Perceptions of place

How do changes to the built environment affect assemblages of place in Somers Town?

Summary Report

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Full dissertation available upon request
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1. Introduction

This report summarises an MSc Dissertation investigation into different perceptions of place in the Somers Town area of London, which through the construction of a major medical research facility, the Francis Crick Institute, is undergoing major redevelopment and regeneration. This acts as a valuable case study for understanding socio-spatial change in an area characterised by marked socio-spatial disparities; between Somers Town, an area characterised by high levels of socio-economic deprivation, and the swiftly regenerating and highly connected areas around King’s Cross. The marked differences between these two distinctive areas, coupled with the Francis Crick Institute development located within Somers Town offers a means of studying how perceptions of place are changing amongst different groups due to the profound changes to the built environment.

Background to Somers Town and the Francis Crick Institute

Somers Town is an area located in the London Borough of Camden, to the north of Euston Road and south of Pancras Way, and between St Pancras and Euston Stations (figure 1). The ward of St Pancras and Somers Town has a population of 13,500 (Camden London Borough Council, 2007), with the borough’s largest average household size (2.33), the largest proportion of Council tenants (51%), and the majority of the housing being purpose-built flats (78%). 600 homes are classified as overcrowded, though 500 households live in accommodation that is too large. Somers Town has high levels of socio-economic deprivation falling into the bottom quintile on the indices for multiple deprivation. The area is also ethnically diverse with 11% of the population Black African and 15% Bangladeshi. There are major health issues with 20% of ward residents (12% of working age people) recording a limiting long-term illness (Camden Data 2011). The area to the south is Bloomsbury, home of many national institutions including the University of London and the British Museum. The King’s’ Cross area to the east is subject
to on-going major redevelopment; projects include the British Library, St Pancras International, and the King’s Cross Central redevelopment.

Figure 1: A map of Somers Town and the surrounding area

Source: Open Street Map
The Francis Crick Institute (the Crick), formerly UKCMRI, is currently under construction and scheduled to open in 2015 will be an interdisciplinary medical research institute costing £650m. 4 key partners back it: University College London, the Wellcome Trust, the Medical Research Council and Cancer Research UK. Housing around 1500 staff it will be one of Europe’s largest scientific research centres (Francis Crick Institute, 2011). The building sits on the edge of London’s Central Activities Zone and has the highest PTAL public transport accessibility score of 6b. The relevance of the Crick to Somers Town is that it will occupy a 1.5-hectare site behind the British Library, on land previously used for the construction of St Pancras International, and prior to that a railway goods yard. The building (figure 2) will be 100,494 square metres, comprising of 4 office and 3 plant floors. In addition to laboratory and office space there will be public facilities such as a ‘living centre’, a lecture theatre, and a public engagement programme. The institute purports that the architecture

‘responds to the architectural heritage of the local area… both to its large civic neighbours… St Pancras and the British Library… and to the smaller scale residential buildings of Somers Town’ (Francis Crick Institute, 2010).

However, there has been much criticism of the site location notably due to the close proximity to a densely populated residential area, for instance Michael Edwards (2010) argues that:
‘Housing needs in the area (as elsewhere) are acute: there is serious overcrowding, very severe ill-health associated with poverty and bad housing. Feeling in the area is very strong because these housing and social needs are not being met.’

Furthermore, the Camden Green Party (2010) argue that the building will undermine the local built environment due to ‘...the enormous, disproportionate scale of the proposed structure…”

Due to the considerable change and strong viewpoints the Crick can help to expose how place in the area is perceived by a range of different groups including local residents, ‘professionals’ working in the community and regeneration, and people living and working in the surrounding area.
2. Key Questions

Combining an awareness of the Crick and the wider area alongside a theoretical analysis helps to generate the following overarching questions that drive the dissertation:

1. How do people’s perception of the built form affect their use of space in Somers Town?

Explore different perceptions about Somers Town, perceptions of Somers Town’s built form, and the relationship between the built form of Somers Town and that of the surrounding vicinity.

2. How do perceptions of place emerge and change in space and time? How will the Crick affect this process of change?

Explore perceptions of change of Somers Town and surrounding areas, particularly with the construction of the Crick.

3. How do changes to the built form affect the assemblages of place in Somers Town and the surrounding area?

Explore how changes to the built form and place affect the internal subjectivity and outward behaviour of different individuals and groups in Somers Town and the surrounding vicinity.
3. Methodology

The methodology seeks to explore how individual perceptions of the built form influences engagement with the urban environment in a way that is open ended, and that captures how perceptions of the physical environment are unlikely to be separated from those of the social environment.

The following table indicates the different methods that were used in a way which could ‘triangulate’ different lived experiences and perceptions of Somers Town and the surrounding area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Who was consulted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Gatekeeper’ interviews</td>
<td>9 ‘gatekeepers’ were interviewed and consulted. Individuals came from UCL, worked directly in the Somers Town community or had relevant links to the area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Professional’ Interviews</td>
<td>8 ‘professionals’ were interviewed. Interviewees came from various perspectives including those working for the local community, the Crick, Camden Council, and property developers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photowalk</td>
<td>7 people participated in the photo-walk exercise including local residents, non-residents and ‘professionals’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local resident and non-resident interviews</td>
<td>6 local residents, and 3 people who work or studies in the area were interviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Quick’ Interviews</td>
<td>18 people participated including parents of young children at a playgroup, members of a Bangladeshi ESOL class, two pensioners using the café, and a small business owner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Consultation</td>
<td>26 People Participated in the community consultation at the Somers Town Festival of Cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Participants</strong></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Results

The key findings to come from the research are:

- Somers Town is generally viewed positively by those who know it, both in terms of its community and the quality of the built environment.

- Many people perceived Somers Town to be an island both physically and socially, and felt that the island nature of the area as both a positive and negative characteristic.

- The areas around Somers Town have changed and are continuing to change; there are many marked differences of opinion over these processes. Many people perceive Somers Town as a residential area where change has been imposed and not met community need; whereas others see Somers Town more in terms of its relationship with central London, and see these developments as a mixture of inevitable or something to be taken advantage of.

- These perceptions continue when considering the potential impacts of the Crick; though they are coupled with many concerns, particularly about size.

- Many people believe that the Crick along with other national institutions in the area should engage with the local community and contribute to the meeting of their needs (i.e. through public engagement activities, that work with different groups such as school children) particularly due to the levels of socio-economic deprivation.

- Perceptions of the area and of development depend strongly not only upon immediate positionality, but also upon memory and ones perception of history of a place. This is particularly the case for those who have a longer-term understanding of the area. This is the key finding that is transferable to other contexts and elaborates upon an under-recognised aspect of assemblage within an urban context.
5. Discussion

1. How do people’s perceptions of the built environment affect their use of space in Somers Town?

There was a definite sense amongst all participants that there was a strong interrelationship between perceptions of the built environment and the use of space in Somers Town. This can be seen to occur in many ways, but could be argued to originate from the marked distinctions in the built environment between Somers Town and the surrounding areas.

It is clear amongst different groups that there were strong perceptions of about the built environment, and how this affected not only their use of Somers Town but also the way in which individuals believed that space should be used more generally. This was most evident amongst local residents, particularly those who had a critical opinion of the Crick development. Broadly, Somers Town was conceived, either explicitly or implicitly, as a residential area both physically and socially, due to the amount and density of the housing stock. This was emphasized by the wide perception of a strong sense of community and a relatively high number of community amenities in comparison to central London.

Judging by the fact that many participants spoke of the area being a residential area in central London, this can be seen to be something that requires definition when there is continual development that has or is occurring on the periphery of the area. Accordingly, is that it is quite understandable to see why criticism of the Crick arises from long-term residents; for instance various opinions felt that it was an overwhelming change forced upon the local community. For instance one resident in reference to this exasperated, ‘Does it all have to be on our doorstep?’; and given the perception that many previous projects had been imposed was sceptical about any benefits, particularly jobs. This is problematic in a place that although was seen to have a relatively high number of community
amenities was perceived by many participants to be limited in terms of resources, specifically housing and any associated problems such as overcrowding. *This perception of Somers Town as residential and subject to resource shortages combined with a sense of imposition has amongst many local people caused a rise to actively defend Somers Town as a residential place.*

The presence of physical barriers such as the railway and road infrastructure was a strong factor in affecting people’s spatial use. Participants typically defined *Somers Town as a physically and social distinctive standalone place*, with clear geographical boundaries. Many people described Somers Town as “*an island*”, due to its separateness and isolation from neighbouring areas. This commented upon in both positive and negative terms, e.g. defining Somers Town as a strong community, although generally seen as positive some voices said that this created a degree of insularity and dependency that inhibited engagement with the outside world; for instance saying the community ‘lacked confidence’. Furthermore, many people perceived there to be physical barriers within Somers Town. Physically many people brought up the issue of gating of many of the housing blocks and other communal spaces; which has occurred to improve perceptions of security, though creating a fragmented and hostile looking environment.
This research question was very much geared towards local residents, as the awareness of the area by non-residents was very limited. The built environment played a definite factor within this with one participant not knowing of its existence despite being a regular user of Euston Road, and another fearing that they would get lost if they went in. Responses suggest that the dense street network of housing blocks in Somers Town was not a particularly permeable or legible built environment. This was confirmed by the perceptions of ‘professionals’ working on the area, who felt that there was poor east-west and north-south permeability and legibility. Some with knowledge of Somers Town inferred that its layout helped maintain the island-like atmosphere. Again this cannot point cannot act as a generalisation, for instance during the participant observations many railway passengers were seen walking between stations.

2. How do perceptions of place emerge and change in space and time? How does the Francis Crick Institute affect this process of change?

The responses that were given by research participants were bound up with their particular position, so that individuals generally engaged in a way that was a direct product of their own personal experiences of the area. Amongst people who had a strong involvement with Somers Town, perceptions of place were shaped by very localised social and spatial interactions, in which the amenities they used and concentration of social relations that they had in the area shaped their understanding of Somers Town. This perception of place went down to the specific everyday experiences of what spaces they used, their gender, age, their own personal needs and gripes. One example is that many of the parents involved in the quick interviews spoke about how their understanding of Somers Town had changed once they had children, and that the primary considerations about the area were now around meeting their children’s needs.

It is important that when looking at positionality this is not just assessed in terms of its immediate implications, but also with a strong awareness of the importance of
the perception of history and memory, particularly amongst those who have a long standing association with a place. It was clear from the fieldwork that these factors (i.e. history and memory) played a strong role in determining how people perceived places, especially in the context of change. Whereby, it was often the case that people made reference to events that had happened in the near and distant past, along with their memories of these events. This was a point that was not considered prior to the fieldwork. Amongst those with a strong association with Somers Town it was clear that the area has had an eventful past that influenced people’s understanding of the area to this day. Associations with the history included the development of the railways, the role of Basil Jellicoe and the St Pancras Housing Association, as well as recent community tensions and violence. This wasn’t necessarily in a neat linear causal sense of how the present day had emerged, but during the fieldwork particularly during photowalks such events were mentioned by participants, and were compared to their present day perceptions of Somers Town. Amongst non-residents or those without a long association with the area this historical awareness and memory didn’t emerge in the same way, as when mentions that conveyed an awareness of the influence of historical events mentioned they were not imbued with the same associations. However, other sites in the area did elicit responses to memory, for instance St Pancras International and King’s Cross were mentioned by two participants as their first memories of London.

Regarding how the Crick will affect this process of perception of change is highly dependent on one’s pre-existing perception of place in the area. This strongly relates to the answer to the first question as the perception of the importance of Somers Town as a residential area is an important determinant to answering this question. However, positionality and awareness of the development are equally important to understanding this question. Although there was a strong association between perceptions that the area was residential and that the development may undermine that character, it was not possible to infer that this is the general perception. Amongst many residents who didn’t display an
active interest in the development there was a distinct lack of awareness of what was going on. Instead people spoke about there being many rumours about the project, and had a vague knowledge about there being construction work on the Brill Place site. Positionality was important as when respondents were oppositional, pragmatically accepting, or supportive of the development based on a variety of reasons including their social and physical relationship with the Crick; their perceptions of other developments in the area and their perception of how it satisfied theirs and wider community needs; and an evaluation of the perceived social and physical impacts of the development.

To summate the various opinions there were:

• Individuals who supported the development feeling it would be a positive contribution to Somers Town as a place; which in the context of Somers Town was related to the community engagement benefits, other associated section 106 related benefits, and the building being a positive addition to the built environment.

• A second group was more pragmatically accepting of the building as although there were concerns about loss of land for uses such as social housing, there was a sense of inevitability about the development and accordingly it was something to work with to secure the best outcomes for the local community.

• The final group considered the development to be an imposition upon land that would not only take away land that had a sense of ownership amongst local people, and was previously allocated for housing. It was also felt to not meet local community needs but to also undermine the community due the risks to safety and security in the area, the imposing massing of the building, and issues related to the planning and construction process.
With a broad spectrum of opinions it is not possible to articulate a consensus on how change will occur, make a general conclusion of how the development will affect how Somers Town is perceived.

3. **How do changes to the built environment affect the assemblages of place in Somers Town and the surrounding area?**

The discussion around the first two questions has provided most of the groundwork for responding to this question. The starting point is that as supposed by assemblage changes to the built environment merge in to other socio-spatial processes. **It is not possible to isolate concerns about specific developments, such as the Crick, from other local concerns.** Concerns related to social processes, positionality, and territorial questions about the use of specific spaces; for instance overcrowding, the perceived lack of open spaces, or unemployment issues. This coupled with the diverse and markedly different set of social and land uses entails that **it is not possible to suggest that the physical changes in the area have gone from one relatively static configuration to another.** Rather there is a dynamic and changing perception of place occurring, especially in the areas surrounding Somers Town where the major redevelopment projects are intertwined with perceptions about safety, the area as an international gateway, residential area, centre for national institutions, as well as traffic, noise and pollution.
6. Recommendations

Whilst the dissertation was primarily a theoretical piece of research, the following are more practically focused recommendations:

- **Recognising the basis of differing perceptions of place.** Perceptions and opinions of change are not just isolated opinions but exist in a much wider contextual understandings of what a place is and for.

Many of the criticisms of the Crick are ground in an understanding that the area is a residential community, and that the development contravenes this notion of place. Whereas, more supportive viewpoints perceive Somers Town more in terms of its position near London’s Central Activities Zone. Much of the criticism has arisen out of a strongly justified perception that the residential community of Somers Town has had its needs overlooked and even undermined in order to satisfy the demands placed by being so close to the Central Activities Zone. Major developments and/ or changes to the built environment should be aware of these differing perceptions of place; and planning, consultation and engagement processes should seek to identify these perceptions and the premises that they are based upon. This is a more in-depth approach when compared to simply gauging opinions, and helps to identify and meet underlying needs or concerns.

- **The need to recognise history and memory.** History and memory strongly shape how places are perceived, particularly in the context of major change. It is important to recognise that there are differing perceptions and memories of a place, and that these inform how contemporary and future change is perceived. Understanding and responding to these perceptions contributes to a richer understanding the foundations for the different perceptions of place that exist. This can then inform how different perceptions of place are understood.
• *Continued and more structured engagement.* Whilst a lot of engagement work has been done between national institutions, including the Crick, with local communities like Somers Town it is important that this continues but does so in a more ‘networked’ fashion that works in close partnership with local community organisations. This was recognised by the ‘New Heart of Somers Town’ report. Working in this manner can help to mitigate divisions between different groups, and embed institutions within local perceptions of place.