

(City) – Noise

A project about noise, urbanism and politics

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Abstract

(City)-Noise is a project that critically studies the anti-noise regulations of various cities. To do so, it examines the press attention given to this issue and also noise maps and the regulations designed to control acoustic pollution; it then analyses this data in texts or reading groups.

Noise in the context of acoustic pollution is considered 'refuse' and so, with the excuse of auditory health and urban planning, governments tend to eliminate specific sources of sound that interfere with the city's productive activity.

This project has attempted to analyse, through texts, workshops and sound walks, the ideology lying behind these measures and the social models that they represent. In this case the results of research conducted in Madrid and Donostia (San Sebastian) will be presented. The presentation consists of a brief description of the theoretical foundations on which the project is based, followed by some of the findings of the two projects.

Keywords:

“The thing that is impeding Europe’s growth is that airports are locked up from 11 o’clock at night to 5.30 in the morning, which is a very, very critical time for east-west transfer. People [in Qatar] are not making as much fuss about noise as they are in Europe.”

Akbar al-Baker. Qatar Holdings ¹

Noise is prior to and larger than politics and the economy. Cities, as a driving force in the economy, are essentially noisy. Our day-to-day activity, organised into different timetables and zones, creates noise. The society in which we live, based on industrialization, is mechanical noise. Everything produces noise, including using public transportation, going into a building with air-conditioning, driving, listening to music or throwing out a rubbish bag that will be collected by a noisy lorry at a time of day incomprehensible to most.²

Although we can make decisions to produce less noise, by riding a bike, for example, the very fact of living in a city creates noise out of our control, such as the lorry that drops off the fruit at the shop or supermarket where we do our shopping, even if that shop sells organically-grown produce. And if we think on a global scale, it is quite likely that somewhere in China or Taiwan, the production of the computer keys we are typing on, or the parts of the light bulb that illuminates our book in a silent library, have produced terrible mining and industrial noises. Noise is a political and economic sound; it is intrinsically related to the value of things.

However, although living as we do involves noise, not all social strata are exposed to it in the same way. In fact, it is safe to say that depending on our social class and our position in this economic system, we will perceive the sounds we hear in different ways and even be able to choose which sounds we hear. This was true of the urban acoustic muddle even before the arrival of the industrial noise featured in the studies done by Murray Sachfer and Karin Bijsterveld, at the theoretical level, and in the fascination shown by Luigi Russolo and Walter Ruttmann, at the artistic level.

There are some studies that speak of different pre-industrial acoustic contexts distributed according to social class. One example is the study on the Aragonese town called Jaca, in *Sound and urban life in a small Spanish town during the Ancient Regime*, which shows that

1. Heathrow board member says locals enjoy ‘excessive freedom’ over noise. Gwyn Topham. <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/may/19/heathrow-board-member-airport-operate-24-hours>. Date viewed: May 23, 2014.

2. The artist Mikel R. Nieto has been recording rubbish collection vehicles for years. <http://www.soinumapa.net/?s=basura&submit=Bilatu&lang=es>.

the town was divided into two parts that were separated by the main street, Calle Mayor. On one side lived the clergy and the nobility – with the sound of processions and celebrations – and on the other side lived the rest of the population, amidst plagues and filth.³ Other examples can be found in the section *Escritos al oído* of the *Mapa de Sonidos de País Vasco*, especially *Donostia – Basque dissonance* (1761), which describes the language in terms of its sounds contrary to the commercial flow.⁴

Another notable example is the one that studies the meaning of “quiet” in the British context, in the chapter *Infernal Din*, *Heavenly Tunes: Repertoires of Dramatizing Sound* in the book by Karin Bijsterveld *Mechanical Sound*. And finally, the chapter *Ethical Volumes of Silence and Noise*, in Brandon Labelle’s book *Acoustic Territories*, which discusses the sound of the *other*.

Mechanical noise is not a new noise, it is the sound of work and it changes as the pace and techniques of work change. This rather obvious remark can be applied to transport and leisure, to understand the problem in a different light. The iron carriage wheels of days gone by are the reaction engine of the planes at Heathrow, while the street musicians that bothered Charles Babbage are our cities’ nightclubs. The question, therefore, is the position taken by the person listening as opposed to the person enjoying or suffering the noise. The undesirableness of noise tends to be its social context. More than an auditory annoyance, noise causes alterations in the patterns of production and rest. This is, it disturbs the productive patterns governing a city that is run to create profits.

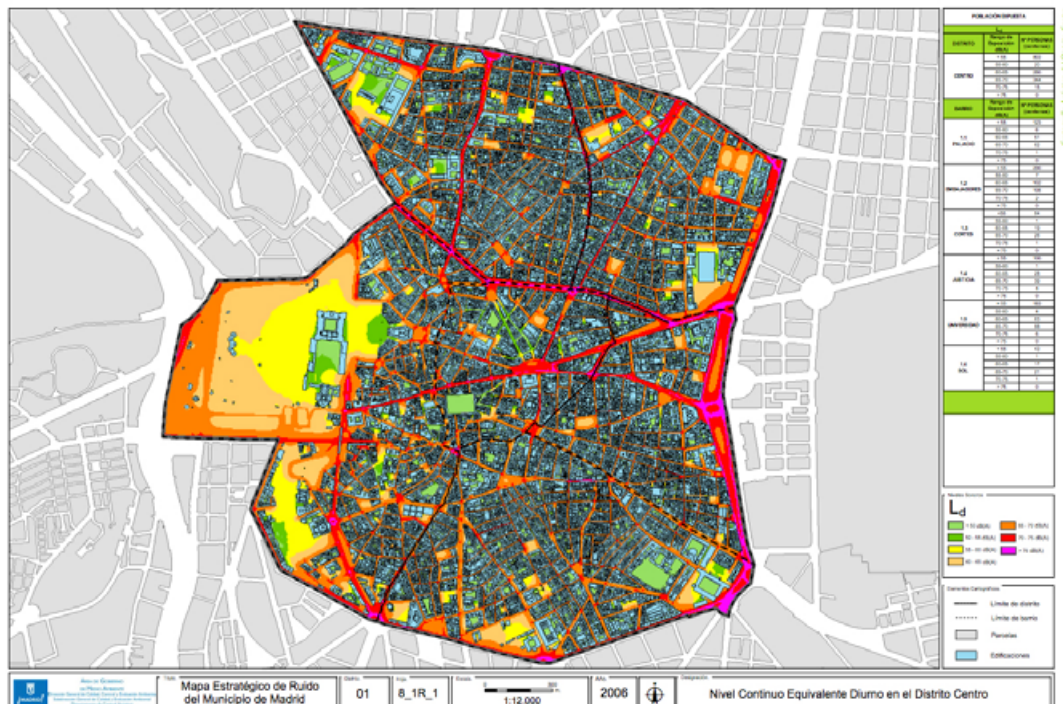
In this presentation we put forward the findings of two very specific cases that clearly show how measures against acoustic pollution are actually used for different purposes. This, rather than universally describing noise as an anti-productive force, demonstrates that it, as an inextricable part of the social realm, can generate or shape political and economic relations.

3. MARÍN Miguel Angel “*Sound and urban life in a small Spanish town during the Ancient Regime*”, *Urban History*, 29:1 (2002), 48-59. http://www.campusvirtual.unirioja.es/titulaciones/musica/fotos/felipeV_Marin.pdf

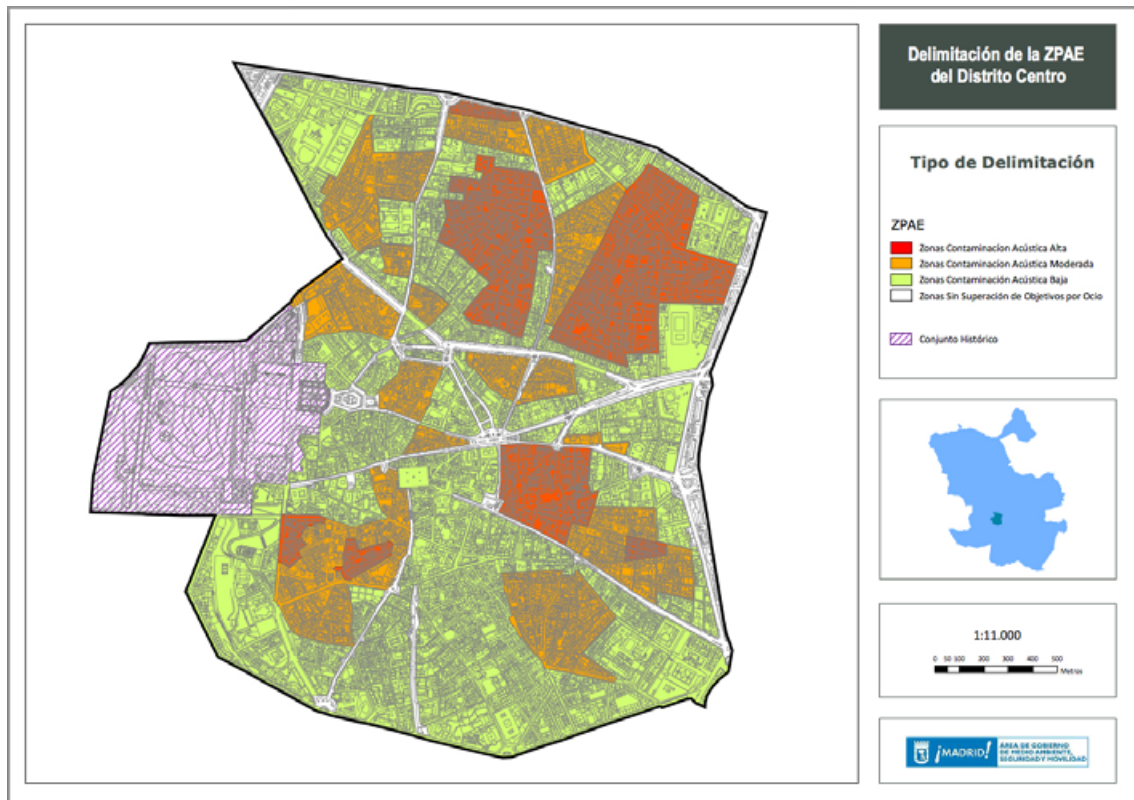
4. San Sebastián en 1761" Joaquín de Ordoñez (??-1769), Alfredo Laffite <http://www.soinumapa.net/marker/donostia-euskararen-disonantziak/?lang=en> Date viewed May 27, 2014

1. Madrid noise

Madrid is characterised by abusive neoliberal urban planning. Within this context, regulating acoustic pollution has been a very relevant issue. Madrid-Noise has conducted a critical study on how regulations against acoustic pollution are being used by the City Council of Madrid.⁵ In the study, the noise measurements taken as part of the 2008 Strategic Noise Map were analysed and compared with the measurements taken for the Special Acoustic Protection Areas map, of 2012.



5. The report on this investigation has taken various forms: as text in the catalogue of the exhibition ARTe SO-Noro (p 63), at La Casa Encendida in Madrid; as a sound walk at the festival ¡Volumen!, also at La Casa Encendida in Madrid; as a series of posts in the blog The Ratzinger Times; and as a presentation in the seminar Espacios Audiovisuales, at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

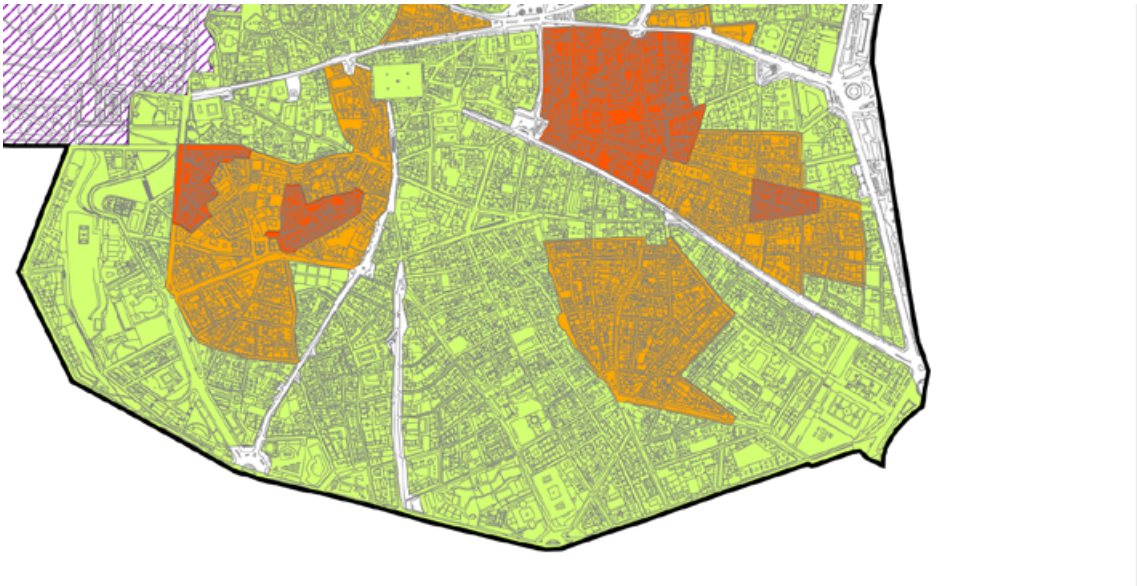


The Strategic Noise Map was drawn up in compliance with an EU ordinance issued in 2002. The Special Acoustic Protection Areas map is part of a City Council plan to control areas with high levels of nightlife. A comparison of the two reveals that the noisiest areas according to each map are not the same.

For example, the neighbourhood of Lavapiés, which falls under the Special Acoustic Protection Plan, is the area with the most complaints concerning traffic and neighbours. The handling of such issues would involve major architectural and urban planning changes.⁶ In December of 2013, as part of the festival ¡Volumen!⁷, a *sound walk* took place, comparing the readings made for the aforementioned maps. It became evident that the acoustic space perceived during the walk did not coincide with the readings cited in these maps.

6. CASCALLANA, Jara. *Estudio de rehabilitación acústica de los edificios del barrio de Lavapiés*. Master's Thesis. E.U.I.T. Telecomunicación (UPM) http://oa.upm.es/21506/1/TESIS_MASTER_JARA_CASCALLANA_OLMEDILLA.pdf Date viewed: May 27, 2014

7. ¡Volumen! At La Casa Encendida, in Madrid https://www.lacasaencendida.es/sites/default/files/docp_festival_volumen_2013.pdf Date viewed: May 26, 2014



The hypothesis developed during the project is that the city's manoeuvres in relation to acoustic pollution are not a reflection of its concern about environmental or social issues, but rather of other interests.

- First, the gentrification process that the city council of Madrid has been fomenting consistently since 2008, which includes closing down leisure establishments, rais-

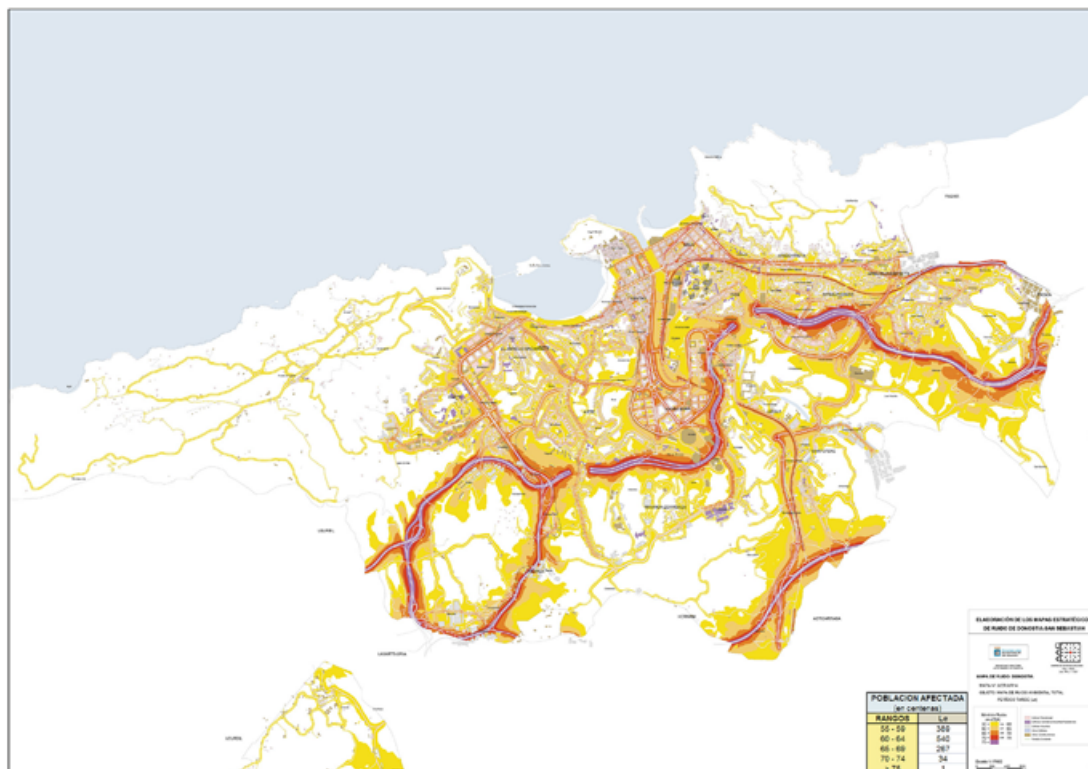
ing property prices and transforming the city centre for tourism purposes, with the construction of luxury hotels.

- The second is the effort to centralise leisure activities in venues operated by the City Council. This manoeuvre became tragic when five persons died at a massive event held in one of these venues. A lawsuit was brought in relation to the deaths, and among the accused parties was the Councillor in charge of the public company that managed the venue, who also happens to be in charge of drawing up the Special Acoustic Protection Areas map.

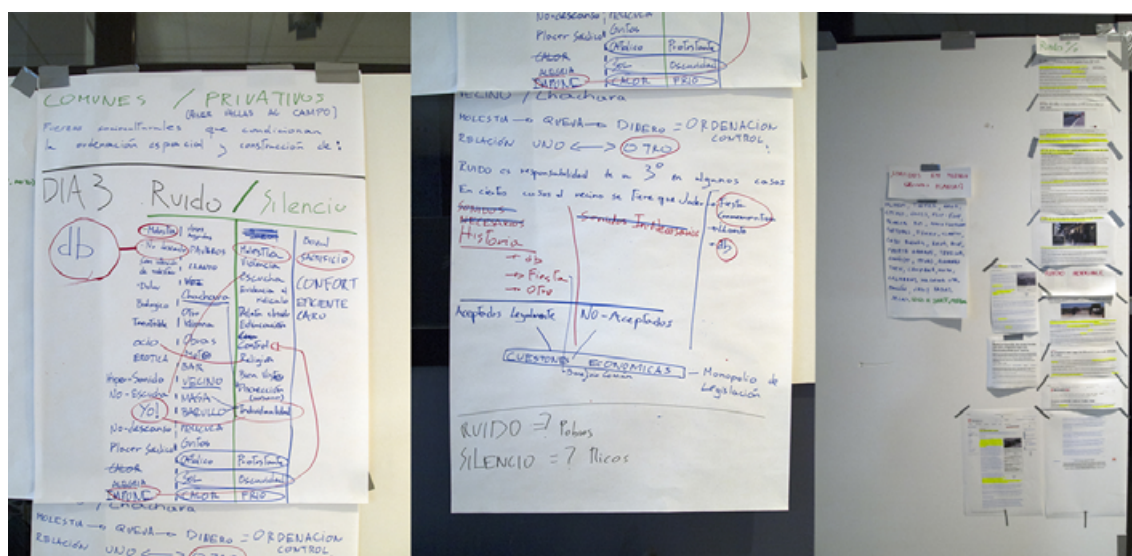
These two details indicate that measures against noise pollution are in fact used for purposes more related to business, and to illegitimate and corrupt use of public space.

2. Donostia noise

In Donostia (San Sebastian) leisure activities and tourism are a significant driving force for the economy. The way the Donostia City Council treats this matter is practically the opposite of the one seen in Madrid, and a comparison of the two allows some very interesting conclusions to be drawn. The noise produced by leisure activity is sometimes ignored and the city's noise map does not give adequate consideration to this type of noise. Donostia's noise map was drawn up in compliance with the 2008 EU ordinance and it mainly reflects the noise of traffic. However, since the measurements are taken from a car, the map does not reflect the true acoustic situation, nor the complaints lodged by the main anti-noise associations, because the neighbourhoods with leisure establishments are mostly pedestrian. The areas with the most complaints are the area surrounding Monte Igueldo and the Old Town (Casco Viejo).



The Donostia-Noise project, like its counterpart in Madrid, arose out of an interest in analysing environmental regulations and the policies put in place to control noise in this city. The methodology used in the analysis consisted of a working group that primarily carried out two activities. One of the activities was a reading group that examined some sound studies with a view to critically re-interpreting the soundscape and to sharing information sources related to noise, architecture and urban planning.



Also, a series of outings took place, news clippings were collected and a podcast was distributed. Finally, the study attempted to draw conclusions about the two areas mentioned above. Although both areas are the object of complaints about leisure-related noise, the reasons that their respective numbers are greater than those of the rest of the city are very different.

- The Old Town has a lot of complaints that go without response because, since the streets in this neighbourhood are pedestrianised, the map is not in effect and therefore many of the acoustic pollution rules cannot be applied. In Donostia, to request an official measurement of decibels, which is required before a complaint can be lodged, costs the requesting party money after the third time. Since the income levels in this neighbourhood are not very high, the neighbours often end up moving away and the problem continues just as before.



- The other area with problems, the area around Monte Igueldo, is a highly sought-after neighbourhood with many high-income residents. The complaints revolve around a club where wedding celebrations take place, in which the noise generated blocks the sound of waves, considered a common good. In contrast with the Old Town, the residents of this quarter can afford to keep paying for the official measurements, as part of their effort to have the celebration venue closed down and thus recover the sound

of the sea. Although in this neighbourhood there is less noise, many more complaints are lodged, although the problem persists in both areas.



The experience of Donostia Noise also pointed out suspicious relationships between property prices, money and noise. Like in the examples cited at the beginning, it is clear that peace and quiet is a luxury that certain social classes are in a better position to demand.

3. What noises can we take responsibility for?

Noise is knowledge, but it obliges us to do politics from a position of dissent. Noise tells us about our customs and our defects. In this specific case it tells us about a classist social system in which laws can be used to make a profit or pursue other corrupt aims.

Noise, before the arrival of technologies for measuring and recording sound, was understood to be an emanation, like diaphanous music or a dreadful din. The poor sections of ancient cities were inundated with the noise caused by metalworkers and with the stench

emanating from tanning activities. In response to this situation, such activities were taken to the outskirts of the city. The industrial areas of 19th and 20th century cities, where workers lived, also shared noxious air, water and acoustic space. Today cities in Taiwan and China, where most of our consumer goods are manufactured, have very high noise levels.⁸ If we think about this example in the context of today's global economy, the tactics used to solve the noise problem are the same; moving it to areas where the consumers and upper classes, in this case us, cannot hear it. It has already been said that the limits of the city (Polis) is where the screams for help can no longer be heard.⁹

What noises are we responsible for? Can we imagine an acoustic space not governed by authoritarian and productivity-based economic patterns? What would allow these spaces to evade their purposes? A good example can be found in street musicians. What economic model do they represent with respect to the worldwide music industry?

Acoustic space, when all is said and done, is a space of relationships. The rules and regulations analysed in this project contemplate a hearer-victim, and a noisemaker-criminal. This leads to policies that are focused on 'policing' and are therefore ineffective in matters of this nature. Is it really reasonable to expect that all unwanted sounds will be controlled and managed by government agencies?

To solve this problem what is needed are active listeners, who, as they acquire awareness of themselves, become responsible for the noise they generate. This is not far from the educational programs promoted by some governments. However, a better listening culture would not focus solely on producing less noise. It would also understand that some of the sounds produced by others are necessary, and that other sounds, for example a large part of the sounds and objects derived from production and consumption, are unnecessary.

8. Suii Cindy *Taiwan's noise pollution dilemma* <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18980194> Date viewed: May 27, 2014.

No noise? 5 reasons why you should be concerned with noise pollution in China. <http://ijustwannabuy.com/?p=1476&> Date viewed: May 27, 2014.

9. CAYRLE, Angus: *Autumn Leaves. Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*. Double Entendre, Paris, 2007. p. 4