

# Soundmarks in Place: the Case of the Divided City Centre of Nicosia

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## Abstract

In this paper, the distinctive sounds of Nicosia are detected and a basis is set for examining whether the soundmarks of the divided centre of the city tend to empower the sense of place of the inhabitants. Firstly, the concept of the soundmark, as defined by Acoustic Ecology, is connected to the complex dimensions of place. Then, the methodology is analysed and explained, and the experience of a soundwalker is sited, delineating the soundscape of the city centre, leading the discussion to the religious soundmarks. Finally, a basis for a further discussion is set, regarding both the methodology needed to be applied and the religious soundmarks in place themselves.

**Keywords:** soundwalk, place, soundmark, religion

## 1. Theoretical Background

The connection of place with sound has been widely discussed and redefined in contemporary Sound Studies (Sterne 2012, 91-94). Already, from the early conversations on the notion of place, which acquires properties of the evolution of space, their complex relation has been stressed, where sound may play a highly significant role: Tuan has been arguing that 'sound dramatizes spatial experience' (Tuan 1977, 16), while, in parallel, the evolution of Soundscape Studies was in full development (Schafer 1977). Today, the notion of soundmark is well established, while it is also considered to be sufficient enough in order to characterise an acoustic community. However, the soundmarks also characterise places and since any sound can participate 'as a vibrant ingredient within community life' (LaBelle 2010, 83), by studying sounds within communities, one can approach an exploration and definition of the relation between the acoustic community that lives in a specific area and place itself.

One of the initial definitions indicates that a soundmark is a unique community sound, or it is of 'qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community. Soundmarks, therefore, are of cultural and historical significance and merit preservation and protection' (Truax 1999). While discussing this theory and trying to expand its attitudes, it is considered important to relate the definition of soundmark to the concept of place, at least as the last has been related to space and meaning in the academic community: Carter et al. agree that '... place is space to which meaning has been ascribed'(1993xii).From the beginning, however, this meaning is a result of a complex procedure before it is acquired to place: Rodman stated that 'places are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions' (Rodman 1992, 641). It has also been discussed that places '... are more than geographic settings with definitive physical and textual characteristics' (Stokowski 2002).These attributes of place are worth being correlated to sound, as they consist of an intellectual approach to the meaning of an area, just as Sound Studies explore such features.

This study intends to explore the procedures that take place among the acoustic community when sounds of distinctive value resonate in a specific place, and the ways in which the general soundscape is evoked within this particular cultural context. The procedures that characterise the interaction between the sound sources and the way the listeners relate to sounds are discussed, depending on the environmental and cultural context of this exchange of information.

## 2. Description

The city of Nicosia, capital of the island of Cyprus, has been divided since 1974: its residents live either in the south or in the north of the city, and they mostly belong to the Greek Cypriot or the Turkish Cypriot community, respectively. The divided capital of Cyprus has been resonating until today, and is still intensively characterised by the presence of the existing sounds over the area. The northern part, the empty Buffer Zone (also called Dead Zone) itself and the south part of the city centre, apart from territorial borderlands, inevitably define separate aural areas, characterised by sonic events caused by the activity of the ethnic communities living there. As a result, specific soundmarks being produced by rich-in-context sources in both sides are audible in the sonic environment of the area too; more importantly, some of them travel across the borders of the city, indicating the existence of one acoustic community with unique characteristics. A common architectural structure makes the area –north and south– sound relatively equally, while by doing further observation, one can notice many detailed differences in the characteristics of sound in the place, from one block to the other.

### 2.1. Objectives

The main objective of this study has been to explore and define the soundmarks of the city centre of Nicosia, and in a next level to study them in relation with its inhabitants, as well as to find out how these sounds acquire meaning by them. These meanings may potentially influence the bonds of the inhabitants with their place, so a discussion can be started regarding people's place attachment through sound. With regard to this objective, the aim has been to listen carefully to the soundscape of the area of interest, understand its dynamics and then approach a method of analysing them, in order to comprehend such interactions.

### 2.2. Methodology

The study of such a subject requires paying attention to the detail of the sound environment and its influence to the acoustic community, therefore, methods that have been applied in Soundscape Studies should be used. It was decided that a combination of soundwalking and ethnographic interviews would be an appropriate combination, mainly in order to combine a classic, experiential approach of Soundscape Studies with a more in-depth knowledge about the soundmarks that can evolve after a guided discussion with the inhabitants, in a future

level. The soundwalk itself incorporates a multi-modal observation of the urban environment, taking cues from the visual and the sonic environment. It is also considered safer to practise the same soundwalks in different hours and days, (Semidor 2006) in order to move the soundwalker towards a better connection with the place. Hildegard Westerkamp encourages listeners to become part of the acoustic environment and reappraise it (2007), and in favour of this research, the soundwalk is used trying to generate data that could offer a place-related direction. Before the beginning of the series of the soundwalks, but also during their practice, the connection with the meaning of place has been kept in mind. In the present paper, an 'average' experience of a soundwalk is described—an enriched mediocre of all the soundwalks realized—looking to discover the soundmarks of place in the city centre of Nicosia.

### 3. The Soundwalk

A first evaluation of the soundscape of the city centre has evolved after intensive observation, listening and verbalisation of the sounds that exist in the area and dominate the soundscape. In the first place, however, the method of soundwalk was frequently used to make the evaluation of the soundscape clearer and more precise. The following text explains the personal experience, from the writer's point of view, after systematic soundwalks in the area of interest.

In the first place, a description is made in order to emphasise the differences between the two sides of the city centre, by examining the soundscape across the area and by focusing on certain characteristic sounds that define that place.

The area is characterised by a unique architectural, cultural, and consequently sound variety, something that has been directly obvious from the first soundwalk. Moving from one neighbourhood to another across the Buffer Zone, and while frequently meeting dead-ends created by the barriers spread across this Line, the qualities of the ambience change, so do the sounds. From Paphos Gate, the east entrance to the old city centre, to the central commercial Ledra Street and then, passing from the check point and heading east again towards the old car repair garages in the north part of the city, the sound qualities vary, yet they

develop on a standard lo-fi basis. Going back to the tourist area and the municipal closed market in north Nicosia, and passing by the Selimiye Mosque, then going back to the south city centre, passing next to Faneromeni church, and walking through the narrow streets, the sound of Nicosia appears to shape its identity. Passing next to a small, quiet cafe in front of another roadblock and ending up in the quiet area of Saint Kassianos Church, where the soundwalk ends, it feels like the sound of the place has been there forever, mixed, rich, united. The soundwalks that lead to the following description took place on a normal summer day in the city centre of Nicosia<sup>1</sup>.

### 3.1. Soundwalking

Starting from the area of Paphos Gate, where the old, calm area of the city centre meets the new buildings and the big and noisy streets, I sense<sup>2</sup> the quietness that lies beyond this point. It is not the buildings, but the sounds which appear being masked when passing the starting point of the soundwalk. And this is what actually happens: entering the old city centre of Nicosia, car sounds cut out and become a far lo-fi soundscape, when new, more detailed and accurate sounds come to the foreground. The school ambience and action coming from the coffee shop where elderly people spend their time, mark the soundscape. Two of them are playing backgammon; the sound of dice rolling and their checkers hitting the wooden board stand out in the -relatively- silent ambience. Murmuring, newspaper page turning and sounds coming from the kitchen of the coffee shop are also present, while walking outside of the Holy Cross Catholic Church. Walking through the narrow streets, alert by the quiet talking of the army guards in front of their military checkpoint, the sound of leaves rustling and birds chirping, I reach an alley, where sound is circulated, leaving my ears exposed to the reverberations created by the high walls.

The open-air parking areas that I have to cross in order to reach the crossing point, create another quality, the one of the abandoned area, as they are quiet, with a terrain texture that is not taken care of, full of dust and small rocks. Standing for a while in the south crossing point of Ledra street, I can focus more on the sound of people passing by, talking on their phones, talking to each other, shouting at their kids. Cell phones, music from the nearby tourist shops and people entering and leaving shops and cafes compose the soundscape of this point.

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1. The sounds were noticed and written down on a separate log, during the realisation of 10 soundwalks in different working days in the city centre, actualizing the same walking route each time.

2. In the description of the realisation of a soundwalk in the area, the present tense and the first person were chosen: the practice of one's soundwalk is a personalised experience, during which it is important for it to be described as intimately and as close to reality as possible.

When crossing the Buffer Zone, the entire ambience changes all of a sudden. While walking through large white iron doors hiding the abandoned and ruined houses of the area, the sound also seems to be missing something. The seventy steps needed to cross the 'Dead Zone' are enough to make someone feel the emptiness of the sound environment, leaving the sound of the city behind, and moving towards a sound of another city, yet the same one. At the Turkish checkpoint, where few people are patiently queuing, waiting for their access to be authorised and cross the Line, what stands out sonically is the sound of the stamp of the officers on their passports, and the relatively noiseless conversation of the police guards.

Having crossed the borders, and still walking across Ledra street, the soundscape slightly changes. After a silent area lies the extension of the deserted Buffer Zone, where tourists and locals appear to give life to the neighbouring cafes and shops. Another, less cosmopolitan, yet busy ambience is present, until I leave behind the last CD shop playing music through loudspeakers, and head West. The soundscape dries out, becomes calm and silent; its quality changes. The streets are narrow, they are the same as the ones in the South, but they are more dusty. By walking and listening in this specific area, one might think that's/he is in a village. Every three or four old buildings, houses or stores, there is an open car repair garage, with few people inside, working or socialising. A printing house establishes the place with the constant noisy sound of its working machines. Walking back, leaving the quiet Turunçlu Fethiye Camii Mosque behind me, and heading East, moving through the narrow streets, I enter a tourist area once more, full of shops with clothes hanging on both sides of the street. As a result, this forms an area where the sound of the walkers dries out and gets absorbed by the colourful fabrics.

Leaving behind this vivid place, I reach Selimiye Mosque; its wide yard, also hosting some trees, lets the sound circulate in the area, and gives a sense of openness to the ambience. Some meters away, children are playing in the square: they are always there and the sound created by their shouts, games and running is a constant event. At some point, distant church bells are heard from a cathedral at the other part of the city. I end up, once again, in a rather quiet area, despite the few cars, close to the end of the city walls of North Nicosia, and I am heading back to the crossing points, this time passing from the closed market. The ambience in there is different, it is a calm closed space, where customers and workers move around and trade vegetables or other products, and the sound reaches to the top of the building and then returns back. Following the way back to the borders, tourists are still there, shops declare their presence sonically, and the sound of life there reminds of commerce.

Crossing the borders for the second time, the sound of the stamp initiates my peaceful short walk along the Buffer Zone, until I reach again the tourist zone, and then end up close

to Phaneromeni Church, an open space full of cafes, accompanied by the typical sounds of people: chatting, arguing, playing backgammon or silently reading. Leaving this area and walking across the line, the streets become more narrow, there are fewer cars left, and I am lead to a calmer neighbourhood, where birds declare their presence and the neighbourhood seems to take over the character of the city centre. Taht-el-Kale Mosque is the last religious-related sound source before I reach the church of Saint Kassianos and finish the soundwalk in a calm sound environment which, once again, brings a village soundscape to my mind. The silence is interrupted by the call to prayer, heard from the north part of the city, which I have just visited.



Figure 1. The Soundwalk (Nicosia).

### 3.2. The Religious Soundmarks during the soundwalks

During the soundwalks, the characteristic sounds of the area were discovered. Above, the experience described has been shaped likewise taking into account all visits in the area. Most importantly, however, it is the church bells and the imam's prayer that mostly dominated the soundscape during these walks, in both sides of the city (the North and the South), meaning the entire acoustic community.

These religious sounds maybe defined as soundmarks, as they are significant in terms of culture and history. Most importantly, they do contribute to the walker's experience of place in the area, which, apart from its particular characteristic architectural structure, considering these sounds, it acquires properties of place. Mazumdar and Mazumdar would probably agree with the importance of the complexity of such an experience: 'People develop attach-

ment to sacred cities and sacred structures, in addition to natural places' (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004, 394). During the soundwalks, the call to prayer would be heard very loud, when close to the speaker of the mosque, distant and tinny when far from it, or distant yet clear and distinctive, when in a significantly quiet area far from the source. The same happens with the church bells; someone can hear the bells from south Nicosia, even when being in areas in the north side. In such cases, the bells are heard distinctively, yet are embedded in the sound environment.

In Figure 2, one may spot the religious places (church and mosque) of the area, which are active sources of the religious soundmarks that are frequently audible in the area. The church bell is heard on Sundays, on religious celebrations or ceremonies (weddings, funeral, Easter etc.), various times per month. The call to prayer is 'a social phenomenon, (where) the adhan unifies and regulates the Islamic community by marking the times for prayer and creating a sacred context' (Lee 2006, 199). The creation of such a sacred context, both Christian or Muslim is significant in terms of sound experience of the city.

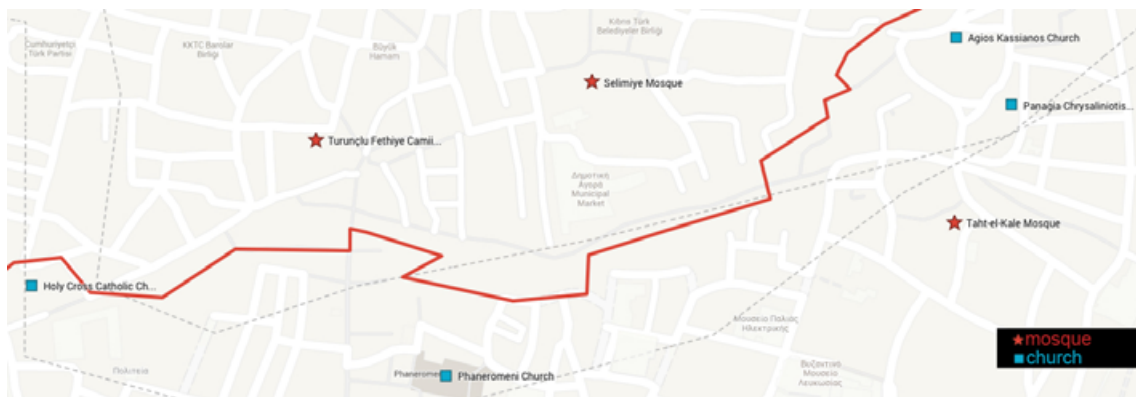


Figure 2. Temples in divided Nicosia's city centre.

#### 4. Soundmarks in Place

Taking into account how characteristic the sounds are, or how identical some sounds appear in the north and south part of the city, it is observed that what seems to form the acoustic identity of the city centre of Nicosia is the sound of the city itself, as described by the soundwalk and the religious soundmarks.



## 4.1. A common soundscape

Soundmarks, such as the sounds of the tourists, the shops, the cafes and the distinctive qualities of the architectural unity of the whole city centre is what forms the acoustic community around the area. While some differences can be noted during the soundwalk, such as the dust on the road – being plenty in the north part–or the age of most cars –they are newer and more silent in the south part–one can observe that the quality of the sound of people’s activity remains the same, as the architectural structure is similar. The surfaces of the buildings are similar, the way people move or act is also similar and the rhythm of life sounds equally: aurally speaking, the area does appear as one place. Although there are both quiet and busier areas in a distance of several meters, one could argue that the quality of the soundscape is alike across the city centre, the silence of the Buffer Zone included. A soundscape, in a wider perspective would also involve the language spoken across the city, as in the north part the Turkish Cypriot dialect is spoken, whereas the Greek Cypriot dialect dominates in the south part of the city.

## 4.2. The religious soundmarks

The religious soundmarks resonate all over the city centre of Nicosia. Church bells, at non-standardized times and the call to prayer, five times a day, are sounds which characterise the acoustic community of Nicosia. Having observed the area, following the soundwalking procedure, and having noticed the sources of the characteristic religious soundmarks, it is obvious that the imam’s call to prayer and the church bells form a constant common sound identity through the repetition of the religious soundmarks all over the city centre.

Thus, the religious soundmarks are the ones coming from the religious buildings, that is churches and mosques along the city roadblocks/across the border barriers of the city. It is also worth mentioning that sounds related to these, such as the people going there for praying or participating in ceremonies, are also present in the area, giving meaning to the place by their activity.

## 5. Discussion

The presence of certain soundmarks in accordance to place, both as described by Acoustic Ecology, and also as they could be defined by a less compositional-approach definition, are present in the city centre of the area. Their presence has been proven after having derived a series of systematical soundwalks in the area. The religious soundmarks mix with other, less resonating but equally important sounds that declare their existence throughout the whole city centre of Nicosia. In a place like Nicosia's city centre, which is divided in two ethnic communities, it is very important that a whole acoustic community can be defined by these –resonating in both sides– soundmarks. The sound travelling over the roadblocks, signifying not only the acoustic, but also the religious, ethnic, or the urban community of the city centre, appears to enforce a place identity in the area.

However, this relation to place through sounds, needs further research: in order to investigate more in depth the relation between these soundmarks and the inhabitants, another, more human-engaging method seems to be useful. Trying to approach the way in which the inhabitants of the divided city centre of Nicosia give meaning to the sounds of the area, ethnographic interviews need to be planned and realised. Using the theory of place attachment as a theoretical umbrella, the interviews can be derived and organised according to the investigation of any special bonds developed between the residents, through the soundmarks that have been observed. In the overall aim of the current research, which has been to investigate place attachment through the soundmarks as far as the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities are concerned, it is essential to proceed to further discussion and reappraisal of the application of the 'acoustic community' title to both communities.

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