

Quiet Is the New Loud

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ABSTRACT: The project QINL in its four parts as a whole was an invitation to a broad audience to – think with the ears – a knowledge-generating practice that exercises personal perception of the auditory qualities of spaces and places.

This practice creates new approaches for every architectural and urban planning design process, and it allows us to discuss the complex auditory interactions of our life worlds and public spaces together. Thinking with the ears also means going beyond the concept of noise as an undesired externality and perceiving sonic emissions in a differentiated way instead: as a source of information that helps us to better understand the processes and infrastructures that we otherwise accept unquestioningly.

Thinking with the ears is not about our everyday, knowing and orientating hearing (“Yes, I hear a train.”). It involves, for example, the course of a sound, the perception of the rising and falling of a sonic event, the associated occupation of space, the release of the sound environment, and the questions: How do I feel here? What kind of atmosphere does this place have? What is its mood?

As the exercise of this different hearing progresses and sound memory for (spatial) sound forms along with it, we develop a qualitative sound consciousness and a language for it. And what is most important: we begin to link our hearing with our own personal history and the momentary mood situation. We begin to understand and sense our hearing as being culturally shaped.

This short text gives an overview and sketches out the main stages of a project by O+A (Bruce Odland/Sam Auinger) for the Triennial for Contemporary Art and Architecture 2015 in Bruges. O+A's central theme is "hearing perspective". Their work is known for large scale, public space sound installations which transform city noise into harmony in real-time. 2009 O+A started on the "Sonic Commons" questioning the dominance of the visual culture in our perception of the world.

The medieval city center of Bruges was declared a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO in 2000. More than five million people visit the city every year.

What would happen, if they suddenly all decided to stay? What would be the impact on a protected historical city like Bruges if it became a megapolis over night?

This was the premise for the Bruges Triennial for Contemporary Art and Architecture 2015. The triennial contrasted two opposing narratives: the static image of Bruges as a protected medieval city that was restored and preserved from the 19th century onwards and a hypothetical 21st century megapolis version of the city.

In 2014 O+A were invited to develop a project for this festival. After longer stays and studies on site, it became clear that the historical center of Bruges is an urban space with a unique acoustic and auditory atmosphere. This is largely due to the situation that no industrialization took place in Bruges for historical reasons. The medieval architecture with its winding alleys, squares, and passages is still retained in its substance, and therefore no urban space has been developed for motorized individual traffic. The soundscape of the city is thus still completely determined by human activity, and in the "quiet hours" it is actually quiet. In technical terms, the noise level of the city is under 20 decibels: in other words, best concert house quality.

In addition to the unique quietness that can still be experienced in this city at certain times, and due to the absence of the permanent noise of traffic and infrastructure systems (also as a consequence of the low basic noise level), a number of unique acoustic phenomena arise, which can otherwise not or no longer be experienced in urban spaces.

To be able to transfer this unique atmospheric quality into a discourse, the project QNL was developed as a four-part work, whereby the individual project parts can operate independently or mutually enhance one another. The artistic intention was to induce residents and visitors to the city and the festival to listen closely with a series of interventions. Personal listening experiences were to be provoked in this way, thus creating discourse material for future urban planning discussions. These interventions will be explained in more detail in the following.

1. song lines
2. earmarks
3. tuning bruges
4. sounding bruges

1. Songlines



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

O+A composed three song lines, allowing visitors an experience of discovery with a specially developed instrument while walking along one of three pre-defined paths through the city, experiencing the special and always changing auditory situation. A floating loudspeaker was developed for this, which in combination with a portable technical bag emits acoustic signals attuned to the respective place. This made it possible to sensually experience the interdependency between open space and materiality, architectural proportions and facade design, the paths and the surrounding built environment. This part of the project impressively underscored the special auditive quality of the city, because something like this only works in an urban environment with a very low noise floor on the one hand, and one that is, on the other hand, not permanently encumbered by motorized professional and individual traffic in the close surroundings.

2. Earmarks

During a six-month research stay, we explored and investigated the auditory quality of historical Bruges. From this artistic research and the resultant material, we developed a map of listening sites in Bruges, called “Earmarks”. This special map enables residents and visitors to seek out various listening sites and become consciously acquainted with their inherent auditory qualities. This part of the project has gone beyond the Triennial 2015 and is still present in the city’s offers for tourists.

3. Tuning bruges



Figure 3.

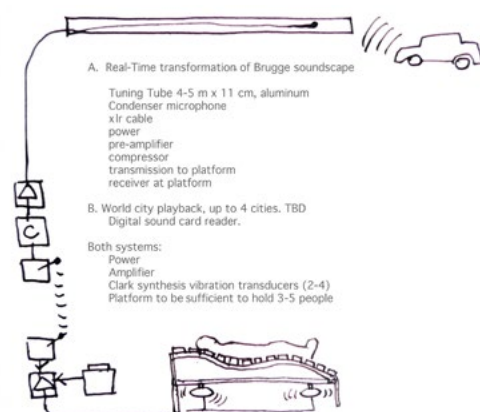


Figure 4.

O+A set up a small red ramp in the Jan van Eyck Square, which made it possible to experience the noise of passing cars and buses as a bodily vibration, transformed and musically tuned to a D. (Fig. 3, 4) For this installation a resonance tube was used, which picked up the surrounding sound, tuned it (D), and transmitted it in its transformed form back to the ramp in real time using two transducers. This part of the project was intended to bring into the discussion that existing urban sound can also be transformed and tuned. In this way it became musically perceptible.

4. Sounding bruges



Figure 5.

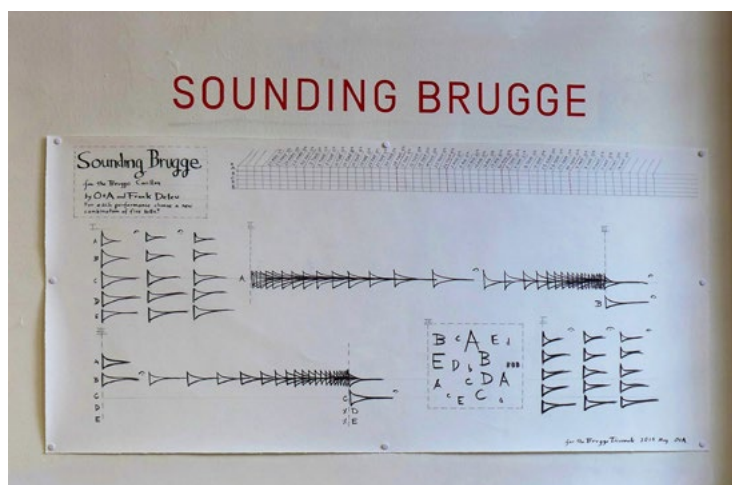


Figure 6.

In the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, towers, large glass windows, and chimes were a sign of wealth in the Europe of merchants. The worldly power and wealth of a commercial city was demonstrated particularly with a carillon, a set of large, playable bells, typically

found in a tower or an especially constructed edifice. Bruges has one of the largest carillons in the world (Fig. 5) Forty-seven bronze bells are mounted in a tower eighty-three meters high from the seventeenth century. It is played by a machine at fixed times every day with secular songs and classical themes.

The city carillonneur gives a concert three to five times a week. Because of the height of the tower, the bells with their different tunings are ideal actors for activating the acoustics of the city and making it possible to experience the various echoes, reverberations, and resonance phenomena. Sounding bruges is a composition created by O+A in collaboration with the carillonneur Frank Deleu. On the one hand it breaks through the musical style of secular songs and classical themes with its permutative form, and on the other makes the acoustic features of the various architectures of the city audible, especially through the timing structure of the composition. The piece was performed forty-three times during the triennial in 2015 and sparked discussions among residents and visitors alike.

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