

(Sound)Walking Through Smithfield Square in Dublin

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Blog post published February 10, 2014 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/phsv3-7kn20>

Abstract

Editor's Note : This month *Sounding Out!* is thrilled to bring you a collection of posts that will change the way you hear cities. The *Sounds of the City* series will prompt readers to think through ideas about urban space and sound. Are cities as noisy as we think they are? Why are cities described as “loud”? Who makes these decisions about nomenclature and why?

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustic Ecology, Article, Class, Cultural Studies, Field Recording



Recommended citation

O'Keeffe, L. (2014, February 10). (Sound)Walking Through Smithfield Square in Dublin. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/phsv3-7kn20>

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Editor's Note: This month *Sounding Out!* is thrilled to bring you a collection of posts that will change the way you hear cities. The [Sounds of the City](#) series will prompt readers to think through ideas about urban space and sound. Are cities as noisy as we think they are? Why are cities described as “loud”? Who makes these decisions about nomenclature and why?

We kicked things off last week with [my critical reading of sound in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*](#), a play about African Americans in Chicago that still rings/stings true today. Regular writer [Regina Bradley](#) will discuss the dichotomy of urban and suburban in the context of sound (noisy versus quiet, respectively), and CFP winner **Lilian Radovac** will share with us a photoessay on the sound installation *Megaphône* in Montreal. Today, guest writer **Linda O' Keeffe** takes readers on a soundwalk of Smithfield Square in Dublin, Ireland and specifically of the Smithfield Horse Fair, in order to illustrate how urban renewal disrupts city soundscapes and how sound reclaims those spaces.—**Managing Editor Liana M. Silva-Ford**

Since 2010, as part of my PhD research, I have conducted over two dozen sound walks through [the Smithfield Square and its environs](#), in Dublin's North Inner city; with teenagers, by myself and through organising deep listening group walks as part of World Listening Day. These walks were designed to encourage the participating walkers to listen intently to this space and compare it to other spaces on the north side of Dublin city. The walks were also designed to examine the changing use and design of the Smithfield space over the past four years. This essay is drawn from the findings of this research, which explored the co-production of space and soundscapes with 84 teenagers (43 girls and 41 boys) from Dublin, Ireland. I include some of their observations of Smithfield Square here.

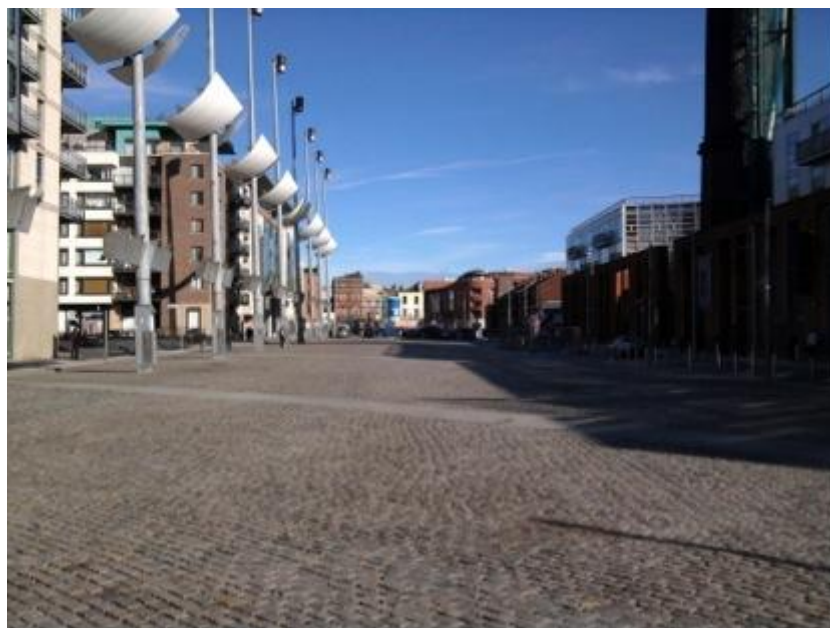
The Smithfield Square's redesign began in 1996 as part of an urban regeneration project, and was completed in May of 2013. Smithfield is a traditional working class area, historically connected to wholesale markets, and in recent years it has gone through many iterations. In a push towards gentrification, the Smithfield Square space was ripped up, rebuilt, re-imagined and ripped up again because each iteration of its design proved unattractive to potential visitors/users of this space. According to [the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland \(1991\)](#), Dublin City Council considered these users were tourists and new middle class urbanites, not the locals.

Large-scale apartment complexes with business premises on the ground floor, tourist facilities, and an art house cinema were situated alongside smaller, older social housing, flat complexes and wholesale markets within the area. This reshaping of architecture impacts the diffusion of sound in space. It changes [what Brandon LaBelle \(2010\) calls](#) the acoustic territories that

demarcate space where sound is no longer attributable to specific spaces or communities. Additionally, since the early 1990s, sounds within Smithfield began to change with the removal or downsizing of certain productive practices, such as the fish and fruit markets. This reduced the kind of traffic, both pedestrian and commercial, which would have moved and sounded through the area. The Smithfield Horse Fair disrupts the area's soundscape and opens up the possibilities of the space of Smithfield Square for the broader community.

The design of the square, its restaurants, boutique shops and cafes, suggest that the soundscape designed for this space was meant to be a quiet and calm, recreating in the square what Karin Bijsterveld has defined in *Mechanical Sound* (2008) as the quiet of the middle classes. The sounds produced by the fair are then seen as counter to the types of sensory experiences that, Monica Montserrat Degen argues in her book *Sensing Cities: Regenerating Public Life in Barcelona and Manchester* (2008), are acceptable to the middle classes, who purchase a type of sensory/sonic experience. However, the soundwalks I describe contest what "quiet" means in the context of the square.

Listening to the Square



The Smithfield square in 2009. All pictures in this post come courtesy of the author, who holds the rights.



The Smithfield Square in 2009

In 2009 the Smithfield Square, which is laid with thousands of cobblestones, had placed around one side twelve 26.5 metre gas lighting masts, at one end of the square two lines of trees were planted with seating placed among them, and at the other end some large concrete plant pots. The seating located within the trees, attracted groups of homeless people and addicts. As a result, the dominant soundscape during the day was the sounds of men and women shouting obscenities at each other, with the susurrations of trees rarely heard over this dominant sound. One of my teenage participants noted, “you always hear people screaming in the background” (Participant 2).



The Smithfield square in 2009

Aside from the shouting voices and loud reflections from singular sound sources within the Square such as the clatter of suitcase wheels across the cobblestones, seagulls screeching overhead, the beeping of trucks reversing and even the sounds of people talking at a distance, the teenagers who participated in the soundwalks defined the space as silent. Their use of the word silent did not mean the absence of sound, but rather an absence of activities, life, general sounds of community, consumption and production.

One sound that dominates the soundscape of Smithfield and its surroundings is the sound of the [Luas tramline](#). The Luas line sits at one end of the Square and the sounds produced are distinctive: there is the whoosh as it passes, the ding a ling of its bells and the sounds of the doors opening and closing. The sound of the Luas echoes around the area from 6 in the morning till midnight. The sounds have become synonymous with that part of the city. The teenage participants defined these sounds as rhythmic, musical, “like a ballet.” For the teenager participants, the sounds of the Luas has been the only constant sound within Smithfield.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/walking-2011-smithfield-square-and-luas.mp3>



Public housing areas surrounding Smithfield

The sounds of children and teenagers were absent, even with the vast housing areas that surround Smithfield Square—some dating back to the 1940s. Within five minutes of the square are two primary schools and one all-boy’s secondary school. During the day, I would hear the children playing in the school grounds, and in flat complexes close to the Smithfield Square. Each of these spaces were gated and enclosed. Most of the teenage participants lived within such housing areas, and would often refer to the level of noise made by the children within their immediate

housing areas. Yet, none of the teenagers, and no young children, used the Smithfield Square for “hanging out” or playing.



A primary school in Smithfield. The play area is on the school roof

The teenagers argued that the Smithfield Square had no point; it was too wide open and too quiet.

Group 11b: Although, there probably was sound for somebody who listened to it but because we were all coming down from the city, the space seemed to be nothing... it just seemed real quiet, empty.

Because of that, the teenagers felt they could not group together to chat. For them, it would be like situating themselves in the middle of a stage. Their sounds were amplified or reverberated, ironically creating a feeling of being surveilled. They felt more comfortable and safer in confined areas, such as street corners, laneways, and the archways of large buildings. Within these smaller spaces, the sounds produced have closer reflections. Teenagers often surround themselves with sounds by shouting, playing music, etc., creating what Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter in *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* (2009) call a sonic bubble. These “territorial bubbles appear as if by magic around a group of individuals if they begin to interact, and the group quickly acquires rights to the arena” (2009:34) thus creating a temporal space. They did not feel they could do so in such an open area.



Smithfield Square by the summer of 2010



The Smithfield Square in 2011

Because of the poor planning and design of the Smithfield area, there are vast empty spaces surrounded by fencing or construction hoarding, numerous derelict buildings, and closed-down shops and restaurants. The Smithfield Square is no different, with numerous buildings left empty as a result of foreclosures or bankruptcy. The silence in this space is indicative of the loss of the social and economic processes. The vast square then takes on another level of silence, the loss of productive meaning, the presence of poverty, homelessness and unemployment.

On one walk with the teenagers I noted that they would group together in the square, even when they were told to walk around and record sounds within the space independently. Later, they said there were no sounds to record, so they just walked towards the closest sound source, a small shopping market in the square. I had noted numerous individual sounds, but they would have required standing in the middle of the square to record them. During focus group sessions after the soundwalks, the teenagers defined positive soundscapes as places with numerous loud sounds, the voices of hundreds within busy shopping streets, music coming from stores and traffic in the distance. These sounds defined a city, and made the teenagers feel safe and enclosed. Smithfield contained none of these kinds of sounds.

Soundwalking the Smithfield Horse Fair



Displaying horse carriages

There are a few events held regularly within the square since it re-opened in 2013. Some of these events are part of the [Dublin City Council](#)'s efforts to invigorate the space, such as food and art markets, as well as fairs for various seasons and holidays. One of the few public events that take place in Smithfield Square is the [Smithfield Horse Fair](#), which happens on the first Sunday of every month. Having walked through this space repeatedly over a period of 3 years, it was only when I attended the horse fair that the space came alive, it had a purpose.

The horse fair has been a contentious event for both locals and city managers for the past two decades, with the horse dealers arguing that there is either a historical precedence for the horse fair or with the Dublin city councillors arguing that the land was historically used for the selling of cattle for market. The appearance within the Smithfield Square once a month of the horse fair brings with it a vast and lively, and sometimes, as defined by the media and Dublin City Council, a threatening soundscape/environment.



<https://youtu.be/ijaMkkjGNag>

Some sounds defined as threatening are the loud whinnying of horses as they are jostled around the fair. The media has also reported, on several occasions, large-scale fights, which have broken out during the fair, leading to the presence of riot police. This eventually led to the gating of the fair and an extreme police presence as if these measures might reduce such sounds through the threat of arrest. For those living in the new apartment complexes, the sounds produced at the fair are amplified because of the design of the space, and possibly sound more threatening as a result.

During one walk of the Smithfield horse fair that I did in April 2013, some of the audible sounds were horses neighing and whinnying in panic, horse shoes on the cobblestones, traders shouting out their wares of horse paraphernalia, seats, stirrups etc., the voices of old men, which was the dominant background sound, and the sounds of traditional Irish music.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/the-smithfield-horse-fair.mp3>

Outside of the gated fair were the sounds of large groups of teenagers, shouting and calling to each other. The space was alive with sound; the voices of teenagers merged with, or were lost within, the chaos of other sounds, becoming part of a larger soundscape. Because the space was busy with people, activities, music and even security there was a reason to use the square, even if you were not actively taking part in the event. The fair created a space for teenagers to engage with, and perhaps feel safe within the boundaries of its soundscape. Suddenly the square was as busy and as loud as the city centre.



Security at the horse fair



Smith hammering horse shoes at the horse fair

While walking through this soundscape, I encountered different kinds of soundmarks. For example, the banging of horseshoes was quite distinctive because it is, as Schafer would define, an archetypal sound, one that no longer belongs in the city. It felt like hearing a sound from the past. Yet this kind of sound creates a kind of historic continuity with the past ([Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 2000](#)). When discussing the cobblestones within Smithfield Square, most of the young female participants stated that it was not so much the look of the cobblestones that gave the space a sense of history but rather the sounds made when something moved over them. The lack of people and activities within the square meant that these sounds were rarely activated. The

soundscape of the fair on those days transformed Smithfield, lifting it out of its everyday silences, which seemed to invite young people to participate. It was reactivated with life.

What was noticeable about the two fairs I visited was that by the second event in 2013, there were far fewer horses than at previous fairs. There were about 8 or 10 horses being paraded around the space by what looked like homeless people or addicts. There seemed to be no real horse-trading; the soundscape lacked the sounds of horses. Instead, the space had become a gathering space, with groups of tourists wandering around taking pictures of anything and everything.



Teenage boys outside the gates of the horse fair 2013



Teenage girls at the fair

Conclusion

This fair does not fit within the cultural ethos of regenerated urban spaces like Smithfield, where culture is defined as a consumerist process or part of the arts. However, the space takes on new potentialities as a result of the presence of people, sounds and activities, allowing the teenagers to view the possibilities of spatial use. Sounds can distinguish a space, as identified during the Smithfield horse fair. These sounds also remove focus from teenagers' voices audible within the space, and transfer it to other sounds. The space was no longer a large fishbowl viewable from any angle; instead it had become a busy vibrant immersive soundscape.

Featured Image: "[Smithfield Horse Fair, Dublin](#)" by Flickr user Admanchester, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Linda O Keeffe is secretary to the Irish Sound Science and Technology Association and editor of the *Interference Journal*. Her practice is concerned with an exploration, both academic and creative, of the ways in which sound alters our experience of different spaces. Her art training was within the sculpture department of IADT under the tutelage of Finola Jones. She completed a Masters in Virtual Reality in NCAD with Kevin Atherton, and just finished a PhD in sociology in NUIM. Her research examined the urban of Dublin city soundscape as socially and technologically co-constructed. She has composed for dance, theatre, quartets, and new instrument performers, installed sound installations for commissions in Ireland, China and Holland, and has had radio works performed both nationally and internationally. In 2008 she was mentored under Eric Leonardson in Chicago, a sound artist and performer. More recently, she was commissioned by Resonance FM to create a work for radio for the 2013 Derry city of culture event. Current projects include a solo exhibition in November 2014 for the Limerick Sculpture Centre, which will be a creative realization of her PhD research. You can find her at www.lindaokeeffe.com.



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