

Sonic Empowerment: Reframing "atmosphere" through Sonic Urban Design

Nicola Di Croce

Postdoctoral Research Fellow

Department of Architecture and Arts

Iuav University of Venice

S. Croce 1957 - 30135 Venezia, Italy

ndicroce@iuav.it

Nicola Di Croce is an architect, musician, sound artist and scholar. He has a PhD in Regional Planning and Public Policies. His research deals with the relationship between urban and regional planning, public policies and sonic environments, exploring new potential for urban regeneration, participatory processes and local development. Through his research, he intends to make use of sonic urban design as an empowerment device for marginal stakeholders, as well as an instrument for the implementation of the institutional understanding of critical urban issues such as depopulation, segregation and the loss of local identities and intangible cultural heritage.

www.nicoladicroce.com

Toward a definition of Sonic Urban Design

Murray Schafer's definition of acoustic design in the 1970s presented an ambitious strategy for developing entire soundscape spectrums (Schafer 1977). The Canadian composer aimed to combine the expertise of different professionals, from social scientists to musicians and urban planners, to implement a new wave of soundscape-oriented design. At the same time, sound design emerged as an independent branch of study, initially focused on live entertainment as well as theatre and cinema productions, which gradually seeped into the production of most objects we experience in everyday life - from electrical appliances to traffic lights and alarms. While the trajectory imagined by Schafer never found a proper entourage in the following years - acoustic design gradually converging into sound and soundscape studies (Truax 1984) - sound design established itself as a leading field due to the exponential rise of new media and communication design, which nowadays shapes a significant proportion of public and private space.

Although it is possible to claim that sound design slowly and incidentally absorbed part of acoustic design's original area of interest - we only need think of the pervasive presence of ringtones on the street and public transport - it doesn't address the "side effects" as well as the social, architectural,

and economic contexts in which “designed sounds” exist day-to-day. Soundscape-oriented approaches have attempted to fill this gap by introducing new tools related to social and urban studies (Augoyard and Torque 2005) that examine the perceptual and qualitative features of the sonic environment aimed at improving the quality of life in urban areas (Lex Brown 2012).

I propose that acoustic design fell short of its original mission (or scaled down its ambitions), because the sonic environment is complex and requires a plurality of professional perspectives, each of which can only modestly contribute to the impact of what a city sounds like. The sonic environment is, in fact, the result of a chaotic combination of atmospheric desires, ecological compromises, and economic battles; it is not composed of “passive” notes to be played as if by an orchestra. Indeed, the development of a certain ability to analyze the expected and unexpected effects of “contemporary life” on the sonic environment from a bottom-up design approach is required. The sonic environment cannot be composed top-down as by a “traditional” composer - it is a social construct whose features are influenced by every single human action or decision - but could be “oriented” through the mediation of art practices, education processes, and urban policy design (Di Croce 2016).

Urban policy design, among other fields, plays a central role in the “composition” of a sonic situation because it can regulate, foster, or limit the way certain areas are inhabited by, for example, licensing street vendors or setting the evening closing time of bars. However, the vibrancy of a popular area is not designed exclusively by urban policies —inhabitants often contradict regulations through their everyday practices. For this reason, institutions cannot control urban sounds as they can a building’s code of conduct; the habitual behavior of residents and economic trends have a much faster impact on sonic environment. A bottom-up approach is needed because the sonic environment is, in the end, an unstable agreement between residents and institutions.

In the light of these premises, I regard sonic urban design as a suitable definition under which the multiplicity of actions and professionals involved in the fields of urban sound regulation can be assembled. As sociologist Caroline Claus underlines: “As an urban sound designer you organise social, physical and auditory components in space and time. You’re thinking of contextual relationships more so than just standard musical relationships.” (Claus 2015, 18-19)

Some intriguing examples of action-orientated practices are presented by the parallel work of sound artists and policymakers. Of particular note is *The Sound-considered City*, an innovative guide for decision-makers edited in 2018 by Belfast and Oxford-based research group Recomposing the City (Lappin, Ouzounian, and O’Grady 2018). The guide “shows how artists and designers can effectively ‘recompose’ the city through sound art” (ibid., 4) and analyzes some of the key aspects of public space to be considered in order to “promote and enhance positive and distinctive aspects of the local soundscape” (ibid., 7). It is interesting to note that the policy context, both at a national and European level (the EU Noise Action Plan above all), is analyzed to identify particularly “pleasant” environments and understand the “unique acoustic character” and “acoustic problems” of each place. Many international sound art projects are then examined as possible tools to approach planning issues such as noise pollution, connectivity, safety, vibrancy, tourism, economic growth, biodiversity, and placemaking.

Subjective-poetic and collective-political listening

Through sonic urban design, which converges sound art and planning, the "quality" of a specific sonic environment can be appreciated in terms of private yet collective meaning. No design process is all encompassing and, therefore, I would argue that the subjective-poetic listening proposed by sound art practices (through installations, compositions, and participatory performances and workshops) is fundamental for the rise of collective-political listening (and possible redefinition) of any current sonic situation.

Media artist and scholar Budhaditya Chattopadhyay reflects on this topic, proposing auto-curatorship as the ideal way of experiencing sound art: "Sound art is potentially suited to direct the listener towards the personal or subjective unfolding of an auditory situation" (Chattopadhyay 2017). By exceeding any form of overarching curatorship and "keeping [the] listener at the centre of the artwork" (Chattopadhyay 2017), sound can freely drive self-reflection and collective engagement within an auditory situation.

From this perspective, the unmediated experience of listening draws a powerful aesthetic able to set the premises for a shared design process. Here, sonic urban design moves along its path, leading the private sonic "drift" - implied in every intimate exposure to sound - towards a collective realm. Only by means of a preliminary "self-exposure" to the sonic environment's multiple meanings is it therefore possible to begin any kind of co-design process.

I explored this very transition from private sonic acknowledgment to collective designed-oriented participation during an artist residency in 2015 organized by the Fondazione Aurelio Petroni in San Cipriano Picentino where I developed a project called *Listening Closely* (Di Croce 2018). In the small southern Italian town, I undertook a series of sound walks with locals, asking them to introduce me to their environment through everyday sounds. The field recordings and stories I recorded formed the basis of a participatory performance that concluded the residency where the public was invited to select sounds from the collated sounds that I then mixed and played back in real time. Each participant's choice became a crucial element within the overall composition's sonic flux. Their curiosity to play particular sounds led local people to rediscover their everyday life and environment through the fresh awareness that, in order to listen to any recording, other simultaneous sounds shouldn't overcome those that have been selected.

Through this performance and a subsequent public talk, the local community was involved in a "sonic meeting"; every participant experienced their role and responsibility in constructing their everyday sonic environment.



The final participatory performance of *Listening Closely*.

The participatory performance particularly stimulated the town's inhabitants to discover their emotional and political relationship with their sonic environment and explore their capabilities to alter its flow. Indeed, each chosen sound led to specific questions - such as what impact might particularly noisy agricultural machinery have on human health - that reflect the sonic environment's global qualities. As a result, a first incitement to engage in urban sound design was proposed to the inhabitants of San Cipriano Picentino aimed at further developing a design-oriented process with local institutions. The project provided an opportunity to examine in-depth connections between the sonic environment, art practices, participatory design, political understanding, and agency of citizens, as well as set the stage for new interactions between these practices.

Certain issues regarding the deep political meaning of participatory sound art practices such as *Listening Closely* arise especially in relation to the notion of "sonic acknowledgment" (Di Croce 2016). A co-designed, fictional soundscape mirrors reality enabling reflections on daily life that can query habitual features of the sonic environment: for example, listening with awareness to the drone of a machine - its complex, multi-layered frequencies and tones that may damage the health of those overexposed to it - enables the critique of what was previously adopted as a mere "matter of fact." Here, the act of listening becomes political - any overexposure caused by precarious working conditions might be difficult to change, especially in poor, marginalized areas. This example shows how listening can positively improve individual understanding to pinpoint problematic social issues, and yet simultaneously reveals how sonic awareness alone cannot drive political change unless supported and followed by the action of local people and institutions.

Indeed, I would argue that both institutional and collective mobilization are required to transform

sonic awareness into poetic as well as political outcomes.

Reframing urban Atmosphere: The case study of Liminaria 2018

In July 2018 I was invited to participate in the festival Liminaria in Guardia Sanframondi, a small, inland, southern Italian town with around 5,000 inhabitants near Benevento and Naples. During the residency, I developed a sound art project to explore the town's narrative, its self-image and urban atmosphere through listening, whilst reflecting on the area's marginality. The aim was to interact with the town's local institutions, inviting them to reflect on issues related to urban atmosphere, marginality and local development. I approached the small town's ambiance through deep listening practices. In particular, I positioned the sonic environment's essential contribution to urban atmosphere as a pervasive element of people's everyday lives, and a crucial spatial catalyst of place (LaBelle 2010, Griffero 2013). More specifically, I was interested in investigating the historic town center's precariousness through its current sonic situation, while proposing sustainable approaches to its future development. I began discussing the possibility with some key local actors (the town's mayor, council members, and local stakeholders such as shopkeepers). We spoke about their personal history and daily lives in relation to the town's central, residential area, exploring their perception of its everyday sonic environment and potential sonic and atmospheric evolution.

I adopted a mixed research-oriented methodology using field recording as key research material. My comments on recordings were combined with those from the informal interviews I undertook with the areas' old and new inhabitants. In addition, I was interested to compare the sonic and territorial understanding I had gained during my residency with the mayor's vision of the town's future development, trying to find a shared position for discussion through sound and listening.



A satellite view of Guardia Sanframondi. The borders of the inner, historical town are marked in red.

The town's central, residential area, is a largely depopulated site that has nevertheless witnessed significant, recent transformations. In particular, since 2010, a considerable number of abandoned houses have been bought by foreign newcomers - mainly artists and pensioners from all over the world - who have moved to Guardia Sanframondi and started a slow process of regeneration and integration with the local community. At the same time, the municipality started renovating the town center - built around narrow, stone-paved, pedestrian streets - which had been seriously damaged in many places.

My sonic explorations of the center enabled me to enter the atmosphere of the place in order to explore both the impressions that entice newcomers to move there and those which lead existing residents to move away. Guardia Sanframondi's old town revealed a surprisingly layered sonic environment through field recordings, which I predominantly produced during the mornings and afternoons of my summer survey when social activity was more evident. The intimate rhythms of still-inhabited houses were clear and undisturbed by traffic noise or other human activities; the prayers of old women joined radio newscasts, random movie soundtracks or kitchen sounds. Meanwhile, water originating from a complex system of underground collectors flowed through the alleys, creating small waterfalls, each of them marking the side of the town that faces the valley. Here several natural elements - such as trees moving in the wind or birds - combined with distant echoes of the modern new town.

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Field recording from the inner-pedestrian area of Guardia Sanframondi (July 19, 2018, h18:45)

Through listening, I was able to experience the "abandoned" area, catching intimate details from the lives of those who have remained in spite of difficulties and now, in a figurative way, "own" the area and distrust passers-by. In listening to their lives, I was trespassing over an invisible threshold - I was not meant to be there; no one was waiting for me. I listened to the conversations of young migrant workers back in their hometown on vacation who re-encounter the narrow streets that divide their old and new lives.

I realized that the center's atmosphere does not mirror the emptiness of its streets, but continuously filters - both metaphorically and physically - echoes of the modern town as well as its citizens' behavior. Due to its suspended character in between the constant presence of natural elements, old and silent memories, and an unusual sense of "safety" from the modern town, the town's historic center provides an assemblage of perceptions - a mix of nostalgia and curiosity. For this reason, living in the old town - which all newcomers have decided to do - does not necessarily mean choosing to be cloistered from the "new" but rather to consider the development model that shaped post-WWII Italy from a "distant" and therefore critical perspective. That promise of broad economic growth inevitably affected a "sense of place" and the social body of Italy's most precarious inner areas.

In collecting field recordings from the old town, I gradually familiarized myself with its particular atmosphere and the sonic perception of both its old and new inhabitants.

Field recording from the inner-pedestrian area of Guardia Sanframondi (July 21, 2018; h 16:30)

During my stay in Guardia Sanframondi, I was able to meet, among many new inhabitants, Clare Galloway, who was the first artist to buy a house in the old town center and move there in the early 2000s. From the open conversation we had, I realized that word of mouth and certain TV shows and internet advertisements interested in unusual relocations had created a strong, idealized vision of the southern Italian rural way of life. When asked about their life choices, and their everyday sonic perception, Clare and most of the other artists I spoke with (mainly young and middle-aged women) agreed that the town center's atmosphere - its silent environment, calmness and profound connection with natural elements - were key reasons to move there and start a new life. I began to realize how a by-product of economic development from the 20th Century's latter decades - which fostered modern expansion, allowing inhabitants to leave old town "discomfort" for a more urban environment - is now being reconsidered and re-valued by an increasing group of foreigners, who are looking for the quality of life that old residents rejected. I recognized that the first new residents must be sonically aware, as their decisions to move there were partially motivated by the environment's sound qualities. Of course, not all of the foreign residents are now silent and contemplative. During my informal interviews, I learned from both the foreign community and old residents that a large number of houses have been sold to non-residents and are only used for short vacation periods.



A view from the inner-pedestrian area of Guardia Sanframondi.

Municipality regeneration has closely followed this new interest in the town center, opening up the area to its prior inhabitants, who are now reconsidering their relationship with that once abandoned place. In fact, during my stay in Guardia Sanframondi, two groups of young entrepreneurs were opening up small restaurants in the pedestrian area to promote local products that would contribute to the town's economic development. In such a regeneration process, the municipality plays a key role not only because it owns the restaurant spaces but also because it can license the number and typology of new activities that might be established there.

In exploring the old town's atmosphere, I experienced the fragile balance between that which is resisting change and elements that are disappearing at the very moment when economic and social developments are necessarily modifying the area's material and immaterial framework. In this sense, the "delicate" sonic environment invited me to consider the town's profound, ongoing transformations and the local impressions concerning its future. I began considering the possibility of contributing to how the sonic environment might be shaped in the future and therefore shifting the small town's self-perception.

The atmospheric environment of inner Guardia Sanframondi is changing rapidly. Old and new inhabitants are showing interest in the central pedestrian area, which represents a particular and precarious "gold rush". If we assume that a quiet yet "dense" sonic environment is one of the main perceptive elements constituting this atmosphere, in searching for it, the 'users' - residents and passers-by - all cooperate in the creation of its antithesis. Its peaceful and delicate character may disappear due to their wish to "colonize" (and earn from) the area's new popularity. The risk, in the end, is that the town center's attractiveness might cause its atmospheric ruin, despite the benefits of new businesses creating employment and driving economic development.

Empowering institutions and citizens through sound art practice

What might happen to the atmosphere that once attracted new residents to the center as a result? If we assume - provocatively - that the quality of the town center lies in its quietness, how might the close-to-nature atmosphere of the previously abandoned pedestrian area be "preserved" without compromising its socioeconomic development? Is it possible to elaborate a strategy that can respect both of these aspects? With these questions in mind, I started a long, involved conversation with the mayor and residents interested in investing in the center. The discussion led me to present the municipality with a guideline proposal for the old town center's sonic urban design as a trace of my research-oriented residency. From meetings at an institutional level, conversations with new residents, and the collection and account of field recordings, I suggested a series of steps that the municipality could take to facilitate a collaborative approach towards atmospheric understanding and transformation (Di Croce 2018b). The proposal included: (i) a series of workshops to raise sonic awareness among citizens and institutional stakeholders; (ii) a detailed overview of the center's quiet areas, those undergoing spatial transformation, and the area's most relevant sonic environment elements; (iii) an updated mapping of abandoned and empty buildings, and a proposal for sound installations to draw attention to these spaces; (iv) a series of urban sound design recommendations

for the town's redevelopment plan, especially regarding commercial licenses, and urban accessibility and mobility; and (v) suggestions for a territorial marketing campaign that could revitalize Guardia Sanframondi's image on a regional and national scale.



A view of the valley from the inner-pedestrian area

The first challenge of urban sound design guidelines is to reassure locals that any proposition is not contrary to economic development. Through this project, I suggested that the small town's socioeconomic future could be developed by recognizing its urban atmosphere and the sonic environment as key attractive factors for sustainable investment. In order to appreciate urban atmosphere, citizens and institutions need work together to identify the particulars of their environment and develop critical understanding of whether and how to "safeguard" or reframe them.

The first outcome of my artists residency, which aimed to explore and evidence a distinctive atmosphere, encouraged a collaborative process between the municipality and its local people. In fact, the quality of life within a local context like Guardia Sanframondi could be newly acknowledged through a coherent understanding of sound and atmosphere, reframing an intangible yet critical sense of place.

The guidelines I proposed to Guardia Sanframondi's mayor concerned urban planning recommendations, underlining the necessity of increasing sonic awareness among inhabitants and institutions through various tools informed by sound art practice. The first provocative point was the absolute necessity of thoroughly unfolding the role of abandon —and, therefore, reinterpreting the

pedestrian area's recent history— both from a poetic and political sonic perspective. In fact, a fresh realization of an area's current sonic environment can lead inhabitants to reframe their aesthetic abilities and create the basis for a shared definition of a complex and interesting sonic environment. As the scholar Leandro Pisano has suggested:

When a narration of a territory and of its memory is encountered at the acoustic level, recalling different stories lost in time and space, a whole community can be involved in reactivating a sonic approach to the territory itself: the community is given the possibility to confront history with another perspective in order to listen to its hidden side. (Pisano 2015, 84)

The majority of marginalized towns (especially in southern Italy but also in other highly-depopulated areas of Europe) share a problematic relationship with abandon. Several authors have debated civic abandon and depopulation alongside the resistance and resilience demonstrated by inhabitants of marginalized, inland, southern Italian towns. Their essays (Teti 2004; Arminio 2015) underline that "quietness" is a sign of impending death for those who remain, whereas, for those who discover the tranquility of an environment perfectly balanced between human and natural elements, "calmness" is the sign of new life to follow. This shift from death to life stands for an essential restart, which needs to originate from an epistemic reinterpretation of ruin; any area freed from the influence of "power dynamics" can finally reinvent itself; therefore, a balance between self-governance (through participatory planning tools informed by sound art practice) and local development (through sustainable investment) could be achieved. For this reason, urban sound design guidelines primarily underline the necessity of a shared sonic and atmospheric acknowledgment among inhabitants and institutions.

Field recording from the inner-pedestrian area of Guardia Sanframondi (July 19, 2018; h 18:30)

From this basis, Guardia Sanframondi's guidelines focus on the physical morphology and policy design of the town center. The proposal encourages the municipality and its citizens to map the most interesting sonic elements and situations within the center's pedestrian area. It particularly focuses on the present role of empty buildings - that could be potentially "activated" through sound installations - and sonic borders that isolate the pedestrian area from the rest of the modern town. Mapping characteristic sonic situations is particularly important, as it outlines a joint manifesto between institutions and inhabitants regarding the entire atmospheric qualities of the area that can be further used during the policy design process.

The proposal also encourages the municipality to implement a traffic plan - limiting access to electric cars and creating new parking areas for residents beyond the historic center's perimeter - and a licensing system - encouraging craftsman to open their workshops in empty buildings and monitoring shop activities based on the previously mentioned manifesto.

In summary, the guidelines derive directly from the art residency process, aiming to stimulate

citizens and local institutions to acknowledge the old town's unique and delicate urban atmosphere before economic development significantly transforms it. Institutions and citizens are encouraged to understand this transition in order to reframe their impression of the small town's future, therefore challenging the leading development model. The residency and consequently proposed urban sound design guidelines support an approach which is clearly oriented towards sustainable and endogenous development that is both attractive to investors and elaborates a long-term vision for the small town.

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Piece composed upon the recording of the final performance of the residency (July 22, 2018)

The considered and collaborative design of Guardia Sanframondi's future sonic environment represents an instructive approach that centers political discourse on the strategic role of acknowledged listening and how local development could be inspired by this practice. To conclude the residency, I invited the mayor to join my sound performance and speak about the role of critical listening within the process of future town planning. His discourse took place in front of many inhabitants in Guardia Sanframondi's main church, which the festival had organized as its indoor venue for final performances. I played a selection of the field recordings I had collected as a "commentary" to the mayor's words through a sound system that also engaged the audience in their everyday sonic environment. This sound and vocal interaction continued for the duration of the mayor's speech and was followed by some closing field recordings.

Through this performance-oriented meeting between the mayor and myself, I intended to launch a process of empowerment for institutions and citizens via critical listening. The process created a challenging communication between mainstream political messages that are oriented towards innovation and development, and the intangible features that give life to the small town. The following words are an extract from the mayor's speech: "Among our urban and regional planning tools, I realize that we have forgotten - and this is a really serious point - a series of expertise that could contribute to the combined narrative of our territory. Sound has a crucial role in a social-oriented project for our region, and, therefore, the local area's development...Sound could become a key factor in Guardia Sanframondi's future image."

The performance both raised its audience's sonic awareness, and left its trace in the municipality's political agenda as a potential collector of ideas and reactions from inhabitants. In fact, the event revealed how critical understanding of the sonic environment can encourage institutions to reach a deeper level of political meaning that encompasses a sustainable future.



The final performance of *Liminaria* 2018

Designing a nomadic world of sounds

So far, I have presented sonic urban design as a strategic tool for the empowerment of institutions and citizens and outlined how I have developed guidelines towards the collective acknowledgment of a sonic environment. Indeed, shaping the atmosphere - and self-image - of a specific area is worthless if citizens and institutions have no sonic awareness. Within this framework, sonic urban design - when driven by deep atmospheric understanding - can suggest an innovative way of evaluating and monitoring the qualitative aspects of intangible features, both from institutional and personal perspectives.

In fact, sonic urban design, working “with” art rather than “for” art’s sake, provides the means to compose collaborative community-based guidelines that can monitor urban policies. Participatory artistic and design-oriented processes can therefore lead to a sonically aware public - an acoustic community (Truax 1984) - that is able to continuously monitor its sonic environment, revealing the efficiency of specific urban policies that deal with immaterial commons and the need for possible implementations. Far from being “deterministic,” this strategy could support a bottom-up perspective, giving voice and responsibility to local communities for their choices regarding everyday activities.

The topic of monitoring and evaluating policies and community initiatives has become significant within social sciences in recent decades. In particular: “Much effort has gone into developing appropriate outcome measures that can indicate the degree of success - or at least progress - in attending desirable results” (Weiss 1995, 66). Yet, most evaluation strategies have emphasized quantitative measurements, which are often problematic due to the very basis of their assumptions.

This is why researcher Carol Weiss proposed a theory-based evaluation as an alternative mode of assessing community initiatives. The question is to understand what theory is underlying any program or policy. In Weiss' view, only by unfolding the assumptions embedded in programs is it possible to address any kind of evaluation; tacit theories and frameworks often drive divergent and conflicting conclusions.

Nevertheless, important questions about the implicit hypotheses of community-based programs endure. It would be very useful to direct new evaluations toward studying these theoretical hypotheses, so that knowledge accrues more directly on these key matters. (Weiss 1995, 71)

Therefore, if, as Weiss has written, "Theories represent the stories that people tell about how problems arise and how they can be solved" (Weiss 1995, 72), then to explicit these stories becomes the main target of evaluation.

To this end and in conclusion, listening comes into play as a suitable tool to read the atmospheric transformations of urban environments, thus providing a "point of tuning" that is capable of constantly monitoring - if aware of the sonic realm - the urban policies concerning a governance of immaterial commons. At the same time, a shared sonic acknowledgment among citizens and institutions could correspond to a shared theory of the future. In other words, reframing urban atmosphere becomes a strong political action, and a collective approach to sense-making that can encourage sustainable local development.

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