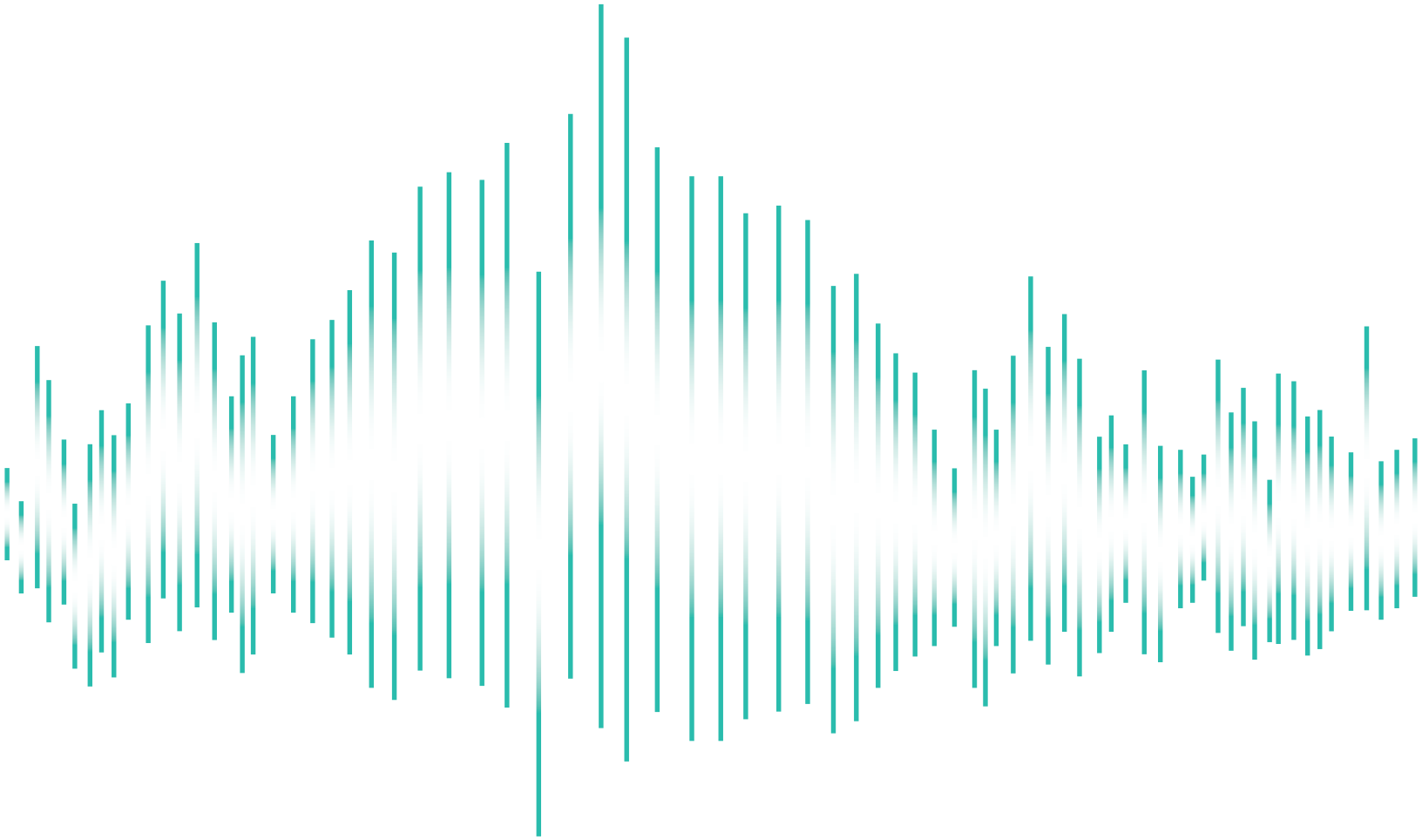
MAKING SPACE FOR ART

Securing Cultural Infrastructure in Boston, Cambridge & Somerville



MAKING SPACE FOR ART BRIEFING PAPER

AGENT OF CHANGE IN SOUND POLICY

December 2025

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MAPC

Introduction

A core challenge for Metro Boston's creative economy and cultural communities is maintaining creative spaces, including creative spaces for live music, dance events, rehearsals, and cultural gatherings and celebrations. These venues and spaces that support cultural activities are foundational for the regional creative ecosystem, and provide spaces for people to gather, create, present, and experience art, culture, and community. As part of the Making Space for Art project, MAPC has identified opportunities to adopt policies that mitigate the displacement of creative space, categorized as spaces of production or presentation. This briefing paper introduces the agent of change principle as a tool to preserve and expand cultural and creative space in Metro Boston, particularly spaces of presentation. Agent of change, in cultural policy, is the principle that the actor initiating new development or proposing a change in the built environment is also responsible for managing potential conflicts around sound that result. The agent of change principle is a policy tool municipal governments can use to manage redevelopment and prioritize a cultural ecosystem that values arts and entertainment-related sound. Adopting a local agent of change principle provides a critical policy tool to protect existing creative spaces in Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville.

Balancing health benefits and risks is essential

Sounds generated by music, dance, audiences, and events indicate the presence of a dynamic and vibrant community. The sounds generated by music alone provide many documented benefits to human health.[1] The importance of cultural belonging and community connection to mental health and well-being is well known. Cultural venues where people gather for shared experiences with music, dancing, and socializing and are part of the fabric of a healthy community. It is essential for cities and towns to preserve these spaces where people can come together without apology for the noise they make.

Sound versus Noise

Sound and noise are not the same thing. Sound is defined as a measure of pressure in air from a source to the surroundings; noise is defined as unwanted sound or sound that is harmful to health. Sound becomes unwanted (i.e., noise or noise pollution) when it either interferes with normal activities such as conversations, disrupts sleep patterns or diminishes a person's ability to enjoy their daily life.[2] Wanted sound becomes detrimental to health (i.e. noise) when its volume and exposure time lead to hearing loss or other detrimental health impacts. The unit of measurement for sound is the decibel and sound is typically weighted to reflect the actual loudness level as heard by average human ears. The most common weighting used is A-weighted noise level which makes sound with different frequency spectrums comparable and has been found to be a more reasonable approximation of human hearing.[3]

Noise and Health

Noise has an impact on our health; the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates at that least 1 million years of healthy life years are lost every year in western European countries because of environmental noise, which includes leisure noise.[4] Exposure to acute, high decibel sounds (85 dB(A)) or greater for long periods of time is associated with hearing loss.[5] While in most cases, exposure to acute, high-decibel sounds occurs in occupational settings, chronic exposure in other settings, such as concert venues, can contribute to noise-related hearing loss. The WHO has updated their Environmental Noise Guidelines for the European Region based on systematic reviews of the most recent science on connections between noise and health. The new guidelines distinguish leisure noise from noise generated by transport and wind. They recommend average noise exposure from road traffic, railways, aircraft, and wind turbines,

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[1] Muriel T Zaatar, Kenda Alhakim, Mohammad Enayeh, and Ribal Tamer, "The transformative power of music: Insights into neuroplasticity, health, and disease," *Brain, Behavior, & Immunity - Health*, *35* (2023): 100716. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbih.2023.100716

[2] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Clean Air Act Overview: Clean Air Act Title IV – Noise Pollution* (Washington, DC: EPA, 2018).

[3] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Information on Levels of Environmental Noise Requisite to Protect Public Health and Welfare with an Adequate Margin of Safety* (Washington, DC: EPA, 1974), https://nepis.epa.gov/Exe/ZyNET.exe/2000L3LN.TXT?ZyActionD=ZyDocument&Client=EPA&Index=Prior+to+1976&Docs=&Query=&Time=&EndTime=&SearchMethod=1&TocRestrict=n&Toc=&TocEntry=&QField=&QFieldYear=&QFieldMonth=&QFieldDay=&IntQFieldOp=0&ExtQFieldOp=0&XmlQuery=&File=D%3A%5Czyfiles%5CIndex%20Data%5C70thru75%5CTxt%5C00000001%5C2000L3LN.txt&User=ANONYMOUS&Password=anonymous&SortMethod=h%7C-&MaximumDocuments=1&FuzzyDegree=0&ImageQuality=r75g8/r75g8/x150y150g16/i425&Display=hpfr&DefSeekPage=x&SearchBack=ZyActionL&Back=ZyActionS&BackDesc=Results%20page&MaximumPages=1&ZyEntry=1&SeekPage=x&ZyPURL

[4] World Health Organization, *Burden of Disease from Environmental Noise: Quantification of Healthy Life Years Lost in Europe* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2011), https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/4c6945b7-497a-4043-9e6f-98d6774b3b61/content

[5] National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), *Noise and Hearing Loss Prevention* (Washington, DC: NIOSH, 2018).

maintains sound pressure levels below 45dB(A) for aircraft and wind turbines, 53dB(A) for road traffic, and 54dB(A) for railway noise.

For leisure noise, in contrast, WHO recommends a yearly average sound pressure from all leisure sources not to exceed 70dB(A), with a weekly average not to exceed 80 dB(A), and a short-term average from occasional exposure (such as at a concert venue) not to exceed 100 dB(A).[6] By averaging exposure a week or year, the recommendations acknowledge that these exposures are experienced occasionally and by choice.

Venue Noise and Health

While cultural expression and community gathering provide social and economic value, the noise they generate can have negative health impacts. Amplification generates volumes that damage hearing in artists and audiences, which can have long-term health consequences. WHO estimates that "over 1 billion people aged 12 to 35 risk losing their hearing due to loud music and other recreational sounds."[7] To address this issue, WHO released sound management recommendations for venues to limit the risk of hearing loss among audience members based on a survey of young venue-goers.[8] These recommendations give venue operators tools to preserve the health of their audiences while providing them with welcome, noisy, cultural experiences.

Outside venues, the sounds generated from inside the venue or by audiences arriving and leaving can be perceived as unwelcome, and therefore as noise, by neighbors. People react differently to sound, based on emotional and physical factors such as the extent to which someone is accustomed to current sounds or has hearing sensitivity.[9] When people perceive sounds from cultural activities and gatherings at venues are un-welcome or disruptive, they will typically describe those sounds as 'noise'. Studies of phenomena such as noise annoyance, or a feeling of displeasure associated with noise from "any agent of condition, known or believed by an individual or group to adversely affect them," are largely based on the effects of traffic-related noise rather than noise from leisure activities. Some types of sound, particularly loud machine-generated sounds, are nearly always perceived to be noise, and the negative health consequences associated with exposure to harmful noise has been well established.[10] Sounds generated by leisure activity, particularly sounds generated by cultural activities involving music, dance, and conversation, are more variable in whether they are perceived as welcome or whether they provoke

[6] World Health Organization, "Environmental Noise," in *Compendium of WHO and Other UN Guidance on Health and Environment: 2022 Update* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2022), 2, https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/who-compendium-on-health-and-environment/who_compendium_noise_01042022.pdf

[7] "WHO Releases New Standard to Tackle Rising Threat of Hearing Loss," *World Health Organization Departmental Update*, March 2, 2022, https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-who-releases-new-standard-to-tackle-rising-threat-of-hearing-loss

[8] Nicola Diviani, Shelly Chadha, Malachi Ochien Arunda, and Sara Rubinelli, "Attitudes towards Safe Listening Measures in Entertainment Venues: Results from an International Survey among Young Venue-Goers," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18 (2021): 12860, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312860

[9] Massachusetts Department of Transportation, *Type I and Type II Noise Abatement Policies and Procedures* (Boston: Massachusetts Department of Transportation, 2011), https://studylib.net/doc/13043513/massachusetts-department-of-transportation-type-i-and-typ

[10] Omar Hahad, Marin Kuntic, Sadeer Al-Kindi, Ivana Kuntic, Donya Gilan, Katja Petrowski, Andreas Daiber, and Thomas Münzel, "Noise and Mental Health: Evidence, Mechanisms, and Consequences," *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology* 35 (2025): 16–23, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41370-024-00642-5

noise annoyance. This variability can make venues and spaces for gathering vulnerable to the subjective enforcement of noise-reduction measures and regulations.

Soundscape Framework

As the public health risks from noise exposure become more widely understood and quantified, researchers have elevated the risk of over-regulating noise with "the unintended consequence of reducing or even losing the positive environmental and human sounds beneficial to our health and well-being."[11] These scholars elevate the fact that noise levels measured only quantitatively in decibels, are not an accurate determinant of the health impacts of sound when they are applied to sounds that are not generated by or amplified by mechanical processes. They advocate for using a management framework that incorporates a qualitative assessment of soundscape, or acoustical environment as perceived by people. This framework incorporates the positive health impacts of sound and offers a wider range of management options beyond a simple reduction of decibels when managing sounds that are perceived as welcome by some and as an annoyance by others.

Balancing Benefits and Risks of Venue Noise

Venues are an example of how such a framework might be applied. Venues that host cultural events and activities can be characterized as key community assets whose sounds convey positive feelings, meanings and value to the audiences they serve. At the same time, these local gathering spaces can be perceived as generators of unwanted noise that doesn't belong in the community. While many challenges exist for maintaining and developing creative spaces, noise mitigation and entertainment-related sound are core considerations for protecting and preserving cultural venues. Cultural activities, the artists who produce them, and the audiences that enjoy them are vulnerable to heightened scrutiny and displacement when the sounds produced by their activities are considered *noise* by neighbors. When the application of quantitative noise reduction not only reduces the noise generated by an active venue, but results in that venue's closure, it can have wide-reaching negative impacts on the community the venue served.

Research has shown that sound is a necessary and beneficial by-product of human creative expression and interaction, and as such it is an important element of thriving, healthy communities.[12] While amplified sound generates real health risks related to hearing loss, these risks differ from the negative health impacts from traffic noise and noise from energy infrastructure. Venues and creative spaces should practice sound management that preserves the health and safety of artists and audiences; and municipalities should adopt tools and frameworks that allow them to preserve venues' cultural soundscapes as part of their communities while also managing the conflicts that can arise among venues and their neighbors.

Noise complaints pose an inherent challenge for cultural venues, which are particularly vulnerable to sound and noise conflicts with neighbors in new residential or mixed-use developments. Even longstanding venues and cultural gathering spaces risk heightened scrutiny as neighborhoods redevelop and bring in populations unfamiliar with these assets. Entertainment and nightlife venues operate during

[11] Antonella Radicchi, Pınar Cevikayak Yelmi, Andy Chung, Pamela Jordan, Sharon Stewart, Aggelos Tsaligopoulos, Lindsay McCunn, and Marcus Grant, "Sound and the Healthy City," *Cities and Health* 5, nos. 1–2 (2021): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2020.1821980
[12] *Ibid.*

evening and nighttime hours when residents may have an increased expectation of quiet. When neighboring residents file noise complaints about existing venues, regardless of their historic or cultural significance, they exert pressure on the venue to reduce income-generating activities by restricting hours of operation or increasing costs by investing in increased soundproofing. This default approach puts the burden of sound management entirely on the venues based on unpredictable complaints by neighbors. The agent of change principle helps to reduce pressure on existing venues from new neighbors who find sounds from the venues to be unwelcome or disturbing and sets clear expectations around sound management for new venues locating near residential and mixed-use areas.

Agent of Change Principle and Sound Management

The agent of change principle emerged as a planning intervention to tackle the issue of sound management among live music venues and residential developments. Since the early 2000s, cities worldwide have adopted agent of change principles in policies to protect music venues and creative spaces from displacement by mitigating conflicts in mixed-use urban development. The agent of change principle was introduced in Victoria, Australia, as a recommendation from a 2003 report developed by the Live Music Taskforce working to address music venue displacement.[13] Beyond Australia, cities in the United Kingdom and the United States began pursuing agent of change principles, formalizing planning efforts around entertainment-related sound.

The main idea behind the "agent of change" principle is that the actor initiating new development or proposing a change in the built environment is also responsible for managing potential conflicts around sound. By applying this principle, local policies assign the responsibility of sound mitigation to whomever is responsible for the new development or construction project. This principle aims to preserve existing cultural venues adjacent to new mixed-use or residential development and to establish a transparent process for managing potential conflicts around sound.

Agent of change policies – policies that codify the agent of change principle - typically focus on mitigating entertainment-related sound in residential areas. For example, if a new residential development is approved for construction next to an existing music venue, the residential developer would be expected to assume the cost of soundproofing their development and any noise abatement efforts required in the building's design and construction. On the other hand, if a developer constructs a new music venue or an existing venue expands its operations near a residential area, the developer or venue owner would be responsible for any costs associated with proper soundproofing measures or other noise mitigation measures.[14]

As cities worldwide adopt agent of change policies, the precise structure of each policy must be adapted based on the local regulatory and development context. While sound insulation in newly constructed residential developments is the most common application of the agent of change policy, other methods exist for navigating potential noise-complaint conflicts. For instance, sound management agreements may require residential developers and landlords to disclose decibel limits to prospective tenants. Other

[13] Elaine Carbines, *Live Music Taskforce Report and Recommendations* (Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment, December 5, 2003), https://greens.org.au/sites/greens.org.au/files/Live%2BMusic%2BTaskforce%2B-%2BReport%5B1%5D.pdf
[14] *Ibid.*

cities have adopted policies that recommend financial exchanges between developers and venues to offset potential harm to the respective parties.[15]

Agent of Change Principle in Municipal Policy

Two notable examples of cities pursuing agent of change principles include London, England, and Austin, Texas.

London, UK

In London, initial efforts to pursue agent of change principles trace back to the Housing and Planning Act of 2016, which proposed widespread changes to the United Kingdom's housing and planning systems. The UK Music and Music Venue Trust championed this policy effort after the significant closure of music venues in London, where 35% of music venues closed between 2007 and 2015, and small venues decreased from 700 to 450.[16]

The bill included an amendment requiring developers to seek approval on noise impacts before changing the use of site to a residential dwelling. Notably, the agent of change principle is found in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF2), and the 2018 London Plan specifically named the principle stating that "the agent of change principle places responsibility for mitigating impacts from existing noise and other nuisance-generating activities or uses on the proposed new noise-sensitive development."[17] Both policies outlined efforts to mitigate and manage impacts of noise, calling for optimized design, and identifying mitigation measures early in the process.

In 2021, the London Plan included updated language to ensure that local boroughs employ the agent of change principle and noise management strategies in reviewing all development plans and planning decisions.[18] The agent of change principle is included in multiple chapters of the plan, where it explicitly states, "cultural venues should be protected through development processes and land use controls".[19] While the adoption of the agent of change principle into the London Plan is a significant buoy for cultural and entertainment venues, the success of implementation and adaptation of soundproofing strategies in

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[15] Music Venue Trust, *Agent of Change Briefing* (2018), accessed December 5, 2025, https://musicvenuetrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Agent-of-Change-Briefing.pdf

[16] Hannah Moore, "The New Campaign to Save Small Music Venues," *BBC Newsbeat*, September 4, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-41152834; Michelle Perry, "Live Venues Set for an Encore?" *Estates Gazette*, May 13, 2016, https://www.estatesgazette.co.uk/news/live-venues-set-for-an-encore/

[17] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *National Planning Policy Framework* (London: Government of the United Kingdom, first published March 27, 2012; revised July 24, 2018), https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20181206183454/https:/www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2; Greater London Authority, *The London Plan: Intend to Publish Version* (London: Greater London Authority, December 2019), https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/intend_to_publish_-_clean.pdf

[18] Greater London Authority, "Policy D13: Agent of Change," in *The London Plan 2021* (London: Greater London Authority, 2021), https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/planning/london-plan/the-london-plan-2021-online/chapter-3-design#policy-d13-agent-of-change-169867-title

[19] Greater London Authority, "Policy HC5: Supporting London's Culture and Creative Industries," in *The London Plan 2021*, https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/planning/london-plan/the-london-plan-2021-online/chapter-7-heritage-and-culture#policy-hc5-supporting-londons-culture-and-creative-industries-170994-title

residential construction remains up for debate.[20] However, the London policy model provides a blueprint for cities to study for codifying the agent of change principle into policy throughout the planning process.

Austin, Texas

As the self-proclaimed "Live Music Capital of the World," the City of Austin has been working to develop an agent of change policy following a dispute between a newly constructed hotel and a nearby nightclub in 2015. In spring 2024, the City of Austin proposed using a mapping tool to identify addresses in proximity to venues that would trigger a sound study as part of the City's development review process.[21] The proposed policy would require "developers of new projects within 600 feet of venues with an outdoor music permit [to] conduct sound testing during a performance to measure the potential impact of noise in their residential units…[which] would then be required to be included in purchase or leasing documents for eventual residents as part of the city's development review process." [22] The ordinance change was approved by Austin City Council on September 12, 2024. [23]

In the meantime, the City has developed a sound management strategy led by the Music & Entertainment Division, which manages a permitting system for music venues, including noise levels and operating hours. Two dedicated code inspectors are responsible for addressing Austin's noise complaints. The City also requires a Sound Impact Plan for venues approved for outdoor amplified sound in all commercial and non-residential establishments. This plan includes on-site inspections, sound measurements, conversations with neighborhood residents and businesses, and, as needed, additional research.

Emerging Sound Management Practices

In addition to the agent of change principle, the sound management field has generated recommendations for how to mitigate sound conflicts proactively. One approach to sound management is for municipalities to develop shared agreements with venues detailing sound measurement procedures. These agreements help to ensure consistent regulation standards for venues. Another approach is for cities to require venues to measure and log their sound levels throughout the night and provide the log to an enforcement officer, similar to a health inspector. Other methods include drafting agreements to determine the exact location for measuring decibel limits between neighboring buildings. All these practices are evolving and require right-sizing the policy to the municipal context and the local venue ecosystem. Additional work is needed to apply a soundscape assessment framework to local venue sound management practice.

Regulation and enforcement standards for entertainment-related sound vary based on municipal resources. Municipalities may look to model regulations as a starting point for building a local regulatory framework. The Massachusetts Association of Health Boards provides a model noise regulation to municipalities that does not explicitly advise on how to manage the positive and negative impacts of

[20] Jonathan Phillips, "It Is Time to Level Up the Agent of Change Principle so That Its Objective Is Actually Realised," *Bidwells Insights*, July 28, 2022, https://www.bidwells.co.uk/insights-reports-events/planning-agent-of-change/

[21] Chad Swiatecki, "Music Commission Approves Revised 'Agent of Change' Measures to Calm Noise Disputes," *Austin Monitor*, April 3, 2024, https://austinmonitor.com/stories/2024/04/music-commission-approves-revised-agent-of-change-measures-to-calm-noise-disputes/

[22] Swiatecki, "Music Commission Approves Revised 'Agent of Change' Measures."

[23] City of Austin, Texas, *City Council Minutes*, September 12, 2024, accessed December 2, 2025, https://services.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=437633

noise generated by cultural activities and venues. The purpose section of the model ordinance states that "this regulation is enacted to protect, preserve, and promote the health, safety, welfare and quality of life for the citizens of … Massachusetts, through the reduction control, and prevention of noise." The model regulation includes recommended maximum decibel limits by use-type.[24] However the model regulations neither define cultural venues as a specific noise-generating use for particular consideration nor offer processes for collaborative sound management with such uses.

Who enforces sound management and how sound is measured can impact the outcome of enforcement. Police departments, code enforcement inspectors, or public health agents commonly enforce noise ordinances and respond to noise complaints. When complaint-driven systems propel sound enforcement, venues are vulnerable to being categorized as nuisances within communities rather than cultural and economic assets. An effective alternative is for sound to be measured by municipal staff (or a qualified municipal consultant) trained in sound measurement and documentation to measure decibel levels with professional equipment at specified locations. While these guidelines may be described in noise regulations, communication to convey guidance with local venue operators is imperative for consistent and fair sound management.

[24] "MAHB Model Noise Regulations." Massachusetts Association of Health Boards. Available online: https://www.mahb.org/local-boh-regulations/noise/.

Applying Agent of Change Principle in Metro Boston

Given that Metro Boston is home to dense residential and mixed-use neighborhoods, it is no surprise that local music and cultural venues frequently face noise disputes and challenges with sound management. Venues report that they face challenges navigating noise complaints and inconsistent noise enforcement, especially during outdoor performances and events. As the region prioritizes and accelerates new residential construction to combat its housing crisis, municipalities need policies that can help them mitigate potential sound conflicts between new residential uses and existing venues.

Applying the agent of change principle in Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville requires a combination of adapting the development review process for new construction to include provisions related to sound management responsibilities and adopting consistent policies to manage entertainment-related sound. This section outlines key proposals based on case studies, the findings of the *Making Space for Art* engagement process, and recommendations for developing agent of change principles into adopted policies.

Development Review Process

A precondition for applying the agent of change principle is maintaining data on the location of venues and creative spaces. Municipalities must know where venues are located in order to know whether new development will be located in proximity to them. Once assembled and maintained, incorporating this data into the development review process facilitates application of the agent of change principle. As municipalities review new development projects, their proximity to venues and other creative spaces should be reviewed. Where proximity is identified, potential impacts related to sound management and increased displacement pressure should be considered as part of the approval process.

Develop an inventory of music and entertainment venues, drawing from licenses and permits to establish a database of arts and cultural venues to reference during development review.

Creating a database for arts and cultural venues across Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville, can support more comprehensive and proactive cultural planning for new residential and mixed-use development. A potential data source to identify these cultural venues is the cities' existing permitting and licensing systems. Cities like Austin, Texas; San Francisco, California; and Brisbane, Australia, require sound permits for cultural venues and maintain dedicated offices to handle permitting for entertainment and live music. Similarly, Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville all collect data from cultural venues through their entertainment licensing processes. Municipal staff can verify venue locations and flag potential conflicts with new development proposals using licensing and permitting data. While some underground venues or events are not documented through formal processes, utilizing a dedicated permitting process and office to support data collection offers an initial step in preserving and protecting local venues in the context of new development.

Incorporate sound studies into the development review process for proposals in proximity to existing venues.

Sound studies can establish a baseline for sound levels and delineate clear measurement standards for existing venues, particularly those with outdoor amplified sound. Examples of sound studies in Austin, Texas, include the Sound Impact studies for outdoor amplified sound and the proposal for Austin's agent of change policy for new development within 600 feet of venues. An early case study of London's agent of change policy demonstrated that documenting the 'current venue noise level' at the loudest sound levels at the events was critical to establishing a baseline standard for a new development proposal.[25] Establishing clear expectations for sound studies as part of the development review process mirrors other impact studies required for new development, like environmental impact or traffic studies.

Provide resources and support for developers and venues to seek soundproofing measures throughout the design and construction timeline.

When sound studies are required, municipalities should employ sound engineers and experts throughout the process to establish a baseline for the current noise level and provide feedback for the construction proposals and designs. The original proposal of the agent of change policy, drafted in Australia, included improving building codes for better sound insulation on new development projects. While adapting strict building standards is one approach, as the Nighttime Economy Culture and Policy (NITECAP) Alliance policy paper, *Planning for Entertainment Related Sound*, notes, it is challenging to implement strict building codes due to ongoing pressures of limited housing supply and affordability crises in US cities.[26] Alternative agreements or solutions include adapting existing venue structures using additional sound insulation, instead of requiring specific designs for ongoing residential development. Regardless, the policy would assign the responsibility of paying for sound insulation measures to whichever party initiates change.

Entertainment-Related Sound Management

A central premise of the NITECAP policy paper is the reframing of entertainment-related sound from "noise to be eliminated" to "sound to be managed."[27] This fundamental shift redefines the challenges around venues as places where sound is welcomed and encouraged, rather than something solely to be reduced or eliminated. This paper includes three recommendations for cities to improve the management of entertainment-related sound and mitigate potential conflicts around noise.

Establish noise ordinances that proactively manage expectations for entertainment-related sound.

Cities must distinguish entertainment-related sound from other sources of harmful noise. Sound policies in London and Austin recognize the importance of music venues and creative spaces in their cities'

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[25] Michael J. B. Lotinga, Toby Lewis, and Tim Taylor, *Music Venue Noise: A Development Planning Case-Study Examining the Application of the "Agent of Change" Principle, a Novel Legal Mechanism and Noise Control Design Issues* (2019), accessed December 5, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Lotinga/publication/332173088_Music_venue_noise_a_development_planning_case-study_examining_the_application_of_the_'Agent_Of_Change'_principle_a_novel_legal_mechanism_and_noise_control_design_issues/links/5cdde0be92851c4eaba68af3/Music-venue-noise-a-development-planning-case-study-examining-the-application-of-the-Agent-Of-Change-principle-a-novel-legal-mechanism-and-noise-control-design-issues.pdf

[26] Brian Block, *Planning for Entertainment-Related Sound* (Nightlife & Entertainment Sound Initiative (NITECAP)), accessed December 5, 2025, https://www.nite-cap.org/planning-for-entertainment-related-sound

[27] Block, *Planning for Entertainment-Related Sound*, 5.

identities, economies, and cultural fabrics. As a result, these policies include specifications for managing entertainment-related sounds as a category that is distinct from other types of noise. In some cases, entertainment or cultural districts provide tools for concentrating and supporting local venues. Austin piloted extended hours for venues within the Red River Cultural District as a limited geography for more concentrated sound-generating activities.

Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville might consider the role of their existing cultural districts in supporting more flexible sound regulations for weekends and specific events. Other cities also designate entertainment districts that enjoy specific privileges for extended periods under noise ordinances. There are opportunities to articulate the value that venues bring to all three cities. Furthermore, Boston's Nightlife Economy Department is well-suited to support pilot projects through the *Wake Up the Night* grant program, which encourages and supports nighttime activities throughout the city.[28] In Cambridge, the Central Square Cultural District provides a unique geography to establish guidance for entertainment-related sound policies and build on recent Nightlife Industry and Thriving Entertainment Spaces NITES grants launched in 2025.[29]

Designate clear and consistent procedures for monitoring sound, with standardized distances and locations for measurement, technology, and tools.

Even when cities provide clear decibel limits within specific hours, regulating cultural activities and entertainment-related sound complaints can be inconsistent. Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville all maintain noise ordinances that guide decibel levels based on the time of day or night. However, the enforcement and management of noise complaints varies from city to city. As a result, venues and event promoters face inconsistent regulation and sound measurement standards.

Noise complaints are also an issue of equity, considering who is regulated and how noise is defined.[30] As cities examine and respond to noise complaints, it is crucial to understand inconsistencies in perceptions of noise versus sound. Standardized procedures that establish where sound levels are measured, for example, at the property line versus inside a building, and what tools measure decibels, like specialized audio equipment versus an application on a cell phone, make a significant difference in standardizing sound enforcement practices. Clear expectations for venues allow adequate preparation and regulation of their sound levels, rather than arbitrary enforcement.

Create a designated staff position trained to manage entertainment-related sound.

Across the metro Boston region, noise complaints are handled differently from city to city. In Boston, the City directs residents to contact Entertainment Licensing for noise complaints about restaurants and entertainment venues.[31] Cambridge directs general noise complaints about festivals and loud music to

[28] Irene Rotondo, "Boston's Nightlife Jolted in $300K Grant Awarded to 'Wake Up the Night'," *MassLive*, August 5, 2024, https://www.masslive.com/boston/2024/08/bostons-nightlife-jolted-in-300k-grant-awarded-to-wake-up-the-night.html
[29] City of Cambridge Community Development Department, "Cambridge Nightlife Industry and Thriving Entertainment Spaces (NITES)," City of Cambridge, accessed December 5, 2025, https://www.cambridgema.gov/Departments/communitydevelopment/cambridgenites
[30] Spencer Buell, "Hey Boston, Shut UUUUUUUP Already!!!!!!!," *Boston Magazine*, November 9, 2021, https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2021/11/09/noise-complaints/
[31] City of Boston Public Health Commission, "Noise in Boston," *City of Boston*, last updated October 30, 2025, https://www.boston.gov/government/cabinets/boston-public-health-commission/healthy-homes-and-environment/noise-boston

the Emergency Communications Center, (ECC), which dispatches a police response, and complaints about street performances to the Cambridge Arts Council during regular business hours and the ECC after hours.[32] The City of Somerville's 311-line handles noise complaints.[33] While these formal processes exist for each city, handling noise complaints and enforcement varies significantly across the region, leading to confusion and inconsistent regulation.

Brisbane, Australia, and Austin, Texas, each maintain a dedicated staff member well-versed in sound policy and regulation for residents and venues.[34] Their roles include monitoring music venues, working evenings and weekends, and managing noise complaints. Enlisting dedicated (non-police) sound enforcement staff is critical in successful sound management, particularly equipping these individuals with standardized equipment and instructions for measuring sound levels. By assigning dedicated staff members to mitigating sound-related conflict and complaints during nights and weekends, cities can ensure that enforcement is more consistent.

[32] City of Cambridge, "Noise Ordinance Information," *City of Cambridge*, last modified July 24, 2023, https://www.cambridgema.gov/services/noiseordinanceinformation
[33] City of Somerville Communications Department, "Constituent Services (311)," *City of Somerville*, accessed December 5, 2025, https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/communications/constituent-services
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Planning for Cities that Value Sound

As Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville work to preserve and expand creative space, including music and cultural venues, agent of change principles and sound management policies are tools for preserving valuable spaces for artists and audiences alike. These policies should integrate findings from public health research demonstrating the short- and long-term health impacts of decibel exposure, balanced with studies demonstrating the positive health impacts of cultural activity and belonging. Venues play an important role in gathering and supporting cultural expression, which is critical to public health and well-being.

In a moment when municipalities are rightly prioritizing the construction of affordable housing, there must also be proactive efforts to mitigate potential tensions between cultural venues and surrounding residents and businesses. Locally-owned venues have been slow to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and many venues have closed since 2020, making the remaining venues even more essential for the local musicians, cultural communities, and the regional entertainment industry.

Venues anchor communities, facilitating creativity, connection, and a sense of place. Proactive policies for residential development and sound management are needed to ensure these communities can continue to support spaces for arts, music, and cultural activities. Future work on sound management should build a collaboration with the public health field to integrate quantitative sound regulation with qualitative soundscape assessment in Massachusetts. This approach should document the positive contributions of sound to health and well-being and build a balanced approach to sound management that promotes healthy and equitable sound ecosystems. As cities seek to develop a healthy cultural ecosystem, they must consider ways to protect and preserve their venues and to support performances and gatherings that produce welcome, but loud, sound.

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