

# Anatomy of a Closure

## Abstract

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This report begins with a story. Don't Tell Mama (DTM) was embedded in the cultural life of central Helsinki. It was a long-standing queer institution, a meeting point, a stage for artists, and a social anchor. It operated in a building historically dedicated to nightlife and functioned for years without major conflict. Its presence was part of the city's rhythm. In 2018, a luxury hotel opened in the same block, facing the courtyard. Shortly after opening, the hotel began reporting noise complaints from two guest rooms. No prior consultation had taken place during the hotel's development regarding the presence of a long-standing music venue nearby. From the club's perspective, it was assumed that a new hotel would be properly insulated. It was not.

DTM attempted to adapt. The management invested in acoustic expertise. They adjusted the sound system, installed isolated platforms under subwoofers, and measured sound inside the venue, outside the building, and inside the hotel rooms. They sought dialogue. They proposed pragmatic solutions, including booking the most exposed hotel rooms during weekends. The hotel refused. Eventually, an official complaint was filed. The venue faced the risk of a substantial fine if it did not reduce its sound levels to the point where its business model would no longer be viable. The club exited its lease. A cultural landmark disappeared.

The story of DTM is not presented as an exception. Similar dynamics unfold across Europe, not only in global capitals such as Berlin, London, or Amsterdam, but also in mid-sized cities and smaller urban centres. The recurring elements are familiar: densification, conversion of commercial property into residential units, tourism-driven real estate development, fragmented municipal governance, outdated sound regulations, and disproportionate sanction systems. The complaint is rarely the beginning. The true starting point lies earlier: in planning decisions that failed

to anticipate coexistence; in the absence of communication between departments; in the invisibility of small venues in urban development processes; in the lack of recognition of cultural value within legal frameworks.

The first transformation explored is spatial. Cities are becoming denser. Mixed-use neighbourhoods, once common in European urban history, have evolved through decades of retail concentration and car-centric planning. As retail declines in city centres, opportunities for cultural revitalisation reappear. Yet densification also creates friction when new housing or hotel developments are inserted next to long-standing nightlife spaces without adequate mitigation. The Shoreditch example illustrates how early intervention during the planning stage can prevent future conflict. In that case, a venue owner noticed a planning notice for a hotel project and engaged directly with the developer's acoustic consultant. As a result, façade insulation and sealed windows were installed. The hotel opened without generating complaints. The conflict was avoided through anticipation.

The report argues that such outcomes require breaking administrative silos. Cultural departments and planning authorities often operate independently. In Cologne, the creation of a Cultural Space Management Office reflects an attempt to translate between cultural actors and municipal administration. In Barcelona, the establishment of a Night Office and Night Commissioner introduces structured governance for night-time life. These examples demonstrate that institutional innovation can mitigate conflict.

The Agent of Change principle emerges as a central policy tool. The principle holds that the party introducing a change into an environment is responsible for managing its impact. When applied to urban planning, it implies that new residential or hotel developments must insulate

themselves against existing venues. While incorporated into planning frameworks in the United Kingdom, enforcement remains uneven. In other contexts, such as Tallinn, the principle appears within strategic documents rather than binding law. Courts in several jurisdictions continue to prioritise residential interests over cultural ones. The report highlights the limits of legal principles when cultural activity is not institutionally recognised as valuable.

Beyond planning frameworks, the report explores cultural protection zones. Cologne's designation of an industrial area as a cultural protection zone prevents incompatible residential development. Malmö's cultural sound zone acknowledges that cultural production generates sound and integrates that reality into planning. These examples illustrate that coexistence can be proactively structured rather than reactively managed.

Tourism adds another layer of complexity. Cities increasingly market themselves through cultural imagery, including nightlife scenes. The report emphasises the need for balanced music tourism strategies that avoid over-concentration in historic centres and distribute activity across districts. Barcelona's strategy to decentralise nightlife reflects an attempt to mitigate crowd concentration and street-level disturbance.

The second transformation concerns sound itself. Sound technologies have evolved. Modern systems are more powerful and capable of producing significant low-frequency energy. However, regulatory frameworks often rely on A-weighted decibel measurements that insufficiently capture bass frequencies, the very sounds most frequently cited in complaints. Authorities and police services may lack adequate equipment or training to measure low-frequency sound effectively.

The report introduces a broader understanding of sound management. Acoustic measurements alone cannot capture the full noise climate. Operational factors such as queues, taxi pick-ups, fire doors left open contribute significantly to perceived disturbance. Expert advice often recommends direct observation alongside technical measurement.

Mediation emerges as a crucial mechanism. Barcelona's street mediators, circulating at night to resolve conflicts before police intervention, illustrate a shift from punitive to preventive approaches. In Mannheim and other cities, multi-stakeholder groups convene residents, venue operators, and municipal authorities to foster dialogue. The report argues that policing alone is insufficient and that noise conflicts are fundamentally issues of urban governance.

Sanction systems receive critical attention. The DTM case illustrates how fines can become existential threats. In Barcelona, complaint thresholds have been adjusted so that five independent complaints are required before formal proceedings begin. Cases are handled administratively before escalating to enforcement. The report highlights the disproportionality of fines in the cultural sector compared to other industries.

Financial support mechanisms are presented not as subsidies but as preventive investment such as in Cologne's annual insulation fund and Tallinn's venue support schemes. The economic argument is explicit: investing in insulation is less costly than managing the consequences of closure. Rebuilding cultural ecosystems requires significantly greater public expenditure, as illustrated during pandemic rescue packages.

The report then shifts from structural change to human change. The COVID-19 pandemic altered people's relationship to private space and noise tolerance. Nightlife stigma persists and venues are often perceived as troublemakers. The closure of the Fuse Club in Brussels, despite public mobilisation, demonstrates the fragility of even established venues.

Recognition becomes the central theme. The report argues that venues are laboratories of culture, incubators of genres, and long-term infrastructures embedded in communities. From jazz to techno, many musical forms originated in marginal spaces before entering mainstream institutions. Recognising venues as cultural institutions strengthens their position within planning and licensing processes. Recognition entails inclusion in cultural policy frameworks, eligibility for funding, and participation in structured dialogue.

Heritage provides another argumentative pathway. Heritage is not solely about preservation of the past but about sustaining living practices. Examples such as the recognition of techno as cultural heritage and the broader European discourse on living heritage illustrate the potential of heritage frameworks to support venues. However, symbolic recognition must be accompanied by concrete policy measures.

Throughout the report, the narrative returns to coexistence. Mixed-use neighbourhoods are described as resilient and inclusive when managed through dialogue. The 15-minute city concept, often framed around proximity of services, should incorporate cultural and night-time life to avoid creating mono-functional residential zones.

The concluding reflection emphasises that closures are not inevitable. They result from cumulative changes—urban, technological, social—and from governance systems that have not adapted. Practical tools exist: planning intervention, mediation, updated sound management, funding mechanisms, and night-time governance structures. The report positions itself as a practical guide for Live DMA members to initiate dialogue with local policymakers. It acknowledges its predominantly European perspective while expressing openness to broader resonance.



## Recommendations for Local Policy Makers

### 1. Anticipate conflicts through planning

**Recommendation:** Integrate cultural spaces and sound considerations into urban planning from the outset in order to ensure that new spaces for cultural activities can be established even as cities become denser, and to protect existing cultural activities from conflicts and real estate pressures.

**Examples:**

- Shoreditch case (hotel façade insulation installed during planning phase)
- Cultural protection zones in Cologne
- Cultural sound zone in Malmö

**Argument:** Conflicts rarely start with the complaint. Early intervention prevents costly disputes and closures.

### 2. Systematically apply the Agent of Change principle

**Recommendation:** Ensure that new developments (housing, hotels) are responsible for mitigating impacts on existing venues.

**Examples:**

- UK National Planning Policy Framework
- Tallinn Night Strategy

**Argument:** The party responsible for introducing a change is also responsible for managing its impact.

### 3. Break administrative silos

**Recommendation:** Create cross-department coordination between culture, planning, and potentially other departments (licensing, transport, tourism...)

**Examples:**

- Cultural Space Management Office (Cologne)
- Barcelona Night Office
- URBACT participatory groups

**Argument:** Mutual understanding is the very first step to prevent venues closures

### 4. Promote mixed-used neighbourhoods that combine daytime and night-time activities

**Recommendation:** Include cultural activities and night-time activities in the 15min city concept

**Examples:**

- Cities of Paris (FR), Milano (IT) or Barcelona (ES)

**Argument:** Mixed-used neighbourhoods are safer, they can reduce mobility emissions, prevent tourism pressure and offer cultural proximity.

## 5. Reform complaint and sanction systems

**Recommendation:** Introduce proportional complaint thresholds and prioritise mediation over fines.

**Example:**

— Barcelona or Mannheim: five complaints required before formal case

**Argument:** A single complaint should not trigger existential risk for music venues. Other sectors are not exposed to such disproportionate sanctions.

## 6. Promote mediation and operational solutions

**Recommendation:** Support night mediators and structured dialogue platforms.

**Examples:**

— Barcelona street mediators  
— Sant Martí public-private agreement  
— UNESCO Creative Cities multi-stakeholders groups

**Argument:** Police enforcement alone is ineffective. Noise conflicts are city-governance issues.

## 7. Support insulation and technical adaptation funds

**Recommendation:** Establish public funding schemes for soundproofing and monitoring tools.

**Examples:**

— Cologne: €300,000/year insulation fund  
— Tallinn venue support schemes

**Argument:** Preventive investment is cheaper than regeneration after closure. Rebuilding cultural ecosystems costs significantly more.

## 8. Recognise venues as cultural institutions

**Recommendation:** Formally integrate venues into cultural policy frameworks.

**Examples:**

— Live DMA position paper  
— Heritage recognition (e.g., Berghain, techno as cultural heritage)

**Argument:** Venues are laboratories of artistic innovation and community spaces. Recognition includes integration in policy frameworks but also funding support, adapted regulation and dialogue with the sector.

## 9. Develop holistic night-time policies

**Recommendation:** Create Night Mayor positions or similar structures and treat night-time as a policy topic beyond safety.

**Examples:**

— Over 60 cities worldwide with night governance roles

**Argument:** Night-time includes workers, families, mobility, and economic ecosystems, not only partygoers.

## 10. Develop balanced music tourism strategies

**Recommendation:** Avoid over-concentration in historic centres; distribute nightlife geographically.

**Examples:**

— Barcelona district strategy  
— Music Cities Network perspective

**Argument:** Tourism must support long-term urban vitality, not undermine local cultural ecosystems.

# Recommendations for Music Venues

## 1. Look into planning notices proactively

**Action:** Register for planning alerts; act early when new developments appear.

**Argument:** Once a building is completed without insulation, the venue is structurally weakened.

## 2. Invest in monitoring and low-frequency control

**Action:** Use direct sound measurement devices and adapt speaker systems.

**Argument:** Monitoring systems protect venues against disproportionate complaints and demonstrate compliance.

## 3. Analyse the real-time situation outside your venue and implement operational controls

**Action:** Adopt dispersal policies, manage queues, supervise outdoor areas.

**Argument:** Noise outside venues often causes more conflict than music itself.

## 4. Build local advocacy momentum

**Action:** Engage in collective dialogue platforms or initiate them.

**Argument:** Visibility and recognition strengthen legitimacy in planning and licensing processes.

## 5. Engage with your audience to demonstrate public support

**Action:** Mobilise your audience and community when your venue faces a complaint or regulatory threat. Petitions, or open letters can show authorities that the venue is valued by a wide community of residents, artists, and participants.

**Argument:** Visible public support helps demonstrate that a venue is not an isolated private business but a widely valued cultural and social space.

## 6. Promote night-time strategies in small and mid-sized cities

**Action:** Encourage structured night governance beyond major capitals. It can be done through local groups, Night mayor positions etc. and public-private agreements with local stakeholders to prevent nightlife-related conflicts

**Argument:** Cities should not be planned only around day-time activity while night-time is becoming more and more an active time, and not only for party-goers.

## Recommendations for Music Venue Associations

### 1. Provide access to acoustic expertise

**Action:** Offer shared consultant services or negotiated rates for your members

**Argument:** Small venues often cannot afford technical expertise individually.

### 2. Advocate for adapted sound regulation

**Action:** Engage at national level on low-frequency measurement standards.

**Argument:** Current dB(A) frameworks are outdated and misaligned with modern sound systems.

### 3. Make the economic argument visible

**Action:** Quantify employment, spillovers, and fiscal contributions.

**Argument:** Preventive support is economically rational and less costly than cultural regeneration.

### 4. Push for Agent of Change implementation

**Action:** Lobby for legal embedding and enforcement mechanisms.

**Argument:** Principles without enforcement remain symbolic.

### 5. Use political momentum strategically

**Action:** Act during windows of opportunity (post-crisis, elections, new strategies).

**Argument:** Political will is decisive but often temporary.

