barking can reverberate in someone’s chest. A dog’s erratic barking is akin to the disruptive pinging and buzzing of electronic devices, the mindless music broadcast in public spaces, or even overly loud talking on cell phones (which Walker sees as a rising negative trend). All of them can aggravate or erode concentration.

As part of her larger mission to educate people about noise issues, Walker began working in January with the Cambridge Public Health Department on a pilot project to map the city’s soundscapes. That includes gathering community responses and site-specific information using the NoiseScore app, integrating archival and geographic information system (GIS) data, and developing soundscape walks, lectures, and case studies. She is also working with community groups that have approached her for help in addressing noise concerns in four Boston neighborhoods: the Seaport, Mission Hill, Grove Hall, and Fenway.

She’s aware she’s “battling an attitude. Noise is often viewed as an affluent problem,” or the price humans pay to live in cities. But it’s not, and it shouldn’t be, she adds. Cities will never be quiet, but they could be quieter—or civic leaders could use her noise data to create more serene public spaces.

She praises Boston’s efforts along these lines: the Kevin W. Fitzgerald Park in Mission Hill, a short walk from Walker’s former classes at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health (HSPH), is “incredibly peaceful,” as are many green spaces in the South End. “Falling water, any natural sounds of water,” can foster calmness. She finds solace when “I’m in an elevator and it closes and there’s this pocket of quiet. I’m like, ‘Can I just stay in here, please?’”

So far, all Walker’s website and neighborhood work is unpaid, although she’s not completely alone; a few volunteers are also dedicated to the Noise and the City project. She does have two postdoctoral positions, one as a research affiliate with MIT’s Senseable City Lab and the other with the Center for Research on Environmental and Social Stressors in Housing Across the Life Course (CRESSH), at Boston University. That study is co-led by Francine Laden and BU professor of environmental health Jonathan Levy ’93, S.D. ’99. Walker’s work includes applying the noise-exposure models developed through her doctoral work to determine if, and if so, how, sound levels and frequencies are linked to cognitive-function outcomes, a project called the Children’s Health Watch at Boston Medical Center. She’s also seeking ways to measure how sounds infiltrate Massachusetts homes, and will develop community-engagement programs and protocols that will likely include use of the NoiseScore app.

The app would prove useful even in Harvard Square. Toward the end of her stroll, Walker focuses on a construction vehicle in Radcliffe Yard that’s backing up, emitting that piercing “beep-beep-beep” that feels like an attack on her eardrums. And there’s no need for it here, she points out: “They’ve blocked off everything, there are no people or other cars around.” The workers, at least, likely have hearing protection thanks to Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations. Government and industry officials “know on some level that this ain’t good,” she says. “But the rest of us aren’t required to wear it.” Sure, the impact on biological health likely depends on degree and proximity of exposure, “But, still,” she continues, “the sound is affecting all of us.”