

Brighton & Hove Community Land Trust: Who Owns Brighton?

Listening to Circus Street: Workshop report by Dr Bethan Prosser

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1. Summary

A group of Who Owns Brighton community researchers used creative and sensory methods to explore Circus Street and reflect on what they have been finding out about the redevelopment. Dr Bethan Prosser led listening and soundmapping activities from her participatory listening research toolbox.

Workshop findings:

- the redevelopment has produced a distinct acoustic environment, which contrasts with the surrounding city
- there's an uncomfortable juxtaposition between what was promised by the developers and what has been produced sonically e.g. "buzzing" vs "sterile space"
- these acoustic dimensions impact the way people behave in the site e.g. a place to move through, not stop or interact in
- listening and soundmapping can aid reflections and provide insightful engagement with a redevelopment site during a community research project

2. Introduction

Listening to Circus Street was an additional workshop offered to community researchers interested in creative, sensory and place-based methods as part of the *Who Owns Brighton* project. The workshop offered the participatory listening research toolbox for community researchers to try out around Circus Street. Dr Bethan Prosser,

who has been developing this toolbox and research approach¹, led the workshop. Participatory listening research is a way of listening with others to the environment to generate new knowledge and discoveries, whilst embracing different listening experiences, practices and positionalities.

These methods address the *Who Owns Brighton (WOB)* research questions: what has the redevelopment produced? How do people experience it? Listening methods also offer a possible way to present and engage people in findings.

The workshop aimed to:

- Provide a practical taster of creative and sensory qualitative methods
- Create a different way to explore, learn and reflect about Circus Street together
- Generate additional material on the site
- Try out the toolbox with a new group of people

This workshop report provides a write up of the material generated as well as facilitator reflections and suggestions for future listening-based work that could be considered for *Who Owns Brighton*.

3. Workshop outline

Date: Saturday 8th June 10am-2pm

Location: Barnard Community Centre

Facilitation: Bethan Prosser, hosted by Helen Bartlett & Martyn Holmes

Participants: 10 community researchers (plus videographer)

Section	Detail
Introductions	Group introductions/ group expectations of session
Overview	Brief context of creative and sensory methods, using example of PhD project
Listening to Circus Street - outdoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitated deep listening exercise (indoors)• Group silent listening walk from Barnard Community Centre to Circus Street• Individual silent listening explorations around Circus Street• Individual capture of listening observations• Pair sharing walk back up to Barnard Community Centre
Break	
What can we discover through	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction of Sound Stimulus typology to frame discussions• Group reflective discussion on discoveries

¹ Part of a postdoctoral fellowship project, funded by ESRC South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership, more details here: <https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/persons/bethan-prosser-2>

listening to Circus Street?	
Lunch	
Listening as an engagement tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intro to soundmapping • What can we capture & share?
Soundmapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual mapping: where & what you listened to • Group sharing of soundmaps • Collective map: what is most significant*
What next?	<p>Group discussion on what's been learnt and anything would like to take forwards into the project</p> <p>Individual feedback forms</p>

*During the workshop we ran out of time to add to a collective map. Bethan added material from the individual soundmaps and group discussion to this map after the workshop as a creative tool for the Community Action Day.

4. Group listening reflections

The community researchers explored Circus Street redevelopment through different listening activities:

- Silent group walk from Carlton Hill into the redevelopment led by Bethan and initiated through a Deep Listening exercise
- Individual silent listening immersion, where each participant explored the site on their own through their ears
- Individual capturing of listening observations (recording format chosen by participants e.g. using participant's phones or note-taking)

Following these listening activities, participants shared their initial thoughts in pairs before feeding back to a whole group discussion. Bethan offered the framing of her Sound Stimuli typology (Prosser, 2022), which asked everyone to consider how they responded to the sounds they heard. The group discussion is summarised through these different types of sound stimulus (see appendix for further notes):

Sound layers

What were the notable qualities of the sounds (e.g. levels, density, textures and contrasts) you heard?

The group described the sound qualities of the site in nuanced ways, but the overall impression was of quietness and silence – “like the volume had been turned down”. A lot of the focus was on the effects of the buildings, either as sound sources, or the ways they bounce or trap sounds. This included interactions with the wind, contrasting windy echoey passageways with open spaces. Important contrasts were also identified moving in and out of the site, with the buildings creating a “swallowing effect”. The

parameters therefore sounded different, being able to hear more sounds of people interacting and moving about e.g. cars and other traffic sounds.

Sound surprises

Were you surprised by any of the sounds e.g. unexpected sounds, absent sounds?

The group discussed the overriding quietness of the central areas in terms of “absent sounds”. For example, one person found 5 dogs in the courtyard area, but surprisingly, they weren’t making any noise. Through previous visits to the site during winter, the researchers had encountered this quietness and described already thinking of it as a “sterile” or “dead space”. So it was a surprise to find a Saturday market in the green space with music being played. But the contrast of the quiet central areas with this market struck many as an absurd juxtaposition. This led to questions about the lack of human interaction sounds. One person asked, why aren’t there any pop-up shops in the space normally? It was observed that children (either in the green space or coming in/out of the Dance Studio) were seemingly allowed to make sounds but the adults remained quiet. One participant was surprised to find that listening to the redevelopment didn’t offend them as much as they had expected, with the quiet areas making them feel sheltered and cocooned.

Sound sparks

What ideas or thoughts were sparked by the sounds you heard?

The group discussion mainly centred on ideas and reflections that the listening exercise had sparked, especially around the absent human sounds. Participants described there being “no sounds of home” and it being “not a human space” despite people being there e.g. on balconies. One participant suggested that the “soundscapes are upside down” as residents have raised noise complaints about students at nighttime. Others suggested there were “hierarchies of sounds”, wondering what differences there are between different floors as well as different types of housing. In trying to understand why it is an empty space, we discussed how it is “cut off”, “disconnected” and “not an inviting space”, where the rest of the city can’t be heard. It was felt to be a place to pass through, not interact with, with some areas inaccessible (the “glen”) or feeling like trespassing (when finding yourself next to a student bedroom on the ground floor).

Other ideas were sparked by the sounds of the buildings coming from the ventilation systems and other electrical hums. One person wondered how this affects the residents, thinking about the ongoing vibrations during people’s sleep. The buildings appear to have their backs onto the streets around, where these ventilation and other sounds are pumped out onto (described as “farting buildings”!). Combined with the blocking of light, it was noted that those most impacted and cut off are the existing families living in the social housing next to the site.

Sound stories

What memories or personal stories were triggered by the sounds you heard?

The speakers playing music (funk and soul) made one participant think of other types of gatherings and was a positive sound story. However, the other memories and stories triggered were less positive. From the lack of human sounds, one person remembered trying to make connections when they returned from Nicaragua but feeling that “in the UK we’re all just in individual boxes”. The listening experience mainly brought out public rather than personal stories, drawing on the research material conducted about the site. These explored redevelopments and what architectural design may invite or not in a space, contrasting with other sites e.g. in London or abroad. For example, it was felt that Circus Street does not act as a public square and is not built for families, describe as “anti-community”. This contrasts with the developers’ narrative of creating a place that is buzzing, vibrant and award-winning. One person described it as the “least circus experience ever”. This sparked discussions about the history of the site, asking how it might have sounded in the past with the active market soundscape.

5. Individual soundmapping

After lunch, we moved into a soundmapping exercise to help further think about sounds spatially and identify *where* notable listening experiences occurred in Circus Street. Each person shared their soundmap back to the group at the end. Key points are discussed below but each soundmap and their maker’s comments are listed in the appendix.

Soundmapping approaches

There was a variety of ways people went about soundmapping, though this was within the parameters and limitations of the tools provided:

- aerial A4 map of the site
- tracing paper
- Sound Stimuli icon stickers
- pens, crayons, watercolours pencils etc

One person broke free from this aerial perspective and created a watercolour drawing of interesting building features from a side angle (more everyday human perspective). The rest of the group used the traditional-style maps to either draw directly on or layer tracing paper onto. Some used drawings as icons, many used the sound stimuli stickers and the majority used written notes. Several people experimented with different ways of graphically representing sounds, though different colours or mark-making (e.g. dots, lines, waves). Some talked about the difficulties of translating the sound and listening experience to a map or thinking about sounds in that way.

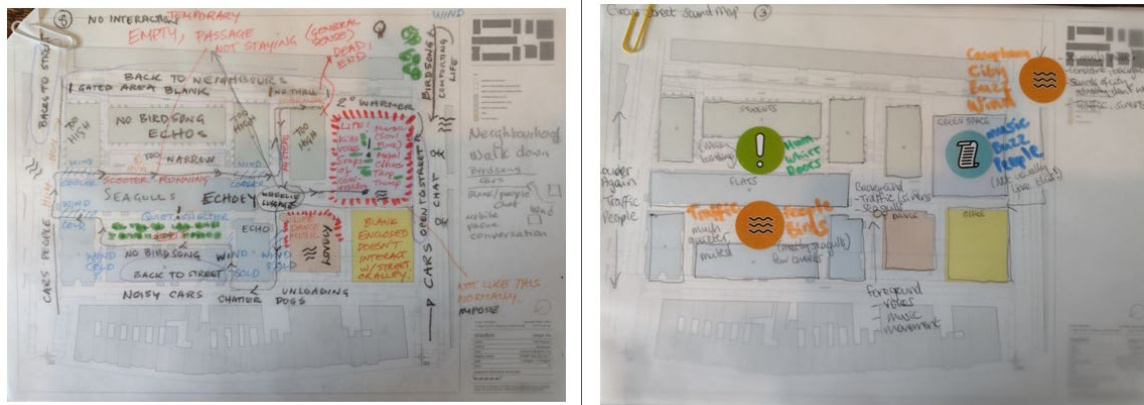
These individual soundmaps echoed the group discussion. The soundmaps can therefore be viewed as individual visual expressions/notations that combine individual and group listening experiences and reflections. I have identified key common themes below.

Moving in, through and out

Following on from the group discussion, many of the soundmaps depict the listening experiences of moving in, through the different passageways and buildings, and out of Circus Street. The borders of the site became points of interest to mark different types of sounds and layers.

This is seen in Map#8, which notes the “neighbourhood walk down”, cars and chatter along the front and side and the “backs to the street” of the building. This chimes with Map#3 that notes the “cacophony, city, buzz, wind” and “sounds of [the] city [you] don’t normally notice” on the way down the hill.

Fig.1: Map#8 and Map#3



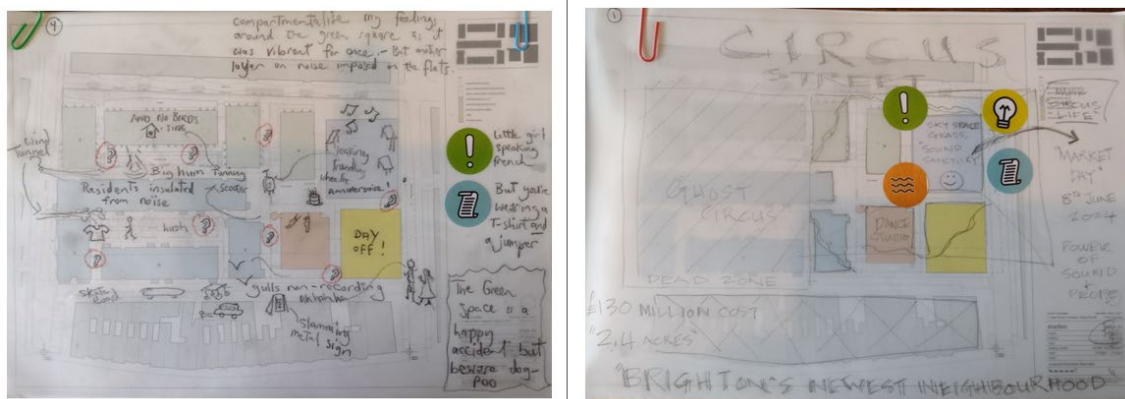
The majority of the soundmaps draw lines, notes or colours along the passageways as well. This visually continues the theme of it being a “space of passage”, with one person commenting that even the sounds of music were “moving through but not grounded”.

Sounds of human activity

There was a focus on places where there was more human-related sound activity: the market stalls setting up on the green space and the Dance Space. All the soundmaps mark sounds on one or both of these spaces, usually made distinct through different colours, types of marks or with the stickers.

Map#1 marks the market as a “sound sanctuary” and the “power of sound and people”; Map#6 marks the Dance Space with “there is life here”. Several conversations were also noted around the Dance Studio between children and adults. Interestingly one participant drew ears in red circles to indicate where others from the group were listening as they walked about – a nod to our own impact on the site through the research activity.

Fig.2: Map#1 and Map#9



Environmental sounds

The main non-human sounds captured in the sound maps were connected to the buildings.

This was a key focus of Map#11, which made different types of pencil lines (dashes, zig-zags and waves) to depict the hums and whirrs. This map-maker commented that it was difficult to represent the increases and decreases of these sounds as they moved through and in relation to the increasing and decreasing of the sounds coming from the surrounding city. Wind and birds were they other main environmental sounds, but as discussed in the group, there was a lack of bird sounds inside the redevelopment.

Fig.3: Map#11



Stimulating sounds

Seven of the soundmaps made use of the sound stimuli icons and the majority included emotional responses/sensations. These icons were mostly used around the sites of human activity (market and dance studio).

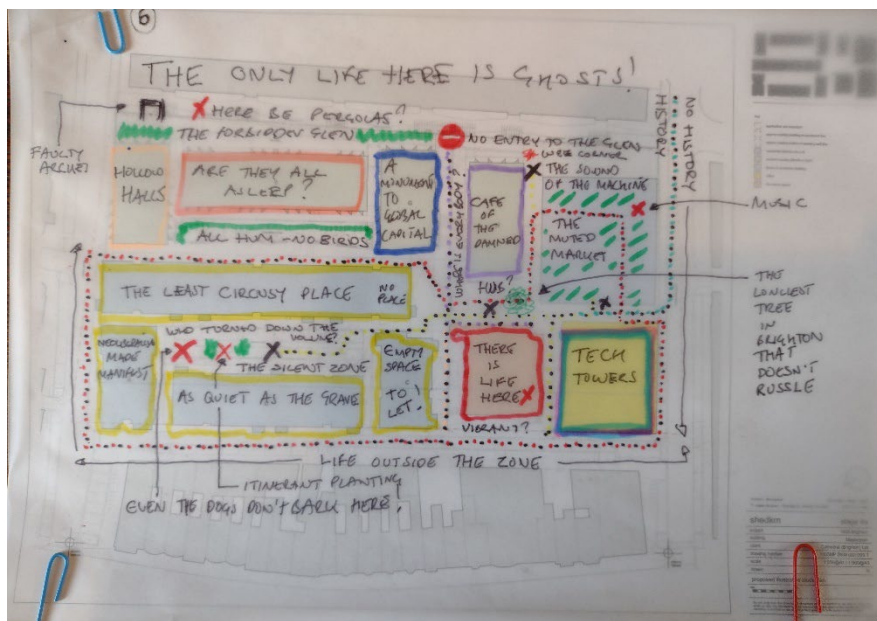
During the feedback, there was some common emotional responses shared. For example, the lack of birdsong and attaching it to the empty bird boxes struck a chord

with the group – “bird boxes look sad, just as empty as the flats”. Interestingly, three of the maps used the word “ghosts”:

- “Ghost circus” (Map#1)
- “The ghosts of what could have been” (Map#2)
- “The only life here is ghosts” (Map#6)

The group discussed this ghostliness both in terms of what was there previously and an alternative future. Map#10 marked a sound story by the existing social housing, writing: “reminder of how social housing used to look, social housing isolated form development”.

Fig.4: Map#6



6. Participant feedback

A four-question feedback form was filled out at the end by 10 participants (includes 2 hosts/organisers as 2 participants left early). Overall, this was very positive and a summary is provided below (see appendix for full answers).

Motivations for taking part

Participants in the workshop were asked at the beginning to jot down their expectation of the day ahead and the written feedback also showed similar reasons for taking part. This mostly corresponded with the publicised aims of the session e.g. understanding the site from a different perspective and the opportunity to explore and share this together. In addition, participants wanted to contribute to and support the project by participating.

Most significant

Half the group fed-back the significance of the listening experiences enabled by the workshop activities. This included:

“Developing a new relationship with listening.”

“The difference it made to me on listening and absorbing the sounds and how that translated into feelings.”

Four people noted the importance of exploring the site; three people also described exploring the connections between space and sound e.g.:

“Getting the chance to walk around the location and for longer than usual.”

“How the buildings and space feel/don't feel.”

“Appreciating the spaces of life including the quiet green space.”

Additionally, two people identified the social aspect of “spending time with people interested in community building and community housing”.

New discoveries

Half the group learnt something new about listening and sound. Four people described a new discovery about Circus Street. There was some overlap between these with two people learning about how noisy buildings can be. The new discoveries about Circus Street included:

“No birds in the bird houses in Circus St....disjuncture between those living there and commercial.”

“If the Dance Space ever moves the whole area of the development will be dead.”

Overall, this demonstrated that listening to the site can “...contribute to further learning and a different experience of the space” and be used as a tool for information gathering and immersion.

Suggested changes to workshop

Half the group suggested the workshop needed more time - from an hour longer to making it into a day workshop. One person however did suggest making it a “little shorter”. Three people made suggestions around content: more tips around soundmapping, completing the group map and adding more multisensory aspects. Two fed-back about logistics: a more central location and the need to dress warmer.

Overall, this shows the positive engagement with the material, with one person stating, “I found it was balanced just about right”. This was further demonstrated in the *Any other comments* section, with appreciation for the hosting and food:

“Great work to make this happen”

“Thank you – very unique and interesting!”

7. Facilitator reflections

In this section, I share facilitator reflections on how the workshop went and the learning generated.

Application of toolbox

The workshop provided a positive opportunity to apply the toolbox I have been developing with a new group of people (activist/community researchers). The workshop happened at a stage further down the research process, after a lot of the research had already been carried out by the working groups. Participants therefore came with a lot of knowledge and opinions about the site already. The listening group activities aided reflection and thinking and so became part of the researchers processing, analysing and interpreting their findings.

The guided listening immersion and soundmapping activity was an effective combination and most participants found the Sound Stimuli typology a useful framing to work within. The workshop potentially needs more time to allow a collective bringing together and possibly more tools and tips to help with the challenges of making sound into visual maps.

Community-building dimension of the project

It was striking how the community researchers were motivated to spend time with others interested in same topic. The WOB project appears to have been successful in community-building and the social dimension is important to those involved. There's a commitment to WOB and BHCLT and appreciation of the working group.

There was a strong sense of ownership, responsibility and investment in Circus St that has built up amongst the community researchers. This has developed from researchers spending time there and learning about the site, especially for those who have had contact with residents/users. For example, participants discussed ideas for what could make the site better and more liveable, rather than just a static case study to learn from.

Listening together

There were striking commonalities in the discussion and material generated, showing shared listening experiences within the group. Participants listened individually but the group sharing and soundmapping activities made this overall an exercise in listening together. This was bolstered by the existing shared collective knowledge that has been created by the project's research activities.

8. Conclusion

As way of conclusion, I offer how this workshop contributes to the project's research questions and how listening could be used in the future.

Contribution to research questions

This workshop focused on two of the project's research questions: what has the redevelopment produced? How do people experience it?

Overall, the redevelopment has produced a distinct acoustic environment, which contrasts with surrounding city.

From this workshop's group listening, it is clear that there is an uncomfortable juxtaposition between what was promised by the developers and what has been produced sonically e.g. "buzzing" vs "sterile space". The community researchers sonically experience the central parts of the site negatively, describing it as dead, sterile, non-human, not home and full of ghosts.

These acoustic dimensions appear to impact the way people behave in the site. It feels like a place to move through and the hushed acoustics do not invite human interactions. It is dominated by the sounds of building maintenance systems and there is a lack of other living sounds that includes non-human e.g. birds.

Future listenings

These findings are from one listening snapshot. It would be interesting to explore how residents and workers experience the site sonically as well as other times of day and seasonally. There are also two main ways that listening could be used in the future.

Firstly this toolbox could be applied again in community research explorations of other sites, if this project was to be replicated. The workshop showed the tools can be used for insightful and creative engagement in the site for community researchers as well as aid individual and group reflections.

Secondly, listening and sound could be incorporated in dissemination of the project's findings. This could include:

- A digital soundmap of site or a static visual representation on the project's website
- Create an interactive listening walks (group live walks) of Circus Street and take different or mixed group of people (e.g. residents, "policymakers", other activist groups etc) for a sensory exploration of the site
- Other digital outputs: podcast, digital story or digital media walk (e.g. one that is downloaded onto mobile phones and uses geolocate technology).

9. Further information

References

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

Acknowledgements

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