



Sound Sparks: Listening together to seaside gentrification

Summary of findings

Co-creation

Bethan Prosser (researcher) and Bela Emerson (sonic artist) co-created Interactive Listening Walks about urban seaside gentrification on the Sussex coast 2023-4. An Interactive Listening Walk (ILW) is a participatory site-responsive group activity to promote active listening, curiosity, and new connections with people and places. Three ILWs were designed for Brighton Kemptown, East Worthing, and Central St Leonards-on-Sea based on PhD findings about the sonic experiences of gentrification. This built on a long-term, mutually beneficial community-university partnership between Brighton & Hove Music for Connection and the University of Brighton, and further developed shared working and creative practices. The ILW format was able to be effectively applied to complex place-based research findings because of its participatory, site, and topic-responsive design components.

Consultation

Through six ILW pilots, 50 people were consulted with. Three groups were recruited: residents, community groups, and policy-related professionals. These groups offered feedback based on distinct combinations of experiences, knowledge, and relationships to both the neighbourhood and the topic. We designed bespoke and agile sessions that supported and responded to the specific motivations, needs, and dynamics of these three groups. This enabled a range of people to be involved in the project, which was further expanded by the delivery of three public ILW events and one academic workshop – totalling 83 people participating in 10 ILWs overall.

Engagement through listening

We found that the ILWs effectively engaged a range of people in listening to urban seaside gentrification across the three Sussex neighbourhoods by:

- sparking curiosity, learning, and new discoveries through listening about each neighbourhood and the processes of urban seaside gentrification
- utilising the distinct qualities of listening to create meaningful connections with the surrounding and changing urban seaside environment
- creating an unusual and playful intervention in everyday experiences of living, working, and visiting the neighbourhoods
- careful and responsive curation of listening, walking, and playing activities
- responding to participants' different motivations and needs to create an accessible and inclusive journey
- facilitating valued time for people to listen together and thereby supporting the conditions for dialogue and debate about policy and planning issues.

Why is this important?

This project has:

- had a positive impact on its participants
- shared PhD research findings with a wide audience across the Sussex coast
- sustained a community-university partnership
- developed new networks and relationships

Crucially, we have:

- created an innovative tool for research dissemination and engagement
- evaluated how participatory listening activities can engage a range of people in complex place-based issues
- demonstrated the potential of Interactive Listening Walks, and participatory listening more generally, as a tool for consultation and engagement in policy and planning
- contributed to understandings about gentrification as a sonic experience
- identified new areas of research, namely the relationship between environmental and political listening: how does listening together to the environment enable and support listening to each other?

It is hoped that many of the participants will keep on listening to their neighbourhoods and surrounding environments. Bela and Bethan plan to continue collaborating and developing new ILW and listening-based projects, both as community-based projects and through research funding.

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Further information

Brighton & Hove Music for Connection: <https://musicforconnection.co.uk/>

Prosser, B.M. (2022) Listening to urban seaside gentrification: living with displacement in/justices on the UK south coast. PhD Thesis. Available at: <https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/listening-to-urban-seaside-gentrification>

Prosser, B.M. (2024) Listening to gentrification: Finding socially just ways to listen to our environments together, in W. Canton (ed.) Sonic Rebellions: Sound & Social Justice.

Prosser, B.M (2025) Sound Sparks: Listening together to seaside gentrification. Full report – available on request.

Listening to redevelopment at Circus Street: <https://vimeo.com/1047534129>

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