

## **Building our environment,**

### *3+1 sonic proposals towards a consciousness of inhabiting*

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## **Our sound in the city**

As urbanites, we establish a capricious, ambiguous, schizophrenic relation with our environment. Walking through the streets and squares of our cities, we often feel overwhelmed by the intensity of the "noise", by the stridency of brakes, horns, sirens and screams; or instead, we feel like plunging into these lively and noisy ambiances that distract us from our concerns and obsessions. Sometimes we long for a silence that respects our mood or our occupation. Or if we dared, we would even shout our intense frustration or joy. At home we either close the window so that the noise does not distract us or open it so that the murmur of the street covers our silence.

To surrender or to run away: we consider our daily environment as something given by default, that we can just accept as it is or ignore when possible. And for this purpose we hide behind a set of headphones, we close the window or turn up the TV volume. We decide to renounce to our sonic environment, to delete it burying it under a new "soundtrack" of our choice, imposing our "self-Muzak" on our urban itineraries, composing, juxtaposing or even opposing both: if these headphones could just also subtract our environment...; "noise reduction", elimination of what surrounds us, bubble insulation. This break with our environment is of course not just sonic; it reveals a deeper discordancy with our urban contexts and probably with some shared modes and rules of social life.

Sometimes this new sonic skin of our choice overflows our private sphere, as a wanted or casual perfume, imposing a sonic print to our environment that others will recognize - willingly assenting, just consenting or even rejecting it. Occasionally, this sonic perfume becomes a cry, a reaction to an open wound, a rejection of all surrounding us; this cry becomes here a weapon able to cover what we don't want to hear, deafening ourselves first and, hopefully, the others. And this rejection causes more rejection, since it is perceived from outside as an aggression and rarely as a protest, resistance or a form of catharsis.

## **Inhabiting urban space**

Public space, away from its apparent flexibility, is governed by strict standards of conduct, rules and laws, written and unwritten. Of all the established rules, the unwritten ones are probably the most rigid as attached to habit and custom, willing to model and give meaning to daily life. And habit does not understand unexpected changes. We all know somehow, by means of habit or experience, what we can do or not in our city, or rather, what kind of actions may be accepted and understood (i.e. with indifference) in our so-called public spaces.

From these “imposed” habits derive the “appropriate” modes of designing and building the city –that is, those commonly practiced by spatial disciplines–, obtained thus from a collection of unquestioned routines and assumed inertia. Two curious hypotheses base this particular way of understanding the city construction; we consider first that it’s possible and licit to conceive social and individual living contexts before living, experiencing them, and we further suppose that we can conceive them without involving in the process the persons that will inhabit such contexts. In other words, we believe that urban spaces can be thought in abstraction from practices and modes of life supposed to give birth to such spaces; this conception represents in fact a denial of the citizens’ sovereignty and creativity.

These “permitted” modes of living and building the city try to avoid frictions, physical or social, to impose safety distances with the others, with the space, with the matter. The “other” is otherness, external to my will, questioning my integrity and anonymity, my being in the social space as a self-sufficient individual; the tension established between too close bodies must be neutralized with distance or, the opposite, maximum density –in rush hours and public transportation for example.

## **Deactivation of public space**

This previous description is of course just a caricature; our social and urban condition is fortunately much more rich and complex, and each inhabitant’s actions prove it everyday. But this portrait invites us to reflect on the ongoing processes of *atrophy* and *deactivation* of public spaces as shared contexts for social expression. *Atrophy* of urban spaces that cannot adopt other uses than those originally considered in their conception. *Deactivation* via the absence of “leftovers”, of non-designed surfaces, of

open spaces to be inhabited by social life, that is, transformed, able to accept material and immaterial inhabitant's traces.

Therefore, an essential question must be posed concerning the nature and character of our new public spaces: should they offer closed over-designed contexts where accepted practices are pre-established, or can urban planners provide the required conditions for new social interactions to emerge and generate its own spaces?

This question applies also to the new "sustainable" urban models, presented today as the urban planning paradigm: eco-cities, eco-neighbourhoods, etc. What remains unclear in the equation is the concept itself of "sustainability", much closer in its application to some kind of ecological engineering and economics than to an integrated balance where social and cultural components are also taken into account. Among other flaws, the absence of social mixity and the lack of open, non-treated spaces is a common feature in some new eco-city models.

### **Sonic public space**

When trying to solve the complex equation of public space, sound is a particularly active and perturbing dimension with very specific attributes in terms of limit, distance or scale that challenge many of the established social rules. We can divert our view from a disturbing scene or our fingers from a repulsing texture, but we cannot escape sound at will. Public space constitutes a shared sound context where silence is made of a dense multiplicity, where our sounds will encounter and negotiate with many others.

*Proposal nr.1, Blind Walk, in pairs: Close your eyes and let your partner guide you through the city. Walk for a long time (at least 30') in an environment you know well.*

Thinking the city through the sounds that inhabit it presupposes a critical reconsideration of the "graphic" city model, of the static and timeless design that still today rules the spatial disciplines. The virtual design of the city seems to deny its "flesh", its matter, its inhabiting nature. Sound will necessarily immerse us back into the sensorial city, away from a purely external overview, a complex city in constant transformation, composed of multiple rhythms and cycles.

From this temporal and dynamic perspective, "thinking the city" is not the exclusive domain of the city planner or the architect; the physical execution of this external will is just the beginning of a process involving all the inhabitants. The sonic city, i.e., the

sensorial, temporal and corporeal one, can only be built from the inside, from the "guts" of this urban body, from its routines and daily experiences. From this inside, building the city means using, eroding, exploring a place, dialoguing with it, experiencing its tensions and necessary conflicts.

## **Building the city**

### *Listening*

In a sonic and sensible construction of our city, the first step is necessarily learning to *listen*, opening our senses to the environment, resonating with it as a pure sensory phenomenon, before imposing any intention or expectation (as far as possible). We have assumed that urban "noise" can only correspond to ugliness and disturbance, ignoring any other possible function or quality that these sounds may have; we became progressively "deaf", shielding our ears first mentally and then physically. A never-ending race started here where we wanted to hide our environment with new and stronger sounds that will become noises for the others. Unfortunately, the antagonism music / noise in occidental culture has excluded many intermediate stages, forcing us to choose between pleasure and indifference (or even pain).

*Proposal nr.2, Sound Mapping: take paper and pencil, place yourself anywhere. Listen carefully and "draw" what you hear. Where are you placed in your drawing? What are you drawing: space, time, matter, motion?*

### *Dialoguing*

Building the city is not just listening: we are all prolific producers of sound, both in quantity and diversity. This production is rarely unaware of the surrounding space: we modulate our voice intensity and colour in order to be heard and understood, or explore an echo, a reverberation, a sound filtering. A wide palette of sound effects shape the response of the space, effects whose meaning we are perfectly able to decode in terms of dimensions, materials, time and weather conditions, and a wide range of other subtle details.

Our sonic explorations are usually furtive, shy, ashamed of what others might think. We are again forced to choose between two extremes with no in-betweens: "normality" (=silence) or insanity. However, exploring a urban space is much more than just screaming and imposing. Exploring is sending and waiting for an answer,

looking for a balanced dialogue where there is place for the space and for those sharing it. The knowledge required for this dialogue is necessarily based on daily experience, the one acquired by the street musician or the seller, aware that in order to be heard, voice register and intonation is much more important than volume. This example represents one of the many possible intelligent sonic adaptations we meet everyday in our streets and squares.

*Proposal nr.3, Exploring a space: choose one place with unusual acoustics: a tunnel, a vaulted space, etc. Explore it, look for its resonance with your voice, your hands, your sonic body. Share this "dialogue" with others. Do it in motion, as in your daily itineraries in the city.*

### *Transforming our environment*

These two ways of approaching our environment, listening and dialoguing, constitute an invitation to transform our relationship with our urban spaces. The aim is to modify our daily experience of the city, to transform the ordinary perception of urban phenomena by means of some subtle "extra-ordinary" actions. A transitory break with normality for its better understanding and re-activation.

We should consider these explorations as an act of awareness of our role as urban builders, as citizens that reflect on the kind of city they want to live in and practice their intuitions. The impact might be limited but at the same time necessary and significant. Maybe then, we begin to modify some of our daily decisions.

*Proposal nr.0, Your everyday urban experience: do not just "go through" a space running to your destination, do not waste a chance to delight your senses. Listen to the composition offered by the city; you are a part of it.*

### **Author**

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