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A Pocket Guide to Soundwalking

Some Introductory Notes on its Origin, Established Methods and Four Experimental Variations

Antonella Radicchi

“Komm tanz mit mir”
(Pina Bausch 1977)

“Let’s climb out of our bubbles now, emerge from behind our screens, walls, loudspeakers and headphones and open ears directly to the environment.

Let’s go for another soundwalk.”
(Hildegard Westerkamp 1974)

INTRODUCTION

Unlike figurative art that is traditionally appreciated by means of visual perception, to experience the work of architecture and of the city necessarily implies a spatial and temporal dimension as well as a perception involving all the senses. Therefore, experiencing space by walking through it, has always been a point of reference for the architect-urbanist who is not merely fascinated by the physical form of the city, but also by understanding how common people experience the spaces of everyday life, how they perceive them and what values and meanings are attributed to them. This approach to “city sense and city design” can be defined as “Sensuous Urbanism” (Radicchi 2012; 2017): a branch of urbanism, the origins of which lie in the theoretical framework created by Kevin Lynch during his years at MIT and to which the work of other scholars such as J. Douglas Porteous, Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte can be connected.

To scholars interested in challenging the predominance of a vision-centred paradigm and supporting the importance of the search for an holistic approach to urban planning, the *soundscape*

paradigm can be considered as a viable path to pursue in order to achieve this objective. From the early definitions of soundscapes provided by Murray Schafer and Barry Truax, to the latest one released by the ISO norm, a soundscape can be understood as “an environment of sound (or sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by a society” (ISO 2014). Soundwalks can be seen as one of the most appropriate tools to allow for analysing and evaluating the city starting from the perceptual relationship between the inhabitants and the city itself through its sonic component. Let’s travel back in time together and, with great leaps, trace its origins and explore early examples.

SOUNDWALKING: ORIGINS AND EARLY EXAMPLES

In general terms, walking as a method of exploring the world belongs to the history of mankind, as the so-called Bedolina Map shows: carved in stone during the late Bronze Age and the Iron Age (1,000–200 BC), it is one of the most ancient topographic maps and depicts walking routes from one place to another. In modern times, especially in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, walking in cities was acknowledged as a creative, reflective and sometimes subversive way of exploring and understanding the city, by means of diverse practices such as “aural *flânerie*” (Boutin 2015), “nightwalks” (Beaumont 2016), and the Situationist *dérive*, (Debord 1958, as quoted by McCartney 2014). In the 1950s and 1960s, “sensewalking” was introduced as a method used by a range of disciplines to “investigate and analyze how we understand, experience and utilize spaces” (Adams, Askins 2009) by focusing on sensory information gained through one or more senses. The first example can be found in 1956, conducted by Kevin Lynch and Gyorgy Kepes in NYC to study the relationship between sensuous urban experience and the capacity of individuals to use the public spaces of the city (Radicchi 2012). Another early example of “sensewalking” was conducted by Michael Southworth in 1967 to investigate “the per-

| Criteria | Kind of soundwalk |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Location | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> rural soundwalks urban soundwalks |
| Time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> day soundwalks night soundwalks soundwalks over time, visiting the same location(s) at different hours, on weekdays and weekends; during different seasons |
| Duration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> from 10 to 90 minutes |
| Number of participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> solo soundwalks duo soundwalks (usually a researcher/artist leads a citizen/expert) group soundwalks |
| Kind of participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> group soundwalks with experts (e.g. acousticians, architects) group soundwalks with citizens/city users |
| Path | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> stationary soundwalks linear soundwalks along a predefined path linear, flexible soundwalks along a predefined path linear soundwalks along an open path |
| Position of the soundwalker | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> detached, trying not to have a sonic impact on the soundscape interactive, trying to play with the environment |
| Group discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> silent soundwalks, with group discussions at the end of the soundwalk commented soundwalks, in which comments are made by both the leader and the participants at designated stops and at the end of the soundwalk commented city walks, with comments made by both the leader and the participants on the way of the walk |
| Evaluation points | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> silent soundwalks without evaluation points silent soundwalks with listening evaluation points, defined before the soundwalk silent soundwalks with listening evaluation points, defined during the soundwalk soundwalks with complex evaluation points defined before the soundwalk soundwalks with complex evaluation points defined during the soundwalk |
| Visual deprivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> blinded soundwalks, the blind leading the blind blinded soundwalks, the seeing leading the blind classic soundwalks without visual impairments |
| Technical equipment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> augmented soundwalk/audiowalks: headphones and audioguides which provide layered sounds over the environment recorded soundwalks with listening evaluation points: stereo, binaural and ambisonic recorder, photo camera, video camera, mobile applications recorded soundwalks with complex evaluation points: noise meter, stereo, binaural and ambisonic recorder, photo camera, video camera, mobile applications |

Table 1: A list of criteria for soundwalk design (Illustration: Radicchi 2017)

ceptual form of the soundscape” in Central Boston (Southworth 1967).

“Sensewalks” usually deal with everyday experiences of the city gained focusing on one particular sense, and, accordingly, soundwalks can be considered as an example of sensewalking, as can be lightwalks and smellwalks. The term soundwalk was introduced by Murray Schafer in the 1970s in the frame of the *World Soundscape Project* (WSP): Schafer and his group used soundwalks to investigate Canadian and European soundscapes, emphasizing the action of “listening” as a means to increase awareness of the notion and evaluation of soundscapes. Schafer stressed the difference between a “listening walk” and a “soundwalk”, defining the first as “simply a walk with a concentration on listening. [...]” and the latter as “an exploration of the soundscape of a given area using a score as a guide” (Schafer 1977). However, it was Hildegard Westerkamp, the German-Canadian composer and musician member of the WSP, who contributed to the definition and spreading of soundwalking as “any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment [by giving] our ears priority” (Westerkamp 1974). In the same period, the French philosopher and musicologist Francois Augoyard – who contributed to the foundation of CRESSON, the *Centre de recherche sur l’espace sonore et l’environnement urbain* in Grenoble – developed a rhetoric of walking, an early example of reflexive research methodology in which the ideas and experiences linked to sounds and urban ambiances of research subjects were acknowledged within the research enterprise (McCartney 2014).

HOW TO DESIGN A SOUNDWALK: CRITERIA SELECTION

Since the early examples of soundwalks, practitioners have experimented with a huge variety of methods within the arts and humanities, social sciences, ecology studies and engineering. However, this contribution is not aimed at tracing the history of soundwalking, which has been presented in seminal texts such as the one by Andra McCartney (2014). It rather attempts to define and discuss a set of criteria to be applied in designing a soundwalk (Table 1), providing several examples of particular relevance. The term soundwalk will be used as it is in

| Purpose | Kind | HOW TO/Instructions |
|--|--|---|
| Civic and political <i>To increase sonic awareness of listening and the soundscape culture</i> | Silent soundwalks | Define a route, potentially with several listening stops along it. Then, walk in a line at a slow pace and stick to the route, in silence. If listening spots are part of the soundwalk, stop the group at these points and focus on listening for one minute, in silence. Then go on. At the end, a group discussion takes place. Questionnaires and maps can be handed out to facilitate the discussion. Participant data collection is not recommended during the soundwalk. |
| Educational <i>To train for soundscape action research</i> | Commented soundwalks with simple evaluation points | Define a route with several evaluation points along it. Then, walk in a line at a slow pace and stick to the route, in silence. Stop the group at the evaluation points, focus on listening for one minute, in silence. Then start the group discussion. Then go on and repeat the procedure at each evaluation point. At the end, a group discussion takes place. Questionnaires and maps can be handed out to facilitate the group discussions during the soundwalks and at the end. Data collection is encouraged during the soundwalk. |
| Research <i>To evaluate the soundscapes in order to develop analyses, evaluation and planning criteria</i> | Solo soundwalks | Walk in silence along an open, imaginary, improvised route. Follow your ears and let them guide you in the sonic exploration of the area. Data collection is highly recommended immediately upon completion, in the form of a sonic diary/sonic notes/sonic mental maps. Recording the solo soundwalk and listening to it when back home is highly recommended to reflect on variations in perception. Binaural recordings are highly recommended. |
| | Soundwalks with complex evaluation points | Define a route with several evaluation points along it. Then, walk in a line at a slow pace and stick to the route, in silence. Stop the group at the evaluation points, focus on listening for one minute, in silence, and start the collection of mixed data. Then go on and repeat the procedure at each evaluation point. At the end, a group discussion takes place. For comparative analyses, the collection of mixed data implies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative data: DB(A) measurements, source definition; • Qualitative data: field recordings, psychoacoustics analyses, questionnaires, pictures, videos. Binaural recordings are imperative in order to develop psychoacoustics analyses. |

Table 2: A Pocket Guide to Soundwalking, proposing four methods of soundwalking, according to civic and political, educational and research purposes (Illustration: A. Radicchi 2017)

practice, i.e. including both guided “listening walks” and guided “classic” soundwalks.

With regard to the location, parks have been a favored place for soundwalks, because of the association of soundwalks with the northern pastoralism of its founder, Schafer; however, in recent years, there has been an increase in soundwalks planned in accessible locations embedded in cities, which promote democratic citizen engagement processes and avoid social exclusion (McCartney 2014). With regard to the duration, a soundwalk might last for 90 minutes, especially in the case of soundwalks with complex evaluation points (Adams et al. 2008). However, 30 minutes could be the ideal timeframe for a soundwalk, especially if conducted in cities, because this “corresponds to the distance which we can cover on foot in an average European city while keeping a certain homogeneity” (Sémidor 2006). A literature review reveals that silent soundwalks and soundwalks with group discussions are mainly performed in the realm of acoustic ecology and sound studies with civic, political and educa-

tional purposes by scholars that follow the WSP’s methods (Des Coulam, John Drever, Eric Leonardson, Albert Mayr, Andra McCartney, Gregg Wagstaff, Justin Winkler, to name but a few). In this case, participants are randomly recruited and they are usually citizens and city users, not necessarily experts in disciplines related to the environment. Commented City Walks, which imply the act of walking, talking, perceiving simultaneously, are practiced with the main goal of gaining access to the *in situ* sensory experience of passers-by from scholars that follow the CRESSON’s methods (Thibaud 2013). Soundwalks with complex evaluation points have mainly been applied in the field of urban planning and soundscape research and in the frame of European interdisciplinary projects, mainly with the aim of validating soundwalks as a tool for the evaluation of soundscapes and establishing soundwalk protocols (e.g. ISO 12913-2: *Data Collection*, currently under development). In this case, participants are usually recruited among soundscape specialists, architects, urban designers, city managers and “local experts” (e.g. Adams et al. 2008; Aletta et al. 2016; Brooks, Schulte-Fortkamp 2016).

A PROPOSAL FOR A POCKET GUIDE TO SOUNDWALKING

As soundwalks can be designed in many different ways, a search for the most appropriate method could represent a challenge,

especially for newcomers. Thus, a *pocket guide to soundwalking* is outlined hereafter (Table 2). It provides an overview of various methods of soundwalking, drawn from a literature review and my own practice, which has been inspired by Albert Mayr, who led the first soundwalk I participated in. The methods are differentiated according to the purposes to be fulfilled: civic and political, educational and research.

Independent of the method applied, the ultimate aim of soundwalking is to listen consciously to the environment and to increase our awareness of the quality of the sonic environment, as Westerkamp points out (1974). By reactivating our ears, we will become increasingly aware that we live constantly immersed in noises from traffic and meaningless sounds. But, rather than coping with them by wearing headphones, we will take action and reclaim sonic quality in cities. By practicing soundwalking, we will also become aware that soundscapes are rather a “resource” (Schulte-Fortkamp 2013) than merely noise: they can tell us about the social, cultural, economic, political and environmental lives of our cities’ inhabitants. Sound delivers information helpful for the city user’s walks in the

city, and it plays a fundamental role in shaping the identity of places. Sound, such as that of a community, is immaterial cultural heritage. Sound can colour the environment and positively impact on our feelings, as is the case with music. Sound can be used as a tool of power to manipulate behaviour, as in the case of the *ultrasonic teenage deterrent* employed with the aim of keeping groups of teenagers away from malls as they are not potential buyers. Sound can also be intended as “the antidote to the widespread fear of having nothing to say; [...] [as] an infusion of acoustic security” provided by our capitalistic society to reassure the mass (Le Breton 1999).

To understand these multifaceted meanings embedded in soundscapes, soundwalks are a valid methodological tool and therefore should be included in the tool kit of anyone interested in recovering an holistic and human centred approach to “city sense and city design”.

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