



# Spaces of Reproduction: How Teenagers Co-construct Post Industrial Soundscapes in Smithfield, Dublin

## 1. What is the study's purpose?

The purpose of the study, undertaken at Maynooth University, was to provide detailed data to support the argument for the use by urban planners and researchers of unique research methods and an interdisciplinary approach to explore the soundscapes of urban spaces, which are integral to teenagers' engagement with public spaces.

The specific objectives were to:

- a) highlight the ways in which community and sound create inclusive public spaces
- b) show how regeneration projects that do not include teenagers in planning discussions can result in poor urban design
- c) demonstrate how perceptions of noise and silence are subjective, and explain why policy makers need to engage local communities when identifying ways to shape urban soundscapes
- d. reveal the methods used by teenagers to protect themselves from danger in certain urban locations.

The research comprised three stages: (i) examination of relevant literature in the areas of youth, soundscape studies and social theory; (ii) development of an interdisciplinary research approach, including participatory methods that succeeded in involving 84 teenagers aged 15-16 years in the study; (iii) analysis of the experience of teenagers' natural and mediated soundscapes.

This Research Briefing summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study.

## 2. How was the study undertaken?

The study combined conventional qualitative methods, such as focus groups and interviews, with more mobile methods drawn from the fields of art and sound research; these included soundwalking and soundmapping, and the use of participant-generated image and audio recordings.

The study began with an exploration of the Smithfield area of Dublin by the researcher. Using a series of auto-ethnographic methods – walking the area over a period of several months and recording through audio, video and photography – the area was catalogued and interpreted as having a varied range of acoustic and sonic properties associated with different types of economic and socio-cultural activities.

In 2010, the researcher identified two girls' and two boys' secondary schools (one fee-paying and three non-fee paying), all located either within or close to the Smithfield area. The researcher then began to engage with the schools in order to establish a working group of 84 teenage participants, drawn from the four schools, who would act as field researchers. Over the course of two years, these teenagers documented the Smithfield area, as well as the King Street, Capel Street, Henry Street and Moore Street areas. The documenting process comprised soundwalking (walking a space while listening intently to the sounds in the surrounding environment), sound recording (using digital audio recorders), and photographing sound-producing objects and people.

Throughout, the study focused on the sounds produced within these geographical areas, how and why the sounds differed, and in what ways urban design could alter or improve the soundscapes of Dublin's North Inner City.

In the final phase of the study, the 84 participants were divided into groups of four or five for a series of 13 focus group sessions. During these sessions, the groups created soundmaps and sound pyramids, and discussed their listening practices as well as the soundscapes of their homes, neighbourhoods and schools in the Smithfield area and specific parts of the North Inner City. They also explored the differences between noise and sound, and what constituted positive or negative sounds. The discussions served to highlight what impact certain soundscapes had on their listening practices.

In addition to working with the teenage participants, the study involved interviewing five older adults who had either grown up in the Smithfield area or had worked there. By soliciting the views of these adults, the research explored the ways in which the soundscapes of the area had changed over the course of 50 years.

### 3. What are the key findings?

- 3.1** Urban design that excludes sound creates public spaces which, for young teenagers, can seem threatening and strange. The study found that during the process of redesigning the Smithfield area, children and teenagers were not invited to participate in planning discussions, despite the fact that teenagers are often the most visible group who engage with public spaces.
- 3.2** During the period of this soundscapes research study (2010–2013), new urban planning models aimed at reducing noise levels in city spaces began to emerge, following key EU directives on noise reduction in cities, which argue that quiet public spaces are for the common good. Such planning models are at variance with the findings of this study, which show that busy and noisy neighbourhoods are defined as the natural soundscape of a city. The teenagers who participated in the study related loud sounds to productivity, to connectivity between communities and activities taking place in the city, and to cultural events and safety. For them, lots of noise and activity had the effect of creating zones of safety and comfort.

- 3.3** The concept of safety – particularly as it relates to sound – was raised by participants throughout the research study period. With no defined amenity spaces for teenagers within Smithfield or the surrounding area, they would instead hang out in the in-between spaces, such as doorways of public buildings, laneways, and street corners, using sound to create both an acoustic barrier and an architecture of enclosure, where their sound is not lost or amplified, as it is in big, empty spaces.

- 3.4** One of the tactics available to teenagers to respond to noisy domestic spaces or quiet public spaces is to create their own soundscapes. Such compensatory activity obscures the need for young people to be engaged in urban planning, where sound should be a key sensory consideration.

## 4. What are the conclusions?

The study reached a number of overall conclusions. First, it argues that sound should be integral to the creation of sustainable urban spaces. Second, it recommends that developers, architects, urban planners and managers of urban spaces should take into account the needs of all social groups living in an area, and should not exclude certain groups who may not be making an obvious economic contribution to the area.

Young people are often defined as a type of noise in public spaces, and many approaches have been adopted to push them out of public view and instead become users of mediated spaces at home. Because the teenagers in this study experienced the urban soundscape in various spaces, both public and private, on a daily basis, they offered a unique analysis of the sounds produced there. It found that their ideas and opinions on the soundscape of Dublin, their ability to connect sound to industry, economic issues, poverty and even environmental concerns, reveals a level of awareness of the urban soundscape that has not previously been examined or understood in social research.

### Teenagers and public spaces

The systematic representation of teenagers as lawless, wild and dangerous is reflected in their increasing exclusion from public spaces, and the continual failure by various authorities to give them a say in issues related to urban design and planning. It is imperative to tackle systems that actively promote

the exclusion of teenagers from urban spaces such as parks, public squares and shopping centres.

In discussions throughout the study, the teenage participants argued that their use of public spaces, including street corners in housing areas, shopping malls and well-lit public doorways, was based on the concept of safety in numbers and the need to be both visible and audible in public spaces. Visibility equated to safety, and the protection afforded by watchful adults and sound, enabled teenagers to create an acoustic barrier which protects them from danger.

### **Public perception of 'quiet' as positive**

There are links between sound policy, the move towards creating quiet public spaces, and discrimination against young people. Signage, cameras and security personnel are all used to discourage teenagers from congregating in public spaces. In contrast, numerous theorists contest the term 'quiet', arguing that, historically, the quietening of a space has been linked to class and gender exclusion. Certain sounds become associated with particular classes and are defined as noise by an elite educated and moneyed class.

Increasingly, both European and Irish policy studies on sound have defined urban soundscapes as noisy, with loud sounds defined as having no particular social or cultural value. This study presents data which counter commonly held perceptions of noise and quiet.

The teenage participants in this study consistently identified the urban soundscape as positive only when it produced loud sounds i.e. traffic, noise from busy shopping areas, and children in flat complexes screaming when they are playing. They linked these loud sounds to productivity, consumption, activity and community. The older participants in the study, when remembering the soundscapes of their youth, argued that the soundscape of Smithfield today is quiet, which is in turn linked to unemployment, the absence of community, particularly children, and poor urban design. Noise policy makers need to re-examine the notion of quiet as 'positive' and noise as 'negative'.

### **Community soundscapes**

It is important to understand that community soundscapes are varied, particularly for people who live in social housing, where the sounds from their immediate external environment intrude

into their homes. These sounds differ from the positive consumerist soundscapes of the city and are a constant feature of where they live. They have learned to adapt to these sounds or to use technology to cancel out unwanted noise. Currently, significant amounts of social housing are located in congested areas close to main roadways where the air is permeated by the sounds of traffic, emergency services sirens and, periodically, construction work. For these reasons alone, there needs to be a rethink on urban social housing and its placement within Dublin city in particular.

## **5. What are the recommendations?**

This section presents the study recommendations.

### **1. Recommendation for urban planners and city managers**

#### **Urban planners need to give greater consideration to soundscapes**

The thesis argues that urban planners need to take both the soundscape and those who live within it more seriously when considering urban design. It also argues that it is necessary to value soundscapes within urban development in order to maintain sustainable communities. Moreover, the management of urban soundscapes should not be implemented through legislation and directives. Rather, it should be implemented through innovative methods, in close collaboration with communities, and especially in collaboration with young people in those communities.

The design of city spaces involves a number of stakeholders, including local authorities, architects, developers and consultants. However, local communities frequently come last in planning discussions, and teenagers are often excluded from such discussions. As regular users of public spaces, and as the future adults in these local communities, they should be included in research studies that explore urban regeneration; they should also be included in research studies on sound and noise in urban environments.



For more information, contact **Dr Linda O Keeffe**, Director of Postgraduate Studies MA by Research, Lancaster Institute of Contemporary Art, Lancaster University Bailrigg, Lancaster LA1 4YW, United Kingdom. Tel: +44 (0)1524 594357 E-mail: l.okeeffe@lancaster.ac.uk

## 2. Discourse on sound

Research by anthropologists has emphasised the importance of sound as a cultural and social signifier within communities. The thesis argues that there is a need to develop a vernacular of sound studies to use in discussions of sociological theories. This would allow for a wider discourse on the shaping and use of urban space. The impact of sounds on teenagers in urban communities shapes their everyday connections to different social practices – productive or otherwise. The increased use of audio technologies by young people to mediate these new urban soundscapes suggests that fragmented relationships are developing between young people and numerous locations in Dublin city. In focusing on one particular area, Smithfield, the research was able to generate rich data, which although specific to that area, can be compared with data on regenerated urban areas where local communities regard themselves as disenfranchised. Further research is needed in order to identify how regeneration and soundscape are impacting on other communities

Combining methods which examine sound as an immersive social experience connected to all aspects of life meant using approaches that are not typical in social research. Elements of these methods can be adapted by urban planners or researchers who are interested in soundscape studies.

## 6. What are the benefits of the study?

This is the first sociological study in Ireland and the UK conducted with teenagers to link urban regeneration to changing soundscapes. It highlights how aware teenagers are of sound and its associative meaning in their everyday lives. It also links positive and negative associations with space to perceived sounds, and it presents data which counter commonly held perceptions of noise and quiet.

The study created a unique methodological approach to examining urban soundscapes with teenagers. The investigation of the qualitative aspects of teenagers' experience highlighted the seldom-explored phenomenon of sound as integral to creating inclusive public spaces for communities.