A geography of the sonic memories. The case of San Salvario neighbourhood

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The work starts from a considerations made while trying to develop a comparative research on sound archives. Indeed, sound archives by themselves, even when based on a map with geolocalized tags, do not allow for a comprehensive geography of the sonic environment: how do such sounds expand in the space, how do they interact with each other? How does the sound of a place organize into a perceptual geography of such place?

Based on such questions, the expected outcome of the work was defined through two core points:

1. In order to obtain a spatial representation of the sonic environment of a place, this sonic environment needs to be translated into a graphic map, therefore moving to a visual medium, which allows for “the encoding of direction and distance relationships between places” (Thinus-Blanc & Gaunet, 1997)
2. If we assume that the city is an artefact which can only be perceived through time (Lynch, 1964), a map that is representative of the sonic geography of a place must be based not (or at least not exclusively) on immediate perceptions, but mainly on the recalling of the mental representations that have been constructed through the everyday perception of a certain sonic environment.

The kind of outcomes expected from this work, a codified map of the sonic image of the city, strongly resemble the ones presented by Kevin Lynch in its work “the image of the city” (Lynch, 1964), in which the collective mnemonic image of the city is derived from the collection of multiple individual memories, which are then selected and organized by a researcher/archivist an presented in maps with an unified symbolic code.

The overall framing of the work was then defined on the basis of Kevin Lynch’s work methodology, which has then been adapted to the representation of sonic perceptions. Hence, the first step of the work included the definition of the graphic code to be used in the final map. A review of soundscape studies allowed to define a taxonomy of the information to be contained in the final maps, i.e. its legenda. The main issue of this phase was to make an attentive selection among the numerous taxonomies which have been applied in sound and soundscape studies, in order to have a code which could, at the same time, provide meaningful information on the sonic image of the area and be simple enough to be used by respondents during the interview.

The cathegories of the legenda are therefore based mainly on four different references:

- The work of the canadian composer R.M. Schafer (1977), one of the pioneers of soundscape studies, who introduced the concepts of keynote, signal and soundmark. Keynote sounds refer to mainly background sounds related to an area (such as traffic noise) Signals are foreground sounds, which stands out from the general keynote sound and to which we consciously listen, Soundmarks, a term derived from landmark, are sounds which are unique to a certain location or a community;
- A simplification of the sound source taxonomy presented by Brown, Kang and Gjestland (2011);
- The qualitative criteria defined by the architect and geographer P. Amphoux (1993), particularly those related to the “collective memory” group;
- A taxonomy related to the soundscape quality assessment, that can be found in Axelsson, Nilsson and Berglund (2010) and Davies et al. (2013).

The interview has then been designed in order to guide the respondents through all the steps of the map realization, as well as to collect important informations on the overall perception of the sonic environment of the area. The interview steps are based on Lynch (1964) but, while in Lynch study the respondents were asked simply to draw a map of the space, without further indication, in this case, due to the complexity given by the overlapping of sounds with different charachteristics, the respondents are guided by precise questions. Moreover, as soundscapes are strongly linked to the the same interview is supposed to be repeated two times, one for daily soundscape and the other one for the evening soundscape.

The chosen area for the study is San Salvario neighbourhood, since it presents a wide variety of sound environments (large avenues, a park facing the river, small streets inside the neighbourhood, the train station…) The area is moreover interested by studies and debates on its nighlife noise and is object of past and present studies on soundscape and sound environments.
The designed legenda has been tested by a first in-situ survey on the area, made in the afternoon of Wednesday 10th May. Outcomes of the first survey can be seen in the attached image. More testing and fine-tuning of the legenda are planned in the next week, based on other in-situ survey and on pilot interviews.

Interviews with inhabitants of the area are expected to take place within the first week of June. The Agenzia per lo Sviluppo Locale di San Salvatio will provide the contacts of around 20 inhabitants who have been living in the neighbourhood for different periods of time. The group of respondents will also include inhabitants with particular concern to the sonic environment of the area (es already involved in the MONICA project of Turin Municipality).

The period of mid-June will then be dedicated to the construction of the final outcome, as indicated in the attached image.

References:

Axelsson, O. Nilsson, M.E. and Berglund, B. (2010), A principal components model for soundscape, J Acoust Soc Am, 128 (5), 2836 – 2846

Biaise A (2011) Vers une iconographie de l’ambiance sonore urbaine, These de doctorat, école doctorale Mécanique, Thermique et Génie Civil, Nantes


Davies W.J. et al. (2013), Perception of Soundscapes: an interdisciplinary approach, Applied Acoustics, 74

Lynch K (1964), L’immagine della città, Marsilio, Venezia.
