

Reflection

Urban Amplifiers

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This graduation project explores the act of listening to “noise”, to develop a new critical attitude to understanding sounds of the contemporary city. The essential aim is to create ears which separate, abstract and re-organize the myriad of sounds of the environment, which often ends up in a cacophony. The sounds of the surroundings are captured and amplified; the harvested sounds conjure up a new soundscape. The structure has the ability to reveal the specific sounds of the city in different situations, given its ability to perform to site-specific conditions and to adapt, as well as perform according to the different sounds within the broader Soundscape of Bogotá.

Our current society is mostly dominated by the visual sense. This western notion was best described already in the Ancient Greek time by Heraclitus, ‘The eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears’. Similarly Aristotle wrote, ‘sight approximates the intellect most closely by virtue of the relative immateriality of its knowing’. The 20th century has proven and determined once again the course of visual focus within our society, as well as architecture of course.

“The fact that the Modernist idiom has not been able to penetrate the surface of popular taste and values is due to its one-side visual emphasis; Modernist design has housed the intellect of the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories and dreams, homeless.”.
(Pallasmaa, 1996)

Before starting the graduation project, I personally have been contemplating about the goal, the aim, and the kind of project which I would want to achieve at the end of my Masters. I was attempting to structure and scaffold certain directions in which I would focus, whilst being in Bogotá.

The actual graduation project begun with a purely intuitive approach. Becoming acquainted with the country of Colombia, with its capital city, the people, the culture, all initiated through a simple method; ‘Thinking Through Things’. An act which required an everyday domestic object from home to be taken to the context of Bogotá. The object would guide you, let you engage with the people, the built environment, as well as the senses. This exercise was a deliberate way of letting go of any rationalities, and simply let the city unveil itself to you through this single object.

This made me reflect on the fact if I should focus and try to define the outcome at all? If I would define the outcome, then the result is something I would expect. No surprises. Everything turned out as planned.

However, if the project allowed itself to be focussed on its process and let the ‘outcome’ float around on the breeze, waiting to be discovered, something different would happen. Slipping and falling, getting back up and discovering new places, new ideas. “You cannot discover new lands by keeping one foot in the old country”. Knowing that failure and risk is involved, will only enrich the design process.

The first semester research phase could be divided into three categories: conceptual, contextual, and disciplinary. Having to decipher the enormous amount of information regarding the phenomenology of sound, noise pollution, urban soundscapes, acoustics, and even sonic art enabled me to think in the right terms, and better understand the academic scope on which I am able to frame my project around.

Analysing the context in regards to the soundscape, was a challenge. Since returning to Delft, the methods of investigating the soundscape of Bogotá have been limiting; leading to a more holistic project. As a response, the behaviour of sounds has been investigated, to propose architectural interventions with a bit more focus.

Trying to apply this knowledge to specific site solidified the functionalities of the project. Through the analysis of precedents, various practical aspects were identified.

At P2, I presented several design proposals which were part of an overall urban strategy. The proposals at that moment were unclear in their purpose, and the reasons for approaching each site. The proposals were categorically undefined, as they were something in between a public space, a building, and a performing architectural element.

I chose to pursue the concept of the latter; an architectural element, which has the ability to reveal and enact the specific sounds of the city in different situations. This 'apparatus' would take on many formal appearances based on the site in which it is positioned.

A further distinction has been made on the feedback from P2, concerning the type of sound I am intervening in. Is it 'noise pollution' which I am opposing, through which an awareness is made; or am I embracing the richness of this urban soundscape? Revealing its diversity through architectural means, I believe that we can become more than mere spectators or passive victims of urban noise by being aware and communicating more to each other about how we experience the auditory component of our urban lives and by reflecting on how we ourselves contribute to and change the environments we perform our activities and our life in.

Leaving a lot of the knowledge behind, thus liberating myself from all the excess weight, and being able to focus on one concept opened up the possibility after P2 to acquire a set of tools; a system, which would help me to intervene within the various sites.

Between P2 and P3 the use of a helpful precedent helped me to study architectural concepts such as proportions, access, circulation, structure, materials, threshold, etc. Through certain simple operations of the precedent such as extruding, flipping, mirroring, the relation of the object to the ground, to the human scale, to the city could be constructed. Having grasped and analyzed these variables, and the conditions which they create of the space in and around the object, made me have a further defined tool-set with which I could design within the sites respectively.

The second element which had to be investigated was the listening device itself; the trumpet. A thorough geometrical study, required a lot of time and energy, to help prove and justify the ability, position, scale and appearance of this object.

In the end, the box and the trumpet had to meet in this 'gramophone'. The question of the relation between the two entities was required a formal study as well as a conceptual reflection. Are the separate entities geometrically and formally to be blended together, or should they be set in juxtaposition to each other?

Having to design this contrast between P3 and P4, resulted in a marriage between the two researched aspects of the precedent and the trumpet. Having come to the point where the two have the ability to stand on their own, the challenge was to (re-)configure the two elements accordingly. Positioning these structures within specific sites, shows how the toolset which was acquired earlier, is able to vary flexibly, whilst still keeping the concept intact. The project almost became an architectural analogy to Marcel Duchamp's 'Readymade Art', where the stool and bike wheel are shuffled around in order to respond to certain site-conditions.

Going into P4, the project responds to some calculated moments, but the true beauty of it all would be the moments which are unpredictable and instantaneous. Sound is a wild creature, as much as we might want to control, contain and confine it. Thus allurements and artistry in this all is the unforeseeable, incalculable and the unexpected. This project plays into that, by creating meaningful

spaces which can be appropriated through use and meaning, as well as integrating the project within the citizen's ability to establish cohesion and corporation through their urban contexts.

The project has taught me, that by uncovering hidden and latent qualities of 'found spaces' and the manifold parameters embedded in these places, there is an acute awareness of the physical presence of the place, its aural qualities, wind direction, sunrise and sunset, and so on, and their relationship to the context and the layers embedded within the built environment.

Alexander Petrounine, 2019