Soundwalking.
A new tool for urban regeneration

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There is no better way of taking in life than walking the streets.

Soundwalking is a practice of focused listening in which one moves through an environment with complete attention to sound (music, noises, voices and tales). Any environment can provide space for soundwalking. Sometimes the walks are guided by a written or verbal instruction. The participants may walk blindfolded, or stand still, or move in response to the soundfield. Sometimes the walker activates the soundscape - "playing along" with the sounds - using the voice, musical instruments or objects encountered along the way.

“A soundwalk can furthermore cover a wide area or it can just centre around one particular place. No matter what form a soundwalk takes, its focus is to rediscover and reactivate our sense of hearing.”¹

The pioneers of this kind of experience of soundscape have been mainly artists: under the guidance of Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, a small group of musicians and activists set forth on the World Soundscape Project (WSP)² in the early 1970s in an attempt to document and raise awareness of the world's acoustic environments. The researchers oriented themselves to an area by sound and to record the sounds of the environments that they walked through. They used this soundwalk method to identify and record the soundscapes of Vancouver and, later, five European villages.

The World Soundscape Project was the earliest organized exploration of acoustic ecology. Combining sociology, urban planning, ecology, philosophy their work has influenced composers, researchers, ecologists and activists. Westerkamp (1974, revised 2001) provides a useful introduction to the art of soundwalking and describes it as ‘any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment’.

The practice of listening while walking has a long history in philosophies of walking (Thoreau 1862; Schaub 2005), as well as practices of walking meditation.

² http://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio/handbook/wsp.html
"Walkers are ‘practitioners of the city,’ for the city is made to be walked. A city is a language, a repository of possibilities, and walking is the act of speaking that language, of selecting from those possibilities. Just as language limits what can be said, architecture limits where one can walk, but the walker invents other ways to go." (Solnit, 2000)

Lately in the early 1990s Janet Cardiff, a Canadian artist, started and continued, until recently, an artwork made of a series of walks. In these works she reinvents the format of audio walks.

The Cardiff's walks focuses little on the exhibitions, creating instead a fictional narrative. Most of these walks begin in an intuitional space then either diverge outdoors into the streets. The user is given a headset, and a mp3 and follows the instructions of the voice through the earphones. Cardiff uses binaural technology creating a 3D audio experience. The audio is a orchestration of recorded everyday sounds, fragments of stories and instructions given from the artist's voice. A fictional plot begins to play out in an staggered reality surrounding the users as they move through the space.

From June to September 2004 she composed “Her Long Black Hair” 4 a 35-minute journey that begins at Central Park South and transforms an everyday stroll in the park into an absorbing psychological and physical experience.

Many others have gone on to adapt the original concept of the soundwalk and use it in a variety of contexts that extend it; a collection of projects that do use sound as an artistic form in an urban environment. Sounds are expressed, mapped, analyzed; each example shows different approaches and possibilities of how to apply methods of soundwalking in an interactive way:

"Streetscape", a project of the Japanese artist Iori Nakai, consists of a plastic map with the sounds of the city "attached" to it. When tracing over the city's white map with a special pen, you can hear everyday noises that were recorded at that particular location: conversations, passing traffic, and all the ambient sounds that make a city.

A soundwalk can be designed and listened in many different ways, we can walk by ourselves or in a group, we can stay at home and listen back to the soundwalk, we can also take part actively to build together a sound map of our city like in the project City of Sound developed by the composer Michelle Nagai.

In this collaborative project "anyone is invited to submit a map and route description for a soundwalk - actual or imagined - that is situated in the five boroughs of New York City. These will be posted on the site as they come in."

Our main focus is to investigate soundwalks and the impact they have on society. This exploratory work is put into practice in artistic exhibitions, interventions in public space and in the development of social software and interfaces, but soundwalking take several applications for alternative tourism in disadvantaged and multicultural neighbourhoods. Soundwalk and audiowalk could engage tourists, inhabitants and non-residents to walk through areas with disadvantaged status and rarely-visited.

3 “The format of the audio walks is similar to that of an audioguide. You are given a CD player or Ipod and told to stand or sit in a particular spot and press play. On the CD you hear my voice giving directions, like “turn left here” or “go through this gateway”, layered on a background of sounds: the sound of my footsteps, traffic, birds, and miscellaneous sound effects that have been pre-recorded on the same site as they are being heard. This is the important part of the recording. The virtual recorded soundscape has to mimic the real physical one in order to create a new world as a seamless combination of the two. My voice gives directions but also relates thoughts and narrative elements, which instills in the listener a desire to continue and finish the walk”, Janet Cardiff, The Walk Book Walther König, Köln, 2005.

4 The audiowalk titled take place during a winding journey through Central Park’s retracing the footsteps of an enigmatic dark-haired woman.

5 http://www.cityinasoundwalk.org/submit.html
The most significant example in this field is the “Vesterbro Site”, a collection of six audiowalks guided by the voices of six young writers and artists; they have produced their own “audio walk” through Vesterbro each of them giving a different angle to their favourite part of the history of the district.

Vesterbro used to be known as Copenhagen's working-class neighbourhood and red light district. During the last ten years the district to the west of the Central Station has undergone a massive transformation.

“...The audio-walks are aimed at providing the listener with a personal account of Vesterbro, thereby allowing foreign tourists and local citizens to experience an inside-view of life in Vesterbro. Fantasy and reality come together in the audio-walk experience, in a way that is impossible to achieve through the more common “written-literature” guides. One’s experience of the neighbourhood becomes both intimate and direct when accompanied by the “sound-literature” guide.”

GIU’ NAPOLI.

Down to Naples. Soundwalk in mp3, duration 30 min., along a 414-step-stairway in one movement or 10 stops.

What is then the sense of space that an auditory experience can reveal? We tried to inquire (and answer) the role of hearing in daily experience, as an element defining space beyond the geometrical configuration of sites.

We soon realized how this inquiry intersects a central issue of urban design related to anthropology of space: the life of spaces, beyond the function for which they were designed. The auditory experience may allow them to survive over time, even for the period of a performance, a practice or an event, designed as a non-trivial variation of their potential flexibility. It is a matter of practicing collective listening.

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6 http://www.copenhagen.dk/en/whats_on/events_english/walking_tours
7 Giù Napoli is a work made by IndiziTerrestri, a multidisciplinary urban research network based in Naples and Madrid.
Our experimental project, called Giu’Napoli (Down to Naples), (this is the common expression Neapolitans living on a hill use when they have to go to the city center) has been based in Naples, during the Maggio dei Monumenti 2008, in a particular place, the Pedamentina, a staircase connecting the hill of San Martino to the historical city centre, along a steep and fascinating slope including several visions of the city, both panoramic and foreshortening.

The walk is an exception among others: it was not built over a water course (as most of this kind of walks in the historical city) but as a connection between the mountainside and the top of the Vomero hill. The walk was built in the same period that St. Martin’s charterhouse was founded and it was commonly used to carry construction material to the hill.

The walk is not much frequented and in same place in state of decay. The Pedamentina, as other stairways connecting the lower city with the hilly city, is mostly used by residents but seldom as a pedestrian alternative to cable railways. We choosed this walk for 2 reasons. One is sound, since, in such a context, there’s the possibility to keep city sounds on the background. In fact the everyday soundscape of the city is muffled in the begin of the walk, is inaudible in the middle, and only at the end, at the final steps, we begin to listen the traffic noise. I listen in my headphones for the first time to the sound of my footsteps.

Another reason is trying to put back together some fragments of Naples urban memory: in 1978 the Pedamentina had been, with other stairways, the scene for “Naples on foot”, a popular event organized by university researchers aimed at discovering new pedestrian routes in the city by mobilizing residents. Every Sunday, for 7 weeks, people got together

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8 Maggio dei Monumenti is the most important cultural event takes place in Naples since 1994. Every year in May the city of Naples celebrates its heritage with a festival during which visitors can obtain entry to cultural sites that are usually closed to the public, benefit from free guided tours and enjoy free entry to museums and other monuments over the five weekends of the event. Moreover numerous cultural meetings by theatres, opera and concert halls as well as author readings are accomplished. Some of the monuments open their doors after final restoration for the first time. In the project was involved the municipality, schools and cultural and turistical associations.
with cultural and theatre associations, providing a program of various activities (recitals, live music, theatre performances, etc.) aimed at improving awareness about the importance of pedestrian routes in the city. Naples on foot was suspended at the beginning of the 80's in the aftermath of a major earthquake.

The Pedamentina is a walk for few: residents, famous travellers, some brave tourists walking down to the city center; a place for loving couples, a secret passage of urban flaneurs, cited just in a few tourist guides. Real estate rates in the area of the stairway, despite it is quite close to the center, are rather convenient. Today, with the historical residents, one can find young couples and students. The walk is quite degraded, with the exception of pieces in front of houses.

Through the audiowalk we invited residents and tourists to join a collective experience in a pedestrian space. Each one listens by himself, but if you reverse the condition from isolation to sharing, the sound experience may produce surprising effects. In the lapse of what could get lost, because it's outside our listening space, people can get that lapse according to their rhythm and using it for a different function. It's almost like in the Silent Raves which transform a silent collective listening in a true sound experience. In many stations, from Liverpool Street to Victoria Station in London, or in squares such as Union Square in NY, groups of people acted dancing flash mobs right thanks to a multimedia device.

In a precise moment, everybody turned on their iPod and started to dance silently but according to the same rhythm, transforming those spaces in meeting and dancing places.

This kind of flash mobs work as happenings and occur in public spaces or shopping malls. This critical dancing mass transforms the nature of those spaces in a powerful collective perspective (Brighenti and Mattiucci, 2008).

"Rave" or form of wild dancing party where all of the members listen to music through headphones on separate portable music players. The players are all synchronized so everyone is hearing the same thing, but no outsiders hear anything, hence the "silent" portion of the name. The police didn't bust the silent rave down the street because nobody complained about the noise.

It is a sound path, which offers an alternative to the usual way of perceiving the city: the audiowalk is made possible through the listening of a story telling voice, which connects monuments, buildings and places. Participants to the audiowalk get together at a meeting point and there media players are distributed for the tour. As result, a kind of ongoing performance is staged in which the participants are both actors and bystanders at the same time. A sound path, as an alternative to ordinary visions of the city, moved on by a voice, has been designed to connect monuments, buildings and places into a narrative.

Making a precise date, and distributing multimedia drives, we played a sort of moving show, where visitors were actors and audience at the same time. The sound narrative has been designed as a synthesis of different features of the city, arranged in different scenes the traveller could hear and see.

The soundtrack was made of dialogues, sounds and music as in theatre pièce about the city’s architectures. The city became a stage to watch and practice, as people moved down watching the same things that were told in the sound track and somehow making the exhibition of themselves.

Through a sound transfer the contemporary traveller could meet old-times travellers, from Benjamin to Beuys, living in the lecture of an actress standing still in some corners of the staircase, in a time shock occurring when headphones were
off. The common sound experience has produced a true alteration of the vision of places, for those who were watching them and even for inhabitants who were watching these people.

The format design has been the occasion to talk about public space and how people use it, to reflect on the relation between the future and the memory, through a patchwork of visions occurring when people use a multimedia driver. Through the sound experience the experience of space becomes thicker, and can be understood through social relations and immaterial, synchronic relations.

The influence of new media in these phenomena of alteration or even enlargement of places is crucial, sometimes as an existential condition. In this sense, iPod can be seen as a device to read/create/interpret space.

After 2008 the Pedamentina has been a location of other public events and included in some new tourist guides. But the walk is still not well kept by local Administration. We consider our work experience as a micro co-regeneration project, a spark for an innovative public space policy supporting urban projects "from the bottom up", the small parentless piece of a Russian doll: "the selection of suitable spatial scale for the development of an urban regeneration programme or project is akin to unpacking a Russian doll: each level of policy must be considerer an appropriate acknowledgment should be given to the other layers of policy both 'above' and 'belove' the specific activity which is the focus of concern."

References


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