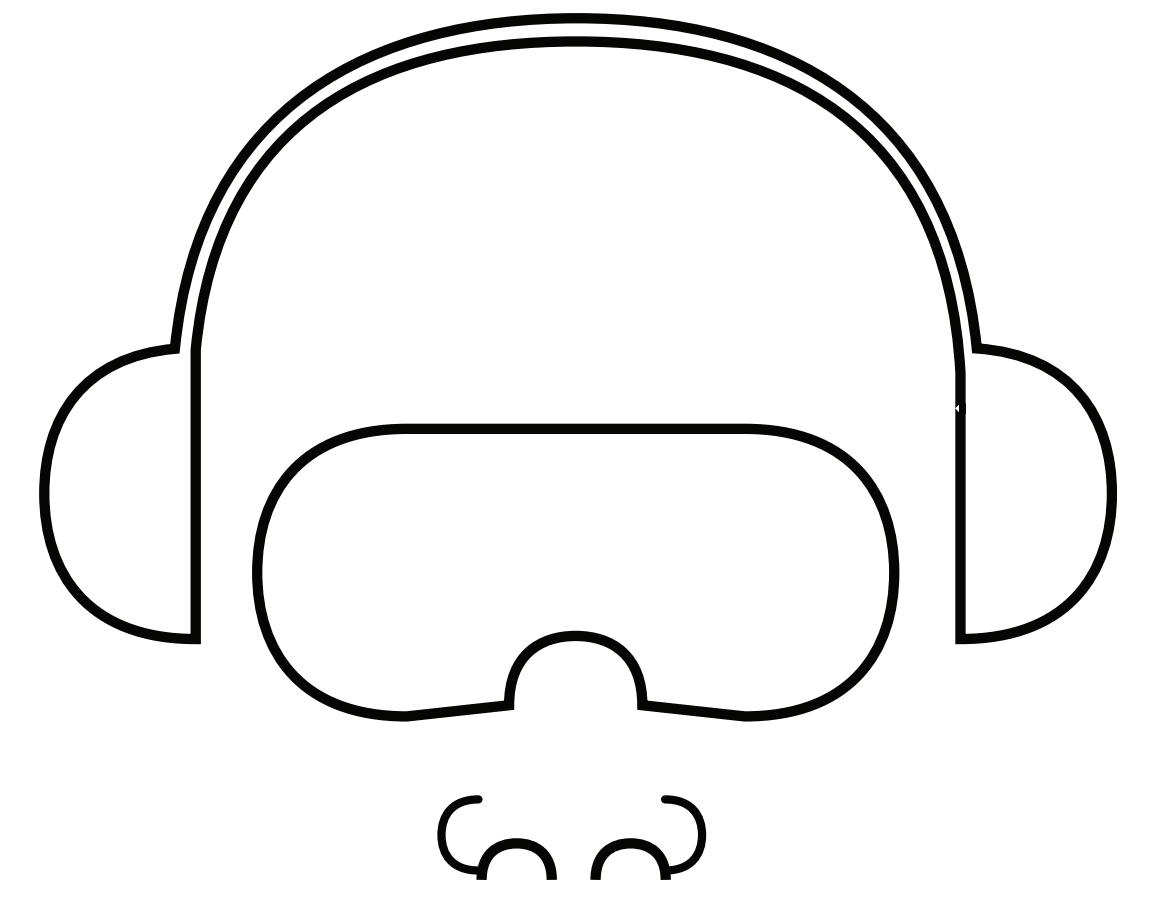


Westminster Sensory Deprivation Map - 2008

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Gorgeous
Nico
Neutral
Not Nico
Disgusting



Leicester Square

Trafalgar Square

The Sensory Commons

The Westminster Sensory Deprivation Map is the result of an intensive workshop with young people organised at the National Portrait Gallery in February 2008. The participants were divided into pairs, one of whom was blindfolded and given ear defenders so that they could not see or hear. The other person was given a clipboard and pen and paper. Together the two explored the local area between Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square for up to an hour. The idea being that the blindfolded and deafened participant verbally related their sensory experience to the other person who was taking notes and making sure they were safe during the journey.

Looking at the map it is possible to look at the different experiences in the two squares as well as the journey in between. Overall the most positive sensations were about taste and touch, while the disgusting sensation often referred to the smell of cigarette smoke. Curiously the mild sensations seem to trigger longer descriptions than the extreme points of pleasure or disgust.

In Trafalgar Square most of the experiences were negative and tended towards claustrophobia. Leicester Square in contrast, evokes much more positive sensations of food smells and touch and taste sensations.

Trafalgar Square is the most famous public space in London and yet it seemed to trigger very few positive sensations. What's going on? One reason may be that the square is just a concrete enclosure with very few sensory stimulations. This is compounded by the restrictive local bylaws that forbid any kind of speeches, music or performative behaviour. In fact apart from looking at the famous surrounding there is little to do there.

Instead of public space a better metaphor might be the idea of the Sensory Commons. Historically common land gave only limited rights to random passers-by but allowed full usage rights to the local commoners. This concept of space was not a property that could be carved up or sold but existed only as communal active usage. Seen in this way we can assess certain spaces as being Sensory Commons such as parks where local people can create and receive sensory experiences for and by others. In this way we can analyse which spaces are designed to encourage this type of Sensory Commons and which spaces actively constrain people from playing, performing or assembling. Seen in this way Trafalgar Square is a very poor example of a sensorial space while Leicester Square provides a wider range of passive sensory experiences.

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