Chapter 5

Activity as a Mediator Between Users and Their Auditory Environment in an Urban Pocket Park: A Case Study of Parc du Portugal (Montreal, Canada)

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ABSTRACT

Sound is receiving increasing attention in urban planning and design due to its effects on human health and quality of life. Soundscape researchers have sought ecologically valid measures to describe and explain the complex relationship between people and their auditory environments, largely employing laboratory studies and neglecting the active role of activity. This chapter proposes a situated cognition approach to study the relationship between context, use of space, and the ways in which users describe and evaluate sounds and their auditory environments in an urban pocket park. It draws on empirical data gathered in Parc du Portugal in Montreal, Canada using a mixed-methods research design that integrates ethnographic observations, on-site questionnaires, and behavioral mapping using a geo-spatial app to offer a situated understanding of the human auditory experience in its full complexity, with an emphasis on the mediating role of activity on the user-auditory environment relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies with an urban focus, embedded in a large variety of scientific or applied disciplines, attempt to research, understand and ultimately contribute to improving urban life, particularly in a public context. In doing so, they attempt to disentangle the complexity of the multisensory urban experience and how the experience is shaped by and shapes individuals’ and groups’ actions in and perceptions of urban public spaces. Researching this complexity and offering multi-dimensional descriptions of the user-environment relationship requires interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate scientific knowledge as well as methods and techniques from both object and human-centred approaches.

To adequately understand the urban experience in context and to also gather meaningful insight that can support the design and transformation of urban spaces, scientists must strive to account for ecological validity concerns in their on-site research and generate insight that city-makers should integrate in their everyday projects for meaningful urban plans and designs. Ecological validity refers to the importance of studying human perception in a way that mimics people’s everyday, real-life experiences, by accounting for and integrating “contextual and environmental cues” (Guastavino, 2005, p. 334) that can affect the ways in which people interact with their environment. It cannot be achieved in a laboratory setting, which divorces users from the contexts they are embedded in and exposes them to a controlled set of stimulations, limiting their agency and reducing the urban experience to simplistic causal relationships (i.e. the user influences the environment or the environment influences the user). Furthermore, it fails to account for the context-dependent ways in which users choose to use and engage with their environment, through different sensory modalities, in their everyday life. Comparatively, in situ studies (“in the wild”) can focus on complex notions of activities and situated descriptions and evaluations of their environment, in context (see e.g. Herranz-Pascual et al. 2017).

This chapter situates the auditory dimension of the urban experience at the centre of the discussion, as it a key, yet understudied aspect of urban life. While the focus is on sound, the authors do not wish to over-emphasize audition compared to other sensory stimulations, as doing so would only reinforce a mono-sensory tradition; the purpose is rather to build on extensive knowledge on the importance of audition and sound in navigating and shaping urban spaces. The work described here advocates a shift from a visual sense-oriented investigation and transformation of public spaces to acknowledging and integrating the auditory dimension in academic and practice-related discourses, (Cerwén et al. 2017, Bild, Coler et al. 2016). In this context, this chapter investigates the relationship between the ways in which users use and engage with an urban pocket park and the ways in which they evaluate and describe their auditory environments. Soundscape researchers have sought ecologically valid ways of studying the relationship between users of public and private spaces and their auditory environment, but have only recently begun to consider the role of activity in mediating this relationship i.e. as the explanatory link between users and their environments (Herranz-Pascual et al. 2010, Bild, Coler et al. 2015, Aletta, Lepore et al. 2016, Steffens, Steele & Guastavino 2017, inter alios). Furthermore, while there is a growing body of knowledge on the influence of certain categories of sounds (e.g. “natural” sounds, traffic sounds) over users’ evaluation of their public spaces, the complex relationship between engagement with public spaces and users’ description and evaluation of their auditory environments in those spaces has not been systematically explored on-site. This is an essential gap because one does not exist or perceive in vacuo, untouched by one’s environment or the others present in it, or even more, outside of one’s own activities, needs, or expectations. Users’ experiences of spaces, particularly their auditory experiences, are situated in a setting influenced by psychological, sociological and linguistic factors.