

Matadero Memoria Aural: Recovering a Lostscape Sonically

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Abstract

The present paper tries to summarise the project Matadero Memoria Aural focusing on pivotal themes such as urban transformation, sound or collective memory. Throughout theoretical references, the collective has established the essence of the project in which converge the importance of oral history, sense of place and community. In this sense, Sound Readers have been experimenting with sound, urban practice and different methodologies; eventually, they have launched an accessible online database with the results of their research.

Keywords: Soundscape, urban memory, history, sound studies, oral history, site-specific stories

1. Introduction

Over the course of 2013, thanks a subsidy granted by the Department of Arts of Madrid City Council, the Madrid-based collective Sound Readers carried through Matadero Memoria Aural¹. The aim of the project is to reconstruct through sound the *lostscape* of the former municipal slaughterhouse (Figure 1) – nowadays a contemporary creation centre which conserves the name of its original purpose: Matadero Madrid² – and its surroundings in Arganzuela district. This paper will expose different aspects of the development of the project in this once vibrant working class area, then regarded as the belly of Madrid due to the presence of the slaughterhouse and the livestock market, as well as of the main wholesale fruit and vegetable market between 1924 and the late eighties.



Figure 1. Municipal slaughterhouse (1916). Source: <http://www.memoriademadrid.es/>

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1. Hereinafter referred to as MMA.
 2. "matadero" is the Spanish word for slaughterhouse.

2. Sound Readers and the beginning of MMA

Sound Readers is an interdisciplinary collective formed in 2012, whose members³ come from different fields like sociology, art history, music and design. During a residency in Matadero Madrid cultural centre, Sound Readers decided to launch MMA, in part as the result of a series of shared interests. These included the potentialities of experimental podcasting; walking as an aesthetic practice – from the rediscovery of the city through the flâneur’s strolls to the situationist drifting exercises; and, above all, a wish to address memory-related topics from a sonic perspective –but at the same time inspired by the practices of collectives like Ultra-Red or Escoitar.

As a matter of fact, Sound Readers’ name alludes to Walter Benjamin writings, in which he invites to read the history of what is not yet written. Furthermore, the project is also inspired by Andreas Huyssen’s texts, especially in his urban memory and palimpsest concepts in which he proposes that:

“Memory and temporality have invaded spaces and media that seemed among the most stable and fixed: cities, monuments, architecture, and sculpture (...) we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space (Huyssen 2003, 7)” since “an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.” (Huyssen 2003, 7)

Taking into account the theoretical background and the importance of the urban memory and landscape, we will now explain the area of Arganzuela where Sound Readers experimented and created the project.

3. There have been several members since the foundation of Sound Readers, but the ones active and who have made MMA possible are: Rubén Coll, Pablo D. Costa, Irene López and Piluca Martínez. Regarding this paper, it was conceived and written by Coll. López proposed some modifications. Costa and Martínez are equally credited as authors due to their vital contribution to the MMA project.

3. Describing the area

MMA was not only a project focused on the municipal slaughterhouse and livestock market turned into a cultural centre. Its impact on the environs was equally important in the research process (Figure 2). It was much needed considering the neighbourhoods of Chopera (where the “Pico del Pañuelo” housing colony, which was built in the 1920s, is located: a total of 1500 dwellings for workers) and Legazpi (where the fruit and vegetable market was active between 1935 and the mid 1980s-). And also Madrid Rio, a space which merges with the boundaries of Matadero Madrid. This is a large recreational and pedestrian area created over M30, one the main highways of the city, which runs parallel to the Manzanares river’s flow. Madrid Rio and the second life of the slaughterhouse are a result of the city’s land-use plan, responsible for the urban renovation of this zone and in some way of the forthcoming gentrification of this traditional working class area.⁴

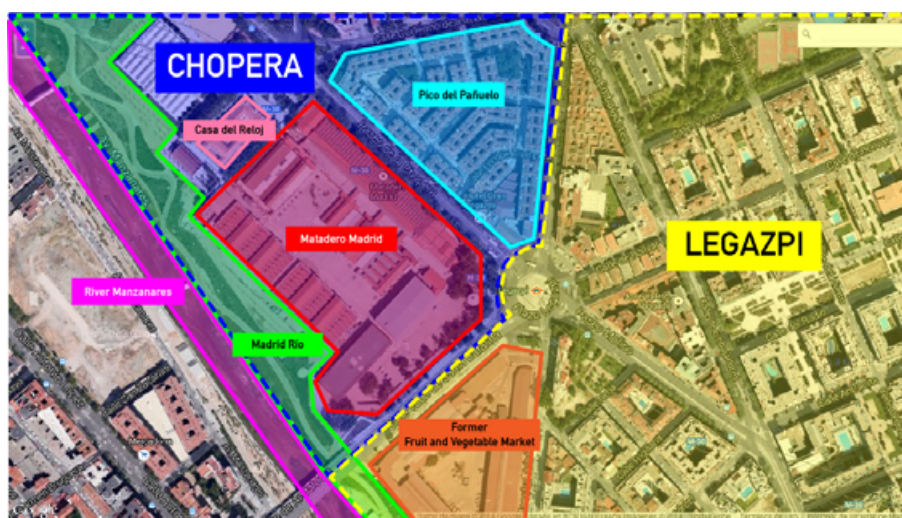


Figure 2. Map of the area.

Nowadays Matadero Madrid is one of the most important cultural platforms of Madrid City Council, in part thanks to its strategic location. But this centre has not always been a space devoted to the cultural production. Only since 2006. Its 165.415 square meters were

4. The two neighbourhoods closer to the slaughterhouse are Chopera and Legazpi. Both have traditionally sheltered migrant people. First after Spanish Civil War-receiving people from other regions of the country-, later between late twentieth and early twenty first century with the arrival of new residents from abroad, mainly Latin Americans. Dominican community, for example, is quite important.

designed during the first third of the twentieth century by architect Luis Bellido (1869-1955), who aimed to build a “small productive city” (Azurmendi 1979, 591) which would be active from 1924 to 1996.⁵ Besides its crucial role for Madrid food supply during part of the twentieth century, the bibliography and documents about the daily life around such an idiosyncratic space are scarce⁶ and practically inexistent on the sonic side.⁷

The activity of the ever-present bulldozers could be considered in Schaferian terms a soundmark of the zone.⁸ But at the same time, bulldozers were not erasing everything. Madrid City Council has declared the slaughterhouse and the Pico del Pañuelo housing colony as heritage of cultural interest. An initiative which could be regarded as part of the musealisation process of some of the oldest sites of the city, also as a tactic to enhance them. A process in which Sound Readers have paradoxically and unintentionally contributed with MMA.

4. Early phases of the project

The early steps – circa late 2012, early 2013 – of MMA consisted of a first contact with the area subject of our research. An exploratory approach was taken, based on doing strolls without a precise direction, in the vein of the situationist driftings, although far from the subversive aspect of that practice focused on questioning the never-innocent urban planning. Sound Readers took advantage of its explorative potentials, trying to pay more attention to our ears than to any other sense in those walks.

5. In 1996 the municipal slaughterhouse was closed definitely due to the lack of proper infrastructures demanded after Spain entered the European Union. Its functions would be replaced by the creation of Mercamadrid Meat Centre in 1999, one the largest in Europe.

6. For their historical approach two references were very helpful since the beginning. First, the documentation for the refurbishment project of the municipal slaughterhouse published in 2005 by the Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid (COAM). Second, the photography-based project *Muta Matadero* (2007) by No Photo collective.

7. Nonetheless, one must keep in mind that in the recent past there were other sound-based projects developed by other artists who worked on the same area. In 2010, *La Stargate* by Carolina Caycedo, a community-based project which employed excerpts of field recordings from Arganzuela district, sometimes using interviews with some of the neighbours. One year later, *Metros cuadrados de sonido* (Square meters of sound) was another interesting effort to try mapping sound snippets of the former slaughterhouse and the surrounding area. But none of these sound-related projects were really focused on the memory of the place or oral history.

8. For example, in the audio trails with Pedro, Juan y Ramón or Avelina it is easy to listen to the sound of the bulldozers in the background.

After some days *paseando* (walking in Spanish) across the different edifices of the slaughterhouse, and doing field recordings indoors, Sound Readers realised that the resulting audio files were not enough to explain what actually happened during decades in those buildings and their surroundings. Each one of these buildings had been designed for a specific purpose – sacrifice, quartering, storage, canteen, etc – or for a particular animal – calves, pigs, lambs, poultry, cows. Listening to the echoes or reverberations of those enormous halls did not provide enough information about the different professions, the relationships among the workers (for example, the strong bonds of solidarity as we were told later), the interaction between the surrounding neighbourhoods and the slaughterhouse (closed for the non-workers but not strictly hermetic, permeating the everyday of the environs). So how to reflect sonically that continuous flux during decades in a particular area which had become a sort of palimpsest?

As a project MMA did not aim at elicit nostalgia, but rather to try and make relatable stories or events – not necessarily pleasant – happened in past decades in this particular and constantly shifting area. Sound Readers produced a series of sound pieces that offer a very subjective and personal – almost musical – take on the acoustic properties of some of the buildings inside the slaughterhouse complex. Musician and audio technician Pablo D. Costa created the sound pieces inspired by the original purpose of the different slaughterhouse edifices (Figure 3).⁹ These compositions were played back at loud volume in each one of those usually empty and large spaces, in order to activate them through sound, recording them through a set of microphones scattered in different points of each building.

Despite this highly demanding effort and although satisfied with the results, Sound Readers thought it was necessary to deepen the sonic approach to the memory of the place from a different perspective.

9. They can be listened to on the MMA website layer entitled *Piezas Sonoras*.



Figure 3. Sonic reinterpretations of the different slaughterhouse buildings.

5. Theoretical references

For that reason, getting in contact with the work of Toby Butler and Isobel Anderson would be determining. Both authors influenced decisively Sound Readers in engaging with a more oral history based project as a way to set out an hypothetical description of the long lost soundscape of the considered area.

On the one hand, Sound Readers took from Butler's *Memoryscape* project his approach as an urban geographer trying to integrate through new technologies different practices from the fields of art, landscape and oral history. *Memoryscape* was the name chosen by Butler for a series of audio walks involving oral history recordings that allow (re)discovering river Thames and its complex and mercurial history. Something unlikely from a more traditional and static perspective focused on the memorial and monumental aspects. The landscape is "interpreted and imagined using the memories of others"(Butler 2006) due to "the ability of spoken memory to make connections with other times, symbols and places." (Butler 2006)

Therefore, Sound Readers adopted his concept of expanded audio guide as a tool that can transform a particular territory in a sort of site-specific piece. For this researcher, “the walks seemed to engender a feeling of identity with the landscape.” (Butler 2006), an aspect that MMA aimed to achieve. For that reason, whenever possible, life interviews were carried out while strolling. And the totality of the contents (interviews and sonic reinterpretations) were recorded in order to be listened to while going through the area, since the audio walk are an ideal resource “providing opportunities for people to build identity and empathy with their surroundings.” (Butler 2006)

On the other hand, Anderson’s text: *Voice, narrative, place: Listening to Stories* was equally influential. Partially, owing to her vindication of the overlooked role of storytelling in sound art¹⁰ through the concept of site-specific stories, characterised by the fact that they “require the listener to engage creatively with their narratives and, therefore, induce a productive listening state.” (Anderson 2012) So this particular kind of listening is crucial for the creation of identity bonds with the landscape because, through it, “the audience construct new meaning within their physical surroundings, transforming it from merely ‘space’, into ‘place’”(Anderson 2012), achieving one of the goals aimed by Sound Readers for MMA project: “Listening to stories of place, in place” enabling “the listener to see alternative landscapes intertwined with what is taken for granted as ‘reality.’” (Anderson 2012).

6. Methodology

The theoretical references just mentioned pushed Sound Readers to search neighbourhood’s residents – preferably long-term ones, but not exclusively – and former ones – the ones committed to the labour in the slaughterhouse, – as well as current employees – those working in cultural activities – who could narrate how it had changed the area and their lives in it. The task was not easy because most of them were too old,¹¹ or a lot of people moved to

10. In fact, Sound Readers share her critique of Alan Licht’s words about the long prevailing definition of sound art as a medium that “rarely attempts to create a portrait or capture the soul of a human being, or express something about the interaction of human beings (Licht 2007, 14)” being its main focus the “sound as phenomenom of nature and/or technology.” (Licht 2007, 14)

11. One of our contacts, Jacinto, died some weeks after interviewing him. He was 92 years old and he worked most part of his life in the slaughterhouse as a meat deliverer.

other areas of Madrid, especially during the eighties, decade that was the beginning of the decline of activity in the area.

Julio was the gatekeeper or privileged informant of MMA project, an elderly man who usually spends his mornings in Casa del Reloj,¹² a senior centre located in the same building that during decades was intended for administration officers of the slaughterhouse, housing for some employees and their families and served also as a sort of commissary for the workers. Julio was vital to meet with the elder neighbours. Together with Casa del Reloj, Peña Atlético bar,¹³ a weekly meeting point for the retired slaughterers, were our main – although not exclusive – sources to get interviewees.

Although, the goal was to do interviews while going around the area, sometimes it was not possible: the delicate health of some of the elderly interviewees or the impossibility of going out due to job obligations were not petty factors. And a good proportion of the time invested in field work consisted of earning the confidence of the potential interviewees. It was not an easy task to persuade the former slaughterhouse workers to come back to their job place almost two decades after its closing (Figure 4). To visit again a place where they spent working the most part of their lives was not necessarily a comfortable experience. A lot of them refused the request of being interviewed there.



Figure 4. Sound Readers interviewing Ramon, one of the former slaughterhouse employees.

12. In Spanish: The clock house.

13. A supporters association for Atlético de Madrid football club.

7. Making the research accessible

The result of seven months -from March to November 2013- of intense field work was uploaded into the mma.soundreaders.org internet domain. An exclusive web site designed to serve as a sort of repository for collecting the different recordings: Sonic reinterpretations of the slaughterhouse spaces and life interviews. The web site presents all these sound materials geo-located on a map. Among the interviews, a part of them were conducted while rambling, appearing displayed on the map as individual trails. (Figure 5) The remainder appear geo-located on singular spots. But almost all the recordings were assigned to the locations where they were recorded.¹⁴

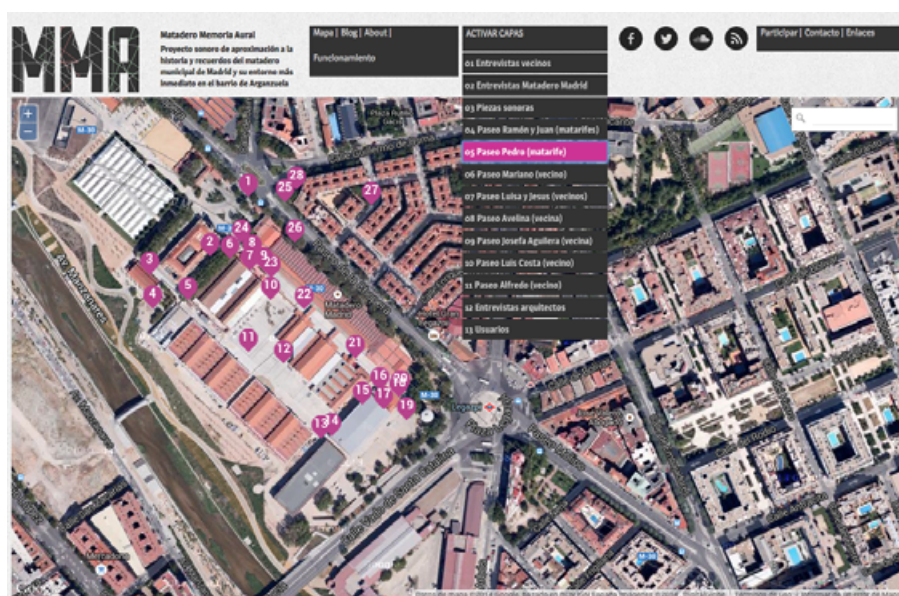


Fig. 5: Display of one of the audio trails.

A list of subjects was prepared as a guide for the realization of the life interviews. That list included the following topics: Spanish civil war and post-conflict years, transformations on the urban landscape, sense of community, immigration, politics, solidarity between workers, etc. This is reflected in the use of tags in the web database, which make a subject-based search easier.

14. There are a few exceptions: the Josefa Aguilera and Luisa & Jesus audio trails. They were interviewed in their homes because they were not able to go out due to health issues.

Sometimes Sound Readers asked the interviewees if they were able to remember a particular sound that could be identified with the area. Interestingly, most of them were not able to remember any sound from the past – nor from the present, – although they didn't find it difficult to remember the unpleasant smell of dry skins from the slaughterhouse.

But MMA website was not only designed to be used for archive or compilation purposes. It was also conceived in order to transform the aforementioned area in a sort of site-specific piece. Through the use of mobile devices like smartphones and tablets (Figure 6) – the later freely available to the visitors of the current contemporary centre for several months,¹⁵ – MMA website could work as an interface which allows the public to find a lot of *site-specific stories*. So it is possible to see on the screens which geo-located contents are closer in order to listen to – with the help of headphones – *in situ* the life narratives of some Arganzuela district inhabitants or the sonic reinterpretations of some spaces of the slaughterhouse.



Fig. 6: Tablet, headphones and leaflet available to the visitors of Matadero Madrid.

15. From 29th November 2013 to 28th February 2014, the period the project was showcased.

8. Oral/Aural

Up to this point, someone could question whether a project like MMA – sound-based but mainly oral – was actually effective in recovering the sound of a definite lostscape, especially when the answers to the question about identifying a specific sound were not particularly fruitful.

Nevertheless, taking a wider definition of sound, as the one proposed by Douglas Kahn in *Noise, water, meat*, the collected life interviews turn out to be really helpful in the reconstruction of that particular soundscape, always keeping in mind that sound could also be understood as: “all that might fall within or touch on auditive phenomena (...) sounds heard by everyone or imagined by one person alone.” (Kahn 2001, 3) In that way, interviewees in their descriptions of daily tasks from the past provided, almost without realizing it, a huge amount of information about how the sound of that shifting urban landscape could be across decades.

Of course, it is highly speculative, but not for that reason less interesting. “Sound is also about associations, memories, feelings, experiences, imagery and thoughts.” (Anderson 2012). Thus, while strolling guided by the MMA interface, it is possible to listen to or imagine the sound of the shootings and bombings that affected the zone during the Spanish Civil War in the late thirties. Similarly, it is possible to imagine, during the after-conflict, how the soundscape was marked by the reintegration of the routine of productive life: the hubbub of the workers inside or outside their job places (for example: crowding the bars for lunch), the arrival of beasts to the slaughterhouse, their sometimes sonorous sacrifice – specially pigs – and quartering – then handmade without the help of mechanical devices, – the coming and goings of trucks and trains. But also the sound of political prisoners forced to work in the scoring of the Manzanares river.

Or discovering different moments of the social life: children playing after school on the streets free of cars – very rare in the forties, – summer nights where neighbours talked until late in front of their houses – a custom lost in the sixties with the arrival of television, – weekend gatherings not far from the river where the youths danced to the music played back on pick-ups, the whispering of clandestine street sellers (*extraperlistas*) during the years of shortage. And any other kinds of events like popular festivities or incidents such as a fatal burning of several slums – today completely disappeared – or the expropriation of cultivation lands – leaving some families without a chance of making a living, – both in the fifties).

The categorization by tags of the different subjects collected in the life interviews helps set out hypothetical soundscapes in different decades in a particular spot. A task in which Sound Readers currently work trying to work out how the explored area sounded in a more detailed way, in the vein of works like Reinhard Strohm's *Townscape Soundscape* or others inspired by it, for example, Miguel Ángel Marin's *Sound and urban life in a small Spanish town during the ancien régime*.

Although the field work process has ended, it does not mean that MMA is a closed or finished project. Sound Readers hope that other researchers found the MMA website helpful and that the public felt the wonder of rediscovering some spots of Arganzuela's district through the voices of its inhabitants. From both of them depends the future of this project, in which the intertwining between the historical and the biographical as a set of geo-located narratives will hopefully contribute to get to know an area in constant change.

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