The Changing Feel of Smithfield:
exploring sensory identities and temporal flows

www.sensorysmithfield.com

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Foreword

The Museum of London is planning to move from London Wall to West Smithfield as it has reached capacity at its current site. The aim is to create a new museum, opening in five to six years’ time, which meets the needs of Londoners and visitors to the city. The site at West Smithfield comprises an extraordinary array of historic market buildings in the City of London and covers approximately 25,000 square metres. Unlike at London Wall, the new museum will be able to welcome over 2 million visitors a year. There will be increased display and exhibition space and a state of the art Learning Centre. West Smithfield offers a unique opportunity to bring together the outstanding heritage of its buildings to create a world-renowned museum.

Locating the new museum here will significantly contribute to the continuing rejuvenation of the locality and build on the opportunities presented by the new Crossrail Elizabeth line station at Farringdon. It will also be an integral part of the Corporation of London’s new Culture Mile that will deliver imaginative collaborations and exciting events in the area.

The vision for the new museum is that its whole look and feel will embody London. It will capture the essence and personality of the restless and creative city, including its past and present sensory experience. It will be a 24 hour museum. Londoners will help to shape the content of the new museum.

Imbedded in the site will be the museum’s London Collection, comprising 7 million items, drawn from the city’s 33 boroughs across over 10,000 years of its history. Smithfield will knit the London Collection into the city’s urban fabric. From its roots in the deep and more recent past, the London Collection will provide insights into London today and the challenges of sustaining a global city. By providing the long view, it will be possible to stimulate informed conversations about urban life, development and change. The new museum will explore important present-day issues and ideas about how Londoners can play a role, whether large or small, in shaping the city of tomorrow.

The museum has just began its research into Smithfield and the surrounding locality. This report on the sensory identities and temporal flows of the area will be a very valuable resource as the museum develops its interpretation masterplan, setting out its vision for programmes, display areas and public spaces both within and in the environs of its buildings.

Alex Werner
Lead Curator, New Museum
Museum of London
Executive Summary

This report makes an intervention into debates about the future development of the Smithfield Market area. Drawing on a range of research findings, which used a multi-disciplinary, mixed methods approach (including ethnography, interviews, photography, sound recordings, oral histories, observational notes and streetscape maps) it provides a detailed analysis of the area’s changing landscapes through a sensory and temporal perspective. The aim of the report is to create a new dialogue between different interest groups.

The ‘feel of place’ at Smithfield refers to the entanglement of features in the built environment, social interactions and everyday practices which create distinct sensory constellations at different times of the day and the week and thereby produce particular place identities. While all cities are defined by heterogeneity, a key feature of the Smithfield area is the mixed use of public space by different social groups across a 24 hour cycle which creates particularly dense and juxtaposed sensory atmospheres. Our findings reveal that these rich multiple place identities emerge from contradictory flows and mobilities around the site which include goods, people, transport, ideas and images. In our survey, all of our respondents commented on how the diversity of social uses gives the area an especially vibrant character contributing to a deep sense of attachment to the unique feel of the area. Moreover, Smithfield’s feel is strongly informed by a strong sense of history and nostalgia which is due to the unique built environment with architectural styles dating back to the 13th Century and the longevity of cultural institutions and businesses in the area. Continuity with the past has resulted in a narrative of Smithfield as a liminal place which has contested wider processes of change.

To conclude, we make some suggestions about issues for the Museum of London to consider as it moves to West Smithfield and the Culture Mile evolves. We suggest that future debates about policy interventions must be attentive to the sensory and temporal dimensions of urban change in order to understand how to retain and promote Smithfield’s unique identity. While there is a great sense of optimism about the future, our findings simultaneously show a deep sense of concern about whether the regeneration of the area will irrevocably change the feel of the area, resulting in the loss of the sensory, social and material characteristics which make up Smithfield’s character. We make suggestions about the role that museums could play in these debates, through their curatorial practices and in relation to their involvement in the wider community. Ultimately, we hope to stimulate a debate about the identity of the area and the importance of understanding the changing feel of place which occurs through regeneration processes.
Project Team

Dr Monica Degen, Principal Investigator

Dr Monica Degen is a Reader in Cultural Sociology in the Political and Social Sciences Department at Brunel University London. Her research focuses on the politics of space with a particular interest in the ways sensory, temporal and emotional dimensions underpin urban culture and politics. She has been the Principal Investigator on several funded projects related to these themes, more recently www.sensorycities.com funded by the AHRC which brought together diverse urban professionals, museum curators and academics in a series of workshops across Europe to discuss how to research, represent and curate sensory experience; and a British Academy Fellowship to research ‘Timescapes of Urban Change’ (www.sensecitiescultures.com) where she explored how different perceptions of time converge or conflict in urban regeneration processes to produce a particular sense of place.

Dr Camilla Lewis, Research Fellow

Camilla Lewis is a Research Fellow at Brunel University London and the University of Manchester. Her research centres around the themes of urban change, inequalities, belonging and community with a strong methodological focus, spanning a variety of ethnographic, qualitative as well as longitudinal approaches. She has contributed to theorising on material culture and social inequalities and the impact these have on processes of urban regeneration. She has published widely in sociology and urban studies journals as well as having edited the book ‘Realising the City: Urban Ethnography in Manchester’ (with Jessica Symon, 2018).
Prof. Astrid Swenson, Co-Investigator

Astrid Swenson is Professor of History at Bath Spa University, having previously taught at the University of Cambridge and Brunel University London. Astrid’s research focuses on the history of heritage and museums in Britain and Europe since the late eighteenth century in a global perspective. Her publications include The Rise of Heritage in France, Germany and England, 1789-1914 (2013), From Plunder to Preservation: Britain and the Heritage of Empire (ed. with Peter Mandler, 2013) and Art Looting and Restitution in the 20th Century (2017). Between 2015-2017 she directed the AHRC Sensory Cities network with Monica Degen.

Isobel Ward, Co-Investigator

Isobel is a PhD candidate at King’s College London in Human Geography, funded by the London Arts and Humanities Partnership (LAHP). Her research explores the changing cultural politics of ‘home’ in London, particularly where the concept is threatened through processes of urban renewal or forced mobility. She is using her research as a lens through which to explore inequalities and the right to the city. Her previous ethnographic research focused on the fluidity of home on London’s waterways. She has worked in the architecture profession both in the UK and abroad, and brings an interest in the built environment, as well as design and photography practice to her projects.
1 Introduction

This report summarises the results of a study that explored the changing sensory identity of the Smithfield area from the past to the present. The aim was to gain insights into how the character of the area evolved over the centuries, how it is perceived now and how it might evolve in the future as the Culture Mile develops. The report reflects on the findings of a six month pilot study (May-October 2017), and should therefore be understood as a snapshot of the issues which emerged. The findings reflect the views of our respondents and are not generalizable across all social groups at Smithfield. The research involved a wide range of qualitative methods including ethnography, interviews with stakeholders, survey interviews with people passing through the area, archival research, sound recordings, photography and mapping techniques. Our approach drew on methods and analysis from a range of disciplines (including history, sociology, anthropology and geography). This report should be read in conjunction with a digital resource that we have devised (see: www.sensorysmithfield.com). This resource is a prototype that experiments with alternative forms of representation in order to analyse the sensory and temporal flows around the market site.

"[The area is characterised by] very human sounds, apart from the big building works. I suppose the sound of distant, but not too distant, hum of voices, it’s people, they’re people sounds." (Interview, local resident)

This document has been written primarily with the Museum of London in mind, as they prepare to move to their new site at West Smithfield in 2022, but will also be relevant to people who have a special interest in the history of the locality, or are involved in the area’s regeneration. Also, more broadly, the report could be used by a range of stakeholders and community groups who have an interest in the redevelopment of urban areas. The aim of the report is to present a range of qualitative research findings on Smithfield Market that focus on the experiential and emotional dimensions of urban life in order to create a new dialogue between different interest groups. Ultimately, by focusing on the senses in relation to urban life and city museum curation we hope to stimulate a debate about the importance of understanding the changing ‘feel of place’ which occurs through processes of urban transformation.
The Senses and the City

Our experiences of urban life are shaped by the senses. The way that we understand the city is guided as much by vision as by the sounds, smells, textures, tastes that we encounter, which create distinctive atmospheres. While sensory experiences are subjective and informed by everyday encounters, personal memories and particular bodies that individuals inhabit, they are not only formed by psychological or biological factors. The senses are also deeply social, shaped by cultural, political and moral values unique to each historical period.

Sensory encounters therefore provide an entry point to understand the lived, political, and economic changes in a city, whether it is the way we experience the redesign of a high-street or make sense of encounters with strangers in public places. A focus on the everyday sensory dimension of places, (which are at times banal, at times exceptional) provides a unique insight into the complex relationships that people develop with the places they visit, use or inhabit. The senses offer a relatable way for people to discuss the places they spend time in and give insight into peoples’ perception of their own lives and life around them. The ‘feel of place’ refers to the entanglement of features in the built environment, social interactions and everyday practices which create distinct sensory constellations which are understood through personal and cultural frameworks.

The sensory dimensions of a place give rise to its atmosphere through ‘a certain tone of feeling’ (Böhme 1993: 114) that is formed as people interact with their environment, and that comes to shape the extent to which they experience a sense of belonging there. Our analysis shows that atmospheres are ‘affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods’ (Böhme 1993: 119) that are coloured by the physical aspects of that space (including buildings, objects and spaces) and by how human bodies interact with them.

Focusing on the senses in urban life connects the lived, imagined and physical city. Cities are not just physical, economic or political landscapes but actively experienced through our everyday lives. By focusing on the past, present and future sensory landscapes around Smithfield Market, our aim was to tap into the ephemeral, fluid and contingent nature of urban life in order to understand its developing identity within a broader socio-spatial and temporal context.

Research questions guiding our study:

- What is the changing ‘feel of place’ around the Smithfield Market area?
- How can we understand the sensory character of the area?
- What do the temporal flows around the site tell us about the unique ‘feel of place’?
- What are the past, present and future identities of the Smithfield area?
2 Background
Our fieldsite and approach

For this pilot study we focused on the immediate surroundings of Smithfield Market as well as the avenues which pass through the building. Our fieldsite included Long Lane, Lindsey Street, Charterhouse Street and Farringdon Road. We were also interested in understanding how the flows of people, goods and transport in and out of the Smithfield area shape its identity over the 24 hour period. The red area of the map indicates where the new Museum of London will be located.

“Well, Smithfield has always had this reputation for being a sort of dodgy area. [This is due to] not only the squalor of the live-stock and dead meat market, but also, the history of it being a red-light district and the public executions. All that sort of stuff. So, it’s always had this sort of fringe thing.” (Interview, local resident)

The focus of this project has been to explore the changing feel of place in the Smithfield area. In the social sciences, the notion of place represents a distinctive set of material, social and political elements, through which people form particular relationships and senses of belonging. By moving through and engaging with our surroundings through touch, sound, smell and taste, we come to know, give meaning to, and form a diversity of attachments with place. The following illustration outlines our analytical framework which guided our approach to explore the question: what makes a place?
The Research Process

In order to explore the sensory and temporal dimensions of the Smithfield area we devised a multi-disciplinary and multi-methods approach. The sensory is often defined as ‘seen but unnoticed’ and difficult to verbalise, and therefore requires a number of complementary research methods. We used the following methods in order to explore the various sensory and temporal dimensions of the area.

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<td>Ethnographic observational research: We started our research by examining how the public spaces around the market were used by spending time in different areas around Smithfield, making a note of the various user groups and activities. We made ethnographic notes about the sensory landscape and how they changed at various times of the day and also engaged in informal discussions with people using the spaces.</td>
<td>Our ethnographic observations gave us insights into the uses of public space and the flows, social groups and sensory characteristics of particular areas. This included detailed descriptions, photographs and mapping.</td>
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<td>Interviews (25): We interviewed a range of people including local business owners, residents, cultural institution employees, architects and planners from the City of London, asking them a series of questions about their experiences of living or working at Smithfield and their thoughts on the future of the area. We also asked them some evocative questions about how they would describe the market in relation to smell, sound, texture and taste.</td>
<td>The discussions provided us with perspectives from individuals with specific expertise which included personal histories and background to local policy.</td>
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**Walk-along interviews (8):** At the end of the interviews we asked some of our participants to take us to places which were significant to them around the market site, where we asked further questions about the sensory characteristics of these specific places.

The walk-along interview stimulated in depth conversations about specific places which were not covered in the standard interview. The discussions were rich in sensory talk and focused closely on particular elements of the built environment.

**Survey (110):** To explore the general feel of place and character of Smithfield Market, we conducted a vox pop style survey of 110 people over 2 weeks. We chose people at random as they were walking along the streets at different times of the day, including weekends. The aim was to find out why they were in the area and how they perceived it. Five questions were asked:

1. Why are you here?
2. How often do you come here?
3. What do you like best about the area?
4. What do you like least?
5. How would you describe the character of this area in three words?

The survey results provided us with insights into the reasons why people were in the Smithfield area, and their impressions of the public spaces. While the findings cannot compare to a big scale survey, they provide an indication of general trends and perceptions. The answers to the questions revealed that people experience and evaluate areas strongly through the senses, and through the relationship they have to an area (i.e. whether they are working, visiting or living in the area).

**Photographs:** We took photographs around the field site as a way of recording the physical environment and how physical space was used.

The process of taking photographs gave us insight into textures, evidence of use and sensory colours etc. We found this method particularly helpful for drawing our attention to visual cues in the built environment.

**Streetscapes:** We created a visual map of the buildings and businesses on the four roads surrounding the market. We made a record of the type of businesses and appearance of the shop fronts. If it was a food/drinks business, we made a note of the price of a cup of tea.

This method allowed us to note down aesthetic patterns and economic trends in the streetscapes and alerted us to some of the more mundane elements of the road. We produced visual and textual notes.
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<th>Guided tour around the market with a City Guide: The project team invited 8 guests (including Museum of London colleagues, academics and members of the public) to an early morning tour organised by City Guides. The tour gave us the opportunity to see the market in operation and chat informally to some of the market workers and customers.</th>
<th>We collected photographs and field notes exploring the sensory dimensions of the inside and outside of the market. The tour gave us insight into the kinds of local history and culture that are transmitted through organised tours. The discussions in the focus groups contained direct reactions to the market and its life and comparisons with other sensory environments.</th>
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<td>After the tour we held two focus groups, where the attendees were invited to reflect on the sensory experiences of the tour around the market and the surrounding area.</td>
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<td>Sound recordings: A sound recordist was employed to make recordings around the market site. Over a 24 hour period, recordings were made at 4 different locations around the site. The aim was to document how the aural landscape changes through the day and night.</td>
<td>The sounds were edited into a loop in order to show how the soundscape changes over the day. The recordings have given us insights into the changing rhythms and atmospheres of the area.</td>
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<td>Textual and material historical data: To identify changing sensory perceptions we surveyed the secondary literature. This included a selection of 19th and 20th Century primary sources from the press, architectural and planning documents, fiction, paintings and print as well as late 20th and early 21st Century regeneration documents and preservation campaign documents, documentaries and social media. To capture current attitudes to history and heritage we conducted ethnographic walks and interviews.</td>
<td>We outlined changes in the sensory history, identified elements of history which dominate narratives and sensory experiences of the site at different moments in time. We then mapped the visible and invisible histories of the site for different users.</td>
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<td>Oral histories (7): We analysed 7 recordings in which various market employees and customers were interviewed in the 1980s. The recordings were accessed through the Museum of London’s archive.</td>
<td>The oral histories gave us direct accounts of practices, feelings and attachments and provided a broader historical understanding of the shifting attitudes towards the area's experience in the late 20th century.</td>
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Analysis and Dissemination

This mixed methods approach produced different types of data (including photographs, sound recordings, oral histories, interviews, observational notes and streetscape maps) which help us to understand various aspects of the sensory and temporal dimensions of Smithfield. We carried out cross-sectional analysis of all the data examining the themes identified in the research questions and identifying new themes emerging across the data. We also used mapping techniques to understand the evolving sensory identity of the Smithfield area (see the next section). The findings should be read in conjunction with the described digital resource (sensorysmithfield.com), outlined below.

Digital Resource

To visualise our findings, we created hand-drawn maps that illustrated the various temporal flows, and fluctuating sensory atmospheres of the area over a 24 hour period. The information for these maps was gathered from our own observations of the area in conjunction with the interviews, secondary literature and other data gathered. Rather than creating a representative history or fixed map of the area, we regard these mappings as analytical tools that allow us to evoke the distinctive feel of place at particular times and moments, which can be difficult to represent through language alone. These maps were compiled and developed as a digital resource with a digital artist, Manuela Barz. We have developed a range of mapping techniques that evoke how:

- the past (both historical past and subjective memories) shapes current experiences of place
- the sensory landscape influences our perception of the different atmospheres across Smithfield and how these vary at different times
- different social groups experience different place identities depending on how they spend time at Smithfield
- the sensory characteristics of place differ across Smithfield

This prototype is an initial attempt at capturing both the history-present-future trialectic of a cityspace as well as the sensory-temporal experience of a 24 hour cycle, both of which inform our relationship to understandings of particular areas. Although the maps focus on separate data (e.g. historical flows, sensory data and social groups) they should not be seen as exclusive but rather be read in conjunction.
3 Findings
What is the ‘feel of place’ of the Smithfield Market area?

The juxtaposition of diverse sensory and temporal flows are key to creating the area’s unique feel. This contrast of experiences is expressed through close proximity of both distinct period buildings and a multiplicity of social groups who’s temporal engagements produce particular daily and weekly rhythms and overlapping, clashing sensescapes. A short stroll passes retail shops alongside traditional Greek cafés, white collar workers bellow into their mobile phones and one may have to step aside as meat market workers hose the pavement or assist tourists requesting directions.

“A Crossrail official described how in the surrounding streets there could be ‘deathly silence’ one minute, followed by ‘utter chaos’ the next. All of the survey respondents commented on how the variety of social uses give the area a particular vibrant character. One local resident we interviewed described Smithfield as ‘buzzy’ and commented on how unexpected encounters were commonplace, as different groups found themselves ‘cheek by jowl’ in this area of the city.

We found that people used the area for a wide variety of reasons. The most common survey response was that people were visiting the area because of the high quality restaurants. They were also drawn here because of the variety of architecture, historical feel, central location, social diversity, cultural institutions, the market and the sense of tradition. Respondents nearly always commented that the area has a ‘distinctive atmosphere’ and described having a strong attachment to the locality:

“It’s quite diverse. ...It’s quite weird cos you’ve got, like, a hospital, you’ve got a meat market, you’ve got a tube station ... and it’s quite a weird little area, yeah. ... Yeah, it’s quite unique, I suppose.” (survey respondent)

Asked about the features they disliked most, some respondents had nothing to object to, but others mentioned that they disliked the smell of meat, or evidence of blood or meat on the street. However, these negative features were also often understood as being ‘part and parcel’ of the area and linked to the authentic feeling associated with the working market. Therefore, these characteristics were described in both negative and positive terms simultaneously. A discussion with two people who worked in the local area highlighted this contestation:
Respondent 1: “The only thing I didn’t like was when I came here one night when they were loading all the carcasses into the market and there was just, like, death everywhere. And the smell was kind of disgusting.”


The survey revealed that the general character around the market was experienced as ‘vibrant, distinctive and stimulating’ (38%) followed by descriptions such as ‘busy, bustling and exciting’ (22%) or ‘historical, traditional and authentic’ (22%). As one respondent explained:

“It’s got a bit of bite to it... it’s a bit of grit, a bit of edge ... It’s a bit trendy here and there. It’s a bit evil. This place is alive at 3 in the morning with ... You’ve got weird little cocktail bars around the corner underground. There’s the market just around the corner. It’s all this, sort of, mash of ... so, it just feels like it’s got that little edge to it, which is interesting.” (survey respondent)

Our results show that it is precisely the entanglements of past, present and future sensory identities that give the Smithfield area its unique feel. Throughout the analysis, we argue that it is important to attend to these multiple temporalities and sensory dynamics in order to explore the identity of the area. We summarise the main findings under five thematic headings in the following pages.
The Physical Sense of Place

The physical and material environment creates a distinct feel of place around Smithfield Market. In particular, the market building has a dominant physical presence in the surrounding area. In our interviews the building was compared to a boat, a ship, and a church indicating the scale of the building and its presence in the surrounding environment. An interviewee who works for the City of London Corporation described:

“When I first came across this area, whilst here on a weekend, it appeared to be very ... like, a dormant part of the City.... Very quiet. It was around 2012. So, it was surprising. The scale of the build of the market buildings was very impressive, but there wasn’t much happening there during the weekend, in particular. So, that was what attracted me to this area – that I suddenly encountered these massive buildings in the middle of the City.” (Interview, City official)

Even at times of the day when there is not much activity connected to the market taking place, the physical presence of the building imparts a strong sensory and physical presence. Smells, sounds and the textures of the market building permeate the wider area.

“Stood facing Crossrail site with back to Smithfield Market on Charterhouse Street at 4pm: Sound – distant chisel/grinding from the construction site, water hose/cleaning sounds from inside the market, the clank of a heavy metal object being dropped on a metal surface. The tap-tap noise of a high heeled shoe on the pavement and a gentle squeak from a passing cyclist. These sounds contribute to a sense that this is a working place, and not particularly a place that you want to hang around.” (field notes CL, 7/7/17)

While the market buildings could be seen as providing a barrier between the north (Charterhouse Street) and south (Long Lane), closer observational work showed how due to the permeable nature of the space, activities related to the market and working practices were present all around the site, both when it is open and closed for business. The textures of the environment such as markings on the road beside the buildings, the layers of peeling paint and rubbing on the stonework from heavy use over many years indicate working practices around the market.
Each of the four streets surrounding the market building have different characters which vary from east to west: from the heavily congested Farringdon Road to a quieter Lindsey Street; and north to south: a traffic intense Long Lane and a more quiet, pedestrian friendly Charterhouse Street. We observed how the flows of people, transport and goods varied greatly across the 24 hour period, as illustrated on the digital map.

Around the market there are a variety of businesses including barbers, a salon, a stationery shop and a dentist, all in a range of architectural styles. These shops cater to different social groups. We used a method of mapping the ‘streetscapes’ in order to explore the shop frontages. For example on Long Lane:

Visualisation of the way different social groups use the Smithfield area.
www.sensorysmithfield.com

Streetscape collage of Long Lane
The shop fronts display a broad range of colours and materials, with both old fashioned and contemporary signage styles. In some cases, the old timber and glazed façades have been updated with new paintwork and signage with a contemporary font and bright colours, in others they have been completely replaced with a fully glazed window. The buildings themselves also differ vastly in their age and styles. This mixture of old and new forms part of the distinctive character of the area. Respondents often pointed to historical elements of the buildings and indicated how the visible history contributes to the atmosphere and understanding of the sense of place. Many of our respondents also expressed a strong dislike for the newer buildings in the area:

“I really, really don’t like a lot of the new architecture that’s going up. I find it anonymous, ugly, cheap, tatty and with no reference to place or culture, it could be anywhere in the world, and nobody cares about it.” (interview, local artist)

Geographically, Smithfield is described as a boundary place – sitting between the City of London, Clerkenwell and Farringdon – with a liminal character, a place which is ‘between’ many others, and on the fringes. The area is influenced by the characters of these surrounding areas, yet is also said to have a unique sense of place. For example, a creative industries worker that we interviewed described how he had become particularly attached to the area, because it felt like a “forgotten edge of the city. It was on the outside of the city wall just by the River Fleet. I still think it’s got a backlands vibe”. Because of its geographical location, transgressive behaviours have always taken place in this area, and this was felt to make the area particularly open for creativity in the present and future. In another interview, we spoke to the founder of a large creative firm, who described how historically the area has always been an ‘alternative to the mainstream,’ because of the absence of bankers, lawyers or ‘similar people’. A local resident described how living around Smithfield Market was exciting because, ‘you keep coming across surprises’.

These quotations illustrate how the identity of the locality is thought to be related to the geographical position of Smithfield and the physical sense of place. However, it is also felt to have been shaped by the people who work there and thus has an evolving character. The fact that the area still felt underdeveloped in parts was the reason that people were drawn to the area, as they perceived other parts of the city to be too developed and lacking character, whereas Smithfield is felt to have retained its historical identity.
A Sense of History: Nostalgia

Smithfield’s feel of place is strongly informed by what we would describe as a ‘sense of history’, which is expressed through a number of narratives that stress the entanglement between past, present and future experiences of the area. Our interviews described how the dense concentration of historical sites in the area is unique in London. As the following two examples reflect:

“[T]he sort of psychogeography, if you like, is quite strong here ... the history is alive. Whether that’s because of the buildings and the fact that [there are] a few cobbled streets here and there’s no real sort of through traffic going backwards and forwards as, again, there is elsewhere in the city. But it’s a little bit ... ghostly isn’t the right word. But you do get a sense of history here. But nevertheless, it is not a dead place. It’s quite sort of special. And also, in a way, quite sort of hidden. I know people are always saying that Charterhouse is a bit of a hidden jewel.” (Interview, resident and historian)

“Well, I think the market is the soul of the area and always has been. And, you know, so much stuff has spun off that. The religious institutions are interesting ‘cos they go way, way back. So, the hospital itself and St John’s Gate and this place. So, you’ve got those extraordinary, medieval survivors and how they relate, or don’t relate, to the market. And this is ... you know, this here: I mean, I think is an amazingly special place. In terms of London as a whole, there’s nowhere else like this. It’s the most incredible place of medieval buildings and sort of activities here that go way, way back, you know? It’s extraordinary. So, this is a very, very special place.” (Interview, town planner/historian)

According to this narrative, Smithfield is described as a place which has contested wider processes of change. This argument has been taken up by conservationists and in the media. It suggests that the area has a strong sense of history, because of a number of unique circumstances which resulted in the built environment retaining its historical characteristics across the centuries. For example, the Great Fire was extinguished just before the Smithfield site, and bomb damage to the buildings during the Second World War was not extensive, compared to other areas of inner city London. An architect working at the site explained: ‘The Fire of London didn’t reach Smithfield, so the medieval street pattern is still there. It is redolent of the history.’ Similarly, a dominant theme which emerged in our interviews held that the area’s historical identity has been retained, because of the continuity in
the physical environment and the enduring legacy of traditional institutions such as the St Bart’s Hospital and Smithfield Market:

“It’s one of those oddities that ... the fact that it’s surviving this long, I think, is absolutely brilliant. It’s just so off the wall that you’d think, for a modern, metropolitan city ... to still be going and to still be strong. And it’s one of those where ... as a civil engineer in the regenerating areas, it’s the fact that it can stay and the place that it’s got within the City” (Interview, Crossrail official)

“I like the human scale of it, the historic buildings, the churches, one used to be able to wander freely in the square in the hospital, so you’re in an 18th century environment, and you can just see Hogarth’s staircase poking through the window. So I like that, the history and the scale of it. I also like the fact that the meat market has been so solidly meat market, they so clearly do what they do and they sit about in the cafes and I like that resilience, almost, to modern life. They seem to inspire a particular sense of character.” (Interview, local resident)

The narrative of continuity has also been mobilised in studies intended to guide future regeneration projects. A report prepared for English Heritage, for instance, argued ‘the fragile identity - defined by its architectural character, streets, places and activity patterns’ should be ‘respected and reinforced rather than ignored’ (Farrells 2007:3).

History thus appears to play a big part in people’s affection for Smithfield. Particularly, elements of an imagined past were referred to in a very vague way, and nostalgia permeates these accounts. As we illustrate in the digital resource, much emphasis was put on continuity in the built environment, through describing the survival of the built environment and the historical street pattern (see maps). Our respondents described the enduring sensory history of Smithfield as a place of transgression, rather than mentioning the fundamental changes which have taken place in it’s social and sensory history such as: Victorian attempts at urban sanitisation, changes to the social fabric, economic change, developments in transportation and environmental regulations in the 20th century.
Beyond the ubiquitous references to ‘history’, there was little explicit discussion about what the markers of ‘history’ are. Different individuals and professional groups put varying emphasis on the importance of architectural, social, sensory, or personal features. While professionals such as planners, artists, architects and conservationists focused strongly on the preservation and reuse of the existing architectural fabric, the importance of preserving and experiencing the area’s social history, traditions and rituals was emphasized by many traders, businesses and residents.

Public displays of the area’s history are rather selective and fragmented, concentrated in a number of key places (see digital resource). The historic churches and the Museums of the Order of St. John and Charterhouse as well as St. Bart’s Hospital foreground the monastic and medical history of the area and the foundations of poor relief. The memorials dedicated to William Wallace are the most visible reminders of the area as an execution site – while shrines to Sherlock Holmes (who faked his death by jumping off St. Bart’s roof) attract a different group of visitors. The history of the market is displayed in the Grand Avenue on exhibition boards. There is also a war memorial and a number of plaques to commemorate the opening of market buildings. What stands out here is a celebration of the social history of the market and the remembrance of people who shaped it.

Another narrative which emerged in our findings, stressed the carnivalesque, working class and sensory excessive features of Smithfield’s history. Many of the restaurants, shops and pubs use visuals and narratives of this intense sensory history of the area to stress a sense of continuity through images of the market, death, animals, meat and drink.

Historical visualisation of Smithfield. www.sensorysmithfield.com
In the survey, the history of the area was referred to as a central characteristic but the responses were vague about what elements of history were significant. Visitors to the area used broad, general terms and an emphasis was put on architectural features and personal memories. For example:

“I kind of like the history, actually, you know? They’ve got this ... the market, which is kind of ... it’s beautiful, sort of in a weird way. Industrially beautiful. I just feel like there’s a lot of sort of history and culture in this area.” (survey respondent)

For people who were visiting the area in order to eat or drink in the restaurants, the historical qualities of the environment and the imagination of past and present sensations around the workings of the meat market were often mentioned. Also, they described enjoying having a brush with the dark, dirty history (in a clean and safe present environment) of London’s past. This was one of the main draws of visiting the area. Some people who spent a considerable amount of time in the area described how buildings such as the market were highly evocative:

“I look at it with affection. I think... the old cliché ‘a thing of beauty is joy forever’, such a corny phrase, but when I say it I really think that this is a thing of beauty, and that will outlast me and everyone. And that’s a comforting thought.” (Interview, local artist)

As well as the ‘official history’ represented on the buildings, plaques and monuments, there was also a rich and varied awareness of other histories, often connected to sounds and textures. These senses of history were highly nostalgic. For example, family photographs in a local café were accompanied by vivid memories of the Italian Immigration to Clerkenwell. Road blocks near the Rotunda reminded a taxi driver of hearing the blast of an IRA bomb in nearby Liverpool Street which led to the road being blocked off. Also, the sights and sounds of the fountain in St. Bart’s courtyard evoked memories of being treated in hospital for a local resident. As one interviewee explained:

“My wife was born in Bart’s hospital. And at that time, the bell at St Mary-le-Bow church was destroyed in the war...they had a really big bell that you could hear for miles around, but that bell was destroyed in the war and now they have a peal of bells there, smaller bells, and they ring the changes which is great, but you can’t hear it so far off. So Bart’s at that time was, in some people’s eyes, was the hospital you had to be born in to be a Cockney cos’ you could hear the bells from Hackney le-Bow.” (Interview, local artist).

The invisible historic flows of cattle and the river Fleet were invoked as creating a sense of connection between Smithfield, Islington and the City. These findings reflect how the past sensory identity informs current imaginations.
Multiple Senses of Temporality

Past, present and future identities of place interweave to create the feel of place at Smithfield and contribute to the area’s unique character. However, notions of temporality are not fixed, but are constantly shifting. These temporal shifts are both shaped by and shape the senses. The use of public space varies across the times of the day as different demands shape the space and therefore, the sensory atmosphere. One of the defining characteristics of Smithfield is how at any one time the streets contain contrasting groups of people: city workers rushing to their next meeting, market workers hosing the pavements, construction workers resting during their lunch break, bicycle couriers waiting for their next job and large lorries parked next to the market, with loud refrigeration units humming.

The sensory character of the area fluctuates depending on the time of day as different groups occupy public space at different times, from market customers, workers, builders, couriers, creative workers to tourists, party goers, and restaurant visitors. All of which gives rise to particular sensory characteristics at different times of the day:

“Late at night, the area changes and it becomes a bit of a nightclub. But more or less at the same time, where the queues are starting to appear for the main clubs, the lorries start to arrive. So, there’s that very interesting transition with the young people coming into the clubs, lorries coming, meat being unloaded from the trucks ... it is just insane. And then, the pop-up toilet comes up.... It is surreal and it just appears by itself. Like, little things start to appear and go and just pop up everywhere. [Laughs]. And then, at some point, all the people from the nightclub go. But the meat trading still comes, completely packed with vans. And then, eventually, they go. And I think there is a time of the day where it feels like the calm is coming back.... Like, around 7 in the morning. But then, they quickly ... just an hour later, it’s busy again.” (Interview, City of London Corporation official)
The constant changing use of public space creates shifts in the sensory atmosphere. In some of the interviews we were told that the different sensory atmospheres were something of a surprise:

“It’s quite a strange area. It’s quite ... sometimes, you look at it and you think there’s nobody here. And then, depending on what time of night you come through ... so, if you come out during the night and you see Smithfield Market working, it’s utter chaos. And then, when you come back on a weekend night with Fabric and the clubs and the pubs and everything else, it’s just a complete mix of things and people and ... with the market there as well, it’s just utter chaos. It’s probably one of the oddest areas, I think, for a major metropolitan city. It is just utterly bizarre.” (Interview, Crossrail official)

There is constant activity around the market throughout the day and night. The temporal patterns inside and outside the market differ and there is a delicate balance between the temporal flows of the various social groups using the Smithfield Market area, which occasionally results in ‘clashes in activity’. As one interview described:

“The meat market is bustling in the middle of the night or early hours of the morning: I do get to see sometimes the meat market in full effect. You’re here at 6 and it’s like gridlock, cars everywhere, which is quite cool to see. You can see loads of white coated people, you get big 40ft trucks. It’s quite chaotic to be fair, when everyone’s coming out of the club, and everyone’s trying to get cabs, this area’s inundated with people stacking up, ‘cos I guess this is for wholesale, people come and stock up and take a van loads worth of stuff to other places.” (Interview, night club employee)
Contestations around social practices and the sensory environment are also evident in historical accounts. It is telling that transformations to the working practices of the meat market have drawn on sensory paradigms in each of the key moments of change. For example, in 1636 the Corporation of the City of London formally established a cattle market by means of a royal charter. However, in the 1700s complaints were made against unruly cattle and drunken herdsmen. In particular, drovers were often thought to be the worst offenders for rowdy behaviour. Despite the market becoming recognised as an official place, it was still associated with barbaric behaviour and unsanitary working practices. As early as 1776 there were calls to move the market from Smithfield and condemnation of ‘the intolerable practice of holding a market for the sale of live cattle in the centre of the metropolis’ (Forshaw and Bergström 1990:55). In 1855 Smithfield Market was closed as a live animal market, and a new site opened near Islington.

These accounts describe how slaughtering was pushed out of the city, yet the association with transgression remained and have shaped the public imagination ever since then. Donald (1999) describes how Smithfield was a site of public executions, with duelling, brawling and crowd disorder. The abuse of performing animals was associated with a ‘spirit of cruelty’ which still haunts the site. Indeed, the publication The Voice of Humanity in 1830 described Smithfield as ‘a shameful blot on the imperial capital – seen as a disgrace, with scenes of confusion, uproar, and barbarity’ (Donald 1999). Later, in 1844 The Herald of Humanity explained how Smithfield, ‘with all its brutal cruelties, its abandoned and frightful demoralization’ was ‘the focus of all the lowest dregs from the vilest purlieus of the town, and consequently, the very nursery of all crime, from drunkenness and robbery, to ruffianism and murder’ (Donald 1999). In these historical narratives, the market is described as a place associated with cruelty and sensory excess, which was forced to modernise, as social norms and morals in the city changed.

In our research of the current site, we found that the area is replete with different images of the future. These futures draw on two main themes. Firstly, Crossrail CGI images and those advertising new residential spaces project a cleansed, smooth and corporate vision of the future alluding to the creation of an imaginary ‘local community’. This stands in contrast with the second types of images. Namely those given by the Museum of London’s temporary ‘Londoners’ billboard on West Smithfield which portray individuals engaged in their particular working practices in the area. These images refer to already existing social groups which are shaping the identity of the area through their current presence. These billboards are dominant in the built environment, shaping the sensory and temporal landscape. In our interviews, we found that there is a strong sense of contestation about how the history of the area will be preserved and whose history will be represented in the new Museum of London.
Sensing Juxtapositions

**Juxtaposition** was a recurrent theme emerging across our various types of data. As one interview described, Smithfield is a unique and ‘special’ place because of the ‘juxtaposition’ of histories, times, social groups and sensescapes. As well as pointing to the unusual features in the area, many of our interviewees also described the banal parts of the physical environment. The combination of the remarkable and the more ordinary resulted in a general sense of unevenness and juxtaposition. For example, a barber, who worked in one of the shops close to the market was asked whether she thought the area had a particular character. While she liked being able to see some green spaces outside her window on the Crossrail site, she would like to have a more interesting view and described that the area was very dull and grey. The barber’s shop was lined with mirrors, so even if she was cutting someone’s hair facing away from the street, the view would still be dominant which made her feel ‘trapped’. She felt that many of the bars in the area were ‘boring’ and full of ‘suits’, indicating a clear sense of non-attachment.

For some other workers too, the area has become synonymous with a lack of atmosphere, boredom and drudgery and waiting. This was confirmed by our ethnographic fieldwork where we observed lorry drivers, taxi drivers, couriers and staff or visitors to St Bart’s hospital using public spaces for waiting or resting. The area is thus made up of different types of mobility and stasis, characterised by different rhythms and tempos.

Sensory juxtapositions were also evident in relation to smell. Indeed, particular smells were often a marker of the unexpected encounters between social groups. An interviewee who had worked in the Smithfield area since the 1970s described how there was a bacon smoker used on a Friday when he first bought an office, and how he remembered the ‘amazing smell coming out of woodchips and smoked bacon’. He contrasted this to the ‘greasy café’ smell which wafted from the cheap market cafes nowadays. Olfactory surprises reminded individuals that many contrasting activities coexisted in the same locale. A former worker for instance was alerted to the smell of the restaurants on a Friday afternoon:
“I suspect it’s from Smithfield restaurant, which would be really annoying at 4pm [...] I think that’s what it is, the cooked shell of a lobster or prawn and that would waft from the track and float into the office.” (Interview, ex office worker)

Smithfield is an area in the midst of transformation. In the last 10 years there has been an increase in chain eateries and a rise in the number of high end restaurants and bars which cater for evening visitors. There are also still some 24 hour cafes which provide inexpensive refreshments and a space to sit and pass time for taxi drivers and workmen, creating small groupings of people catching up on the gossip and socialising. However, the owners of these cafes, which in some cases have been there for over 30 years, express uncertainty about their future as rent prices soar. The change in the types of businesses over the years is emblematic of the developments taking place locally, partly encouraged by Crossrail and now the Museum of London bringing a renewed interest in the area. There is also a longer history of change in the area. Over the past 25 years market-related businesses adjacent to the market buildings have been replaced by cafes and restaurants.

As gentrification processes take hold, the use of public space and temporal patterns are further changing. Our focus on the sensory realm shows how the lived everyday effects of processes of urban change are experienced in relation to contrasting sensory atmospheres and transforming temporal patterns. Our findings further reveal how gentrification processes have uneven effects, creating feelings of exclusion for certain groups. A sense of anxiety about how this will be managed in the future prevails. Tensions are rife about the future of the market. Questions about whether the market will be open at night or during the day are prominent. Creating a future for the area will require the redesign of temporal cycles and it appears uncertain whether different demands over space will lead to clashes. The variety of these juxtapositions is not explicitly discussed in official narratives or regeneration documents, which support particular zonings around the market.

“I would suggest you go at different times of the day during the week because it all changes so much. That’s the thing – its very schizophrenic – but actually not two personalities but many different ones. I remember in the day first it would be quiet, second at lunch you’d go to get food and maybe buy a birthday card, then have a business meeting in a café, third after work it would be busy, then it quietens down at night. Fourth its quiet at night time. Fifth its dead at weekends because the shops are shut. To understand it is to try and visit in those different times.” (Interview, creative industry office worker)
Sense of Belonging and Attachment to Place

Although there is a fairly small residential population around Smithfield Market, there are various groups of people who describe themselves as ‘communities’. They include occupational groups (e.g creative workers/St Bart’s employees/market workers), cultural institutions, (e.g. Charterhouse Museum), social and religious communities (e.g Charterhouse Brothers and St Bartholomew the Great’s congregation and interest groups (e.g air pollution pressure group). In the survey, we spoke to three individuals who had formally worked around Smithfield and were revisiting the locality because they held fond memories about the area. For example, one elderly woman told us that she was spending the day at Smithfield:

“….to be part of it again, just for an hour or two, because I lived within the city and I worked at St Bartholomew’s hospital. [...] It was in the late-60s to the early 2000s. And for most of my life. But in answer to your question, it’s this part of London ... to me, it’s got something indefinable.” (survey respondent)

Different groups hold a strong sense of attachment to the area, which is often described in terms of an emotional connection to Smithfield. One interviewee who had lived in the area for some time, and was involved in a number of cultural institutions described: ‘That’s typical for a city isn’t it that you belong to several communities at the same time [and have] multiple identities.’ What makes Smithfield unique is how these communities often inhabit the same geographical space, but often do not interact. What is judged to be successful about the area is how these social groups are able to coexist with related economic ties, but quite different social identities.

Within the market there is a strong sense of community and belonging, many of the businesses have long family histories, going back generations. The historical sense of identity is celebrated in the market’s publication ‘The Smithfield Gazette’ which chronicles news and events in the market community. Outside the market we also spoke to people who held a strong sense of attachment to the area. This could be said of most places, but we argue there is something specific about Smithfield. The identity of the area combines personal memories with the longevity of the cultural institutions and businesses in sensory terms, which in turn create emotional attachments to the spaces, buildings and institutions in the area.

“I really love coming in here. I like being in touch with the 18th century. The poor box for example. And the fountain which is newly renovated. So my son was born here, and I was treated for cancer there, and this fountain is where I’ve sat for monumentally difficult things. ... When I come here I feel much more inside my own skin, much more in touch, because this a family place for me... It’s difficult to describe, I suppose it’s the antiquity of the buildings partly, exerting a benign, it just feels as though it has carried on doing its own thing whatever the NHS throws at it, it feels like it could be in Italy.” (Interview, local resident)
This sense of attachment translates into a sense of protection for the area, and concerns for the City becoming too developed. Across interviews and the survey there was a real concern for protecting the unique identity of Smithfield and questions were raised as to how it can be developed without being overly sanitized. How can its temporal, social, sensory diversity be maintained? For example, an office worker strongly stressed the sense of ownership this enabled:

“It’s grimy but you have a sense of ownership because you worked there and you’d try and get friends there. It’s yours. In the future it will be better connected. But when I was there it just felt that it’s yours – you thought it was your kind of London– you were proud of how grotty it was.” (Interview, office worker)

However, some interviewees wanted further sanitization to take place in the area and further redevelopment to take place. Some respondents stressed that the market had been in decline for many years, and was ‘out of place’ in this central area of London:

“I mean it really is a shithole, it’s a real mess, the pavement is filthy. The market I get the impression is pretty much in decline, and it’s the lower end of, I don’t think posh restaurants use it, it’s white van kind of thing, it’s pretty tatty actually, it needs a complete revamp and probably it needs moving out of Smithfield really, I don’t see why they have to keep a meat market in central London. Trying to bring these massive trucks into really congested streets and then running them all night is just ludicrous.” (Interview, local resident)
4 Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The majority of people that we spoke to expressed a strong sense of optimism about the future of the Smithfield area. Many of our respondents were greatly excited about the Museum of London relocating to West Smithfield. There was a general sense of hope that the Museum would be able to bring about positive change and retain the unique sense of place at Smithfield. In both interviews and surveys there was a strong sense of nostalgia about the market and its place in London’s history. As a cultural institution the Museum was largely regarded as being able to simultaneously reinvigorate the area as well as making the Smithfield’s history more visible:

“I think it’s going to change drastically…I would imagine it’s going to become fantastic isn’t it. Because you’re gonna have Crossrail there, you’re going to have the Museum of London taking over the Smithfield building, which is gonna be marvellous because that’s been lying derelict for years now, and I would imagine it’ll be something along the lines of St Pancras where they’ll try and keep all of the original features inside. But it’ll come to life again won’t it, cos it’s kind of dead now isn’t it?” (Interview, local artist)

Our respondents articulated concern about whether the regeneration of the area would irrevocably change the feel of the area, resulting in the loss of the sensory characteristics which make up Smithfield’s unique identity. For example, one interviewee was anxious that the ‘secret, hidden feeling’ would be lost when there were thousands more visitors to the site every day. For other respondents, questions about the future were much more pragmatic. Market employees were concerned about how their trucks will be able to unload when there are new demands on public space around West Smithfield. Also, questions about whose history will be represented in the Museum, and what role the Museum will play in the use and redesign of the area arose in many of our conversations. Hence, respondents were concerned that the regeneration might lead to the closure of the meat market and thereby would lead to the erasure of Smithfield’s distinct sensory environment.

Our findings also showed that there is a general sense of concern about the pace and direction of change as Smithfield undergoes urban development. For example, one interviewee from the creative industries said: “I’m all for cities emerging in an organic way, but it’s going to be a very fertile place for new things” while others were more reticent about the types of change which may occur and how these decisions will be made. As one local employee told us:

“I feel like this area is in a bit of an identity crisis. I feel like some people want it to be one thing, other people like it for what it is, and no one can really sit down at the table and go yeah well this makes us all happy. So, there’s a lot of to-ing and fro-ing…but time will tell I guess…Whoever can foot the biggest bill probably wins.” (Interview, local employee)
In a survey interview this dynamism was seen as a positive thing, saying that change is inevitable and ‘what London’s all about. As long as you change with it’.

A theme which emerged in our findings is that Smithfield is generally described as having managed to ‘buck the trend’ compared to other areas of London. It is described as an exception compared to other markets in London, which have either been relocated or have been gentrified. A narrative of ‘survival’ is used in reference to the market, depicting how it has been under threat from the ‘encroaching’ City of London, noticeable through the redevelopment of the physical environment. The future of the market was described as precarious and uncertain. References were made to other markets in London which have undergone dramatic makeovers, such as Covent Garden and Borough Market, and are mainly catering for tourism and retail. Questions were asked about whether in the future Smithfield will be relocated, or whether it will become more upmarket, opening during the day time and selling cooked high-end goods, rather than focusing on the wholesale market. Respondents were unanimously clear that they would not like the replacement of what they described as a ‘traditional market’ for a uniform and homogenous retail and service environment such as Spitalfields.

The involvement of the Museum of London is regarded as an opportunity to buck the trend again, by promoting a different type of redevelopment – which can foreground the areas of history/culture, rather than just the interests of finance and, crucially, retain the unique elements of the feel of place we have outlined in our analysis, which are said to define this locality. The Museum of London is deemed to be a suitable new tenant for the market because it will be able to promote the history of the area and protect the architecture of the building.

By focusing closely on how the area is experienced, in relation to the senses, we have drawn attention to multiple temporalities that interweave in this area, which relate to varied sensory environments. This report is a first attempt to show how to investigate and represent the happenings of a lived, constantly changing place – its fluctuating feel, it’s relation to other places, emotional significance and sensuousness. Focusing on the senses allows us to link the physical constitution of the city, its streets and buildings, with a living social landscape. While there was a strong sense that this area would be changing, there was a general agreement from our research participants that this should be done in a way which is sensitive to the needs of the area.
5 Moving Forward

The aim of this report is to open a wider discussion of regenerating urban spaces through a sensory perspective. We hope to have shown that the city is not just an economic and cultural space, but also a lived, sensory and experiential one. Moving forward, we would like to suggest that attending to the senses should be an integral element of the new Museum. An architect we interviewed agreed: ‘I have always argued that once you engage with the senses, the imagination is triggered. It is what being alive is all about.’ A 21st century city museum cannot neglect the sensory dimensions of its curatorial practice, nor of its city.

The senses are crucial in museums’ curatorial practices as they are sites of embodied sensory knowledge. City museums not only reflect the development of the urban form but they also capture the lived experience of the city as its political, economic and social conditions transform over time. With its relocation to the West Smithfield site the Museum of London now has a unique opportunity to connect to the surrounding streets and people and make its history visible and tangible by explicitly focusing on its existing sensory landscape and engagements. It appears important to acknowledge the reasons for the strong sense of nostalgia that surrounds the site, while moving beyond it.

The relocation of the Museum of London and its ambition to be the ‘Museum of Londoners’ (as advertised on billboards around West Smithfield) provides a unique opportunity to include the sensory in its physical, social and commercial conception. Attention to the senses, their changing and ephemeral nature, and the tensions and connections between personal and collective experience are all evident. They offer a way to start a dialogue about the shared as well as about competing and parallel meanings of Smithfield, and the way London’s history informs its present and future more broadly. Crucial questions for the future will include: Whose history will continue to shape the future of Smithfield? How can museums integrate themes of contemporary urban change (and its contested nature) into their curatorial practices? What kind of sensory landscapes can be created inside and outside of the Museum? And how can these spaces remain inclusive whilst addressing the multiple meanings of place for various social groups?
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