

Andrin Uetz
Klybeckstrasse 74
CH – 4057 Basel
andrin.uetz@iash.unibe.ch

Project description

Soundscape of Density: Architecture, Space and Sound in Sai Ying Pun

Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities on earth. With its unique architecture of crowded pencil towers (Christ & Gantenbein 2012), the one square kilometer small district of Sai Ying Pun is inhabited by approximately 90'000 people, and it can thus be described as an extremely dense and heterogeneous spot. Its total area of only one square-kilometer makes the exam of every street, every public space and a big amount of private homes a realistic enterprise. This is possible through vertical expansion, creating new spaces and sound in the third dimension. The reduction of the examination field to a geographically small – but super dense living area of high complexity and diversity –allows multiple perspectives to the question: how does this city sound like?

Hong Kong, as a dense and diverse living space, has been often discussed in the fields of anthropology, urban sciences, and city planning. Hong Kong University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong City University undertake research in urban studies. Similarly, the architects Christ & Gantenbein (2012) used Hong Kong as example for their project connected to the Zürich-based ETH on the typology of buildings. The pro-democracy protests of 2014 were partly rooted in academic circles, e.g. by the action of Benny Tai, an associate professor of Law at Hong Kong University. He was the initiator of the movement «Occupy Central with Love and Peace.» Yet, the city's sound has only been marginally examined there, since primacy of visibility over aurality is notable in scientific publications about Hong Kong. Nevertheless, there are some studies related to the sounds in Hong Kong, e.g. a study by the Chinese University of Hong Kong on the soundscape of Hong Kong's countryside,¹ or a study by the Hong Kong University on the sounds at the Cheung Chau Bun festival.²

As a perfect example of gentrification with its local dried food stores, garages and family businesses being displaced by hip restaurants, bars and towers with luxurious flats, Sai Ying Pun is an interesting case from a sociological point of view. Besides concepts from the projects general methodology, especially Stephen Feld's acoustemology (Feld & Brenneis 2004), Emily Thompson's (2004) aural history and sound studies (Pinch & Bijsterveld 2004, Schulze 2008) subproject C will also include the theory of programmed background music (Lanza 1994; Sterne 2003b), as well as philosophical concepts, such as Hegel's (1970) concept of music as architecture of time, Kant's (2006) aesthetics of the sublime or Heidegger's (2006, 2009) ontology. This research project has two main goals. First to create a comprehensive catalogue of sounds in Sai Ying Pun with

¹ <http://www.grm.cuhk.edu.hk/eng/research/proj/file/proj0065.htm> (Sept. 8th 2015)

² <http://www.soh.hku.hk/hksounds/SoundScape/Introduction.html> (Sept. 8th 2015)

consideration of its vertical building structure. Second to examine these sounds and discuss them with reference to aesthetics, philosophy, musicology, sociology, economics and history. This transdisciplinary approach seems unavoidable, as the object of this examination – the soundscape of Sai Ying Pun – is as heterogeneous as the people living in this small and overcrowded neighborhood.

In more detail, Sai Ying Pun is located in the Western District of Hong Kong Island. It is known for its dried seafood wholesale markets, which are mostly located on busy Des Voeux Road, that connects Kowloon and business districts Central and Admiralty through the Western Harbor Crossing tunnel. The lower parts of Sai Ying Pun, including Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park, a highway and skyscrapers, are built on reclaimed land from the sea. The higher part is built submontanely on the steep granite of the Victoria Peak Hill. This inclination makes the area interesting for promenades, and it allows people to catch a glimpse of sea water from the higher streets. Recently real estate investors got aware of the potential of that area, having bought most of the local businesses and garages that were formerly located in the higher parts. Afterwards, they built towers with luxurious flats for expats and wealthy Chinese who mainly work in the financial centre nearby.

With the newly opened MTR station, Sai Ying Pun becomes definitely one of the most convenient places to live in Hong Kong, as Central becomes reachable within minutes. This gentrification is characterized by a spectacular rise of property prices and a strong gap between, on one hand, local dried food store owners that keep their business running, cheap local food corners and, on the other hand, westernized restaurants and bars. Other than in neighboring Sheung Wan, which has a longer tradition of mingling Western and Chinese culture, in Sai Ying Pun both does not seem to match yet. This can be seen in terms of architecture, restaurants, stores, parks and on the streets, where both sides do not seem to interact much. There is also a huge difference between locals that work and live in that area, therefore spending most of their lives in Sai Ying Pun, and expats that basically only come back to their towers to sleep.

The main questions are: can these differences also be heard? How does gentrification sound like? What are the “traditional” Sai Ying Pun sounds? Can music create private space within crowded public areas? Are wealthy and poor people exposed to the same sounds? What difference does the housing situation make, for example, between an older walk up building and a skyscraper? Are there sound-marks that have a specific meaning in the aural community? Are there functional sounds or commonly used sound signals?

In Hong Kong, architectural visual aspects seem more important than acoustics. Buildings are tall, shiny and should look glamorous. Their hard and flat surfaces often create rather unpleasant echoes. Most public spaces seem to be constructed without consideration of sound. An auditory examination is challenging this primacy of the visual in questions related to the city's development (Wrightson 2000). Yet, a simple antagonism of city-noise as a nuisance to the sensitive ear and peaceful sounds of nature as a lost paradise could not satisfy the intention of this

project. The seemingly lo-fi³ soundscape (Schafer 1977) of Sai Ying Pun is more complex and distinguishable in its aural details, if the vertical building structure is included in the study. With the help of binaural recordings, a comprehensive examination of the various sounds found in this environment is possible. It is important to emphasize that all sonic occurrences happening in Sai Ying Pun are part of the research material, be it music or noise. The term “sound” allows to undercut the opposition between the two, especially because “noise” often implies a negative connotation. Emily Thompson (2004) suggests to tell passive “hearing” and active “listening” apart. People in Hong Kong would constantly *hear* sounds, but, due to its consensual categorization as city noise, usually not *listen* to it.

In his groundbreaking field study in Papua New Guinea, Stephen Feld (1996, 2006) was able to show that bird song and other sounds of the rainforest are important means of orientation and help to structure daily life of its local communities. In anthropological terms, this aural orientation could be seen as a *conditio humana* (Plessner 1985). Therefore, the people in Sai Ying Pun should endue ways in order to arrange themselves within the city's loud soundscape. The questions are whether aural orientation is possible, how it works or whether it needs to be replaced with visual signals? Thus, this subproject departs from the following hypotheses:

- a) Sai Ying Pun's soundscape is strongly formed by its vertical architecture of density,
- b) Its vertical dimension forms new aural spaces and room to produce and listen to sounds,
- c) Vertical expansion allows to create quiet living space comparable to, but yet different from, horizontal expansion in suburbs or countryside areas,
- d) The sound perception of Hong Kong's city noise can be described and partly understood with Kant's (2006) concept of “the sublime”,
- e) Origin and function of sounds can be distinguished in regard of cultural relevance, technical function, commercial interests, production, etc,
- f) Seemingly accidental and unintentional sounds give valuable information about culture and society, as well as music or well-known sound marks,

The specific subproject's methodological approach will follow three steps:

- Extensive study of bibliography and developing of fieldwork methodology, including a) in-depth study of all relevant publications on soundscape and sound studies; b) methodological extension with reference to sociology, economics and architecture, i.e. theory of agency, typology, gentrification etc.; c) test recordings and sound analysis in Bern, test of methodology; d) discussion of interdisciplinary approaches with colleagues from the Walter Benjamin Kolleg.
- Fieldwork in Sai Ying Pun, Hong Kong, including a) binaural sound recordings of everyday sounds; b) documentation of recordings with video, photos and field notes; c) qualitative interviews with people working and living in Sai Ying Pun; d) online open-access discussion of research material through a fieldwork diary-blog.

³ Schafer (1977) distinguishes hi-fi from lo-fi soundscapes. Hi-fi is used for soundscapes, where most of the sounds can be heard by itself, e.g. the bird songs in a quiet landscape. Lo-fi in contrary is an environment of blending noises, e.g. a highway with traffic jam.

- Analysis of fieldwork material and writing of doctoral thesis, including a) selection and analysis of data, i.e. sound recordings; b) sound mapping with special emphasis on vertical building structure; c) discussing data in historical, site-specific and philosophical contexts; d) complete dissertation and compare results with further soundscape projects.

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