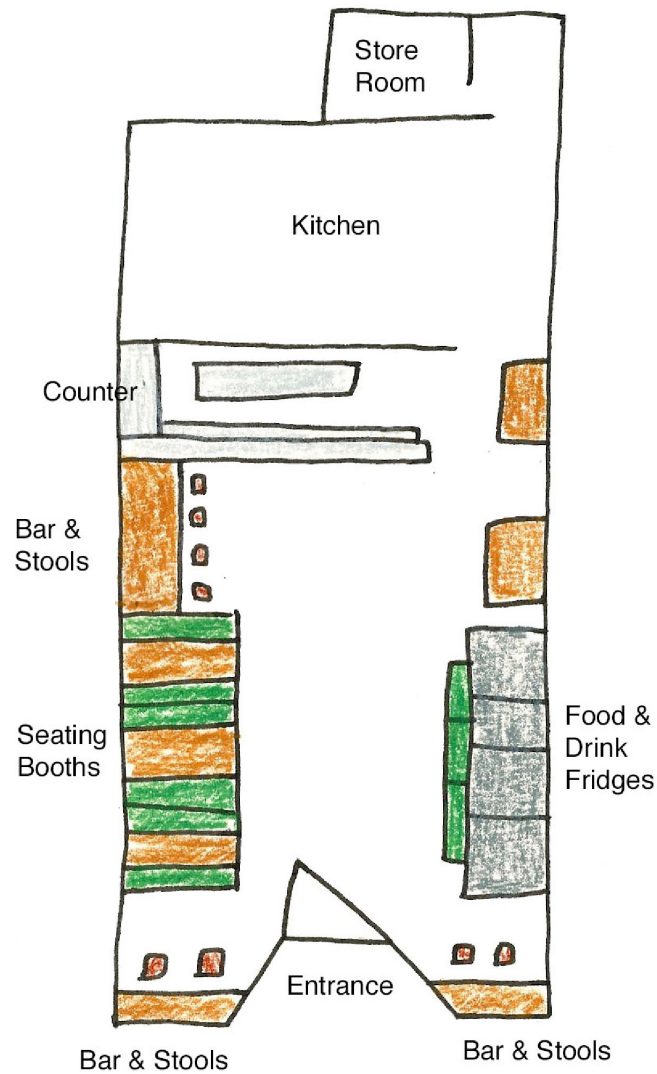


A Taste of Field Notes from Social Bite

RACHEL JOINER



Social Bite – Map © Issey Medd



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Field Notes

Social Bite is a not for profit organization in Scotland, it has two main cafes with one branch in Edinburgh and one in Glasgow. It defines itself as a Social Business, inspired by Nobel Peace Prize winner, social entrepreneur, and banker Muhammad Yunus. In practice, this means, for example, that staff wages are capped so the people at the top do not earn more than 7 times the amount of the lowest paid staff member, and all profits go to charities that help the homeless. In addition to this, customers have the opportunity to buy a drink or a meal for someone homeless as they buy their own. Donated meals are recorded on ticket stubs for homeless customers to collect during the allotted hours. Furthermore, all left over food at the end of each day is given to homeless customers after the shop closes. The Social Bite café is also a social space where they offer homeless and vulnerable people counselling and social suppers for a few hours in the evening, a few times a week.

My ethnographic research focussed on the Social Bite café on Rose Street; a narrow, cobbled, pedestrian road off Princes Street in central Edinburgh. It is late Wednesday morning in the second week of February. I arrive after the early morning rush and before lunchtime therefore it is quiet. Few people are around as I arrive, only a large delivery van parked outside one of the shops. It is only my second visit to Social Bite, I have arranged to join one of the members of my group inside. We have each been once or twice, from their feedback I gather we are becoming familiar faces. It is the first week of February, Wednesday, around 1pm. I am coming straight from a morning of lectures so I am carrying a large backpack and have a warm winter coat wrapped around me. The shops along the street are a mixture of independent stores and well known chains; from hairdressers and small boutique shops to Greggs and Debenhams. Two men sit huddled on the floor in the doorway of a closed-down shop, covered in many layers and blankets.

Social Bite is towards the end of the street, a small shop front, similar in size to others next to it. The door is open and a sign on it reads: "Fresh and healthy local produce sourced locally hand made everyday." Inside the café is bright with a large space at the centre of the room. A display fridge runs all along the right hand wall, seats and tables along the left. A counter with the tills are placed at the back of the room, with a view into the kitchen behind. Some of the tables are laid out in a booth style; a wooden table in between two green sofas. There is additional seating by the window looking out onto the street, a breakfast bar with tall, metal chairs. On the walls are various signs relating to healthy food and good value. The café offers a variety of food, from individually packed meals in the fridge, such as sandwiches and salads, to hot meals like soup or paella. Smaller snacks, including crisps and health bars, are displayed by the tills. Staff members are regularly bringing out packaged food from the kitchen at the back of the room to the fridge in the front of the cafe. The layout in general feels reminiscent of a café such as Pret or Costa.

It is warm and bright inside due to the many lights and the large window facing the street. One can hear quiet music playing, blending into the background, songs from the current 'Top 10' as well as older, classic hits. I take a moment to listen to the other sounds of the space, the hum of the fridges, the intermittent grinding of the beans in the coffee machine. The smell of the café is reminiscent of a canteen, coffee granules as well as an amalgamation of food all mixing into one warm, savoury scent.

I join my fellow researcher sitting at one of the booths. It is fairly quiet inside the café and the door is holding back the fierce winds of the cold afternoon that is gracing Edinburgh. We are sat opposite each other with our bags and winter coats piled next to us on each bench. A man in his late twenties or early thirties is wandering around the café; darting into the kitchen from outside and back again. Takeaway coffee cup in hand, he is wearing a checked shirt with blue jeans and red Patagonia gilet over the top. I haven't seen him before and am wondering what his role is within the company. He stands behind the till counter talking to

Ryan, the assistant manager, just after, he walks over and introduces himself.

His name is Stephen, he asks what we are up to as “Ryan wouldn’t give him a straight answer”, we all share a laugh. I explain that we are University of Edinburgh students working on an anthropology project writing an ethnography about Social Bite as a space. He smiles and draws one of the metal chairs from the breakfast bar over to the end of our booth and sits down. He is tall and slim with light hair and a short manicured beard, he explains that he is the corporate driver for the Edinburgh branch of Social Bite. I ask what this involves; he says the shops are ‘the face of the company’, a platform for publicity and a safe, social place for people. The corporate section, which provides catering facilities to meetings and events for large companies, is the engine producing the majority of the profit as it has less overheads than the cafes. I ask what kind of clients they have, “Everything from RBS, to Natwest, to the NHS and smaller, local lawyer firms” he answers. I enquire as to why he thinks companies choose Social Bite, “Do you provide a competitive service and price?”. All of the food comes from the same place; Central Kitchen he explains. The food in the shop, the food given away and the food used in corporate events is the same. They offer a wide selection including vegan and gluten free, the quality is good and they offer the same service for the same prices as other companies, he says. However, as well as all this, they are doing it for zero-profit and a good cause, he explains that corporations use them as they can advertise that they work with ethical companies. From this information our group began to think about gifts, reciprocal gain and the perhaps selfish motives involved in exchange.

The conversation is flowing as he freely talks, there are few pauses so little time to ask questions without interrupting him. He speaks to both of us, changing the direction of his body and eye contact at frequent intervals. A few times we speak over each other as I respond to a specific comment, he pauses and allows me to interrupt with my questions before enthusiastically elaborating, often diverging onto a new tangent. This was the first occasion that any of us had spoken with Stephen and so it felt like both parties were enthusiastic and invested in the conversation. As our research developed we fell into a rhythm of interacting with the space and staff at Social Bite: the first ethnographer arrives, says hello to the staff and customers they are familiar with and settles in. After a few hours they are joined by another member of the group who in turn takes over and stays until the café closes. On the first few visits we were new faces and people were eager to speak to us to find out what we were doing. None of our interviews were planned, we ended up having semi-structured conversations with individuals finding out about their backgrounds and involvement in Social Bite, as exemplified in our conversation with Stephen.

I ask how he ended up working for Social Bite. He starts from the beginning, explaining that he has a “Background in Logistics” and has always been interested in working for the not for profit sector. He did not clarify specifically what this was, what kind of training or education this background involved. The conversation moved too quickly to ask more questions and we were forced to make assumptions. From the way he spoke about his past and his role in Social Bite we assumed it was a course or degree of some kind involved with management and business organisation. He had not heard of Social Bite before he saw their advert, it was exactly what he wanted and had been looking for. He got in touch with them and said he “was basically begging for the job”. We discuss how lucky this is to have found a company so perfectly tied to what he is interested in, all smiling, nodding and agreeing with each other. The conversation moves on, led by Stephen, to more political issues. He talks for a minute or so, without interruption, he rhetorically asks: “How has Britain has let this happen, how have we given up on so many people?” He seems passionate about this topic, he is talking in a steady, serious voice, laced with a tone of compassion. He discusses Social Bite’s role in relation to the larger problem of homelessness; Social Bite is just a “Bookmark...it’s bullshit, it is not a solution”. This comment is not said in a negative manner towards Social Bite because it is not doing enough to help the problem, but with anger towards the situation in general. An annoyance that a company like Social Bite is even required. He speaks quietly but with force, you can hear the frustration and anger streaming from his thoughts into to his voice. He sits with his body open to us, his hands gesticulating quickly, putting emphasis of what he is saying. It is clear he is passionate about what he is saying and what he is doing with Social Bite.

After each visit to Social Bite it became clearer that we were not just observing staff in a café but a family united in working towards helping the same cause. This interaction was the trigger for us to begin focussing our thoughts and ideas. We started thinking about the tensions a social business faces between the segregation that inevitably occurs when identifying and labelling the homeless, which perpetuates capital-

ist frameworks of exchange and a genuine interest in helping the homeless by offering them sanctuary and counselling.

Reflection

After spending a fair few hours in Social Bite over several weeks our group became familiar faces as we slowly built up relationships with members of staff and customers. This familiarity meant that despite Stephen being a complete stranger he was friendly and interested in what we were doing, he was happy to talk to us and share any information he had. It was just by chance that we caught Stephen this afternoon, he usually works in the offices or at the events which they are catering for. He spends much of his time transporting fresh food from Central Kitchen to the events which are taking place that day. He had just finished his morning shift and was grabbing a coffee on his way out. No planning or negotiation was required which allowed the interview to be as relaxed as possible, when we explained our project we were honest and clear telling him that we were University of Edinburgh students working on an anthropology project and writing an ethnography about Social Bite as a space. Stephen did not express any surprise when we told him our reasons for being there, this leads me to think our project may have previously been mentioned to him by someone at Social Bite.

Whilst there are obvious differences between Stephen and myself; age, gender, employment experience to name just a few, these were not apparent in the context of the interview. Our group was made up of four females all with similar educational backgrounds leading us to be in our second year at the University of Edinburgh, aged between 19 and 21. Whilst working together, it became apparent that our group shared similar political and social ideologies too, not surprising seeing as we all chose to write our ethnography on a not for profit space. Whilst we may not have been too different from some of the members of staff at Social Bite, such as Stephen, there certainly were others from various backgrounds which we shared much less in common with. I feel confident that these surface differences with Stephen had no influence in the quality of the interview. Perhaps our shared interest in the logistics of Social Bite was more important in shaping the interaction than typical social influences.

I think Social Bite as the setting of what turned out to be an informal interview worked well. Stephen was passing through at the end of his shift and was therefore not interrupted or rushed by work. Evidently, he would feel confident and at home here, furthermore, I am familiar with the space and staff too so felt comfortable. A good space for an interview is vital as it sets the mood and tone and therefore in turn the feel of the interaction.

Due to the relaxed, impromptu nature of our interview a voice-recorder would have been inappropriate, the unstructured interview to the anthropologist would be considered just a conversation to my interviewee. Using a voice-recorder might have made Stephen more conscious of what he was saying, meaning his responses would be less representative of his opinions than what he shared with us on this occasion.

I found the interview an informative and enjoyable experience. I felt relaxed and comfortable, we maintained eye contact and were facing each other throughout, leaning forward occasionally. I felt Stephen wanted to speak to us and did not require constant probing and questioning, he spoke fluently about his role in Social Bite leading onto various tangents such as his personal background and wider socio-economic problems within Britain. This meant I could ask questions I had previously thought about as well as coming up with new questions in response to what he had said. One aspect I did find difficult, however, was remembering all the details of our conversation. Once Stephen left I did my best to immediately record everything I could remember, I think I did a good job of getting the general gist of the conversation down as well as a few specific quotes which stuck in my memory.