

“You can hear them before you see them” Listening through Belfast segregated neighborhoods

Published by: Journal of Sonic Studies, n. 14, 2017,
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/369479/369480>

Abstract

The present research explores urban segregation in Belfast through listening. Specifically, the aim is to investigate how auditory culture subtly and deeply affects everyday lives and how marginal areas can be identified and analyzed from an auditory perspective. Moreover, the paper highlights the strong relationship between everyday sonic environments, certain urban and social issues, and the system of public policies related to the preceding. Therefore, urban planning and public policy design are investigated through a sonic studies approach in order to reveal the political framework of the city. The sonic environment of Belfast's most segregated areas is characterized by ice cream van melodies and their propagation within different neighborhoods. Such a street trade, which is also spread over Great Britain and Ireland, represents the perfect opportunity to enter areas that are often difficult to approach.

Our case study shows how a study of the production and reception of the moving melodies emanating from ice cream vans is crucial in detecting where and how Belfast's contemporary culture is developing and in what ways sonic studies may influence a new wave of inclusion policies. The sounds of ice cream vans and their dissemination can be investigated to both confirm and challenge Belfast's segregation trend; understanding them offers practitioners and dwellers an unexplored “sonic tool” to discuss segregation.

Methodology note

The research was conducted in March 2015 as part of a PhD visiting program at the Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), Queen's University Belfast. I was hosted by “Recomposing the City,” a multidisciplinary research platform co-directed by Gascia Ouzounian and Sarah Lappin.

The fieldwork was based on a careful sonic exploration of different neighborhoods in Belfast; the analysis, the outcomes and the diagrams derive from the fieldwork and are also informed by many interviews. All quotes from inhabitants were collected via informal interviews. All the field recordings presented were recorded as simple field notes for the inquiry. The analysis was enriched by an interview with the Belfast City Council's license and permits department, which contributed important institutional information and data. Maps were realized to better describe the outcomes of the research, which was difficult to present through a combination of words, photos, and field recordings

1. Introduction: Observing marginality through listening

The paper aims to reveal the relationship between marginality and the diffusion of specific urban sonic cues. In order to begin on solid theoretical footing, it is necessary to clarify our understanding of “marginality”, where we propose it is possible to listen to marginality, and, finally, how sonic awareness of marginality could help to further an understanding of social and spatial segregation.

We can define marginal urban areas as low on the list of government priorities due to 1) significant “distance” from big centers, 2) lack of infrastructures or 3) anthropic or natural barriers. Social segregation is one the first outcomes that can arise from such marginalization.

The notion of marginality often corresponds to a socio-cultural situation where dwellers are unable to self-represent and self-govern (Lindblom 1965). From this perspective, a marginal area inhabitant – normally living in lower-income neighborhoods - is the protagonist of an abandoned environment; its “language” is not the institutional one, and its self-activation tools are insufficient to stimulate any relevant change within its social and physical surroundings.

Therefore, listening to lower-income neighborhoods represents a challenge that connects sonic studies with urban planning and public policy design: What does urban segregation sound like? How can a sonic understanding of this issue stimulate a reframing of policy? These are the central questions this paper approaches through a case study of the Belfast urban environment.



Peace wall in West Belfast, 2015 – Photo: Nicola Di Croce

I decided to listen carefully to Belfast’s lower-income neighborhoods, observing inhabitants’ aptitudes and define their audible everyday practices. The primary places to experience a real sense of segregation were the areas close to the so-called “peace walls” – physical borders built between different religious communities.

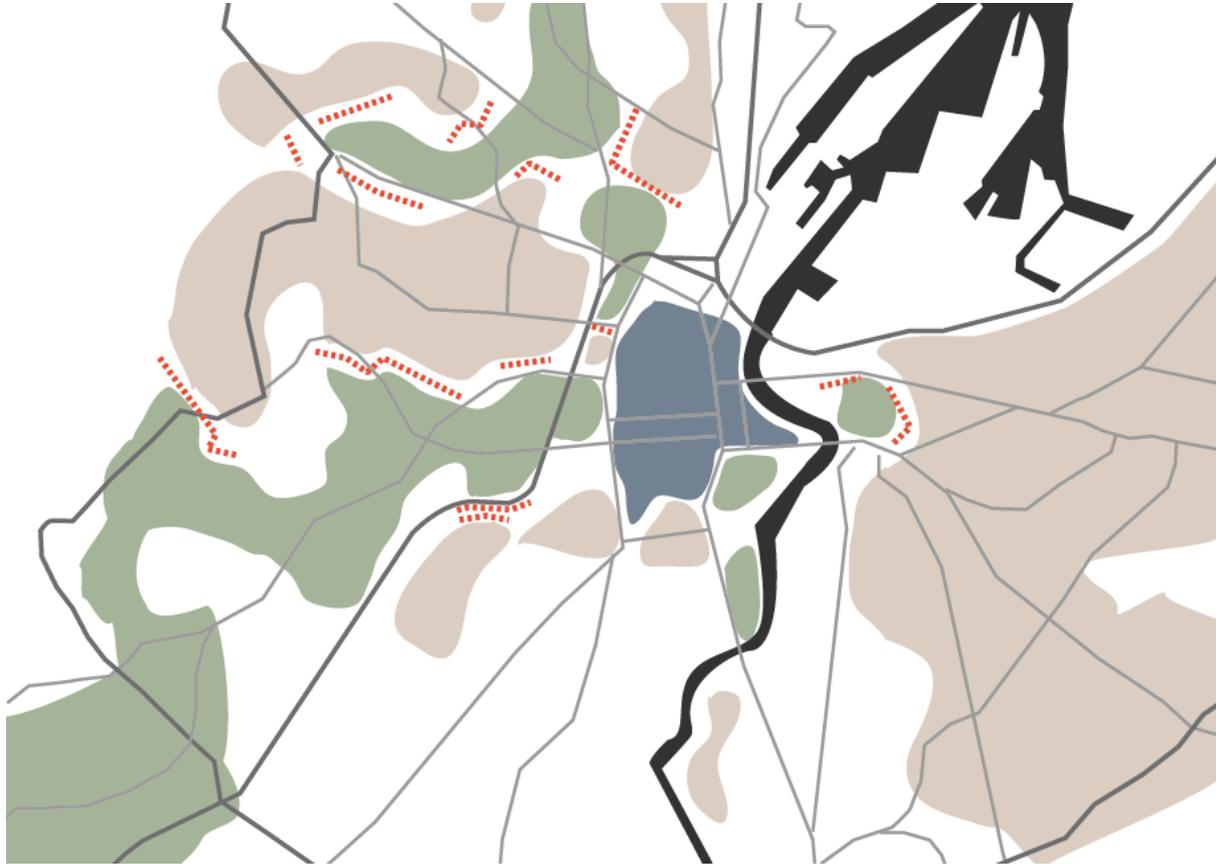
In my first explorations, some of the few sonic signals I heard in an extremely silent sonic environment were distant melodies; I later understood they were coming from ice cream vans. Soon I realized that whether the trucks were moving within the same neighborhood or operating on the other side of the wall, the sound they produced was so strange, powerful, and apparently “inappropriate,” that it substantially impacted the rest of my research.

[Field recording 1 / Belfast peace wall / https://soundcloud.com/ricerche-sonore/belfast_1]

I noticed that as I moved away from the peace walls, reaching middle- or upper-class neighborhoods, the ice cream vans would gradually disappear. From these first observations, I started to wonder why ice cream street vendors were covering only certain parts of the city and how the diffusion of the ice cream van melodies could be perceived and characterize the most segregated areas of the city. Marginal area inhabitants who share a passion for ice cream participate here in a collective “ceremony,” which takes place in public space and includes both the young and the most vulnerable generations. The present research claims that a sonic inquiry into ice cream vans’ trade could contribute to the understanding of Belfast’s segregation logic and offer constructive critique to the public policies addressed to public space and social integration.

2. Sonic consequences: Causes of segregation and effects on the sonic environment

Belfast's residential patterns and their sonic environments reveal what the quiet lower-income neighborhoods sound like, demonstrating how the impermeability of the actual spatial configuration contributes to delaying resolutions to civic controversies (Sennet 1970).

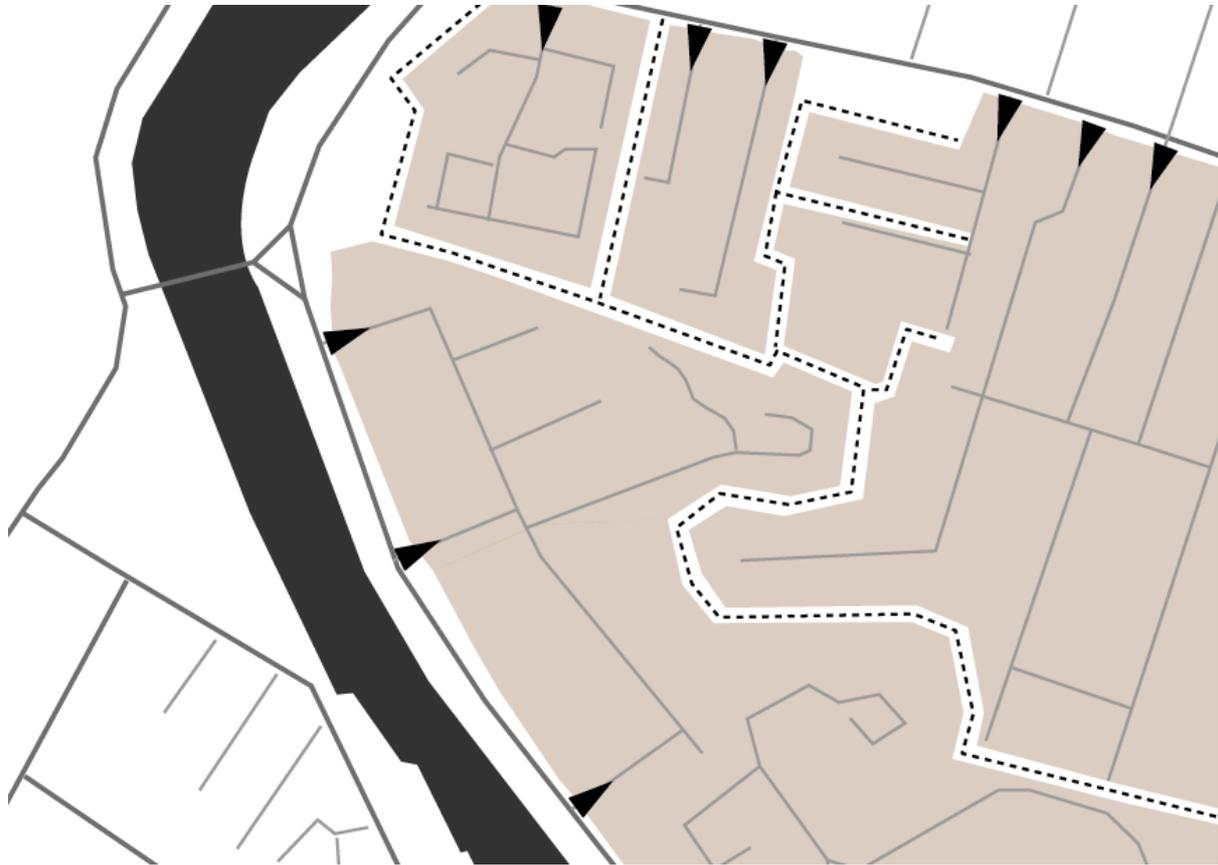


Belfast inner city (blue), surrounded by predominantly Protestant/Unionist neighborhoods (sand) and predominantly Catholic/Nationalist neighborhoods (green). Peace walls (dashed red) divide the conflicting neighborhoods.

Northern Ireland's capital is a winding, sprawled city that experienced a huge growth in population around the first half of the twentieth century. This increase ended in the late sixties, when the "Troubles" started; since then, from the nearly 600,000 people living in the Belfast Urban Area, the number of inner-city inhabitants has dropped dramatically as people have moved out, expanding the Greater Belfast suburban population (Pointer 2007, Office for National Statistics 2009). The 2001 census showed that the population within the same area had fallen to 277,391 people, with 579,554 people living in the wider Belfast Metropolitan Area (Census data; Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency 2001. See also Stephen 2006). This loss of density corresponded to an increasing lack of physical connections between neighborhoods; this was caused not only by the introduction of "peace walls" but primarily by the new transport infrastructure configuration, which isolated areas previously accessible to each other.

The fragmentation of the urban form through highways and walls thus contributed to creating "culs de sac" that facilitated the establishment of "ghettos." These "enclaves" now host still-conflicting lower-middle and working classes with strong religious affiliations (Gaffikin and Morrissey 2011). One result of government attempts to limit or suppress the riots was the creation of isolated neighborhoods, which prevent communities from experiencing a permeable urban environment (see Forum for Alternative Belfast and its Cul-de-sac-City project).

As a matter of fact, from the 1960s to the end of the millennium, street connections reduced and mobility was limited through the formation of the culs de sac. Moving from a specific spot of the city to another became more and more difficult. Distances increased while neighborhoods gradually established their individualistic character, which followed an “appropriation”, thus a “semi-public” use of the residential courts. The inner city is currently the only permeable urban area, although it is also, paradoxically, the most depopulated one (Plöger 2007).



Detail of a residential area in southeast Belfast. The dashed black line shows the invisible borders between residential blocks and frames the dead-end streets.

The sonic environment of Belfast residential areas reflects their urban contours: often calm, never disturbed by the traffic noise, sometimes enriched by the sound of children playing. This quiet environment reveals how little the public areas are used by the inhabitants and demonstrates at the same time a strong appropriation and control of the public space by its occupants. In fact, the calmness dissolves when a “stranger” comes into a cul de sac and breaks up the established order. The inhabitants control their environment through closed-circuit cameras as well as through their dogs, which bark as soon as a stranger oversteps the boundary between public and semi-public.

[Field recording 2 / Inside a Loyalist courtyard / https://soundcloud.com/ricerche-sonore/belfast_2]

This “out of place” feeling perceived by strangers is created in part by the suspicious gaze of neighbors as well as by visual identity symbols, such as religious flags, wall paintings, and flag-like printed urban fabrics. Moreover, peace walls resonate loudly when the wind blows over them. In fact, this is often the predominant sound that identifies border areas. In summary, even though the sonic environment is calm, it is always ready to react and continually reveals a tense ambience. City sounds are far away, rarely emerging throughout the buildings. Therefore, this quiet environment hides a full range of features that need to be further explored (Schön 1979).

The theoretical framework of the present research straddles sonic studies and urban planning. In order to orientate the inquiry toward Belfast's sonic environment, the investigation into audible everyday practices (Di Croce 2016) is enriched by an acknowledgment of public-space dynamics (Augoyard 1979). Thus, the relationship between urban morphology and sonic perception is revealed through a distinctive and conflicting soundscape (LaBelle 2010). In fact, specific sonic cues could be attributed to specific stakeholders, that is, to specific users of the public space (Baláy 2004); the sonic environment is certainly a place where everyday practices are continually revealed.

Moreover, by listening to everyday sounds, it is possible to inquire into public space uses and abuses (de Certeau 1990), conflicts and resolutions, as well as acoustic characteristics, peculiar sonic identities, and cultural heritages. All these elements are crucial for the investigation of a specific context, especially with regards to understanding segregated areas. The sonic environment of Belfast's most segregated areas is studied here as a "bridge" to investigating anthropic traces (Dewey 1938), symptoms suggesting urban issues to be further examined (Thibaud 2003). This is particularly interesting when the inaccessibility displayed by the urban form prevents an accurate investigation of the urban environment.



Closed road in West Belfast, 2015 – Photo: Nicola Di Croce

3. Sonic boundaries: Mapping segregation through ice cream van melodies

Ice cream vans organize their routes within specific residential areas. In particular, working-class neighborhoods are the only areas to directly experience the particular sound marks produced by ice cream vans. Since mobile ice cream vendors cover almost all the areas around inner-city Belfast, my sonic investigation reveals a specific connection between the diffusion of the ice cream van melodies and the segregated neighborhoods.



Ice cream vans areas of activity (brown) extracted by the fieldwork

Despite the long cold seasons, ice cream vans represent a surprisingly widespread mobile trade which enjoys considerable success in these areas. From a sonic perspective, the melodies broadcasted by ice cream vans seem to be one of the few sonic signals able to break down the segregation framework. Indeed, their melodies are easily recognizable on one side or the other of a peace wall as well as within one courtyard or the other, even though residential courts are often impermeable to each other (Augoyard and Torgue 2006).

Ice cream van melodies compose a peculiar and disorienting sonic intervention, with their capability to penetrate borders, due to their mobility and the permeating quality of the music (Gopinath and Stanyek 2014). Such “deterritorializing” melodies mark afternoons and evenings in Belfast residential areas with a wide range of sweet themes taken from a classical to popular music catalogue, from “O sole mio” to vintage jingles. These melodies contribute to creating a displacing ambience by establishing a contrasting atmosphere that is even more surreal due to the absence of other significant everyday practices (Cox, Franck, Hinant, Miller, Murphy, Paci Dalò, Quinz and Szepanski 2006). The sound is played near the residential courts to grab the attention of the inhabitants. It is the only sonic cue coming from the “outside” that is perceived as innocent and familiar. In fact, kids immediately come out of their house to meet the van, later followed by their parents. As the van moves through the neighborhoods, the melody shapes the sonic environment of a specific time period of the day.

[Field recording 3 / Ice cream van melody / https://soundcloud.com/ricerche-sonore/belfast_3]

The route of the truck leaves a sonic ripple that influences the ambience of the area; it conjures for only a few minutes a sense of place that scarcely returns during the rest of the day. In most of the cases the sonic ripple persists; indeed, it can be heard continually as the van maneuvers in and out of the nearby residential courts. Since the neighborhoods are not easily accessible - due to Belfast’s impenetrable urban anatomy - the route covered by the trucks is far from linear; that is to say that the persistence of sound within the environment is strictly linked to the urban contours.

As a result, the melody also appeared in the background in unexploited, abandoned, or uninhabited areas; in those cases the sound contributes to creating a surreal or even alienating ambience. Ice cream van melodies, more than any other sounds diffused through public space, play a crucial role in constructing the various nuances of the perceived sonic environment.

Marginal areas inhabitants, who are habituated to this sound, correspond in this analysis to ice cream buyers (the ones who can afford a 99p soft cream) who experience a segregated environment daily. The fieldwork shows how the circulation of ice cream vans traces a sonic delineation of urban marginality, introducing a strong relationship between the diffusion of these melodies and low-income housing areas. Indeed, the investigation reveals that mobile ice cream vans have chosen for their business those neighborhoods that are closer to “peace walls”, and more generally to low-income residential areas.

Approximately 20 trucks drive through lower middle-class and working-class residential areas from 3pm to 7pm. According to one resident, “The truck is passing by here every day, around 4pm and again after dinner. I actually can’t remember a single day it doesn’t pass by.” It seems that the inhabitants have established a special relationship with ice cream van melodies: As one dweller said, “It’s like I’m waiting for it every afternoon, and suddenly, when it comes, I can hear the kids coming out their homes ...”

The habit of listening for and to the ice cream melody coincides here with a strong sense of cultural belonging; a resident, in fact, proudly declared, “We have our ice cream truck, the others’ have their own.” Ice cream vans form part of the identity of the inhabitants and reflect the isolation of these residential areas. In this case, even though dwellers can hear other ice cream vans passing by, they recognize and firmly support their own. However, as sound does not honor borders, ice cream melodies can disclose a special sonic awareness linked to the perception of urban limits: “Sometimes you can hear them before you see them; some other times you can just hear them, but there is no chance to catch one, because they are on the other side of the wall.”

The interviews revealed how it is more likely for inhabitants of working-class residential areas to be fully aware of ice cream van melodies, especially close to the peace walls and other infrastructures built in order to separate two conflicting neighborhoods. In fact, outside the most segregated areas, there is a strong difference between the dwellers who are typically aware of the ice cream van melody and the ones who never notice such sounds. Inhabitants living in middle- and upper-class residential areas rarely perceive the ice cream melody, even if their neighborhood is quite close to a working- or lower middle-class ones. Sometimes they even question whether the trucks are still active in the city. One resident asked, “Are ice cream vans still passing through the streets? I can see them just in the main parks.” Their relationship with ice cream vans is then mainly nostalgic; the melody sometimes brings them memories from their childhood: “I remember I used to hear ice cream vans back in my childhood, when I was living somewhere else in another neighborhood, now I never hear them.” In this case, the disappearance of ice cream melodies within his present sonic environment reflects a social mobility that is difficult to be hidden.



Peace wall in West Belfast, 2015 – Photo: Nicola Di Croce

Based on the field analysis and the interviews in this study, it is possible to conclude that ice cream van routes rarely touch middle- and upper-class residential areas. The sonic identity created by ice cream melodies within working-class residential areas reveals a strong connection between borders, isolated residential courts, and difficult-to-access neighborhoods. Once or twice a day the ice cream vans establish a symbolic “bridge” between the city and the marginal and segregated areas. This is relevant especially for those who rarely leave their neighborhoods (i.e. stay-at-home parents and children as well as elderly people).

By pinpointing the presence of ice cream vans within certain residential areas it is possible to compare different urban fragments through the lens of marginality. It is also possible to assume that the quantity of ice cream vans in a neighborhood corresponds to its level of segregation. In fact, ice cream vans are “allowed” to come inside the courts; they are not seen as strangers. Therefore, marginal areas inhabitants seem to consider ice cream trade as one of the few “social services” coming toward them.

4. Sonic propositions: Acoustic identity and policy design

Urban planning, especially policy design, can consider the potentials of ice cream van melodies in breaking down Belfast’s segregation patterns. In order to do so, the public policies dedicated to street trade must be taken into account and implemented. At the same time, the psycho-acoustic involvement of marginal area inhabitants with ice cream melodies must be clarified.

For example, it is possible to claim that ice cream van melodies strongly contribute to producing a “safe” urban atmosphere. Notably, in 2010 a policeman used the ice cream van melody to calm a riot in West Belfast. The Police Service of Northern Ireland said, “An officer used the vehicle's tannoy system to play music to the youths in an effort to use humor to defuse the situation.” The youths stopped throwing the bottles. However, police admit that this was not an appropriate action (McDonald 2010). Even though the action was not considered appropriate, the fact that it happened demonstrates how powerful everyday sound messages are (Kelly 2011, Henry 2010).

An “innocent” sound discloses, in effect, a multiplicity of meanings, as it is used to orient people’s actions and moods. The policeman used the ice cream van sounds because their intervention was specifically addressed to a group of segregated dwellers; their reaction confirms how strong their connection is with such a melody. Thus, it is possible to claim that sonic perception is related to social class origin. This is shown observing the relationship that working classes have established with ice cream van melodies, when compared to less segregated, higher-income neighborhoods.

In addition, perhaps it is not a coincidence that police vans were redesigned to a particularly ice cream truck-like construction in 2001, right after the NI police force transitioned from the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the Police Service of Northern Ireland as a result of the Good Friday Agreement (United Nations 1998).



Police van compared to ice cream van

Ice cream vans have historically played an ambivalent role within lower-class residential areas, representing on one hand an innocent mobile trade, on the other an “ambiguous” activity. The Glasgow Ice Cream War illustrates the symbolic influence the vans held over people’s everyday affairs. In this “war” in Glasgow’s East End in the 1960s, the trucks were used as fronts to sell drugs and stolen goods; criminal organizations would intimidate the ice cream vendors and force them to execute their requests. In 1984 when a young driver refused to sell drugs, he was shot through the windscreen of his van. That event sparked a 20-year-long legal and street conflict (No author 2004).

In Belfast, as well, it is largely assumed (half-jokingly) that ice cream truck drivers do sell drugs, thus the perception of the vans’ activities as potentially drug-related exists, even though the situation cannot be compared with that of Glasgow.

Ice cream van melodies deeply affect the way marginal areas inhabitants make use of public space. Every truck resounds its own melody through its own trading area; thus, ice cream vans perpetuate a sonic demarcation that corresponds to a physical segregation. Thus, the sonic environment could inform an institutional level of understanding, using a sonic perspective and actual sonic material to highlight social exclusion.

By focusing on the links between sonic environment and public policy it is possible to encourage a reframing of urban-planning. To this end it is crucial to explore the policies that deal with mobile trades in order to better clarify the role played by ice cream vans within segregated areas. In particular, through the License Office, Belfast municipality orients mobile vendors’ actions across community borders. By doing so, the Office effectively “composes”, as a conductor, and could transform the sonic environment of the most segregated neighborhoods through a rewriting of the street trading policies (Competition Act 1998). However, the Belfast City Council’s License Office regulates licenses only according to the already-existing urban divisions (Street Trading Act 2001):

To enable the Council to regulate Licensed Mobile Street Traders, the traders apply for an area or areas of Belfast to trade in. Council officers have used Electoral Wards and/or commonly referred

to areas, such as housing estates, to try and define the area the trader is permitted to trade in. On occasion, this has been problematic; a trader may trade in an area covering two or more Electoral Wards. While on paper this may look as if they have a large area, the trader will most likely only trade in a small area of those Wards.

Legal advice has been that the Council can apply criteria over and above what the Street Trading (NI) Act 2001 states, provided it is in keeping with the intention of the legislation. However, the Council cannot refuse an application on the basis that it would be detrimental to existing traders. Economic considerations of this type are not contained within the Street Trading (NI) Act 2001 and would undoubtedly be contrary to the European Services Directive and also to subsisting primary competition legislation, namely the Competition Act 1998.

In order to determine this application, the focus must be on whether the services already provided within the area are sufficient, not whether the granting of a further license or licenses would reduce the revenue stream of the existing license holders or businesses within the area. (Interview with Belfast City Council License Office)

On the one hand, by following electoral wards and “commonly referred to” areas, the Council sticks to the existing cultural and religious borders. On the other hand, an economic parameter seems to override any further social consideration. The interview shows that a sonic acknowledgment of urban segregation is lacking within the different Council departments. In the present situation, the routes of the ice cream vans sonically reinforce socio-spatial borders; it is my opinion that street trade policies should instead be implemented in order to demonstrate how sound can traverse concrete boundaries.

The present research posits that the reconnection of Belfast’s fragmented neighborhoods can be stimulated through a sonic approach. For this to happen, however, cooperation between Planning and License Offices is essential.



Areas with the highest concentration of street trade licenses (blue) and the border areas where new licenses could be activated (yellow). For this sonic proposition, I have indicated the most accessible borders with arrows.

As described, ice cream melodies easily enter lower-income neighborhoods and could therefore contribute to develop a different perspective on borders by challenging segregated areas inhabitants' sense of (sonic) belonging. Thus, street trade licenses can operate both as planning and sonic scores that encourage an understanding between communities. First of all, trade licenses can shape a "shared" sonic environment within different neighborhoods, a possible first step to promoting pacific dialogue between conflicting groups. If mobile trading was licensed in such a way that it connects typically segregated areas, young generations (who all love ice cream) might become involved in a common, regular, experience involving multiple levels of integration. Furthermore, the implementation of less divisive street trade licenses policy could stimulate the establishment of new trading points at accessible border spots, where the ice cream melody can symbolically unify conflicting communities. That is to say that it is possible – and expedient – to evoke a new permeable urban environment first through sound, although a relevant reconfiguration of the urban arrangement is also needed.

In conclusion, the sonic environment of marginal Belfast neighborhoods reveals both a social segregation and a morphological fragmentation that can be approached through a policy design perspective. The fieldwork shows how ice cream van melodies deal with people with a similar potency according to their class and community identification, and how policy design should take that into account in its decision-making on licensing. To this end sonic studies could constructively cooperate with urban planning when examining issues of urban marginality.

Sound has the potential to orient the inquiry and drive strategic planning priorities; a shared acknowledgment of the sonic identities experienced within segregated communities can encourage marginal areas inhabitants to reach beyond their limits toward a "sweet" resolution.



Dead end street in West Belfast, 2015 – Photo: Nicola Di Croce

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