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# **ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE**

Dr Chloe Steadman & Loretta Lipworth

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# INTRODUCTION

*We have created this Atmospheric Methods Guide as part of a project into methods for researching high street atmospheres, led by Dr Chloe Steadman and funded by a Research Accelerator Grant at Manchester Metropolitan University. The guide is designed to provide practical advice to academics, students, and others involved in researching the topic of atmosphere about a range of sensory and creative methods that could be used to do so.*

Atmospheres—the feel of place—are thought to be challenging to study due to their instability and intangibility making them difficult to pin down and represent in research. Such difficulties are conceivably heightened within the complex outdoor place of the high street—which was the site of interest in our project. Our research, therefore, aimed to find out which methods are most effective for researching atmospheres on the high street.

Drawing insights from an initial scoping review of literature about atmospheric methods, we selected six methods identified in existing work as particularly valuable for researching atmospheres: drawing/mapping, photography, poetry, sensory participation, smellwalk, and soundwalk. We tried each method out on an English high street during the summer of 2024 and kept a methodological diary about our experiences using each method. We also conducted two walking tours of the same high street in July 2024 with 10 participants (5 in each group) who selected one of the six methods for use during the tour, followed by a group discussion about their experiences with their chosen method.

We have created a guide for each of the six methods trialled collated here, which provide practical information about: the background to the method; how you can get started on using it; why you might want to use it; what challenges you could face using it; how these challenges might be tackled; a case study of the method in action; and suggested further readings. We hope the guides will be useful for others researching the topic of atmosphere.



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**ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:**

# **DRAWING & MAPPING**

**Loretta Lipworth & Dr Chloe Steadman**

## BACKGROUND

Creative methods such as drawing and mapping are increasingly used in consumer research and other fields as a way of accessing and communicating affective, embodied, and emotional experience. When used to convey atmospheric experiences of place, drawing and mapping can be used as standalone methods or combined. As a flexible approach, drawings can either be created from scratch or overlaid onto a bird's-eye view map of the place being studied, potentially alongside text and photographs. Different types of maps can also be created to communicate a place's atmospheres, such as drawing a personal 'affective' map of a place or creating a digital map to share with diverse audiences.

## HOW TO GET STARTED

*Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...*

- Decide whether you want to draw from scratch, or overlay a mixture of drawings and text onto a personal affective or bird's-eye view map of the place being studied. If the latter, you will need to find and print off a map of the research site in advance.
- If using the method with participants, consider their comfort and skill levels. It is useful to give participants a flexible choice of what types of drawings or maps they feel comfortable creating.
- Prepare suitable materials and equipment for the climate of the place you are researching. This might include coloured pens and pencils, markers, tracing and regular paper, clips and stickers, or a variety of relevant apps on a digital device.

*“Feeling constrained by the representational map of [the town] and that I was drawing things in the wrong places... I instead decided to draw my own ‘affective map’... It felt like much more of a flexible approach to mapping”*

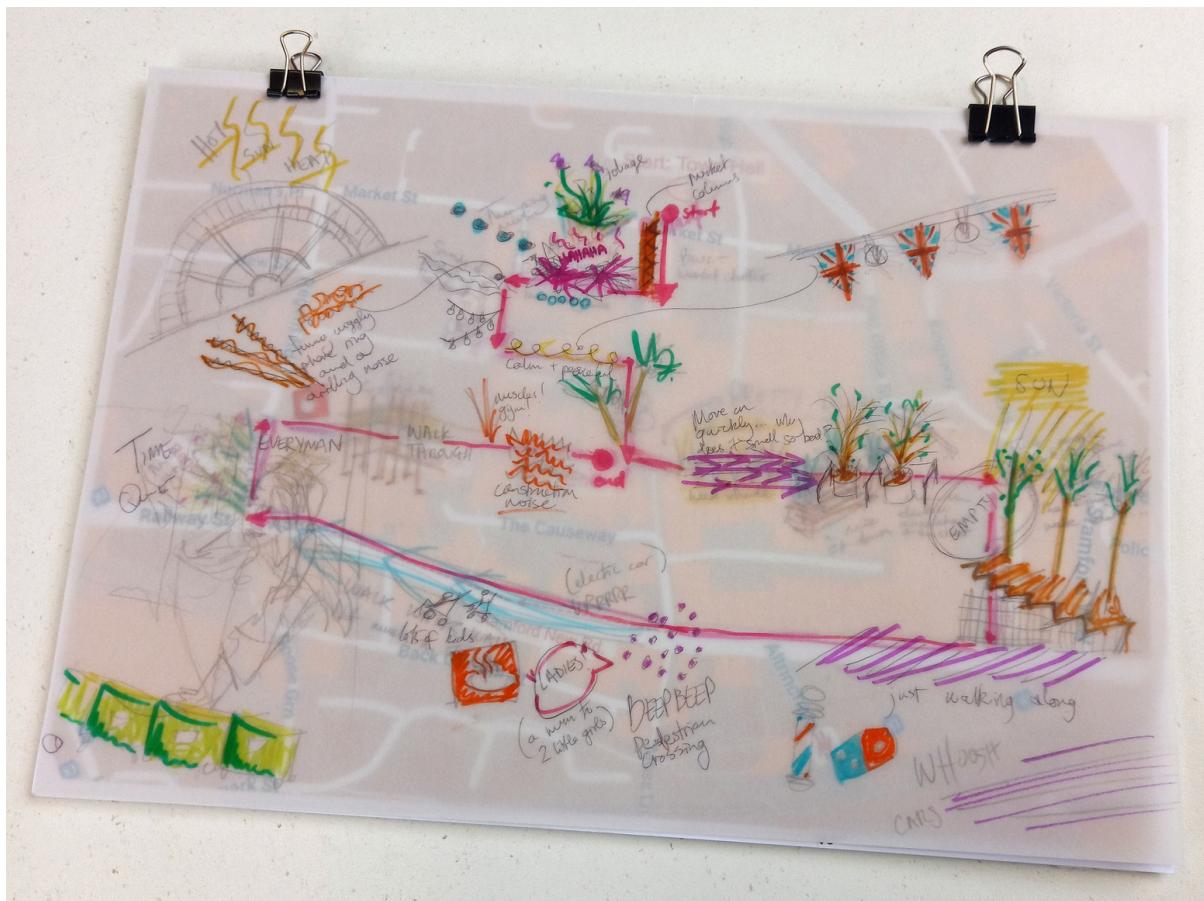
(Chloe's research diary)

## WHY USE DRAWING AND MAPPING?

Drawing and mapping are flexible methods that can be adapted according to people’s skill levels and how they want to express their experiences of atmosphere. If drawing in situ, the person is encouraged to attune to the material and sensual features of place, which might be overlooked when using more ‘traditional’ methods. Drawings and maps can be used to communicate research findings to more diverse audiences, such as including a digital map on a project website.

***“I think I would benefit from giving myself some guidelines or specific exercises, such as stopping every five minutes to draw how I feel about the place... I think setting some ‘fun’ limits within the method would help me feel more relaxed and probably more successful in conveying atmosphere”***

**(Loretta’s research diary)**



Loretta’s atmospheric map

## WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

Drawing and mapping techniques can feel daunting, even anxiety-provoking and frustrating for those who perceive they lack artistic or creative skills. It can be challenging to produce drawings which express the dynamic aspects of a place's atmosphere, rather than representational drawings of what can be seen. It may also be difficult to resist reverting to text, especially if the person using the method does not have much experience with drawing.

*“I felt a bit embarrassed if anyone came near my map to see my lack of artistic talents... especially since I felt my drawings were quite childish”*

(Chloe's research diary)

## PRACTICAL TIPS

- To help people feel more comfortable with the method and to suit varying skill levels, provide a range of different options for producing drawings and maps.
- Allow people to adapt the method according to how they feel whilst they carry it out. For example, if people feel frustrated with the first option they choose, they could change to a different technique as these methods are flexible.
- Reminders or prompts could be included to help people convey the place's multisensory and atmospheric qualities, either on notebooks/maps, when introducing or facilitating the research activity, or by introducing activities such as stopping every five minutes during a walking tour to draw how they feel within that space.

## DRAWING AND MAPPING IN ACTION

Kimberly Powell draws on a student research trip and four example student projects to showcase how mapping methods were used to capture lived experiences of the El Chorrillo neighbourhood in Panama. The student research trip aimed to develop methods to capture the dynamism and rich stories of Panama City, beyond its typically negative depictions. The students created maps in different ways, such as drawing personal maps or overlaying photographs, collages, and sketches onto maps. Powell found mapping helps communicate the complexity of multisensory experiences in creative and non-linear ways, can help to understand where people spend their time, and can also elicit other senses, such as touch, when visually looking at a map.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT DRAWING AND MAPPING

Degen, M and Barz, M. (2020). Mapping the urban experience digitally. In Ward, K. (ed). *Researching the City: A Guide for Students*. London: Sage.

Powell, K. (2010). Making sense of place: Mapping as a multisensory research method. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(7): 539-555.



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**ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:**

# **PHOTOGRAPHY**

**Dr Chloe Steadman & Loretta Lipworth**

## BACKGROUND

Visual methods are geared around producing non-verbal and non-textual knowledge. As one of the most commonly adopted visual methods, photography involves making a still image recording of something of research interest using a camera or smartphone. Photographs might be taken during a fieldwork trip either as a lone researcher, as part of a walking tour group, or by participants during their everyday lives or when taking part in a 'go-along' walking interview. Photography especially helps attune to the sights of place; but photographs can also elicit embodied reminders of the multisensory experience of being in the field when revisited during data analysis, writing-up, or when viewed by audiences of the research. Photography is frequently combined with other methods during fieldwork, such as field interviews, observational methods, and videos.

*“There is a manual and mechanistic process of winding the film onto the next shot which I find really attunes you to the photos you plan to take next. Rather than just easily whipping out your smartphone where there can be endless images taken and retaken”*

*(Chloe’s research diary)*



Loretta’s photo of a community garden

## HOW TO GET STARTED

*Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...*

- Consider what type of device you want to use to take photographs, whether a disposable camera, digital camera, or smartphone and acquire this equipment. This will depend on your research aims, ethical guidance of your institution, and budget.
- If using this method with participants, think about whether you are able to do a go-along or follow-up interview in order to establish the links between the photo taken and that person's atmospheric experiences of the place being studied. If this is not possible, consider creating a photography form to be used alongside taking photographs.
- Make an initial visit to the place being researched and try out taking some photographs, especially if using a device you are unfamiliar with. You might want to establish a walking route through the place during this initial visit if using this method with participants, or if you will be returning to the same place multiple times.

## WHY USE PHOTOGRAPHY?

Photography can help capture how a place and its atmospheres have changed, especially if photographs are taken of the same place across multiple points in time. The use of a manual disposable camera can heighten the focus on visual drivers of a place's atmospheres through the manual and embodied process of using the device. Within a smartphone and social media-driven societal context, photography is often very familiar to people, meaning it can feel comfortable and enjoyable to use this method.

***“I just like photography. I like taking photographs. That’s how I like to capture things. So that’s my thing”***

**(Chimp, Interview participant)**

## WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

People often take photographs of visual features provoking a particularly positive or negative atmospheric charge, meaning the everyday and mundane can be neglected. If using a disposable camera in a public space, feelings of awkwardness can arise due to seeming more conspicuous than a smartphone, whilst the photograph limit might also be a source of frustration. Ethical guidance of institutions can also place some constraints on photographing people, which can lead to images of empty landscapes not fully able to capture how people co-create a place's atmospheres.

*“I did feel a bit limited by not being able to take pictures of people. Obviously there's ethical reasons. But I think that people can capture a lot about a place”*

**(Jimbo, Interview participant)**

## PRACTICAL TIPS

- If taking photographs of the mundane features of place is beneficial for your research project, participants could be administered a disposable camera for use in their everyday lives, rather than the researcher selecting the research time and walking route, which might jolt participants out of their usual habitual routines, in turn heightening focus on the spectacular.
- To establish the links between a photograph and a participant's atmospheric experience, you can pair photography with a follow-up interview or photography form, including information such as: a description of the photograph, the location it was taken in, and what about atmosphere the photograph was taken to represent.
- If doing fieldwork in an outdoor environment open to inclement weather, a paper photography form is not very weather-proof. If you have access to a digital device, it might be useful to instead create a digital version of this form. If not, you can use plastic folders to shelter paper forms from the wind and rain.

## PHOTOGRAPHY IN ACTION

As part of a broader collaborative sensory ethnography, Sarah Pink used photography, alongside walking methodologies, field interviews, video recordings, and eating and drinking with participants to research the Slow Cities movement. During an urban tour around the Welsh town of Mold led by local residents, Pink used her own camera to take photographs of the town, whilst residents also took photographs of Pink with others using their own cameras at various points during the tour. The photographs helped with recalling embodied memories of the materiality, sensoriality, and sociality of being in the town, and several photographs are included in Pink's [published article](#) about the research to help bring the place to life.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

Pink, S. (2008). [An urban tour: The sensory sociality of ethnographic place-making](#). *Ethnography* 9(2): 175-196.

Sumartojo, S and Pink, S. (2019). [Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods](#). Oxon: Routledge.

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**ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:**

# **POETRY**

**Loretta Lipworth & Dr Chloe Steadman**

## BACKGROUND

Poetry is becoming more commonly used in fields such as marketing, where poems have been showcased at the Consumer Culture Theory Conference and International Place Branding Association Art Gallery. It is a creative and flexible method which can be effective for communicating personal, emotional, and vulnerable experiences of place. Researchers and/or participants may choose to write poems in the moment from scratch, or use other approaches such as 'erasure' poetry, where words of an existing text are erased until the final poem remains. Poems can be written using traditional materials (e.g. a notebook and pen) or digital devices (e.g. smartphone notes app or voice recorder). Poetry also works well when combined with other methods such as videos to bring the poems to life.

*"I would have thought I'd feel quite silly standing around with a notebook and writing. And I didn't actually. I felt it was okay"*

(Rebhead, Interview participant)

## HOW TO GET STARTED

*Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...*

- If using the method as a researcher, it is useful to spend some time in the place you are researching whilst writing down some observational fieldnotes about its atmospheric and sensory qualities to draw on as inspiration for your poem(s).
- If using the method with participants, think about whether you will be writing poems in the place being studied, or in another format such as within a sit-down workshop context. If writing poetry in situ, consider whether you will follow a route set by the researcher or allow participants to lead the way.
- If you or your participants are feeling less confident about writing poems from scratch, you could choose some existing texts with atmospheric and sensory language to use for erasure poetry. Ensure to select texts your participants would feel comfortable working with as the base for their poem(s).

## WHY USE POETRY?

Poetry enables people to express their anticipatory feelings about a place, their experiences while they are in a place, and their memories of a place. It is a flexible method which can be produced in different ways and combined with other creative techniques such as videos and drawings. Writing poems about a place's atmospheres can also be an enjoyable process for some, once some time has been spent using the method.

## WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

It is common for people to feel a bit apprehensive about writing poetry, especially if they have limited experiences with the method or anticipate their poems would be received negatively by others. The person writing the poem can sometimes become more internally focused on personal memories of a place, rather than the sensory environment around them. It can also become tiring when producing poems from scratch over an extended period in the field.

*“A wave of anxiety rushes through my stomach as I imagine myself writing my poem. I imagine I will feel very uncomfortable doing this, as I haven't really written poems before and I am worried the output will be of an embarrassingly poor quality”*

(Chloe's research diary)



# The main high street

## Montreal, Vegas style

As an iconic place in the American urban vernacular (Klingmann 2007), Vegas is featured up as the paradigmatic example of the postmodern city with its pastiche ~~and~~ ~~in~~ ~~near~~ ~~excess~~ — a more is more mix where everything is an imitation of something or somewhere else. Urban sociologists have also pointed to the city's ~~status~~ ~~as~~ ~~the~~ ~~prime~~ ~~example~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~McDonaldization~~ ~~or~~ ~~"Disneyization"~~ ~~of~~ ~~society~~, in which everything becomes part of a themed (and branded) experience (Gottliener 1997, Gotschall 1995, Lukas 2007, Sorkin 1992, Howes 2003).

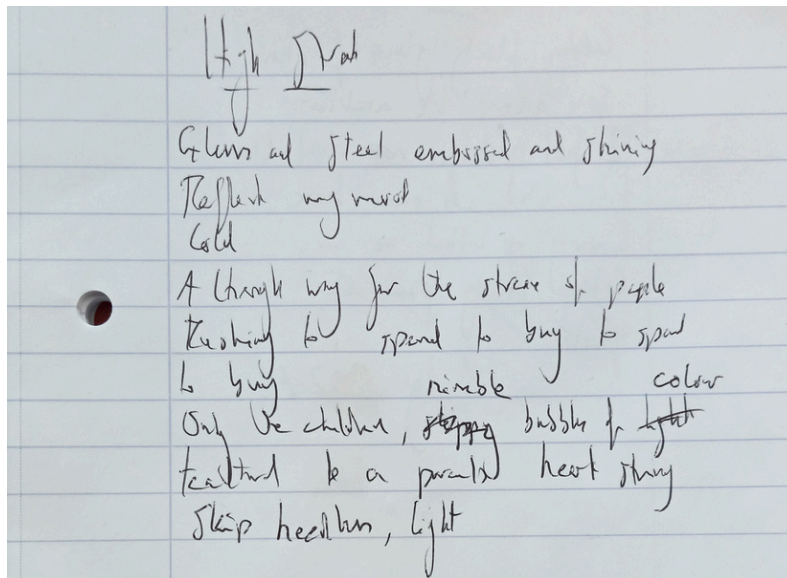
So what happens when a themed environment itself becomes a theme? From September 9<sup>th</sup> to October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Montreal Casino hosted Vegas Nights. Vegas Nights at the Montreal Casino involved a buffet of over the top spectacles and sensations, right down to a small scale replica of a Vegas style wedding chapel (where couples could get "married for fun" in a ceremony officiated by a drag queen). Casino patrons could order a "pure shot of energy" in the form of a Vegas style cocktail, or maybe a deep fried sharing platter, the marketing of which prompted you to "Eat like a King." They could also be wowed (and occasionally underwhelmed) by a resident magician, and hooie down on the dance floor with Chewbacca.

A copy of a copy par excellence (such that even Baudrillard (1994) could scarcely imagine), Vegas Nights at the Montreal Casino offer a fascinating mix of simulation and stimulation for the sensory ethnographer to probe. By examining the casino's embrace of the Vegas style more is more esthetic, we can begin to understand the impact of ~~the~~ ~~immersive~~ ~~experiences~~ ~~where~~ ~~risk~~ ~~taking~~ ~~is~~ ~~entangled~~ ~~with~~ ~~the~~ ~~provision~~ ~~of~~ ~~"fun~~ ~~for~~ ~~all~~ ~~the~~ ~~senses"~~ which increasingly define the casino environment.

## A "glittering jewel" in the Montreal skyline

Built in the reimagined French and Quebec Pavilions of the Expo 67 site in the city's Parc Jean Drapeau, the Casino de Montréal is a featured attraction in the Montreal skyline. As you cross the bridge heading toward the casino, its steel girders lit with strings of Hollywood marquis lights, whispering at coming attractions, the casino glitters on the horizon. This is far from a happy accident — the redesign of the casino took care to embed lighting into the skin of the building so as to make it glimmer with opulence even from afar ("Casino de Montréal," Provencher Roy Architects n.d.). One visitor remarks that it strikes her as a chandelier — a shimmering bit of extravagance suspended from nothing.

The casino's exterior, even on closer examination, is striking. A glass curtain in its shimmering façade hints at what is inside, with dashes of gold and lights flashing between hues of blue, green and red that echo the machines inside. The mat out front — an always evocative red carpet — welcomes visitors with the note "Par pur Plaisir." The front entry hall is decked in more glittering walls and expensive gilt ornamentation, including some beguiling gold statues who seem to peer down at the new patrons with curiosity and beckon them inside. The entryway feels vaulted — aspirational and with room to breathe — and almost seems designed to obscure what lies beyond. Patrons waiting to check their coat can begin to hear the machines just around the corner, however, and — once they



Rebhead's high street poem

## PRACTICAL TIPS

- So poetry feels less daunting, consider providing a flexible range of approaches and suitable materials. For example, texts rich in evocative and sensory language could be used by researchers or offered to participants, along with highlighters, pens and pencils, for use in erasure poetry. Those writing poems should also have an open choice of what style of poem to create.
- Researchers and participants should be encouraged to not only focus on their past memories of a place, but also their sensory and atmospheric experiences of the place being studied. It can be helpful to write poetry in situ to immerse the poet first-hand into a place's atmospheres.
- Rest stops should be factored into data collection, as the poetry method can be quite tiring both physically and mentally. Organisers of group tours using the poetry method, for instance, can look for suitable resting places, such as public seating, quieter spots and covered areas in advance of fieldwork by visiting the place themselves or by using online maps.

***“Soon enough, this becomes quite a fun and humorous exercise... It's been much more enjoyable than I expected... I actually found it improved my mood”***

**(Loretta's research diary)**

## POETRY IN ACTION

Pablo Arboleda worked in collaboration with a video editor, writer, voiceover actor, and sound mixers to produce a videopoem titled 'Cyclical Ruins' to express the changing feel of Spanish tourist spaces in the low season. The videopoem enabled Arboleda to express the changing atmospheres of tourism spaces and how the absence of people and activity in a place can generate a particular ambience, which he argues written text cannot always effectively convey. You can watch or listen to the videopoem [here](#).

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT POETRY

Preece, C, Rodner, V, and Rojas-Gaviria, P. (2022). Landing in affective atmospheres. *Marketing Theory* 22(3): 359-380.

Arboleda, P. (2023). Cyclical ruins: A videopoem on sun and sand tourism spaces in the low season. In Sánchez-Fuarros, I, Paiva, D, and Calvo, D. (eds). *Ambiance, Tourism and the City*. Oxon: Routledge. 95-109.



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ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:

# SENSORY PARTICIPATION

Dr Chloe Steadman & Loretta Lipworth

## BACKGROUND

Academic research is said to be undergoing a 'sensory turn', with approaches such as sensory ethnography—paying attention to multiple senses throughout the research process—becoming more commonplace. Whilst participant observation is a key method in the ethnographer's toolkit, sensory participation involves attuning more keenly to multisensory and embodied experiences of place, and using the body as an instrument of research in knowledge generation. Practically, the person using the method will spend time in and/or move through an environment whilst paying attention to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures shaping their experiences of the place. Fieldnotes are typically produced as data, either written using a traditional pen and paper, a digital smartphone notes app, or verbally spoken into a sound recorder.

## HOW TO GET STARTED

*Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...*

- Consider how many fieldwork visits you want to make to the place under study. Given atmospheres can fluctuate over time, it could be useful to visit your research site across different seasons, days of the week, and times of day. This will depend on your research aims and how much time and budget you have available.
- Think about how you want to structure your fieldnotes. If less structure is preferred, fieldnotes can be recorded in an open way either using a notebook, digital notes app, or verbally spoken into a digital recording device. If more structure is desired, consider creating an observational template before entering the field, including sections such as: the time of day, weather conditions, location, the sense (sights, sounds, smells etc.), and how sensory stimuli impact the feel of the place.
- Make an initial fieldwork visit to familiarise yourself with your research site. During this visit, you might also want to devise a route that you will take through the place each time you visit, depending on the purpose of your study.

***“I found that I was probably too ambitious. I couldn't get around to writing anywhere near... at the pace we were going. So I think I started defaulting towards visual”***

**(Melissa, Interview participant)**

## WHY USE SENSORY PARTICIPATION?

Sensory participation involves first-hand immersion into a place's atmospheres and encourages a more all-encompassing approach by focusing on the multiple senses shaping atmospheres, rather than a singular sense. Whilst observing both your own and other people's embodied and emotional responses to a place's atmospheres, this method enables behaviours to be observed in situ, rather than hearing about them when reported in an interview context. It is a flexible method and often combined with other techniques, such as interviews, photographs, and videos.

## WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

It can sometimes feel overwhelming trying to attune to multiple senses at any one time, and the visual sense can often be focused on too heavily as a result. Some people can feel the method lacks structure and prefer to instead produce fieldnotes using a more structured observational template. Too much focus can be given to describing sensory stimuli, rather than making the link through to how they inform what the place feels like.

*“Although I have used this method before, I am finding it more difficult today to attune to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures of the space at any one time. The high street, although relatively compact spatially, seems to elicit a large array of sensory information I am finding it difficult to attune to all at once”*

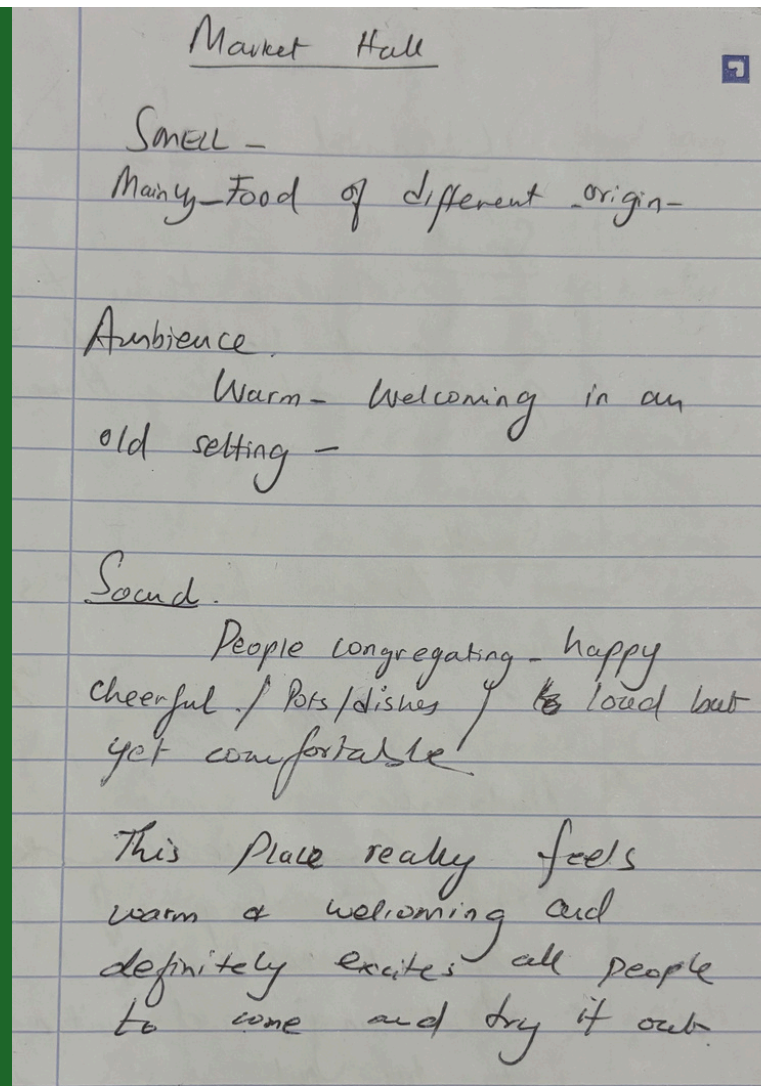
**(Chloe's research diary)**

## PRACTICAL TIPS

- To reduce any potential feelings of sensory overload, build in regular rest stops during fieldwork. You might wish to pause and focus on each sense in turn within a contrasting range of spaces in the place being studied.
- The researcher and/or participants should consider how they want to organise their fieldnotes before entering the field. Some may prefer to record fieldnotes in an unstructured and open way, whilst for others it would be useful to create some sort of observational template in advance.
- Ensure to not just spend time describing sensory qualities of the place, but also reflect on how that makes the place feel. Reminders could be included to encourage links to be made between sensory information and atmosphere, either written on a notebook or including a separate section for this if using an observational form.

*“I think if it's already written on my notepad, you know... so I just need to fill it in, rather than me just, you know, trying to scribble it down in different ways. I don't know what a mess I made. But yeah, that would have been helpful. So it's kind of really set up beforehand”*

*(Ruby, Interview participant)*



Ruby's sensory fieldnotes

## SENSORY PARTICIPATION IN ACTION

Chloe Steadman and Steve Millington used sensory participation to investigate challenges of atmospheric control on the North Pier- the oldest of three seaside piers found in the seaside town of Blackpool, UK. They visited and walked along the pier numerous times, attuning to the multiple senses impacting its atmosphere, and recorded their sensory experiences through fieldnotes written using both a notebook and digital smartphone app and later expanded and typed up. They combined the method with soundwalks, videowalks, and photography. Sensory participation enabled the researchers to immerse themselves into the atmospheres of the North Pier and sense its fluctuating atmospheres through their own embodied experiences.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SENSORY PARTICIPATION

Pink, S. (2015). *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: SAGE.

Steadman, C. (2024). Using multi-sensory methods to study atmospheres. In Steadman, C and Coffin, J. (eds). *Consuming Atmospheres*. Oxon: Routledge. 187-203.



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**ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:**

# **SMELLWALK**

**Loretta Lipworth & Dr Chloe Steadman**

## BACKGROUND

Smellwalks have become an increasingly utilised method as part of the 'sensory turn' and move towards unsettling the dominance of the visual in qualitative research, as well as the growth in more mobile forms of inquiry. Smellwalks involve actively attuning to smells whilst moving through a place, either as an individual or as part of a group, and recording observational notes about olfactory experiences, the intensities of smells and their impact on how the place feels. Smells encountered in a place might be in the background (constant), episodic (characterising a place), or short-lived (transient). The person doing the smellwalk may wish to 'catch' and follow a smell or actively 'hunt' for particular smells, and then record these in writing using a smellwalk form or verbally through speaking into a digital device.

## HOW TO GET STARTED

*Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...*


- Create a paper or digital smellwalk form for use in the field, including information such as description of the smell, its longevity, smell location, a smell intensity rating out of 5 or 10, and how the smell makes the place feel.
- If using the method with participants, decide whether you will follow a set route or allow participants to lead the way. If using a set route, it is helpful to refer to online maps and make a preparatory visit to ascertain the duration of the planned smellwalk. Ensure the smellwalk lasts for around an hour maximum, as sensory attention can wane and participants can become fatigued.
- If you allow participants to lead the way, consider providing some 'how to' guidance: for example, you could ask them to 'hunt' for a particular smell associated with a place, or ask them 'catch' a smell and then follow it.

*“Even though I enjoyed trialling the method overall... my sense of smell was in constant competition with the more dominant senses of sight and hearing”*

*(Loretta's research diary)*

## WHY USE SMELLWALKS?

Smellwalks help people to attune deeply to the sense of smell, foregrounding a sensory modality which may usually be overlooked in everyday experiences of a place. Smellwalks can also be a fun method to use, whether conducted solo or in groups. The smells of place can be brought to life through dynamic and digital smellmaps and olfactory exhibitions if you have the skills in creating these, or are working in collaboration with somebody who does.

Description of smell	Smell duration Is it lingering or short-term?	Where on the high street are you? Where on the high street was the smell?	Where does the smell come from? From a shop, market stall, item on the street etc.	Intensity of smell Circle the smell's intensity from 1 very weak to 5 very strong.	How does the smell make you feel? Positive/negative? How does it contribute to the high street's atmosphere?
	Short-term	Side of the market	A flower bed.	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	Feel happy (pleasant smell) Draws attention → high street feels covered for.
Dry food / meat treats for dogs.	lingering	outdoor market	market stall	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	Unpleasant / disruptive. feels out of keeping with human food being sold at the market feel a bit disgusted.
Incense.	lingering	outdoor market	Jewellery stall	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	pleasant. nostalgic as an orientated childhood smell. feels 'authentic' / food made previous
fish.	Short-term	outdoor market	fish stall	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	Familiarity and expected smell at a fresh food market

Chloe's smellwalk form

**“Some odours I was clearly smelling, but I found myself feeling puzzled and unable to detect the source of the smell or describe it in words”**

**(Chloe's research diary)**

## WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

Inclement weather can impact smellwalks negatively by making paper forms difficult to use, and because smells can be dispersed by wind or become less intense in wet weather. The smellwalk method is also difficult for people who do not have a well-functioning sense of smell, such as those afflicted by allergies or a cold, and sights and sounds can sometimes become foregrounded instead. Describing smells through language can be difficult if using more representational approaches, particularly in writing.

*“I found myself having to work my body quite hard to attune to the smells of the high street, walking particularly slowly and breathing in through my nose more heavily, rapidly, and intentionally than I usually would”*

(Chloe’s research diary)

## PRACTICAL TIPS

- Digital devices and forms can be used to record smellwalk observations when wet weather causes difficulties using paper forms. If possible, the organiser(s) could schedule the smellwalk to take place during typically less windy/rainy times of the year.
- To help attune to smells, and ensure the sights of place do not become a sensory distraction, researchers and participants can pause and try temporarily closing their eyes (safely!) and breathing in more deeply than usual through the nose.
- If finding it difficult to describe smells through written language, a column for drawing pictures could be included on the smellwalk form. It could also be useful to build connections with those who specialise in creating digital smellmaps or olfactory exhibitions to learn about more creative ways of communicating smells.

## SMELLWALKS IN ACTION

Louisa Allen used smellwalks to understand how the presence and absence of smells shaped the experience of Covid-19 in a suburban town in New Zealand. The author conducted six solo smellwalks of the town: three during lockdown and three outside of these restrictions, to access the changing smells of the place. Allen was subsequently able to compare the smells encountered during lockdown and out of lockdown, with more natural smells, for instance, dominant during lockdown as businesses were closed. Allen found smellwalks help to foreground the often unnoticed aspects of life and experiences which might elude written description, and ensure more than just the visual sense is attuned to.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SMELLWALKS

Allen, L. (2023). The smell of lockdown: Smellwalks as sensuous methodology. *Qualitative Research* 23(1): 21-37.

French, J and McLean, K. (2024). Two Centuries of Stink: Smell mapping Widnes past and present. In Steadman, C and Coffin, J. (eds). *Consuming Atmospheres*. Oxon: Routledge. 67-89.



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**ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:**

# **SOUNDWALK**

**Loretta Lipworth & Dr Chloe Steadman**

## BACKGROUND

Soundwalks are becoming a more commonly used method as part of the ‘sensory turn’ and move towards unsettling the dominance of the visual in qualitative research, as well as the growth in more mobile forms of inquiry. Soundwalks involve actively attuning to sounds whilst moving through a place, either as an individual or as part of a group, and recording observational notes about sonic experiences, the intensities of sounds and their impact on how the place feels. Instead of– or in addition to– making written notes using a paper or digital soundwalk form, digital recordings can also be made of the sounds themselves.

Description of sound 	Duration of sound Is it lingering in the background or short-term?	Where are you on the high street? Where is the sound located on the high street?	Where does the sound come from? From a shop, person, music playing etc?	Intensity of sound Circle the intensity of the sound from 1 very weak to 5 very strong.	How does the sound make you feel? Positive/negative? How does it contribute to the high street's atmosphere?
Chatter	Constant in background	Market	People sat outside bars + market	Weak Strong 1 2 (3) 4 5	Positive -friendly -socialising
Cutlery clatter	Occasional	Market	Customers in bars, market	Weak Strong 1 (2) 3 4 5	Positive -enjoy food
Dogs barking	Occasional	Market	Passing dogs as over dogs sat outside market	Weak Strong 1 2 3 (4) 5	Indifferent -may be scary to some but also social

Helen's soundwalk form

*“...It makes you notice things that you wouldn't normally notice... Because we're all from [the town] we're used to it. So you almost don't notice it the same... It does open your eyes to it, doesn't it”*

(Helen, Interview participant)

## HOW TO GET STARTED

*Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...*

- Create a paper or digital soundwalk form for use in the field, including information such as description of the sound, sound location, a sonic intensity rating out of 5 or 10, and how the sound makes the place feel.
- If using the method with participants, decide whether you will follow a set route or allow participants to lead the way. If using a set route, it is helpful to refer to online maps and make a preparatory visit to ascertain the duration of the planned soundwalk. Ensure the soundwalk lasts for around an hour maximum, as sensory attention can wane and participants can become fatigued.
- Decide whether you will also take sound recordings and acquire and prepare the appropriate equipment. You may need a bit of training if using sound recording equipment you are unfamiliar with. Also consider the ethical implications of recording in public spaces as applicable.

## WHY USE SOUNDWALKS?

Soundwalks help people to attune deeply to the sense of sound, foregrounding a sensory modality which may usually be overlooked in everyday experiences of a place. In doing so, the method helps to address the usual emphasis on the visual. The sounds of place can be brought to life through including clips of sound recordings in project outputs.

***“I used to do photography, so I thought that's just going to be too comfortable for me. So I chose away from it... I've not done anything with... sound before so I thought why not?”***

**(Ezio, Interview participant)**



## WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

Wet and/or windy weather can affect soundwalks by making paper soundwalk forms difficult to use, or impacting the quality of sound recordings. Soundwalks may also stir up feelings of awkwardness on first try, and overwhelm in busy places where there may be many sounds overlaid even in a single area. It can sometimes be difficult to connect sounds to the atmospheric qualities of place and how they make the place feel.

*“Doing the soundwalk felt a bit overwhelming at times. There were so many sounds overlaid in just one place... Chatter, crying, sneezing, wheeling shopping trolleys and pushchairs, jangling keys, rustling shopping bags, cars, clattering cutlery, the fizz of cans being opened...”*

(Chloe’s research diary)

## PRACTICAL TIPS

- Digital devices and forms can be used to record soundwalk observations when wet weather causes difficulties using paper forms, as well as pairing written notes with digital sound recordings. If possible, the organiser(s) could schedule the soundwalk to take place during typically less windy/rainy times of the year.
- To lessen feeling of self-consciousness and overwhelm, soundwalks could be conducted with co-researchers, in small groups, and during typically less busy times.
- Make sure to reflect on how sounds make the place feel, as well as the qualities of the sounds encountered. Reminders could be included on soundwalk forms or notebooks to encourage links to be made between sounds and atmosphere.

## SOUNDWALKS IN ACTION

Chris Hurst and Michela Stinson used sonic methods to access people's experiences of tourist atmospheres. The researchers layered sound recordings with corresponding audio waveform images, observational fieldnotes, poetry, photography, and videos to creatively communicate the sounds of Niagara Falls and Agawa Bay in Ontario, Canada. In their project outputs, the authors include QR codes to video and sound recordings to engage audiences in different ways with the research and elicit care for the sounds of place. This experimental and multi-modal methodology enabled Hurst and Stinson to access the non-representational, embodied, affective, and atmospheric experiences of tourist destinations.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SOUNDWALKS

Hurst, C and Stinson, M. (2024). Inviting engagement with atmospheres. In Rantala, O, Kinnunen, V, and Höckert, E. (eds). *Researching with Proximity: Relational Methodologies for the Anthropocene*. Cham: Springer. 165-187.

Steadman, C. (2024). Using multi-sensory methods to study atmospheres. In Steadman, C and Coffin, J. (eds). *Consuming Atmospheres*. Oxon: Routledge. 187-203.

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## **To reference this guide:**

Steadman, C and Lipworth, L. (2025). Atmospheric Methods Guide. Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.