divided into five sections, each having two to three chapters, two case studies, and personal stories that touch on or are directly related to the sections' themes. The introductory section includes a sort of historiography of reading while visually impaired and how we continue to develop ways of conveying information-including cartographic – haptically. Part II introduces the reader to perception, giving a basic but comprehensive understanding in order for the reader to take the necessary considerations for designing tactile maps. Part III is, appropriately, design and takes, applies considerations to the minutiae of tactile map design.

For many sighted cartographers and map enthusiasts, these considerations could be easily overlooked or taken for granted. Including the perspectives of people with visual impairments is emphasized throughout the book, but is especially impactful in Part IV's user-centered section. The final section, Part V is reflective and focused on maintaining the momentum of scholarship and technological breakthroughs in tactile mapping without losing that user-centered emphasis. Issues of map accessibility outside of visual impairments, such as cost, must also be taken into account.

While the chapters are deeply informative and the case studies show the reader further possibility within tactile mapping, this book is at its best in the personal stories shared. As referenced in chapter 7, scholarship is often extractive of the communities being studied. The inclusion of personal stories places voices within

the visually impaired community to the same level of importance and need for understanding as more “formal” scholarship. It also shows how they are inseparable from one another. The final story, for example, declares that maps are not merely fun or interesting but deeply important to understanding the world and how we navigate it. Creating greater accessibility to maps is an imperative, not a quirky niche in cartographic scholarship. Books that practice what they preach appear to be unfortunately rare, and the editors, storytellers, and all other contributors to this book should be proud that *Tactile Mapping* does just that.

Overall, this book is foundational for those who are interested in making their cartographic designs more accessible. It’s easy to see how a practiced cartographer could pick up this book and learn something new about perception, about symbolic consideration, or about continued prejudices against the visually impaired. Some of the chapters are more accessible to the general public than others, assuming varying levels of cartographic knowledge. I’d therefore recommend this book to any academic library, but especially those in universities with strong geography, civil engineering, or urban planning departments. It would also be an excellent addition to any cartographic professional’s personal collection; even if one doesn’t work in tactile mapping, challenging readers’ visual bias when it comes to understanding space and place is valuable.

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