

The Global Composition. Sound, Media, and the Environment
Darmstadt-Dieburg/Germany, July 25 – 28, 2012

The soundscape of youth

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Abstract

This paper explores the voice of teenagers in the experience of sound within the urban landscape and is part of my PhD research exploring the youth experience of urban soundscapes. It focuses on the methodological approach adopted by the researcher in examining the phenomenological experience of sound. The methods used in this project were influenced by previous research within the arts, music and acoustic ecology, as well as traditional qualitative sociological methods. The area chosen for the research was a space, which has undergone significant redevelopment in an attempt to rejuvenate it, both economically and socially. In exploring this space, which many argue has failed in both design and social inclusion, I wished to have the voices of teenagers, formerly under represented in discourse on urban design, heard. I wanted to highlight how sound can impact on teenagers use of and relationship to, space primarily because they have to adapt to spaces created around them.

Introduction

This research examines the use and application of methods from various fields to explore the role that sound plays in the construction and understanding of space. I distinguish between place and space, borrowing from Lefebvre (1974), Soja (1996) and Gieryn (2000). Space is a more ‘amorphous’ definition in which conceptually new ideas about place can be inscribed through less physical means. I use the term sound to include technological sounds as well as sounds from the natural world. My research is exploring the role of sound in the production of space, within both real and virtual spaces, mediated and non-mediated. I am examining the youth experience of space and sound, through a series of methodological approaches that enable young people to produce the kind of knowledge that we as researchers cannot produce (Chin 2007). This approach aimed to work with adolescents as fully informed people rather than underdeveloped adults. This, according to Raby (2007), has been a dominant theory amongst researchers of youth, otherwise known as the “developmental approach”; whereby teenagers and children were seen as underdeveloped people. However Raby argues that teenagers and children have their own particular insights into the world, therefore we must treat them as the experts in fields of

research, which we are trying to understand from their perspective.

Methodologies

The methods used in this project were influenced by previous research within the arts, music and acoustic ecology, as well as traditional qualitative sociological methods. In this paper I will focus on both the new methods adapted for this research, soundwalking and sound-mapping as well as the more traditional approaches, focus groups and interviews. To date 85 teenagers have participated in soundwalks and focus groups from four local schools from the north side of Dublin city. The goal was to have teenagers document sound through various media in a way that made sense to them and which would be of value to the researcher. These methods included sound and photo documentation soundwalks, as well as a series of focus group discussions.

Soundwalking

The concept of soundwalking, dates back to the early 1970's research of Hildegard Westerkamp (2000) an acoustic ecologist, she explores how sound and space are linked through memory. For Westerkamp, an 'excursion' or walk allows a person the opportunity to take in their sonic environment, she argues that with an increase in sound levels and a neglecting of the importance of sounds within public design, many people are exposed to sounds that can be "painful, exhausting...depressing" (Westerkamp 2007:49) A soundwalk can involve bringing people on walks through familiar spaces or using recording devices to document sonic journeys. This approach can be used to evoke memories of either a place or an experience much like photo elicitation (Harper 2002; Stanczak 2007). The concept of the soundwalk has been further developed by numerous sound researchers as a method to explore a persons connection to space, economic and social practices and urban development (Venot and Sémidor 2006; Semidor 2006; Adams et al. 2008; Adams 2009).

However, one difficulty with this method is that when we are walking, we are also watching and most people find it difficult to separate the two, or to think about what they hear as distinct to what they see. There is a definite sense that being asked what did you see, as opposed to what did you hear, is the norm in western cultures. Thibaud (1998) argues that there is a lack of terminology to describe what one hears, and that most terms are restricted to particular fields, in other words there is no praxeology. Augoyard and Torgue (2006) argue that it is not that there are insufficient words or terms to use within the study of sonic experiences, but rather that there has been a split in the study of sound, between attempts by western culture "to classify noise, music and everyday sounds" and simultaneously working to "abstract and assess sounds on a scale of purity, musicality and intelligibility" (2006:3). The study of audio cultures, noise cultures and the soundscape are often explored in very different fields of research with little overlap; ethnomusicology, communications, history and the physical sciences, for example explore sound within society but in very different ways, (Feld 2004; Howard and Angus 2009; Smith 1999; Leman 2008; Dyson 2009). While this means that there is a large field of research into the area of sound, there is often a gap between sound as a physical and scientific object and the social meaning of sound. There is research within social theory, which looks at the nature of sound and linguistic communication. For example Ong (1982) and Derrida (1973) who have followed on from the work of Saussure and Riedlinger (1986), have

proposed models of language based on social constructivism, for example, language is shaped through a process of interaction and engagement with discourse. They argue that there is also a model for language as a social structure, a process whereby language shapes society, in a kind of feedback loop. These explorations very rarely step outside language and meaning and move across to pure sound, perhaps because it is fundamentally invisible as a subject/ object. This has left sound out of a lot of social literature, which when paralleled to other fields of research such as anthropology and even parts of psychology, presents a major gap in understanding what part sound plays in society.

In designing a research approach that would involve working with teenagers exploring their sonic environment, it was necessary to explore definitions of sound in our group discussions. At the same time trying not to overly influence the meaning they gave to sounds. In general it was actually unnecessary to define the term soundscape as they usually grasped a sense of the meaning from the wording.

Chin (2007) argues that it is important to recognise the inherent expertise that young people bring to the table. We must, when working with teenagers, remember that they have knowledge's, which we do not. Although I presented my research to the teenagers on our first meeting I opened up the floor to their understanding of sound as a concept. This meant talking about sound as mediated and sounds within the natural world and the differences between the two.

Bull (2000) would argue that engaging in listening, particularly in public with sound devices such as iPods and Walkman's, is a solitary experience, a bubble of sound that the listener inhabits. People who engage in listening to media devices are separating themselves from the urban environment. This 'cyberphobia' as Loon (2007) describes it is often linked to concepts of technologies which are in some way immersive, not simply that they surround us but are seen to alter our sense of reality. Contemporary practices of listening, and accessing audible technologies, or using audible technologies to navigate through space as is argued by Bull (2000), a new phenomenon brought about by numerous factors. Some of which are based on the rapid transformation of audible technologies in the past one hundred years, the increased mobility of society as a result of neo liberal ideologies of mobility and freedom (Hagood 2011).

When introducing the teenagers to the soundwalks, their initial reactions were distinctly nonplussed. The soundwalk was first introduced as a silent soundwalk. I explained how through *active* listening as opposed to *passive* listening, I was looking for their experience of the soundscape as actively heard. For a better understanding of noise and sound it became relevant to introduce terminology used within sound studies such as noise, acoustic, mediated, electric sounds, etc., so the students could start to think about sound beyond their immediate understanding. I hoped that this initial dialogue, accompanied by their experience of the soundwalks, would create for a series of interesting discussions within the focus groups.

Research space

Smithfield-from market/ agrarian space to service sector space

The soundwalks undertaken for this research involved concentrating on a specific area within the north side of Dublin city in Ireland. The focus of this study is a place that has undergone significant physical changes and socio-economic shifts since the early 1970's (Lee 2009). For over 200 years the north side of the city was connected to

markets and the docks (Cahill 1861). More recently the relationship between the north sides of the inner city area to these trades has diminished. One area in particular, which was particularly connected to markets, was the Smithfield area and its environs. This area was designated in the early 1990's as a space for the Historic Area Rejuvenation Project, (HARP). This project involved collaboration between several agencies, in discussion with local communities; Russel argues that these types of collaborations are used to legitimize "the role of partnership which may mask the continued dominance of property led forms of renewal and, the use of partnerships as a means of managing the local community" (2001:3). It could be argued to date that the HARP project within Smithfield has failed to revitalize the former market space, in part because of mismanagement between the various partners on this project.

Although Russell argues that the difference between the regeneration project in this area and those that happen in other areas was "the role afforded to the community - at least in the rhetoric of regeneration" (2001:2). Today this area is surrounded by a collection of large public housing and flat complexes, as well as a high rise private apartment complexes, the main city courthouse and a police station. The west side of this area leads towards the largest public park in Ireland, the Phoenix Park, and the east side leads towards a busy shopping district and the docks.

Designing the soundwalk

In designing the soundwalks it was necessary to develop a walk that took in the Smithfield area as well as a small section of the surrounding housing estates, and the busier shopping districts, such as Mary Street and Henry Street. Since the early 1990's it has undergone a series of rejuvenation projects to deal with what has been called the "post-industrial vacancy of Smithfield" (Reflecting City 2012). A number of buildings in that part of the city were derelict as a result of neglect and abandonment by various business and trades, and there were large open spaces once used for cattle and farm trading that were left empty. This area in comparison to the rest of Dublin city has a unique soundscape. As a market space it operates at very different times of the day compared to the rest of the city starting at 4 in the morning and finishing at two, for example. I wanted to create a walk that moved through different soundscapes within the city, which would end in the Smithfield area, hopefully highlighting how sounds changed in relation to spatial, social and economic practices.

The walks were designed to explore how sound could be understood as emerging from different parts of space, connected to different modes of production and socialization and if levels of volume would be sensed by the group on the walk. Raby argues that "there is a cultural gap between adults and young people because children and teenagers occupy distinct cultural locations from those of adults" (2007:40), walking with the teenagers would highlight their motivations for listening to or recording particular sounds within space. The city as a space is often designed to be used by adults, and some spaces are particularly designed to segregate adults from young people (Van Lieshout and Aarts 2008; Kato 2006), space is then "defined through inequality but also through the institutionalization of age-based distinctions" (Raby 2007)

Raby argues that because teenage-hood is now seen as distinct from childhood, there are "distinct discourses, representations, and expectations" (2007:40), and that distinct spaces exist just for and possibly created by teenagers. Sound as a phenomenological

Fig.1 Map of Smithfield walks Map Data ©2012 Google Tele Atlas

The second two walks involved recording the soundscape and landscape through photographs and audio recordings. The photographic walk caused some confusion at first, as the students weren't sure how you could photograph sound. Through short discussions they eventually understood that they would be looking to capture sound producing objects, human and non-human. The audio recorded soundwalk was more difficult for the students as they felt that sound was immersive so how could one capture an individual sound, I explained that like the camera if they moved closer to a sound they could in a sense isolate it, and the further back they were from sounds the more they would record of a space.

The silent soundwalk was discarded after the first school, as the teenagers found it extremely difficult to walk with, what they saw as, nothing to do. In fact some of them found it 'exhausting' (student). Instead they continued to walk the space with the expectation that chatter was still not ideal amongst themselves, but with a clear goal in mind, to become documenters of the soundscape using media technology. This overcame the issue of walking only in silence.

In getting them to do the soundwalk I was asking them to pay attention to what they heard while walking, and not to engage with each other too much. Confronted with the idea of still being together but to ignore the usual social norms of conversation caused some consternation. As a social group, in general, teenagers tend to travel in pairs or small groups, and are only alone when they are at home and in their bedrooms. Essentially I wanted the group to pay attention to the sound produced within different parts of the spaces we walked, and not to each other.

The aim of my soundwalks were:

- To examine what the young people hear,
- Understand what the experience of listening means to them,
- To see if they could differentiate between hearing and listening,
- To find out what part if any, sound plays in their lives.

Sound map and focus groups

The focus groups

The third and final stage of the research with the teenagers consisted of a series of approximately 45 minute to one-hour focus groups. The groups consisted of five teenagers and the researcher, with the conversation recorded onto a digital audio recorder. The purpose of the group was not to simply talk about the meaning of the soundscape; it was to create a space for a more active participation into the research. For example all of the groups created a set of sound maps. These maps were intended to explore how we could look at a space geographically and designate spaces of sound, noise and spaces of alteration, see Fig. 2. That is if the students could potentially alter the soundscape through the reconstruction of place where and how, and why would they do that. This question was always left to the end of the focus group, as by then we would have covered areas such as

- What is noise? What is sound?
- What is the predominant sound within your area?
- How is your home designed, is it soundproofed?
- Who controls sound within the home?
- Do you listen to media technologies and how often?

This pyramid was created to explore sound as not just immersive but also as a layered experience. Each section of the map starting from the bottom up and was separated by sounds that were (from the bottom up)

1. Continuous, always in the background
2. Sounds that happened a lot throughout the day
3. Sounds that happened infrequently
4. And sounds that only happened very occasionally

This sound pyramid created a very different focus, which allowed for a more open dialogue about where sound sat in space. In general it allowed for a more individual voice to appear in the group, as disagreements would arise over where sound belonged in this pyramid. But also debate over what a background or keynote sound is, and what constituted infrequent sounds, made for very interesting discussion. It also, without conscious thought, raised a discussion over what type of meaning these sounds had in their daily life, which was not expected by the researcher.

Conclusion

When exploring sound within social spaces we need to record the sounds but also separate them out and identify them in various ways, for example their meaning, duration and production. This means also looking at the difference between experiencing mediated or non-mediated sounds and natural or man made sounds.

Sound is an important but overlooked part of everyday life and the construction of space. Lefebvre (1974) argues that it is through the use of space and the rethinking of meanings within space, that space becomes re-imagined. Soja argues "we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities" (1996:1), I would also argue that we are sensual beings, subject to apprehending and engaging with the world as much through our senses as our material relationship to space, beings and ideas.

This research involved working with teenagers as active participants, but that means creating a project that interests and engages them. Difficulties arose early on in the soundwalking, initially they were asked to walk in silence. However they found it very uncomfortable to walk in silence with their peers around them. There were problems with sourcing recording devices, and teaching the students to use and record audio took longer than anticipated.

When the maps were found to be inadequate in creating dialogue around the soundscape, there was a lengthy discussion about how that method could be changed without fundamentally altering the research approach.

However working with these problems means having to adapt in a way that best supports your research, but also works best for the teenagers. Most if not all of the changes that occurred over the course of the fieldwork created for a better approach to the research.

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