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BERLIN SONIC PLACES
A Brief Guide

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Introduction

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Berlin Sonic Places: A Brief guide is an appreciation of, and an enquiry into, Berlin's sounds and soundscapes in all their moods of noise and quiet. It asks why does Berlin sound the way it does and what makes one neighbourhood sonically different from another. It pays attention to the aural character of particular buildings, streets, squares and green spaces, listens to the city's public transport system and celebrates the importance of nature to Berlin's acoustic environment. Briefly it attempts to find out what Berliners think and feel about the sounds of their city and how Berlin's soundscape compares with those of other European capitals? *Berlin Sonic Places: A Brief Guide* raises the question, "How do we hear the cities in which we live?" and offers some thoughts and responses from Berlin's point of ear.

How do we hear the city? When speaking of a city soundscape it often seems that we are referring to a single sound: all the activity of the metropolis combined into an acoustic whole that, however complex, still, somehow, represents the city's sonic character. It's an attractive idea – perhaps an aural response to the stunning urban landscapes we see from aeroplanes or via satellites high above – one that encourages us to think of city sounds as an interrelated whole and that gives expression to the widespread belief that each city has a unique sonic identity distinct from other cities. But in practice, as individuals immersed in the ever-present sound and noise of urban environments, this is not what we hear. Cities are just too large and our ears cannot register the entire soundscape as one.

However, while the whole sonic panorama may elude us, what we actually experience is equally profound and significant. Environmental sounds are inseparable from the locations where they are heard. When moving around a city we pass through a continual succession of local soundscapes that merge, often unnoticed, from one to the next. Each is connected to a particular place or spot. These are the city's innumerable *sonic places* – the building blocks of the urban sound environment. They are present everywhere; in public and private space, streets, parks, inside buildings, at home, at work, below ground in subway stations or cellars and above in towers or skyscrapers. At any one moment their size is limited to the range of our hearing and their soundscape a product of the acoustic activity there, in resonance with the material, architectural and social character of the place.

What are sonic places? Sonic places imply a constant interplay between the physical environment – buildings, streets, walls, spatial layout, vegetation – and the sounds, which are created by people using the place, by the infrastructures and technologies present and, even in the most urbanised of spaces, by natural elements and other living species. It's a constantly dynamic relationship, affected from moment to moment by the normal rhythms of city life, weather and seasonal changes and over the longer term by redevelopment, changing technologies, planning decisions, cultural, social, economic and environmental trends.

A basic description of a sonic place would include its location, terrain, the main architectural features and its most notable sounds. For example, Berlin Alexanderplatz – a large, busy, city centre plaza, completely paved and surrounded by tall buildings and glass fronted shops that create substantial echoes and reverberations; a major city transport hub and tourist attraction; sounds include trams rumbling across the centre, people's footsteps, conversations

in many languages, roller cases and a constant background of mid-distant traffic. But more is involved than a simple account. The interactions between different elements and their changes over time are also central. Perception is multi-sensory, so information from all our senses is important. What is seen, the temperature, humidity, the atmosphere of the moment and many other factors, including memories from previous visits and any prior expectations all potentially affect our experience of sonic places.

All sonic places combine elements that are fixed with those that vary. The dynamic between the two is often very characteristic. Material structures, the architecture and physical layouts, plus the acoustic effects that they create, have permanence, although their impact and atmosphere will be modified by the weather, time of day and many other factors. Sounds heard range from the ever-present to the completely accidental. The urban drones of air conditioning, electrical hums or buzzes and traffic backgrounds, often seem so constant that they take on the durability of stone or concrete. But non-continuous sounds can also be fixtures through their regularity. Bells chiming the hour, or playgrounds always noisy after school, are particularly noticeable and distinctive. Others though, like ambulance sirens close to a hospital or early morning birdsong, are much less certain in their timing, but are still likely to be heard. In this case, sonic probability, rather than individual occurrence, characterises the sound. Many aural events though, including those caused by the weather or unexpected wildlife, are far less predictable, and some are just occasional accidents. The predictability of sounds is an important aspect of sonic place. Busy places, such as railways stations or main city squares, may be sonically dense with a great deal of activity, but because much is predictable there are few surprises. However, in quiet locations where little happens, like small courtyards or isolated green spaces, even small sounds can be startling when they occur.

The relationship between the seen and the heard is also vital to sonic places. In urban environments, where vision is often restricted by walls or buildings, hearing keeps us in touch with events and sound sources that are out of sight. This is particularly obvious at night. The city of the ear and that of the eye may be closely associated, but their boundaries are rarely identical. If both are mapped they show an intricate pattern of links and overlaps but never complete correspondence. In the above example, hearing has a greater range than vision, but the reverse is also common. At vantage points with a clear view or in large open spaces, it is possible to see further than to hear and the distance information received is visual. Some sonic places may be characterised by an aural/visual relationship that constantly fluctuates. Beside busy roads or under flight paths quiet and more distant sounds will be drowned out by the peaks in traffic or aircraft noise but become audible again in between the loud moments.

Sonic borders, the edges of sonic places and how they merge from one to the next are also significant. Often they are barely noticeable. We may just become aware that the sound has changed after a relatively short distance and realise that a border has been passed. But exactly where it lies is rather ambiguous. Nevertheless, we cross sonic borders frequently while moving in the city. Some are more obvious, as in the sudden change of soundscape when entering a building or the reduction of traffic noise when turning a corner into a less busy street. The acoustic variety of cities is created as much by the number of sonic borders crossed as by the range of sounds present. Borders are intimately connected to the layout and architecture of an area. Older parts of cities, where streets are narrower and connected via small plazas

and passageways, usually contain a greater density of sonic places and borders compared to newer areas, which are likely to be more open with broader, straighter streets. In Berlin the interlinked courtyards of Hinterhöfe are a good example of an architecture that creates an intriguing variety of sonic places and borders.

City residents get to know particular sonic places very well. Indeed, those at home or on regular travel routes become so familiar that they virtually disappear from our awareness. This does not mean that they are unimportant. On the contrary, their very familiarity means that they are essential to personal city knowledge, key to our sense of place and vital to our navigation through urban geography. *Berlin Sonic Places: A Brief Guide* is an attempt to draw attention again, not only to the number and variety of sonic places in the city, but to their intricacy, interest and continuing significance. They are the small beauties of everyday sound and, sadly, too often ignored.

Although the focus of this publication is on sonic places and soundscapes as experienced by individual city dwellers, it is certainly not the only perspective. Max Dixon, in his opening article *Towards a New Sonic Land Art*, draws upon his experience in the environment department of the Greater London Authority to address the state of acoustic planning by those in positions to directly effect what we actually hear. Sadly, it is still all too rare for governments, city planners, developers and others to consider more than the basic regulations, which are intended to keep noise levels below legal limits but do little to actively promote humane soundscape design. Max argues that current changes to mass transport technologies – electric cars, new aircraft engine technologies – offer a one in a hundred-year opportunity for more positive approaches and makes practical suggestions as to how this might be achieved.

The *Brief Guide* itself portrays a few of Berlin's countless sonic places. They range from the spectacular cold war site *Teufelsberg* to completely ordinary locations, such as Cobble Streets, and to small spots on the map like *Eislabor*, *Prenzlauerberg*. Most are in the open air, but not all; the *Vaupel Supermarket*, *Moabit*, provides an indoor example. But where ever they are and whatever their individual characteristics they all contribute to the totality of Berlin's unique soundscape. One of the sonic places, *Linum*, *Brandenburg*, actually lies outside the city boundary, but it is included because it is so special. Every autumn thousands of migrating cranes gather there and the sight and sound of these birds passing overhead in v-formation at dusk is just wonderful. At that time of year small groups also fly high over Berlin, their trumpeting calls adding a brief moment of magic and wildness to the city hubbub.

The articles by Udo Noll, Fritz Schlüter and Pascal Amphoux also refer to specific Berlin sonic places, but are presented separately because they contain additional ideas and approaches. In *Maybachufer* Udo Noll compares today's sounds of the street market there with those described by the writer Frank Hessel 80 years ago and finds that much remains the same. He also reflects on listening to audio recordings of places that one hears daily as part of normal life and on the ephemeral nature of sound maps. In *A Soundscape Remodelled: Nauener Platz in Berlin-Wedding* Fritz Schlüter gives an account of the European Soundscape Award winning re-development of Nauener Platz, which is one of the few examples (worldwide) where soundscape ideas have played a major role in the design. Local residents were invited to take part in the planning process and can now sit down on 'ear benches' to listen to sounds that they helped to choose. Fritz asks the very pertinent question, "How successful is this

in practice?" In *Two Sonic Landscapes for Berlin* Pascal Amphoux discusses the soundscape at two of Berlin's best known places, Tempelhof Airfield and the Hauptbahnhof, using the ideas on acoustic environments and of 'sound effect' developed by researchers at CRESSON (Le Centre de Recherche sur l'Espace Sonore et l'Environnement Urbain) in Grenoble. These allow a very detailed, and often philosophical, approach to the understanding of the soundscape. Pascal not only alludes to the acoustic nature of what is heard, but also to the architectural and historic contexts and in so doing creates a description of sonic place that is both distinctive and poetic.

The publication ends with two articles that attempt a more collective view of Berlin's soundscape. *Berlin Favourite Sounds* sets out to discover what people find positive about the city's soundscape by asking the question, "What is your favourite sound of Berlin, and why?" The responses are fascinating to read and often quite personal. This article outlines the replies and discusses what is said. *Why is Berlin Quieter than other European Capitals?* considers the observation made by many incomers that Berlin seems noticeably quieter in comparison to other European cities. It is interesting to ask why and a group of colleagues were asked to suggest their reasons. This article gathers the suggestions together and reveals a very broad set of possibilities.

This publication has its history in the original Berlin Sonic Places project, which was developed while I was a guest of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program during 2012. The plan was collaborative, bringing together different interest groups – artists, architects, planners, sociologists, administrators, musicians, local residents, students, and the public – for a broad dialogue on the city's changing soundscape. Specific research and sounds arts projects were set up in the Berlin areas of Prenzlauerberg, Rummelsburg and Tempelhof Airfield leading to a day of public events at each location, where the work was presented alongside performances, talks and discussions. For more details, please visit the Berlin Sonic Places website ¹.

The *Rummelsburg Soundwalk: Map and Guide*, presented as the removable cover of this publication, was created for Rummelsburg event in 2012. Even though it is now out of date it has been included in its original form. Following the same soundwalk today reveals the changes that have taken place. It is interesting to discover how the rebuilding and renovations have affected the soundscape. Which sounds remain the same, which are new and which are altered?

On a personal note: as a field recordist and artist/musician with a long interest in the environment, city sounds are central to my work. The DAAD residency offered a wonderful opportunity to explore Berlin's soundscape and the chance to collaborate with like-minded artists and researchers based in the city. It's been great. Although the residency was for twelve months, six years later I am still here and still fascinated by the varied, often subtle, soundscapes, sounds and sonic places to be heard in Berlin. There always seems more to discover. This is to thank the DAAD for their generous support and for setting me on such an absorbing path.

Peter Cusack, September 2017

¹ Berlin Sonic Places website: http://sonic-places.dock-berlin.de/?lp_lang_pref=en&page_id=6