

**A Materialist Acoustemology of Urban Atmospheres  
in Mexico City's *Centro Histórico***

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## **Abstract**

The resonant frequency of sound, that is to say, the vibratory quality of sound, is felt and registered by our bodies in a way that goes beyond the audible. In an urban environment, the combination of sounds creates a sonic topography that manifests itself in the environmental qualities of a place. Sound is an integral constituent of atmospheric construction. How we think and feel sound is contingent on the architectural and lived conditions of space. In turn, the configuration of space is linked to capitalist-nationalist practices of urban development. This paper takes a materialist approach to urban sound in two areas of Mexico City's central district (*Centro Histórico*). The first is the corridor made up by San Jerónimo and Regina Streets and the second is the area known as La Merced. Through a combination of sound recordings, soundwalks and interviews with local residents, this paper aims to gain insights the construction of the built environment and its relation to quotidian interactions with situated sound atmospheres in the context of urban regeneration. Additionally, this paper seeks to bring to the forefront aural research methods as a way of approaching the nuances of urban life at the intersection of political economy, geography, and ecology.

Two sound pieces accompany this paper. One (11:30 minutes) is a recording of daily sounds around Edificio Smirna located in the San Jeronimo/Regina Streets area. The other (16:36 minutes) provides a sonic glimpse of Edificio Uruguay 125 in La Merced.

## **Foreword**

A materialist approach to sound understands situated acoustic elements as products of a system of value articulated through capitalist practices. By paying attention to the sounds in certain spaces, we can hear how power and economics are critical to the everyday unfoldings of geographies. This paper argues that changes to the material conditions of each post-1985 have led to the formation of different acoustic environments which exercise what Allen (2006: 3) calls “ambient power” i.e., the elicitation of specific attitudes and behaviours in a population that interacts with an environment which are caused by that same environment’s own atmospheric conditions. Throughout my time in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, I was required to provide and continually update a ‘Plan of Study’ which would provide a framework for subsequent research. My Plan of Study focused on three main components: historical materialism and theories of intersecting power and oppression within a capitalist society of classes; atmosphere, power and space; and sonic theories and methodologies. This research paper explores the intersection of these areas of study by focusing on the sounds of a rapidly changing part of Mexico City --its historic working class colonial downtown core-- to understand how the material and spatial conditions of capitalism, and the reproduction of daily life within it, produce atmospheric power. This paper aims to gain insights into perceptions of self within political ‘atmospheres’ altered by the material world and to explore methods through which this might be made possible.

## **Dedication**

To my parents, Sandra and Guillermo

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge the immense support provided by Dr. Jinthana Haritaworn as an advisor and mentor. Their inclusive approach to education provided me with an environment that minimised the challenges posed by my disability to academic development and performance. I would also like to acknowledge the work of Dr. Liette Gilbert, whose guidance and support as a supervisor were indispensable throughout my journey as an MES student, and who, in a very friendly way, helped de-mystify the processes and barriers of academia to someone who is often severely disorientated by them. Likewise, I would like to thank Joseph Cesario for helping me navigate the complexities involved in seeking academic funding.

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## **Introduction**

This paper examines the role that sound plays as a component of a city-space's atmosphere and the subsequent role this has on urban regeneration. The atmospheric conditions of urban landscapes are necessarily in relation with the social, therefore urban atmospheres are inherently political and as such, impact the daily lives of people. Thibaud's (2011: 203) approach to atmosphere as "space time qualified from a sensory point of view" provides us with a conceptual starting point from which to analyse sensory relations to the material environment.

This study focuses on two areas within Mexico City's central district commonly referred to as the *Céntrico Histórico*, the pedestrian streets of San Jerónimo/Regina and the La Merced area. These areas date back several hundred years: La Merced to its origin as a commercial hub in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan and San Jerónimo and Regina to some of the first residential streets built by the Spanish colonial authorities. Although a short walk from each other, these areas have undergone very different processes of development since 1985.



Figure 1: Research Areas: La Merced and San Jerónimo/Regina Streets

The research focuses on the post-1985 development of the city because in September of that year, an 8.0 magnitude earthquake destroyed large parts of its central district. The destruction of the *Centro Histórico* led to different area-specific re-housing and reconstruction efforts. The *Centro*'s location at the core of the Mexico City megalopolis as well as the large number of buildings of historical and cultural significance within it, make it a very desirable area for urban (re)development. Different reconstruction plans arose after the earthquake which led to clashes between local authorities, the federal government, residents, housing and aid organizations, etc. As a consequence, neighbourhood or building-specific assemblies that sought to fight the government expropriation of lands under the guise of reconstruction were formed.

The subsequent character of the re-development of neighbourhoods largely depended on the level of organization of its residents. My research therefore focuses on two *vecindades*: the Edificio Smirna, a housing development destined to house people affected by the earthquake built in 1987 on expropriated land using aid money from Germany, and República de Uruguay 125, a residential building dating to the 1920's whose residents fought an expropriation attempt and contacted aid organizations to raise sufficient funds to allow tenants to purchase the building. The Merced Area has managed to remain a largely low-income residential area while the San Jerónimo/Regina Streets area is undergoing a rapid process of gentrification.

This paper argues that changes to the material conditions of each post-1985 have led to the formation of different acoustic environments which exercise what Allen (2006) calls "ambient power" i.e., the elicitation of specific attitudes and behaviours in a population that

interacts with an environment which are caused by that same environment's own atmospheric conditions.

While the term 'atmosphere' has been developed into a concept, its usage and interpretation remain fluid and unstable. For instance, Brennan (2004), whose work deals with human molecular science, psychopathologies and social psychology, understands it as environment, or the transmission of others' feelings. For Stewart (2007), atmosphere operates as an impersonal or transpersonal intensity. Stewart's discussion of affect deploys the concept of atmosphere in a similar way to the how Brennan (2004) concept of the 'contagion' of feeling. Meanwhile, literary theorist Sianne Ngai (2005) understands atmosphere as tone within literature, an affective projection throughout a novel's overarching reliance on 'aesthetic' language. In his discussion of the engineering of affects in Euro-American cities, British theorist Nigel Thrift (2008) describes atmosphere as mimetic waves of sentiment. There exist, likewise, other terms which operate within the realm of the atmospheric and which I find to be useful parallel references such as Martin's (2011: 454) usage of the "connective potential of fog to deepen the relationship between vision, distance, and embodied immersion in aerial space." This resonates with McCormack's (2008: 413) discussion of 'atmosphere' as a space that is "simultaneously processual, distributed and sensed." In his writing about the 1897 hydrogen-filled balloon expedition from Stockholm to the North Pole known as the Andrée expedition, McCormack (2008: 413) presents the voyage simultaneously as: 1) an effort to create a relational field of affect between the balloon and its meteorological surroundings, 2) moving, sensing bodies and 3) a "distributed space of anticipation and expectancy." Tying atmospheric conditions to the built environment, the political philosopher Gernot Böhme (2006: 402) writes about atmosphere as qualified aura or a sense of 'whereness' in relation to space

when discussing the perception of architecture in the context of art and aesthetics. Anderson (2009: 80), taking Marx's 1856 usage of the word as a point of departure, presents 'atmosphere' as “diffusion within a sphere.” The formal instability of atmosphere lies precisely at the centre of the fluid and equally unstable relations amongst bodies and between bodies and space. Atmosphere ultimately is a social dialectic and therefore reflects a class society's ever shifting characteristics. These relations operate necessarily within the material conditions and surroundings of their period but are not fully understandable by observing the material conditions of space alone. Rather, it is human relations to space and to each other that must be observed in conjunction with material conditions.

Examining the phenomenological totality of an ‘atmosphere’ proves to be quite difficult, thus focusing on the acoustic environment provides us with a way of examining “the complex and shifting terrains that make up its infrastructures, the sudden flashes of activity, the unremarkable meanderings and stutters, the relations of organic and inorganic matter” (Kanngieser, 2013: 1). What Kanngieser (2013: 1) refers to as a process of “acoustemology” situates political atmospheres within a materialist framework. Thus, I consider a methodology that incorporates historical materialism to be crucial in this project.

## **Methodology and Methods**

A materialist approach to sound in urban space is crucial to understanding its role in the production of political atmospheres. Marx’s approach to atmosphere as a “felt” condition of collective politics in some ways operates similarly to Allen's (2006) “ambient power” in that they both denote a series of material conditions that although not consciously perceived, nevertheless form the basis for political actions be they disciplinary or revolutionary. In Marxist methodology, historical materialism aims to understand people’s relationship to

nature as important to understanding the means of production in a capitalist society. How we transform nature and create our environments impacts how we structure society. As Marx (1998: 9) writes in *The German Ideology*, “[t]he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men [sic], the language of real life.”

Jakubowski (1976: 9) presents humans as a social product and nature as human, socialised nature. He writes that “[t]here is no 'unchanging nature', only nature that is changed by man [sic], who in so doing changes his [sic] own nature too”. This does not mean that material conditions impact all people equally. An intersectional reading of historical materialism is crucial to understanding the way in which relations of production create social hierarchies. In her 1996 work 'Disability and the Dialectics of Difference', the Marxist critical disability scholar Nirmalla Erevelles (1996: 525) states that “[w]hat is produced and how that production is organised become central to the shaping of our social history.” A historical materialist reading of production within capitalist society also provides an insight into the unequal distribution of surplus through “invoking biological differences as the natural cause of all inequality, thereby successfully justifying the social and economic inequality that maintains social hierarchies” (Erevelles 1996: 526).

A similar political economic understanding of spatialised oppression also characterises the work of Martin F. Manalansan IV (2005) who frames urban development within capitalist societies as often part of an effort by developers (reflecting the capitalist and statist need to approximate spatial conditions to their most value-producing state) to change the atmosphere of a place. These “spaces imbued with meanings that coalesce around marginalized identities” suddenly find themselves transformed through the need to “demarcate and police racial, ethnic, class, and sexual spaces and boundaries while creating

physical, emotional, and symbolic brutalities and cruelties toward marginalized peoples” (Manalansan 2005: 142). The targeted concentration of businesses that are unaffordable for long-time residents coupled with the ‘beautification’ of San Jerónimo Street, alter the material conditions within which locals engage in the reproduction of daily life. Manalansan IV (2005: 142) asserts that “[t]his kind of violence transforms the built environment, eradicating spaces imbued with meanings that coalesce around marginalized identities.” In this instance, those marginalised by the subtle deployment of power exercised in the transformation of the built environment are the working class people with no legal claim to their homes of Edificio Smirna.

What is at stake in the atmospheric conditions of a place are the lives of those who live within it and that are classed at the lowest rungs of capitalist hierarchies based on their perceived lack of extractable surplus value. It is precisely in these atmospheric conditions that the dialectic relations of power within the city both take place and displace. A materialist lens that incorporates an aural dimension to atmosphere allows for an insight into the machinations of power in the contemporary city. Rachel Gorman's (2010) work on labour power and disability makes the link between state power and ableism in the context of imperialist capitalism. This approach is necessary in order to think about identity and experience within material exercises of power in space. Allison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) explores notions of statist utopias as necessarily 'disability-free'. Her work departs from a notion that all plans concerning future ways of structuring society imagine such a society as one without disability. In the context of urban planning this means that spaces are designed to be most navigable by those who most align with these utopian ideals. The production of space works hand in hand with the production of difference which manifests itself in the atmospheric conditions of a place.

Initially, the project involved engaging in ‘soundwalks.’ A “sound walk” is an “empirical method for identifying a soundscape or components of a soundscape in various locations” (Adams et al., 2008: 1). The concept was developed by Canadian sound theorist R. Murray Schafer as part of the Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in the late 1960’s. Westerkamp (2001: 1) provides a useful introduction to soundwalking as “any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment”. She describes it as a kind of acoustic education, a purposeful act to “expos[e] listeners to the total content of their environmental composition” (Westerkamp 2001: 1).

As part of this research, project, all walks were carried out within the *Centro Histórico* for roughly two hours each time, over a period of three months. These would involve sitting on benches, leaning against walls, sitting in cafés, etc., to take note of the sound environment of different places. To do so I would walk around a place, choosing locations in which to stay stationary for a few minutes while I wrote down the sounds that stood out to me. The routes for these walks were not planned but I would try to avoid going to the same place twice unless it was at a different time of the day or if I had gone either on a weekday and it was the weekend or vice-versa. After 10 weeks of soundwalking in the *Centro*, I settled on the pedestrian streets of Regina and San Jerónimo between the streets of 5 de Febrero and Bolívar and on Uruguay Street between Pino Suárez and Anillo de Circunvalación.

I chose the San Jerónimo/Regina area because it was highly frequented and filled with restaurants and bars that seemed to target people with higher incomes than those that lived there. It was also a pedestrian-only street which gave it a character that the surrounding streets (which were used by cars) did not have. The sound from the bars, the

restaurants, the street musicians and the people talking, laughing, walking etc, created a unique soundscape that was not present one block away in any direction.

Likewise, it was the unique soundscape of La Merced that made it an appealing area to study. The area is filled with businesses that sell wholesale items such as fabrics, school supplies, t-shirts, leather goods, religious objects, etc. Supporting the numerous businesses is an informal economy of food stalls, small cafés, juice stalls, etc. These cater to the thousands of store employees and shoppers. The area is quite dense with businesses on the sidewalk, streetfront and interior of buildings over roughly 700 square metres. During the day, the street is packed with customers which is why ‘informal’ street vendors target the area and set up shop on its sidewalks. The sounds heard here are the sounds of cars, trucks, bicycles, police, people buying, working, eating, and selling. The area is characterised by an atmosphere of informality, chaos, debris, etc. Müller (2011: 6) describes La Merced as “a space for the undesired ones, where the territoriality of the informal has relocated.” This ‘other part’ of the Centro Histórico, Müller (2011: 7) maintains, is viewed in the city’s popular imagination as a place of “little hygiene, poverty and danger.”

The sounds of La Merced are contingent on the opening hours of the businesses that operate along its streets, as soon as these close, the area becomes quiet and empty and the soundscape transforms into a desolate one. The opposite is true for San Jerónimo/Regina streets which become louder as the night progresses and only experience moments of relative quiet before noon.

Once I settled on these two areas I began to engage in more specific soundwalks through and around different *pasajes*, courtyards, stores, bars, etc. I began to talk to people in the areas, at first to people that worked or ran businesses and eventually to residents. Although on San Jerónimo and Regina streets it was easy to determine which buildings

were residential, República de Uruguay proved much more difficult as the line between commercial and residential space was blurred through the informal market. Apartments also operated as restaurants, corner stores, key cutting places, pirated DVD shops etc. A building could have people living, working, and purchasing in the same space (although usually the same people did not engage in all three activities).

Through these walks I met a resident of Edificio Smirna and a resident of Uruguay 125. Both were in their late 60's, both were life-long residents of the area and had lived through the earthquake and the redevelopment of the damaged areas. Through snowball sampling I was referred to two other residents of Edificio Smirna and two other residents of Uruguay 125. I arranged formal interviews with all six participants. In Edificio Smirna, all interviews took place in the home of one of the participants and in Uruguay 125 the interviews took place in each participant's respective home. The conversations lasted roughly one hour each and were recorded with the participants' consent. Although the interviews did not follow a specific script I tried to ask the following guiding questions:

What sounds stand out the most for you when you think of the street outside your building? Have these sounds changed over time? What did the street look like before the earthquake? What did the street look like immediately after the earthquake? How would you describe it now? What are the main changes you have noticed to the physical space around you since 1985? What sounds have remained or have changed overtime? Are there sounds you find pleasant/unpleasant? How do the sounds in your area impact on your daily life? Since 1985 and especially in the past ten years have you felt like the people in the area have changed? Do you feel like you belong in the neighbourhood more, less or in an equal way to the way you felt before 1985? If things continue the way they are, how do you think the street will look like in 10 years? What sounds do you think will be most prevalent then?

Do you see yourself living here in the future? If not, what reasons would you give for leaving the neighbourhood?

In tandem to the interviews that were carried out, several field recordings were done using a handheld stereo condenser microphone. The microphone allowed me to record in all directions at once to capture the sounds of different parts of the streets of San Jerónimo, Regina and República de Uruguay. These recordings last roughly half an hour each and were taken in the same place at different intervals of the day: morning, mid-day, evening and night. The purpose of these recordings was to create a series of sound pieces that would be mixed with the voices of participants. These pieces are an attempt to empirically represent the atmospheric conditions of the research sites, charged with the social relations to the material conditions within them. It seems fitting to incorporate an acoustic element in a written paper regarding sound.

### **Situating the Research in the Context of Mexico City**

Mexico City's *Centro Histórico* has been almost exclusively a working class area in terms of its residents since the 1940's when more affluent inhabitants began to move to the city's new surrounding residential developments (in the Roma, Condesa, Santa Maria La Ribera, San Rafael, Cuahutemoc and Juarez neighborhoods) and has also been a focal point for non-official, informal and criminalised forms of employment for both its residents and people living in the slums of the city's periphery. These include but are not limited to, engaging in sex-work, petty theft, the sale of *fayuca*,<sup>1</sup> food, pirated media, pharmaceutical and recreational drugs, etc. All of these activities provide a source of income for groups

<sup>1</sup> *Fayuca* is a Mexican word used to denote goods or products that have been illegally imported and therefore untaxed. A vast majority of these products are of low quality and come from factories in China. The kind of product can vary from electronic goods, to clothing, to cigarettes, etc.

such as indigenous people, migrants, Afro-Mexicans, LGBTQI people, homeless people, and people with addictions, disabilities or mental health issues and people in the city's outer peripheries who experience extreme economic precarity. Researching the ways in which officials and developers manipulate areas marked as undesirable to create atmospheres of exclusion which, in turn, provide the conditions for aggressive gentrification in megalopolis has the potential to provide valuable insights into the role of sound in processes of targeted social cleansing within urban planning.

### ***El Centro Histórico Since 1985***

In 1980 then president of Mexico José López Portillo issued the *Decreto de Zona de Monumentos Históricos*, a presidential decree that established a large part of the *Centro Histórico* as an official area of historical monuments. This decree transformed 668 blocks of the city centre into a protected zone which was divided into perimeters A and B. Perimeter A comprised the central portion while B its periphery. In 1987, UNESCO declared Mexico City's colonial centre (roughly following the limits of Perimeter A) to be a World Heritage Site. In the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake roughly 1,219 buildings were expropriated by the federal government of which about 796, with more minor structural damages, were rehabilitated (Müller, 2011). Despite this rehabilitation plan, residents were evacuated and re-housed in other buildings in the *Centro Histórico*. Over time, many of the properties that were expropriated were sold, often to people with connections to the government.

In 2001, a coalition comprised of the federal and city governments, the Catholic Church and Carlos Slim (Mexico's, and often the world's, wealthiest businessman) created the *Consejo Consultivo para el Rescate del Centro Histórico* or Consultation Council for

the Recovery of the *Centro Histórico*. After a series of negotiations between the federal and local government on one side and Carlos Slim on the other, an executive committee was formed to oversee the following five aspects of the city centre's development: 1) water distribution, 2) public safety, 3) social and economic well-being, 4) urban revitalisation, 5) the restoration and conservation of buildings. Although redevelopment was led by this newly created government agency, Carlos Slim was the main financial backer and therefore also the most influential member. Over the next ten years and through a series of foundations established by his companies such as the Fundación Carlos Slim, Fundación Telmex, and Fundación *Centro Histórico*, Slim began to purchase buildings in the Centro Histórico's Perimeter A. Using his influence in the governmental executive committee for the recovery of Mexico City would allow for the infrastructure of the streets around the buildings owned by his businesses to be rehabilitated therefore increasing their market value.

Recent changes to the political configuration of Mexico City have transformed it from a Federal District to something more akin to a state within the Federal Republic. In January 2016, the Federal District Political Reform Law gave Mexico City similar rights of other federal entities, including the right to its own constitution. The federal act also created a Constitutional Assembly for drafting the constitution. The assembly consisted of one hundred representatives, only sixty of which were elected by the people of Mexico City by proportional representation. The remaining forty were appointed by President Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI), the mayor of Mexico City Miguel Ángel Mancera (PRD) and the PRI-controlled federal legislature. These parties along with the right-wing PAN are all signatories of the 2012 Pact for Mexico (*Pacto por México*), a document that establishes an

agreement between the three dominant political parties to push through neoliberal structural reforms.

The combination of an clientelistic city government and a political coalition with no real opposition makes it so that any citizen-led or left of centre political force in the city is all but excluded in the urban planning process. This set of circumstances coupled with the eagerness of private developers to buy cheap real estate in working class neighbourhoods has led to an intensification in the speed and severity of urban 'regeneration' and gentrification projects in the *Centro Histórico*. Since 2001, government and private interest has been concentrated in Mexico City's central area, which comprises four delegations. As Sánchez (2014: 3) writes, "It is the area the local government decided to strengthen in terms of housing, shopping, services and street furniture in order to take advantage of existing structures it could renovate, according to the city government's General Urban Development Program." This concentrated development has translated into large areas of the city being rapidly transformed (sometimes beyond recognition) into areas that cater to tourists and people of a higher income rather than long time residents.

### **Research Sites**

Both Regina and San Jerónimo Streets have traditionally been residential streets. According to Participant B, a former resident of Regina street who was relocated to the Edificio Smirna after the 1985 earthquake, both streets were relatively quiet and had businesses that catered mainly to local residents such as produce shops, corner stores, hair dressers, butchers, tailors, dry cleaners, etc. Currently Regina and San Jeronimo Streets are, according to Diaz (2014: 267), a "finished product" in terms of urban regeneration. The façades of buildings have been painted, 1900s-style street lamps have been erected, people

ride their eco-bici (bike sharing program) bikes, walk their dogs, and carry their Macbooks under the watch of some form of police presence every 100 metres. With its galleries, bars, and restaurants, and, especially since it was made into a pedestrian area in 2008, the block comprising of Regina and San Jerónimo Streets between Cinco de Febrero and Bolivar, is often seen as *the* prime example of gentrification in the *Centro Histórico*.

The area has numerous restaurants that have opened with the support of the *Fundación Centro Histórico* and Carlos Slim is the owner of several of the buildings in the area. San Jeronimo Street, located one block south of Regina, has undergone a similar process of transformation, and with the exception of the Edificio Smirna and two other *vecindades*, every other unit on the street is now a bar or restaurant. The focal point of what is the new cultural corridor is '*La Bota*' a Spanish-style tavern located next to a newly renovated residential building owned by the *Fundacion Carlos Slim*. Here, one may find the street's newer residents gathering, eating, drinking, smoking, watching live music, etc. Unlike the streets surrounding it, there are no street vendors or informal food stalls. In the midst of this, the residents of Edificio Smirna, find themselves in a legal limbo as they are neither tenants nor owners of the units they live in. Residents were never given documents to certify their ownership of the building. All residents of Edificio Smirna come from nearby blocks and are lifelong residents of the *Centro Histórico*.

La Merced neighbourhood is named after the 16<sup>th</sup> century Mercedarian monastery of the same name. The area was one of the first parts of Tenochtitlán (the Aztec city founded in 1325, now Mexico City) to be built and became a commercial centre during colonial times because of the number of canals that connected it to agricultural areas. The neighbourhood operated as Mexico City's largest food market until the 1960's when the market stalls were moved just outside of the neighbourhood to a new purpose built building

and the Central the Abastos, (Mexico's largest food distribution market) was built. However, the commercial nature of the neighbourhood has not changed drastically. Although food is no longer the main product sold in the neighborhood, hundreds of stores sell fabrics, school supplies, clothes, beauty products, and miscellaneous houseware products.

La Merced is adjacent to the core plaza of the city, the *Zócalo*, which is frequented by tourists. Despite being within Perimetre A, La Merced has a reputation for being unsafe and, is not as well maintained or policed as other areas. It is a hub of informal commerce in which most buildings are of mixed residential and commercial use. The majority of the neighbourhoods residents live in poorly maintained vecindades or in improvised housing on the rooftops of buildings. It is busiest during business hours and becomes desolate at night. The building located at Uruguay 125, where the participants live, was originally built to house the employees of the Martell Cognac company in Mexico at the turn of the century. Although most residents were tenants prior to 1985, they resisted an attempt for the building to be transformed into a shopping mall and secured funds from aid organizations that allowed them to individually buy all the units in the building. As with other vecindades in the *Centro Histórico* most of its residents are older, long-time residents.

### **Urbanism, Regeneration and the Role of Sound**

Recent scholarship on shared urban spaces has focused on the blurring of the distinction between public and private. This blurring has led to the creation of a new kind of space which is actively exclusionary and inaccessible (Mitchell, 1995, 2003; Allen 2005). Speaking about the 'mall-ification' of Potsdamerplatz in Berlin, Allen (2005: 5) states that "control over access through some means of filtered exclusion is the hallmark of

domination in privatized public spaces, so that only the ‘right kind’ of strangers are encountered.” Allen (2005: 5) goes on to note that “neither domination, nor authority, as the most familiar urban registers of power, are able to stage the kind of accessibility or openness where anyone can move freely around a public setting, yet unknowingly remain subject to a form of control that is regularized, predictable and far from chaotic.” This is what Allen (2005: 8) refers to as ‘ambient power’, “something about the character of an urban setting – a particular atmosphere, a specific mood, a certain feeling – that affects how we experience it and which, in turn, seeks to induce certain stances which we might otherwise have chosen not to adopt.”

Although Allen (2005) uses ambient power to discuss the elicitation of certain types of behaviour within a space, I argue that it also serves to exclude the kind of people it is not designed to target. That is to say, a space can feel inaccessible to some people, and, the same qualities that render it inaccessible to some, will also regulate the behaviour of those who feel entitled to access it. Within neoliberal processes of urban regeneration, certain material aspects of a space are manipulated in order to both create this illusion of inclusivity and actively exclude certain people. These can manifest themselves in any number of ways including bright lights, an absence of surfaces to recline on, tactically located plants, etc. or in a less subtle manner, the presence of police. Sound, as an integral component of space and spatial practices equally has the potential to exercise an exclusionary power. However, sound as part of the atmospheric conditions of a place also has the potential to be an “immaterial asset” for a community (Di Croce 2015: 2) and works as a “means to engage with, and elaborate upon, contemporary social-economic and political landscapes” (Kanngieser 2013: 1). Culture-led regeneration projects seem to be the latest ‘common-sense’ policy in neoliberal urban development (Kanaï and Ortega-Salazar

2009, Miles and Paddison 2005). Bringing in and fomenting the development of spaces that are perceived as ‘cultural’ through galleries, cafés, music venues, bars, etc. significantly alters the acoustic character of a place. When the culture-led regeneration is designed to appeal to a different group of people than those who inhabit the area, it has the potential of creating acoustic environments which serve to remind residents that the new ‘cultural-ised’ neighbourhood is not for them.

Edificio Smirna, located on San Jerónimo in between 5 de Febrero and Bolívar streets sits between two older *vecindades* and, if it wasn’t for the plaque outside commemorating the fact that it was built to house victims of the 1985 earthquake, most people would think it to be a typical *Centro* residential building. Once you enter through the main gate, you walk through a small courtyard filled with flowering plants in typical Mexico City style.

At the back and two floors up, lies the apartment of the first person who chose to participate in the study, whom we will address as ‘Participant A’. She opened up her 20 square metre apartment, similar size as all the other ones in the complex, and we sat down to talk. The woman, in her mid 60’s, was a life-long resident of the *Centro Histórico*. She used to live on Mesones Street a short walk from where she lives now and moved to Edificio Smirna like all of the other residents in 1987.

She describes the area as quiet in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. The street in front of the building has been a pedestrian street since she has been there and the sounds she remembers from the early years in the building are those of birds, children playing outside, the *tamal* vendor and the water vendor. When I asked her how she felt about living in this new area after the earthquake, she said that everyone was brought together by the tragic events of 1985 and there was a sense of optimism amongst the

neighbours. The building on the corner, a former convent, was completely in ruins. In the aftermath of the earthquake it was expropriated and eventually it made its way to the hands of a businessman who converted it into a large bar around a decade ago. She describes herself as someone who goes out at different times of the day including late at night. As far as she can recall, the bars on San Jerónimo started appearing about ten years ago with an especially strong presence in the past five years.

When asked whether or not any of the people that live in San Jerónimo frequent these establishments, the answer is categorically no. “Most of us can’t afford to” she says. When asked about establishments that are free of cost such as galleries or events put on by the city, she also mentions that residents don’t go. This can be attributed to what Ferguson (2004) refers to as ‘ideologies of discreteness’ which Manlansan IV (2005: 142) describes as “practices that seek to demarcate and police racial, ethnic, class, and sexual spaces and boundaries, while creating physical, emotional, and symbolic brutalities and cruelties toward marginalized peoples.” The targeted concentration of businesses that are unaffordable for long-time residents coupled with the ‘beautification’ of San Jerónimo Street alters the material conditions which locals engage in the reproduction of daily life. Manalansan IV (2005: 142) asserts that “[t]his kind of violence transforms the built environment, eradicating spaces imbued with meanings that coalesce around marginalized identities.” In this instance, those marginalised by the subtle deployment of power exercised in the transformation of the built environment are the working class people with no legal claim to their homes of Edificio Smirna.

The general feeling seems to be that the transformation is for the new people that have moved in and that they have not been built with the older residents in mind. Participant A felt that the arrival of newer residents had made the overall price of rents

higher for older residents, and that anyone who was renting no longer lives in the neighbourhood and only people who manage to own their units remain. She mentions the case of a large art-deco apartment building on the western corner of the street, owned by the *Fundación Carlos Slim*, where rents more than doubled once the bars started coming in and which was completely evacuated by the tenants. The building is now rented by young and affluent people, some of them art students at the nearby *Claustro de Sor Juana* University. According to Participant A, the neighbours have complained about the noise generated by bars and restaurants with the local government, bringing up the fact that they felt it was not ‘legal’ for so many of such establishments to be given permits on what is a residential street. Up until now these complaints have remained unaddressed. Perhaps the most significant is that Participant A felt that since these businesses have started coming she feels a change in her daily habits, and she confides that she no longer likes to walk past the giant bar on the corner in the evening and that she generally feels like there is more petty crime and drug usage on the street.

Kanngieser (2013: 2) writes that “[w]here and how sound is heard tells us something of how geographies are categorized and allocated, by whom they are populated and in what capacity.” Participant A mentioned that the sounds of the street absolutely change the way she feels and interacts with it. She felt increasingly uneasy being out at night when the bars are most frequented. These sounds, she says, make her feel like the neighbourhood is slowly shifting to the hands of a different group of people. When asked what she thinks her street will look like in ten years she says: “it will be completely commercial with no residential spaces yet, we will all have moved out by then because this is no place to live in your old age with all the noise” (Participant A, 2017).

At one point, Participant A picked up the phone and called two of her neighbours, one slightly older than her and another in her 40's. The slightly older Participant B used to live on Regina Street behind her current building before the earthquake and now lives in Edificio Smirna following a post-earthquake eviction. She has been living in the area since she was young and moved from Veracruz. When asked what Regina Street was like when she first moved in, Participant B describes the place as "very calm, everyone knew each other, kids would play in the street while we went to work." I questioned her about the sounds of the street then and she responded that it was generally more quiet because businesses did not play loud music in respect to the residential character of the street. Despite the fact that it was not a pedestrian street at the time, the noise levels were lower as she recalls, and "now its full of businesses and noise." She echoed the previous participant on the fact that the businesses are too expensive for residents and that most people that frequent them are not locals and are more affluent.

The residents of Edificio Smirna appear to exhibit similar attitudes to the material transformation of the acoustic environment. Although some of the cultural offerings in the area are free of cost, residents are reluctant to engage with them. As Allen (2006: 10) writes, "[i]t is one thing to acknowledge that experience is always mediated, it is quite another to suggest that responses to the same setting are endlessly multiple and distinct from one another. Ambient settings are of a pattern and so too are our responses to them." In this case the pattern is one of noisy bars and restaurants which elicit a general rejection towards regenerated spaces in the neighborhood and a behavioural response which seeks to avoid them, especially when they are most evident, that is to say, at night, when they take over the acoustic environment.

I asked if she feels there is any relation between the fact that the city gives permission for loud businesses to operate on residential streets in which the buildings have slowly been acquired by Carlos Slim and other people with real estate development interests, and the fact that neighbours feel the streets to be less livable than before. Participant B explained: “Well, Slim has been after our building for a while now, but because we all individually own our apartments he hasn’t been able to buy it. Of course I think there is a relationship, the government and Slim are working together to move people out and bring wealthier people in that will to pay those very high rents.” She complained about the giant building on the corner which became a bar, the one that “used to be a butcher’s and a dry cleaner.” I asked if they have ever had street vendors like the ones in La Merced. They never have. The third neighbour, Participant C weighed in on the conversation: “In ten years we will all have to move, it’s not a place to raise children anymore. If they go out at night you’re worried about them coming home safe. If the neighbours leave this building will turn into businesses. They’ve been trying to turn the *Centro Histórico* into a commercial area and an area for ‘another class’ of people for over thirty years now. During the earthquake there were a lot of displaced people but people organized themselves and fought to defend the right to live in *el Centro*. But despite this, people that have to pay rent have slowly been leaving the neighbourhood because of the rising rents.” (Participant C, 2017) I ask about how long she’s felt this has affected her. “It’s quite recent,” she said. “It used to be quiet. The local government forgets that people still live here. Now you hear rumors about them wanting to raise the price of living in *el Centro*. I don’t think they don’t want people to live here, just not the poor. This is a beautiful area with lots of history so I understand what the appeal would be for wealthier people to live here.”

The general sentiment of the residents was that the ‘noisy’ businesses were slowly encroaching on the traditional sounds of the neighbourhood in a way ‘taking over’ the sonic landscape of the area. The reconfiguration of Regina and San Jeronimo Street therefore subtly transforms behaviours and attitudes towards public space. This deployment of power can be read through the changes to the acoustic ambient that allow developers to “both stage publicness in a different way and control it through means other than physical or technological surveillance” (Allen 2006: 16).

When speaking to residents of Uruguay 125, an area of La Merced which has yet to experience the aggressive gentification of the San Jerónimo/Regina area, I got a very different set of responses. I carried out my interview in the apartments of three different residents, again, three women. As is typical of the demographic profile of the *Centro Histórico*, all were above 60 years old and all were life long-residents. Two had been born in the building. The first resident, Participant D, is a woman who runs a small convenience store out of her apartment for the employees of the ground-level business facing the street, describes the area as being more quiet before: “It used to be more residential before the earthquake, most of the building on this street were residential and there were not as many shops” she says. She also mentions that the area has become much more commercial and a lot of the former residential buildings are now used as storage space. When asked to describe the sounds of the street before 1985 she commented “it was more quiet before because there were less people but there were still sounds. For example, there was a streetcar that used to go up and down the street. The alleys have always been used to sell things and so there has always been noise there”. Participant D also mentioned that La Merced market which is now inside a purpose-built building immediately east of the neighbourhood used to be located in the neighbourhood. The market is named after the

neighbourhood, which is named after the monastery. “The whole neighbourhood was a market so it was never completely quiet” she tells me. Participant E painted a similar picture of the area. “The streets were narrower” she says, “and the market was just stalls after stalls that extended in all directions starting on the corner of Jesus María Street just a few blocks from the building”. Participant E added: “there was lots of movement, people, carts, I’m not sure if it was more or less noisy before, it think it was the same you just heard different noises because the types of businesses were different, it was mostly fruits and vegetables, my brother ran a banana depot in the area.” I asked if she felt the area was safer or more dangerous than before. “It’s more dangerous,” she says, “now people come from Tepito because it’s really busy and so it’s easy to pickpocket or to steal jewelry.” This opinion of rising crime was something all three participants of Uruguay 125 agreed on. Participant F explained that the fact that the street was always busy and noisy created an atmosphere in which people thought it would be more permissible to steal. This reflects the way in which Thibaud (2011: 208) addresses behaviour within ambiance when he writes that “[b]y shaping ongoing activities, the ambiance guides the manner in which a situation unfolds.” If the perceived ambiance in La Merced is one of informality and noise, it dictates the unfolding of interactions inside it as potentially criminal. Thibaud (2011: 208) writes: “[d]epending on the state of the ambiance at any given time, the situation will be more or less tense or relaxed, conflicted or consensual, problematic or straightforward.” This ‘state of the ambiance’ also impacts the behaviour of the participants. I asked Participant F if the way she goes about her daily life has changed. Participant F’s response brought up another sound, that of dogs barking at night: “the city doesn’t allow this anymore but before people kept dogs on their rooftops for security reasons. So you would hear them barking at you or

each other at night. Now the streets are very quiet, it feels like you're all alone at night so I try not to go out after dark anymore.”

When asked about how they would compare their area to that of Regina and San Jerónimo, all three residents described the latter as ‘touristy’ or less attended by people from *el Centro*. When asked about the difference in noise, all three described the Regina/San Jerónimo Streets area as very noisy. There seem to be a distinction made between the sounds of businesses in their area (fabric stores, school supply stores, street food, parking lots, gas delivery, etc.) to the sounds of Regina and San Jerónimo (bars, restaurants, music, singing, drunk people, etc.). Although when asked whether they thought the San Jerónimo/Regina area was noisier than Uruguay, all three said no. That perhaps Uruguay was even louder during the day, but it was a different set of sounds which seemed to bother them less. Radicchi (2012: 254) introduces the concept of the ‘sonic niche’ as “a relational sonic space of intimacy and sharing whose changing boundaries are defined each time by its own structural sound qualities.” The sounds of wholesale businesses and the informal service economy associated to them seems to operate as a ‘sonic niche’ which imbues the neighbourhood with a certain identity that residents feel they relationally belong to. I asked all three residents of Uruguay 125 if they felt they would reach a point in which they would no longer feel welcome or like they were a part of the neighbourhood. Two residents first responded that they had been living there their whole lives so they didn’t see how that would change while the third resident said that she could not imagine living somewhere else. Of the participants, two lived with their children and affirmed that their children were planning on staying in their respective apartments after their death. I asked what sounds they associated most with the street. Organ grinders, *camote* sellers, *tamal* vendors, *fierro viejo* gatherers, and the chants of street vendors all came up as well as the

birds that live in the building's courtyard and the noise of the church bells across the street. "Perception cannot be dissociated from the concrete conditions in which it occurs" writes Thibaud (2011, 205). In the case of the residents of Uruguay 125, this perception is linked to the 'sensory fabric of urban ambiances' (Thibaud, 2011) that exist in La Merced, the collection of material conditions and relations to environment that residents a sense of belonging.

### **Sound Pieces**

Using the material from both site recordings and interviews, two sound pieces were created to act as 'sonic referents' accompanying the statements of the residents. Mermoz (2004: 23) asserts that sonic reference is "the capacity of sound to relay meanings outside the codes and conventions of language." Because the subject of this essay is sonic atmospheres and their political effects, I find it relevant to include a sound component that helps to convey meaning beyond the written word.

### ***Edificio Smirna***

The voices heard in this piece are those of three women in their 70's 60's and 40's respectively. They intertwine with the sounds of San Jerónimo and Regina streets. As the recording progresses so does the time of day of the ambient sounds in the piece. The piece focuses on specific sounds, birds, a ball bouncing, the music from a bar, in an attempt to isolate some of the components that make up the totality of the acoustic atmosphere.

## ***Uruguay 125***

The voices heard in this piece are of 3 residents of the building three women, in one in her 70s, and two in their 60's. The register of the voices differs depending on the person speaking and the apartment it was recorded in. The voices in the recording belong to people living on the first, second and third floor of the building. Like the previous piece, their voices intertwine with the sounds of Uruguay Street during the day and then at night. There is a noticeable contrast between the two acoustic temporalities.

## **Findings**

Although the residents of both buildings described a similar situation of rising crime and to a certain extent, rising noise, there seems to be a drastic difference in their perceptions of their place in the life of the neighbourhood and in its imminent future. Residents of Edificio Smirna saw themselves as, in some ways, marginalized and unwanted in a rapidly changing neighbourhood, as vestiges of another era. In contrast, residents in Uruguay 125 saw themselves as an integral part of their neighbourhood. Both areas exhibited high levels of street noise. However, the distinction seems to lie in the type of sounds that constitute these. As Balaý (2004: 13) writes, it is important to “acknowledge the special role and attachment that local people associate with sounds.” Doing so allows us to gain an understanding of “the way in which individuals manage to define sounds in their familiar territory and take a certain pleasure in identifying with them” (Balaý 2004, 13). In both instances, residents identified traditional sounds of the neighbourhood such as the yam vendor's whistle or the call of the *tamal* vendor as positive sounds. They seem to recognize these sounds as what Radicchi (2012) calls the ‘sound identity’ of a place, that is to say, the series of quotidian sounds that together allows residents to coalesce around a shared identity of sonic space.

The residents of the Edificio Smirna seem to carry with them a sound identity that does not match the present acoustic elements of the San Jerónimo/Regina Streets area. This rupture in the collective acoustic identity of the neighbourhood presents residents with a new set of sounds, which in turn, disrupt a sense of belonging to the material environment around them. As Kanngiesser (2013: 2) asserts, “political and economic conditions articulate the character of the sonic environment at the same time as sounds iterate and reflect aspects of a political culture.” In this way, we can observe how the rapid and deliberate gentrification in the area has had an effect on the acoustic atmosphere. Material changes have created a sonic environment that, through the deployment of ambient power, has changed the way in which residents navigate the space.

Where the political culture is one of targeted gentrification, the deployment of ‘ambient power’ can be reflected in long time residents’ attitudes towards sounds that are part of the new acoustic atmosphere. Feigenbaum and Kanngieser (2015: 8) refer to this phenomenon as ‘atmospheric policing’ which they define as “those technologies and techniques for controlling populations that are fundamentally predicated on their relationship with air; through requiring air for their transmission and dispersion, they colonize space in ways that other weapons do not.” The types of noises that are generated by the businesses which are permitted to operate on San Jerónimo and Regina Streets exercise this type of power which, Feigenbaum and Kanngieser (2015) assert, constitutes a form of policing, a diffusion of power inserted into the atmosphere of a place.

Residents of Uruguay 125 do not share the same attitudes towards their place in the neighbourhood not because it is imbued with a more tranquil or residential quality, but because the sounds generated by the activities on the street have not undergone a significant transformation since 1985 and because these sounds are not sounds that disrupt their idea of

La Merced as always having been a centre of commerce. Kanai and Ortega-Salazar (2009: 485) assert that “In Latin America, as is the case in other parts of the world, culture occupies an increasingly central role as a resource for economic and social development in cities. The diverse factors leading to this conjunction include... the deepening integration of Latin American cities into transnational networks of cultural production and consumption, including the growth of heritage tourism to historical urban centers.” Unlike the sound atmosphere of San Jerónimo and Regina Street, that of La Merced is not tied to the production of ‘cultural’ spaces and therefore, is not imbued with the gentrifying quality of the former.

## **Conclusion**

Thibaud (2015: 204) suggests that “the word “ambiance” itself comes from the Latin ambire, which means to surround or go around. If the ambiance surrounds us, it necessarily results in “perception from the inside” and makes it difficult for the subject to step back and observe.” Therefore, perception cannot be disassociated from the concrete conditions in which it occurs. “From this standpoint, the notion of ambiance implies a particular conception of situated perception that helps us to introduce and take on board the sensory, affective, and material dimensions of the built environment” (Thibaud 2015: 212).

The differing attitudes towards acoustic environments between the participants of Edificio Smirna and those of Uruguay 125 reflect the material differences in urban development the San Jerónimo/Regina area and the La Merced area have had since 1985. As Kanngiesser (2013: 4) explains, “[t]he acoustic elements that constitute the soundscape are products of systems of value articulated in this case through neoliberal practices of what David Harvey calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’, re-territorialisation and employment,

embedded in corporate capital expansion.” Aggressive and targeted processes of gentrification, dispossession, urban regeneration, and property speculation create seemingly “antipodal narratives of emergence and disappearance” (Manalansan IV 2005: 152). In this case, the emergence of a new, more ‘culturally attune’ area of leisure for wealthy residents and tourists and the disappearance of the old structures and places necessary for the reproduction of working class life in the in the San Jerónimo/Regina Streets area. These opposing narratives argues Manalansan IV (2005: 152) “actually mutually constitute a form of structural violence” which “need not involve actual physical violence” to be effective. In contrast, the acoustic atmosphere of La Merced imbues the area with a specific sonic identity that unfolds relationally and provides residents with a sense of belonging. This “perception from the inside’ impacts residents attitudes towards their place and their future in the neighbourhood.

A materialist acoustemological approach allows us to hear the ‘ambient power’ that capitalist development exerts on the everyday unfoldings of a place by observing the relational quality of atmospheric conditions. In the case of Mexico City’s *Centro Histórico*, this approach has allowed us to gain an insight into the ways in which differing material conditions of atmosphere impact residents’ behaviours and attitudes regarding urban development. Geographical analyses of political economies stand to benefit from the more nuanced register provided by an aural-centric approach. As Kanngieser (2013: 4) writes: “this is a useful perspective to take if we wish to engage the relational and material political elements that contribute to these atmospheres, and the differential economies of sound that compose them.” In the context of urban development, a materialist approach to sound highlights the interactions between the characteristics of the built environment and the lived experience of city dwellers. As such, this approach has the potential to recognise

“inhabitants as stakeholders, experienced citizens, and sensitive subjects” (Thibaud 2011: 212). At the crossroads of ecology, environment, socio-economics and political geographies, a materialist acoustemological approach provides a new way of understanding the urban world.

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