

Resizing Auditory Communities. Urban Noise and Strategies of Sound Mapping

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Introduction

Within recent years studies in urban culture have found inspiration from new paradigms and methods in the field of cultural geography. Instead of just mapping the physical character of the city structure, cultural geographers look closely at the culturally constructed *meaning* of places in the city.¹ Reflected in such practices is a shift in focus from the mapping, and the construction, of a symbolic city around the core of historically founded identity, towards the city periphery, and the meanings ascribed to the urban fabric through use. The multiple perspectives of everyday culture, mobility, and the network city gradually substitute the central perspective of symbolic mapping.

Anticipating this development the French cultural critic Roland Barthes in a lecture from 1967 on "Semiology and Urbanism" and later in his essay about Japan *Empire of Signs* from 1970 uses the Japanese capital Tokyo as a testing ground for an urban semiology that substitutes the classical idea of power emanating from a symbolic centre, with that of meanings projected into multiple centers and locations through everyday practices of trade, transportation, and imagination.² An analysis of the urban, argues Barthes, should not limit itself to the meanings inscribed on the city through the planning process, but should proceed to incorporate the ongoing scripting of the city performed by the users – they who attribute to the city difference and meaning. Signs, such as monuments, and representational buildings, may be relatively stable, but the signification that takes place around them is dynamic. An analysis of the city, says Barthes, should preserve some of the transient and fleeting character of signification.

Of course, it is interesting to wonder why Barthes chose Tokyo, a city at that time not very renowned for its urban qualities, as the turning point for his influential urban semiology. It is even tempting to find in his reading of Tokyo an element of

¹ For an introduction to the field of cultural geography see Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001

² Barthes, 1982 and Barthes, 1997.

orientalism substituting the ideals of European planning with the immediate complexity of the foreign Asian city. But upon visiting Bangkok for a seminar, not on *city planning*, but on the role of *social communities* and *artistic practice* in shaping urban culture,³ I feel, it is worth once more to emphasize the role not only Tokyo, but all emerging Asian cities play in redefining the field of urban studies. New forms of urban culture have come into the light of urban studies through studying Asian cities.

What I attempt to present today is largely based on studies done in Osaka under supervision of professor Nakagawa, and may be understood as an attempt to comply with the appeal made by Roland Barthes in "Semiology and Urbanism": to multiply not only the functional studies of the city, but also, and not the least, *the readings of the city*. The questions I wish to pursue are first: how the study of *urban sound environments* can contribute to the analysis of contemporary urban culture by putting new focus on the social aspect of urban signification? And secondly: how artistic practice may play a role in reinterpreting the city through its sound?

I The Tuning of the World

Studies of the sonic qualities of environments have emerged within geographical discourses a number of times during the last century.⁴ But, it is only recently through the systematic use of recording equipment that the studies of sound environments have contributed significantly to the interpretation of cities. Interestingly – in the context of this forum's focus on art and community – the project of listening to environments has primarily been carried out by composers, musicians, and sound artists, the most prominent among them being the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, who founded the so-called World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 1971.

In his main work *The Tuning of the World* Schafer conceptualizes and systematizes an aesthetical approach to sound environments, which largely underlies the politics of contemporary sound space. The general call is for so-called *hi-fi* soundscapes – that are environments, where all sounds may be heard "clearly without crowding or

³ Call for Papers, The 8th Academic Forum on Urban Culture Research, Urban Research Center and Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

⁴ The Finnish geographer J.G. Granö investigates the sonic character of landscapes in *Reine Geografie* from 1929 (Acta Geographica, vol. 2) and Paul Rodaway includes "Auditory Geographies" into his *Sensuous Geographies* (Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place. London: Routledge, 1994).

masking."⁵ Such soundscapes are considered to reflect a natural, organic, and pleasant community. On the other hand, the overloaded sound environments of modern cities are, what Schafer calls, *lo-fi* resulting in a lack of distance and perspective, displaying only presence.⁶ Of course, such environments incorporate a considerable amount of *unwanted sound*, which is how Schafer defines *noise*.⁷

On one hand accepting Schafer's central methodological claim that environments can be analyzed through their sound, while on the other side, I would like to question some of the notions and values invested in Schafer's project. It seems to me, that urban culture has already gone a far way since Schafer coined his concepts. It may even be that Schafer with his heartfelt fear for modern noise was already a stranger to the modern Vancouver that was among his study objects. It is no secret that he, upon the termination of his employment at Simon Fraser University in 1975, moved away from the city with the intent never more to move back to urban life.⁸

II The Sound of Ishibashi

With the intent of studying Japanese sound culture and with Schafer's work in my bag, I traveled to Osaka in 2004. Upon arrival, I was struck by the intensity of applied sound in public and semi-public space. I was annoyed, disturbed and puzzled by music steaming from hidden speakers in every shopping area, with talking elevators and the like, an immensity of sound sources clearly constructed, what Schafer would call a *lo-fi soundscape*. Going from irritation to accept and later to critical interest I started to ask myself, if Schafer was not unrealistically idealistic in his claims for modern sound environments? The call for hi-fi soundscapes seemed out of line with the realities of a modern metropolitan culture. In many cases, the alternative to applied music would be a metabolic hum of urban sounds, from cars, trains and planes.⁹ Taking a closer look at my own neighborhood while living in Japan: Ishibashi, it seemed quite possible that the installment of a sound system on two main streets (sometime in the second half of the 20th century) was actually a reaction to noisy urbanization of the former village Ishibashi. Acting as a masque for external noise from highways, trains and incoming flights, the music from speakers

⁵ Schafer 1977 p. 272.

⁶ Schafer 1977 p. 43.

⁷ Schafer 1977 p. 273.

⁸ Schafer confirms this in a speech given at The Canadian Centre for Architecture in 2005. The speech can be heard through this link: <http://alcor.concordia.ca/~senses/sensing-the-city-lecture-RMurraySchafer.htm>. (8/3 2010)

⁹ The concept of the urban metabole is borrowed from Jean-Francoise Augoyard and Henry Torgue's inspiring and thought provoking encyclopedia of *sonic effects* (*effet sonore*): Augoyard & Torgue, 2005.

in the streets rather established and upheld, than corrupted, the community of Ishibashi.¹⁰

Banal as such realization may seem, it did rearrange the subject of sound environments in a whole new way, since questions of authenticity now carried less weight than aspects of design and territorialisation. The sound of Ishibashi seemed less to reflect a historical core, but more to be subject to processes of shaping and organizing the cultural meaning of the place. The sound system participated in building a *place* in contrast to the surrounding suburban sprawl – and did so thanks to the effort of one of the agents of the local community: the trade organization *Ishibashi Shôtengai*.

I would like to use the opportunity to outline some of the features of a possible theory on urban sonic environments. As a first proposition I would suggest to downscale the notion of authenticity, which so often underlies common discourse on soundscapes. Though urban planning has an urge for the authentic place – meaning the historically and symbolically loaded place, within the field of urbanity such places are generally designed and carefully maintained. So, too, with sonic environments, where authenticity cannot be constructed through processes of elimination of contemporary sounds.

This is not to say, that "anything goes" when designing and evaluating sound environments. For it is easy to detect the social tensions arising from sound design practices as that of Ishibashi trade organization. Testimonies from the shop staff in the area cast light on mechanisms of reterritorialisations, through which shop owners carve out their own "defensible space" within the area aurally signified by the trade organization. Shops in Ishibashi largely use their own sound system, not to attract costumers, they said, but to avoid listening to endlessly repeated music streaming from speakers. Sitting in each his own sound domain, the shop staff may have experienced some form of autonomy, while simultaneously undermining all correspondence between inner and outer, so dear to modern cityscapes – particularly the Japanese.

¹⁰ For an initial presentation of my research in Ishibashi see: Kreutzfeldt, 2006.

III The Concept of Noise

Within the field of urban culture the study of sonic environments should not look for a historically founded authenticity, but rather seek to understand the social, and cultural differences marked through acoustic territorialisation. To encircle a helpful notion for describing and evaluating urban sound environment, I would like to discuss another of the concepts Schafer adopts from modern acoustics: that of *noise*.

Schafer defines *noise* as "any unwanted sound" and thereby gives the concept a very subjective meaning. What is noise for me may not necessarily be noise for you. Such definitions originated from the field of electro-acoustics and communications theory, where any disturbance to an intended signal may be called noise. For example, when listening to radio it is reasonably easy to distinguish between the signals transmitted and the extra noise received. But – a bit like with the concept of hi-fi – it may be difficult to decide what is signal and what is noise, when listening to environmental sound.

Interestingly Schafer discusses the concept of noise in a publication from 1969 and here introduces another, older, definition of noise, which may be useful to this discussion.¹¹ In earlier acoustics the term 'noise' referred to sounds, which were impure and irregular – sounds that were neither tone nor rhythm.¹² As Schafer demonstrates, sounds can easily be analyzed mechanically and their purity or impurity displayed as a Hertz curve. Of course, the strict mechanical definition is once again difficult to transfer to environmental listening. But, the notion of noise as that which is irregular, complex, and improvised may prove to be more useful to a discussion of urban sound space than the concept of *unwanted sound*. Isn't the irregular, the complex, and unforeseeable exactly the nature of urban sound space, where voices and sounds blend and interrupt constantly?¹³

Again returning to the sales staff in Ishibashi, it is significant that their defensive reaction to the music played in the speaker system does not seem to be due to the experience of these sounds as *unwanted*. Actually, the shopkeepers themselves support and cherish the system. Rather their reaction seems to be caused by the endless repetition of the broadcasts. The Ishibashi broadcasts consist of 20-minute tapes endlessly repeated. Thus, it is not because the sound from speakers in the streets is unwanted to the shop people, rather they react because they experience the sound as an unbearable *repetition*, an intolerable automatism acting as a homogenization of time and place.¹⁴

¹¹ Schafer, 1969.

¹² For a discussion of three definitions of 'noise' see Sangild, 2004.

¹³ The idea of noise as irregularity is inspired by Reeh, 2002. pp 78-103.

¹⁴ The description of the double character of the repetition effect by Henry Torgue could support

Following such lines of reflection I would like to suggest as a second proposition for a theory of urban sonic environments, that one element of a desirable sonic environment is that *noise* (meaning the irregular and complex) *may happen*. It is important here to emphasize that noise should not be a permanent condition (that is when it becomes unhealthy), but on the reverse it would not be an urban sound environment, if noise never happened. Consequently, the greatest threat to urban sound environments is not that of noise, but – reversibly – that of homogenization. While Schafer argues for a 'cleaner' sound environment, why not work for a more diverse sound environment? One in which many different social practices, groups, and classes are not only visible, but also audible? The environment that accommodates noise may be the most socially inclusive environment.

IV Acoustic Urban Creativity

Proceeding to consider the role of noise in urban culture I would like to draw some distinctions regarding territorialisation and de-territorialisation of urban space through sound. I borrow those concepts from Deleuze and Guattari, who have developed a whole philosophy around the concepts.¹⁵

As I stated earlier, the use of applied music in the streets of the city may act as a territorialisation of urban space producing signified places within the relatively unsignified city space. In Ishibashi this practice of territorialisation is mirrored in the trade organizations sound system and in the local sound systems in each shop. Enlarging the scope based on material I could generate through interviews with leaders of two other shopping streets in Osaka; it is possible to see a general tendency of increased control over the shopping street by the trade organization.¹⁶ Both in Tenjimbashi 5 shopping street and in Shinsaibashi-suji shopping street the heads of the trade organizations tell me, that the general policy is not to tolerate sale calls and street musicians within the area. Such practices are disturbing to the atmosphere carefully constructed through visual and auditory displays in the city

this argument: "A reappearance of similar sound occurrences. The repetition effect works on two levels: on the one hand, it marks phenomena of automatism involving subjection; on the other hand, it characterizes phenomena of return, re-prise, and enrichment by accumulation." (Augoyard & Torgue 2005 s. 90).

¹⁵ Notably in Deleuze & Guattari, 1987.

¹⁶ Interviews with Mr. Hiroaki head of Tenjimbashi 5 Shôtengai (16/4 2008) and Mr. Hiramatsu head of Shinsaibashi-suji Shôtengai (17/4 2008). The interviews were conducted by myself with Kaori Okado as English/Japanese interpreter.

scene, they argue. Also, the music from shops within the areas can be subjected to control from the organization staff, tells the leader of Ishibashi trades organization.¹⁷

In the context of such tendencies, it is interesting to hear in Ishibashi the emergence of sales calls carefully adapted to the acoustic and social situation within the shopping arcade. Particularly from the local fish shop one often hears calls that blend into the surroundings transforming and appropriating the space. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari I like to suggest the concept of 'the ritornelle' for such deterritorialising practices, developed through a kind of ritualization closely related to the concrete place, and surprisingly sensitive to the music played constantly.¹⁸ Such calling may be seen as the very paradigm of acoustic urban creativity and precisely occupy the role of urban noise developed above.

What differentiates the broadcasting of music and the sales calls are an acoustic openness and sensitivity to the surroundings. While the music may act as a functional masque of external sound thus producing, a rupture between inside and outside, the calls produce fleeting and temporary differences within a signified field through adaption and appropriation. The same may be the case with several unheard and unconsidered ritualized acoustic practices in the city. As a third and final proposition for a theory of urban sound environments, I would like to suggest the relevance of overheard everyday sounds, sounds of human practice, organic, ritualized are immensely significant as mechanisms of producing difference and meaning in the city.

VI Reinterpreting Urban Culture

Finally, I would like to return to the question of mapping, and artistic practice mentioned in the beginning of this paper. As pointed out, the new cultural geographies put the focus on the mapping of socially and culturally constructed meanings of the city. As I have tried to illustrate in the above, I believe analysis of urban sonic environments may prove to be a valuable contribution to that field. Through careful analysis of the ways in which urban environments and cultures are shaped and restructured it may be possible to map some of the ways in which cities are marked with differences and meanings.

My contribution so far has merely been methodological, but to conclude, I would like to show an example of a concrete project of mapping everyday sounds I did in collaboration with the sound artist Brandon LaBelle in 2007 in Copenhagen. As I turn

¹⁷ In an interview conducted with Mr. Akari head of Ishibashi Shôtengai (15/4 2008). The interview was conducted by myself with Kaori Okade as English/Japanese interpreter.

¹⁸ See my PhD-dissertation (Kreutzfeldt, 2009) for a more thorough investigation of the concept of the ritornelle as developed by Deleuze and Guattari.

to the second question posed at the beginning of this paper: how may artistic practice play a role in reinterpreting the city through its sound? It will be my suggestion that apart from the vital contribution to urban vitality from performing arts (street musicians, theater groups etc.), art may function as a forum for reinterpretation of urban sound and urban culture, precisely as it was the case with R. Murray Schafer's musical listening to environments. Art may help us look – and listen – to the city in new ways.

Such were the intentions with the Sonic Postcards-project Brandon LaBelle and I carried out in Copenhagen. In the wake of a new interest in strategic noise mapping started by the European Union, and resulting in maps like fig. 1 we wanted to produce other representations of sound like fig. 2. Instead of the one-sided focus on the unhealthy and potentially deadly influence of external noise, we were interested in probing into what could be called the *everyday soundtracks* of urban dwellers.

Of course, the Copenhagen Sound Experience map only amounts to a random snapshot of how the citizens of Copenhagen experience their city through sound. The data displayed is collected through distribution of questionnaire postcards to random inhabitants in different parts of the city. The questions were as follows "What sounds make you feel at home," "Imagine your street as a piece of music." How would you describe that music?", "What sound experience in the city bothers you the most and why?" and "what sound experience in the city do you enjoy the most and why?" Of course, the incoming data were complex and multidimensional and this is only one attempt at representing the temporary and dynamic character of urban sound space. Though simple and imprecise, such representations may help to refocus attention from the *harmonization of the city through acoustic design* to the *maintenance of urban diversity and cultural specificity*.

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