

Cultivating Urban Sound as an Object of Design

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ABSTRACT: Emphasizing the necessity and urgency of a conscious urban sound design, this paper offers an insight into the notion of *cultivating urban sound as an object of design*. On the basis of theoretical considerations and exemplified by initial results of an extensive research on the subject, the text indicates that this cultivation process not only comprises further developing and transforming urban design practice itself with its methods, tools and measures but, to the same degree, the cultural and social reference framework. Furthermore, the article explicates the congruity, complexity and range of influence of the concept and points out the advantages as well as the prospects of cultivating urban sound as an object of design.

KEYWORDS: Urban sound, urban sound environment, urban sound design, urban sound planning, cultivation.

1. The sounding actuality of urban life

Sound is integral to our everyday urban life. It concerns us. Not only because it's sometimes annoying but mainly because it's meaningful and relevant to our physical, mental and cultural orientation. (cf. Truax 2001, pp.65) What we hear is inseparably tied to the particular circumstances and social conditions. To this effect sound is not a negligible aspect but rather a natural part, precondition, as well as attribute of urban life all at the same time.

While the urban sound environment affects our wellbeing and our social living together, beside noise abatement up to now it is not intentionally planned. Still it results just accidentally from the way we build, the way we organize and the way we inhabit our cities. Even today the sound of cities is only a by-product of our urban activities.

2. The need of cultivating urban sound as an object of design

In principle this situation should be a great chance for urban planners. At least in theory they've got the opportunity to develop design ideas and concepts for urban sound environments and to provide required measures and solutions. But how can planners be enabled to do this in a conscious manner? How could the auditory dimension be integrated in the daily practice of urban planning?

Actually, interest in urban sound and possibilities to design it has increased significantly in recent years. The growing number of publications and events on this subject may substantiate this observation. Oftentimes interested persons come up with the request for a simple toolbox or catalogue of measures to consider the auditory dimension. But it's not quite as easy as that. The practice of designing urban sound is not only dependent on adequate instruments. In fact a broader and much more complex action is needed: *urban sound as an object of design has to be cultivated*. Cultivating urban sound as an object of design means implementing a comprehensive process of negotiation and agreement to generate collective imaginations, opinions, paradigms, routines, rules, procedures and conventions with regard to urban sound. In other words not only does the urban design practice itself, with its methods, tools and measures have to be developed, but to the same degree the cultural and social reference framework must be further developed to open up the auditory dimension for planning.

3. The notion of cultivating urban sound as an object of design

To theoretically underpin the notion of cultivating urban sound as an object of design, it is helpful to examine the following two related positions from the field of sociology of art: The "art world" theory of Howard S. Becker and the "art field" concept of Pierre Bourdieu.

In his book “Art Worlds” Howard S. Becker outlines from different vantage points how art worlds “come into existence and persist”. (2008, p.xxiv) He describes an art world as “the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for.” (ibid.) According to Becker artworks are not an outcome of the activity of a single person called artist alone. Instead, to appear as it finally does many activities of different specialists must be carried out. As an example, he cites the concert of a symphony orchestra. To make such a concert happen, long in advance

[...] instruments must have been invented, manufactured, and maintained, a notation must have been devised and music composed using that notation, people must have learned to play the notated notes on the instruments, times and places for rehearsal must have been provided, ads for the concert must have been placed, publicity must have been arranged and tickets sold, and an audience capable of listening to and in some way understanding and responding to the performance must have been recruited. (ibid., p.2)

Becker emphasizes the cooperative nature of acting in the art world. He points out that for cooperative acting “conventions” are needed. He writes:

People who cooperate to produce a work of art usually do not decide things afresh. Instead, they rely on earlier agreements now become customary, agreements that have become part of conventional way of doing things in that art. Artist conventions cover all the decisions that must be made with respect to works produced, even though a particular convention may be revised for a given work. (ibid., p.29)

Similar to Becker, his French colleague Pierre Bourdieu describes the collective in “The Rules of Art” as an enabling but at the same time limiting framework for artistic practice. He calls it the “space of possibles”:

[...] the heritage accumulated by collective work presents itself to each agent as a space of possibles, that is, as an ensemble of probable *constraints* which are the condition and the counterpart of a set of *possible uses*. (1996, p.235)

The space of possibles arises from the current state of a specific art field. “Field” is one of the fundamental terms in Bourdieu’s theory. The author Helena Webster recaps in her publication “Bourdieu for architects” the art field concept as follows:

Bourdieu suggested that the notion of field could be used to represent the 'autonomous', bounded, nature of a group of artists, buyers and intermediaries, who shared a constructed set of knowledge, beliefs and values, and who existed in a hierarchical, capital dependent, juxtaposition with other social groups (fields) in social space. (2011, p.43)

Bourdieu agrees with Becker that any artistic practice stands in a relationship of mutual interdependence to its respective art field or art world. Without this reference framework the artistic practice couldn't exist.

Although both researchers refer to artistic production, their theories have claims to universal validity. For this reason their conclusions can be easily adopted for urban sound design, and it can be assumed that this practice must also be linked to a reference framework which is not only a factor of influence but rather constitutive for it.

With regard to intentions to integrate the auditory dimension in urban design and planning, the theories described are highly relevant. According to them, an integration can only succeed if, besides the practice of urban design itself, with its methods, tools and measures, also the constitutive reference framework is going to be developed further and transformed appropriately to the sound-related requirements. Precisely this simultaneous and reciprocal process of development and transformation of both practice and reference framework is meant by *cultivating urban sound as an object of design*.

4. The complexity of cultivating urban sound as an object of design

As highlighted before, cultivating urban sound as an object of design involves much more than only inventing adequate instruments. My current research focuses on the identification of those elements, which are essential for the cultivation process. Below I'm going to outline some initial results of my work, generated from expert interviews, participatory observations and literature research. Due to the short length of such a paper there is no chance of providing an exhaustive overview or discussing individual points in detail. Therefore, I will limit the account to select examples and brief descriptions.

First I would like to indicate that the presence of the subject matter in general public discourse is lacking. Indeed in recent years urban sound became an occasional topic in the public media. But this is by far too little for initiating a broad debate on urban sound design and to push the cultivation process. Even now the awareness that urban sound could be deliberately planned nearly doesn't exist. Therefore a general sensitization for the topic is essential. (cf. e.g. Elliot 2013 or Flügge 2014, p.662) Without it neither a higher demand for urban sound planning nor a sense of its urgency will arise.

A precondition for a successful discourse on urban sound design and a working communication between different stakeholders is a common basis of speech. (cf. Becker 2008, p.254) The ability to verbalize and express your own thoughts and ideas on sound matters is essential for collective acting. Although an approved terminology in the field of acoustics exists (cf. e.g. Morfey 2001), and despite a few efforts at creating a special vocabulary to name further phenomena (cf. e.g. Schafer 1994, p.271–275; Truax 1999 or Augoyard and Torgue 2006), such a common basis of speech is, with the exception of few widely-used terms, still lacking. What we have so far is either inadequate, limited to professionals or hardly widespread. Thus establishing a common basis of speech is an inherent part of cultivating urban sound as an object of design.

Beyond that, within the cultivation process it is necessary to broaden the horizon of imagination and knowledge about what urban sound design could be. A wide horizon of imagination and knowledge is crucial to respond adequately to heterogeneous design tasks. Up to now this horizon has remained limited. To broaden it, on the one hand the factual knowledge about urban sound environments and the possibilities to design them has to be increased. For instance, further exploring which aspects of the environment can be influenced directly or indirectly, as well as how, and which aspects are not controllable but must be considered as given and determining. Even though the factual knowledge partially exists already (cf. e.g. Kang 2013 or Hellström 2003), it is either too rudimentary or not yet made accessible for urban planning. On the other hand besides factual knowledge, the know-how about designing urban sound environments also has to be expanded. Since know-how is practical experience it will only evolve from the ongoing cultivation process. But practical experiments as well as gaming simulations, for instance in the framework of lessons, can be helpful for developing this know-how to some extent already at the very beginning of the cultivation process and to push this process along.

In addition, broadening the horizon of imagination and knowledge refers to another vital aspect of the cultivation process: generating concepts and ideals of how sound designed urban environments could and should be. This point concerns the development of guiding principles, models and archetypes, which only enable substantial examinations and actions with respect to sound and within the framework of urban planning. Established concepts and ideals provide the required orientation for planning – even if they will be updated permanently. Without them, planners would act in a kind of vacuum, in a space without any reference point. Certainly, concepts and ideals do not simply pop up out of nothing. Rather, they emerge from an ongoing process of dealing with the subject, through intensive exchanges of views, and not least on the basis of the awareness about general demands and own needs. In the end, by implementing concrete projects underlying concepts and ideals become manifest. Realized projects again can serve as successful, or failed, examples (cf. Hellström 2003, p.23) and, by widening the experience, modify the concepts and ideals. In

this way and in the long term, general principles and even architectural styles with respect to urban sound will arise.

Both of these developments – acquiring knowledge and generating ideals – need a starting point. Oftentimes an awareness of issues and subsequent theoretical considerations can lead to primal assumptions and theses, which are able to initiate the aforementioned developments. In this connection I would like to quote the building of a stable theoretical basis as a further example of an essential element of cultivating urban sound as an object of design. Such a theoretical basis comprises for instance assumptions and theses about what exactly the object of urban sound design is, about what designing in this context means, or about what aims will be pursued in the design process. In addition, the definition of terms also belongs to the field of activity in this context and much more. In fact, regarding several aspects of urban sound design, theoretical considerations already exist. However, as of now they still do not build a broad and stable basis but rather a loose collection. The scientific landscape in this respect is fragmented and a comprehensive theoretical framework still lacking. Past attempts to provide such a framework – one of the best known examples is Murray Schafer's "THE SOUNDSCAPE: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World" (1994) – indeed led to inspiring conclusions and especially Schafer's book was groundbreaking, but so far the theoretical approaches of all these attempts were in parts either still limited, inconsistent or rather speculative. (With regard to the soundscape approach cf. Kelman 2010 and Ingold 2007) Yet it should be noted that recently more and more efforts to build a sufficient theoretical basis and to act more scientifically have been made.

Another important issue of the cultivation process is dissemination. Knowledge, concepts and ideals as well as theories – all of them need dissemination to be discussed, pushed forward and, finally, to be operative. Therefore, extended mechanisms and methods of dissemination must be developed and used that are appropriate for the subject of urban sound design.

Cultivating urban sound as an object of design will gradually create and consolidate structures in many areas, for instance with regard to organizational matters. Organizational structures involve, inter alia, clarified responsibilities and competences relating to urban sound design. Legal structures are another example. They regulate for example authority issues. Beyond that, financial structures should be mentioned, (cf. Becker 2008, pp.107) which only enable the practice of urban sound design on a professional level, as well as distribution networks, which are relevant for the provision and allocation of resources. These structures, and several more, will be partial outcomes of the cultivation process and many of them will involve institutionalizations. In the end, such structures are crucial to permanently establish urban sound as an object of design.

The examples given above can only provide an impression of the complexity of cultivating urban sound as an object of design. Most of them can be assigned to the reference

framework, which is constitutive for the urban sound design practice. Obviously, the design practice itself, as a main part of the cultivation process, also has to be developed further. That implies, among other things, the creation and/or enhancement of procedures, methods, techniques, tools and measures – for instance of recording, analyzing, reviewing, presenting or simulating any sonic aspects. It should be noted that, even if many further developments are still needed, both in the reference framework and the design practice, progress is already partly taking place and some solutions have already been found. In fact one of the major challenges will be to relate the single threads to one other in a reasonable way and finally to merge them into a consistent cultivation process.

5. The value of cultivating urban sound as an object of design

Cultivating urban sound as an object of design is a continuing, complex and extensive process of forming, negotiating, agreeing, adapting, modifying, enhancing and refining. Even when urban sound one day becomes an established object of design, the cultivation process will continue. This is because elements like the focus of public awareness, speech, knowledge, ideals, the way of thinking, dissemination channels, organizational, legal or financial structures, procedures, methods, techniques, tools, measures etc. change over time due to new findings and conditions, as well as current perceptions and needs. Beyond that, the process of cultivation could not – and should not – be fully controlled. Particular circumstances, such as personal requirements and ambitions, ingrained habits, or power structures in society are key determinants which can hardly be influenced by a third party. For these reasons and others, the cultivation process is to some degree quite unpredictable.

Nonetheless, cultivating urban sound as an object of design can and should be a deliberate and directed action. It *can* be because, as above-mentioned examples show, many elements of the cultivation process are definable or at least transformable in a conscious manner. Further elements can be influenced indirectly by creating a milieu which supports certain developments. Beside that, it *should* be a deliberate and directed action because, in spite of any uncertainties, this will offer the opportunity to promote and accelerate the integration of the auditory dimension in urban design and planning, and to avoid erroneous trends.

Cultivating urban sound as an object of design, understood as the simultaneous and reciprocal process of developing and transforming both practice *and* reference framework described above, is not only worthwhile but even necessary to establish sound as regular part of urban design and planning. According to the theories of Becker and Bourdieu it can be concluded that the cultural and social reference framework is constitutive for any design practice. Therefore the creation of an operable urban sound design practice will only succeed if at the same time the reference framework is taken into account.

In addition to the achievement of enabling planners to design urban sound in a conscious and comprehensive manner, the cultivation process may lead to a further outcome: It is conceivable that, based on new and alternative approaches to cultivating urban sound as an object of design, entirely new paths will open up even for urban design and planning in general and with regard to other sensory perceptions.

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