

John Bingham-Hall Site and sound

Article (Published version) (Refereed)

Original citation:

Bingham-Hall, John (2014) *Site and sound*. Journal of the London Society (466). pp. 32-37.

© 2014 The London Society

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69903/>

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.



SITE & SOUND

Text by John Bingham-Hall
Illustration by Kyle Platts

A decade ago, Ken Livingstone, then Mayor of London, put forward an unusual proposition: a dedicated strategy to incorporate urban sound into City Hall's planning decisions. The report, *Sounder City*, had a remit to address sound in London, ranging from aircraft noise to raucous neighbours to idiosyncratic neighbourhood "soundmarks". It was the first strategy of its kind and remains unique – a time capsule of how London's acoustic (that most marginal of urban aesthetics) was then, momentarily, duly considered.

As anyone who has reported a late night party to a local council will know, action on noise pollution is nothing new. Where Livingstone's 'Noise Team' (Max Dixon and Alan Bloomfield) went further was to define sound as of something of cultural value. They spoke of "soundscapes": understood in contemporary music circles but rare as an explicit concern in city building. The word was coined in the 1970s by R Murray Schafer as part of his World Soundscape Project, which took stock of acoustic environments from across the globe, categorised them and identified imbalances with implications for human and animal

health. In his 1977 manifesto *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer described sound as something "mythological": a pre-literate medium "from the beginnings of earthly presence" and a means of defining space "much more ancient than the establishment of property lines and fences". Amongst those who have made it their work to further the aims of Schafer it is generally accepted that modern culture, with its focus on written over spoken communication, has an overwhelmingly visual bias. Unlike "property lines and fences" that are inscribed visually on maps or in architecture and be enshrined in law, soundscapes have no edges and change

constantly. So no wonder that, undoubtedly, the design and preservation of soundscape remains slippery to grasp and to cement as a value in the urban planning conscious.

Nevertheless, Livingstone's Noise Team followed in Schafer's footsteps, not only looking for ways to identify London's different sounds, but also with a view to balance the soundscape, and enhance it to create a more attractive environment. Noise pollution mapping was already standard practice in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. *Sounder City* took a step further by recognizing soundscape as part of the city's distinctive historical character. It aimed to identify individual sounds that shape London's unique acoustic. Canals and waterways stood out as a starting point as places of quiet compared to the traffic-clogged streets but also as home to the idiosyncratic sounds of locks, boats, wildlife, and moving water. Church bells, wind in trees and reverberant spaces such as railway arches and street arcades were also cherry-picked as soundmarks ripe for documentation and protection. The strategy went so far as to propose designating "Areas of Relative Tranquility or Special Soundscape Interest" for the most valuable of London's sound environments.

Sounder City argued for the conscious design of new acoustic experiences. Whilst private homes should be protected from noise, public spaces were thought of as places to be animated with "sequences of soundscapes characterised by diversity and special local interest". They called for design that "pleases the ear as well as the eye". But the ear and the eye are not always in cooperation. Many visually attractive building materials are sound reflecting, on top of which materials designed for their acoustic qualities are in short supply. In our visually oriented culture, where urban design is most often judged in a professional context through the camera lens rather than immersive multi-sensory experience, looks are

always bound to win out.

So who is listening to London today? The 2011 London Plan makes fleeting reference to Livingstone's vision for a well-tuned urban acoustic but dismisses the possibility of formal soundscape designation. It refers to the value of quietness but loses the focus on sound's positive cultural contribution – and, so other groups and institutions have picked up that slack. Also in 2011, the British Library created the UK Soundmap with 350 members of the public uploading some 2,000 recordings. A quick glance suggests that that it's not tranquil waterways that inspire amateur phonographers, but busy train stations, revving bus engines and rain on pretty much anything. These things Londoners are accustomed to, but perhaps we should also think of these "noisy" sounds as part of the energy of city life.

Another collection of sounds, the London Sound Survey, painstakingly curates amateur and professional recordings and explores fascinating ways of examining their relationship to the city through scores of maps. In one, London's canals and lesser rivers are represented in the style of the tube map with over 100 recordings taken at bridges, basins, locks and creeks marked out as stops along their routes. Not all sounds are ambient backdrops to the city's visual aesthetic though; some also compel us. The London Sound Survey includes sound actions – "sounds designed to have an effect on others" – like the calls of markets traders, fundraisers, protesters and street entertainers. The soundscape of street voices, shaped by accents, languages and social practices, varies from one neighbourhood to the next and forms the acoustic evidence of social makeup. As such, local soundscapes are directly affected by powerful social forces – new immigration, and displacement from rent increases – population dynamics that can move much faster than changes to the built environment. What's more, not all the sounds London has heard are still part of our audible

environment today. Unlike visual artifacts, writing and art that can be preserved on paper, or music that can be recreated through performance, there is a past that predates audio recording – a past that cannot be revisited.

In attempt to compensate for this, The London Sound Survey collects descriptions of sound from the last 1,000 years of London literature, news and personal account. The most common reference? “Ambient sounds of street and town”. The everyday noise of city life seems always to have inspired listening, though its quality is constantly changing. The rattling of wooden wheels on cobbles features regularly in these historical accounts, but has now been usurped by the internal combustion engine. Technology has always fundamentally reshaped our urban sound environment, and does so again as the fuel cell silences traffic. Will this mean the more subtle acoustic nuances of social interaction, wildlife and building material can come back to the fore?

The London Sound Survey is just the most prolific of a raft of projects making use of web technology to create publicly-sourced and accessible sound archives. The University of Salford’s Sound Around You project allows anybody to upload to its sound map, aiming to inform urban planners and homebuyers as they research urban areas. For a project called Your Favourite London Sounds, Peter Cusack polled the London public and released a CD of the soundscape top 40 alongside a (now defunct) online map. Once again the prosaic sounds of train stations, markets and busy streets fared well. Through technology, the public has done the job Ken Livingstone wanted doing 10 years ago: the exploration and identification of soundscapes that make London unique.

Sound mapping means we have a rich description of the relationship between sounds and the geography of the city. However, the rich potential of online resources to be exploited by architects and City Hall – for soundscape preservation or enhancement projects – goes

unrealised, leaving them marginal interest sites for academics and amateur phonographers.

To promote listening as a public activity – perhaps “site-hearing” to go hand-in-hand with sightseeing – this exploration of sound would need to be brought into the public spaces of the city itself, where it can be chanced upon by a wide audience. Specialist groups like London College of Communication’s Creative Research in Sonic Arts Practice project and Goldsmiths College’s Unit for Sound Practice Research occasionally promote “soundwalks”, guiding members of the public on an acoustic tour. Susan Phillips’s 2010 installation *A Song Cycle for the City of London* highlighted the “eerie quiet” of architecture in the Square Mile outside of business hours as “her unaccompanied voice resonated through empty streets around the Bank of England, across post-war walkways and medieval alleyways”. Beyond this though, no developments or permanent public projects have made soundscape a central feature.

Is sound perhaps too ephemeral and irrational to be a deep consideration in planning policy, as Livingstone would have had it? Whilst the look of the city can be literally set in stone through urban design, sound is less easy to control – especially in the public realm. By attempting to design the soundscape of the city we risk cleansing this most anarchic of urban sensory experiences of its richness and presenting an idealised version of urban tranquillity, or rigidly offering a provision of space for noise. Sound should no doubt be a consideration, and no doubt recorded for posterity, but life in a city may always mean learning to listen to and love all of its noise & sounds. ■

“By attempting to design the soundscape of the city we risk cleansing this most anarchic of urban sensory experiences of its richness and presenting an idealised version of urban tranquillity, or rigidly offering a provision of space for noise. Sound should no doubt be a consideration, and no doubt recorded for posterity, but life in a city may always mean learning to listen to and love all of its noise and sounds.”

JOHN BINGHAM-HALL is a PhD researcher and freelance consultant with both professional and academic interests in public space, urban cultures, media and communication technology.