

Trains, Cars and Trees

Peter Veenstra ^(nl)

Lola Landscape Architects
Director, Landscape Architect
peter@lolaweb.nl

Geert-Jan Hobijn ^(nl)

Staalplaat Soundsystem
geert-jan@staalplaat.org

Composed City

In 2008, Staalplaat Soundsystem and Lola landscape architects started to collaborate on projects that are at the interface of public space design and sound art under the name of Composed City. Sound art as a piece of landscape, and sound design of public space in order to create local identity, evoke play or contemplation, form the main subject of this collaboration. From an architectural point of view, there are very few good examples of permanent art in public space, let alone permanent sound art in public space. Therefore, these projects feel as artistic experiments rather than works of art. And no experiment can stand without a critical review. In this article, two projects are described and reviewed. Although they are very different, the projects share the love for the sound of trains, cars and trees.

Project 1: Sound barrier and Aural Garden

In Dordrecht (NL), a new residential area is planned next to a busy rail- and highway. Due to regulations a large area of buffer space is reserved in between infrastructure and neighbourhood, partly filled with a sound barrier. In the design of this area we dealt with sound both by changing the physical circumstances that affect the existing traffic sounds and by adding a new layer of sound, produced by trees.

In the design of the sound barrier, a playful approach was used by converting the homogeneously sound blocking landform into a more complex form that creates a variety in sound passages and insulated areas. This primarily acoustic approach of the sound barrier has great visual consequence: instead of a monotonous dike, a series of pyramid-shaped hills is created, varying in height between 5 and 12 meters. In order to amplify this pronounced shape, every hill is coated in a different vegetation mix and planted

with a different tree species, each with its own specific leaf sound. These trees create a rustling layer on top of the sonic play of passing through and insulating train sounds.

North of this sound barrier, on a 4 hectare island in between railway and highway, we have asked Max Neuhaus (1939-2009) to make a design based on his ideas of the Aural Garden: a garden to listen to, that is purely designed on its aural qualities. Different than the sound barrier, Neuhaus' idea was to make the park look as unnoticeable and normal as possible, in order to bring a 'pure' sonic experience. Unfortunately, he hasn't been able to finish it. With the help of his close colleagues, Pidu Russek and Andres Bosshard, we are busy developing a garden that is in line with his ideas. The main ingredients of the garden will be water, (parabolic shaped) walls, local depressions and vegetation, all used as instruments to reflect, absorb and block the sound of cars and trains. Gravel paths and trees are used to add sounds that make the visitor feel comfortable to open up to the play of traffic sounds.

Project 2: Train station concert and car horn concert

For the Today's Art festival in The Hague we applied the idea to use architectural elements as sound devices to the The Hague Central Station, in collaboration with Mike Reinirse, Erik Hobijn and Mark Bain. To explore the train station as a sound source, we transformed it into an instrument, using the train movement in the station as faders for the mixing of 10 train horns and station sounds. This resulted in an intense 30 minute concert, that even led to hysteria of an unaware train passenger.

The same concept was translated to a totally different situation: the car traffic system of New Delhi, India. One prominent user of the city's road structure has forced himself as a main player: a small three wheel green and yellow Tuk tuk taxi, that fills the city streets by the thousands. Thanks to a special electronic device we were able to control their horns at distance, and play a huge Tuk tuk orchestra in free movement, in contrast and together with the overall city symphony.

Conclusions

When looking at these experiments, some conclusions can be made. First of all, when working with sound, it's very hard to control the dynamics of public space. During the Tuk tuk concert, much of the car horn concert was drowned by city noise. It appears to be almost impossible to calculate the sound effects of the parabolic shaped walls of the Aural Garden due to wind and temperature dynamics and with each frequency behaving differently.

Within the experiments we can discern two approaches that face different challenges. When using existing sound sources and bending or changing the effects of the physical space around it, the dependency on these sound sources is the most important issue to overcome. When adding new sounds to the existing soundscape of the city, the hardest part is to control the acoustic characteristics of the surroundings space.

Secondly, we believe that permanent sound art can add a special layer in the experience of public space, but is modest in its impact. In fact, the length in time of the artwork seems to be inversely proportional to the intensity of the experience, with the train concert leading to personal hysteria at the one end and the enjoyment of rustling tree leaves at the other end of the spectrum. For both short and long pieces, the visual, performative or narrative aspects seem to have an equal or even bigger impact on the experience than the sonic aspects themselves.

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