

# Acoustic Cities

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**John Bingham-Hall:** I was just thinking as we were listening to those works that it really complicates the notion of the acoustic city, that it's not just the case of if you're walking down the street, the city sounds a certain way. There's so many different kinds of spaces that we need to pay attention to. The way music may work in the street when you play it out loud or even when you're humming it to yourself - that there's a kind of internal acoustic space, as well of how you're thinking about it and imagining music. That there are abandoned spaces that aren't accessible or at least they're not supposed to be, and their acoustics and their emptiness, and their silence as well.

We need to think about domestic interiors, about how they sound, about the inaccessible, the acoustic spaces that only certain people experience and aren't public or shared, and how they remember those, how the experiences impacted on them. Almost to listen inside of the structures of buildings, there's an acoustic kind of space going on within the walls as well that's generating friction and sound in different ways. And nightclubs, and the toilets of nightclubs and the kinds of different social pressures and spaces of freedom that are going on because of certain kinds of music, because of the beats within this music, there's so many kinds of different acoustic spaces, but I also wanted to think and also talk with you all a bit about the different ways of listening that you've proposed.

By working with the Relief Centre who were looking at these questions around quality of life and what that means to people living in Beirut, but also opening these questions up more widely, I think these works propose a set of tools for people who may not know, as many of us do not, how to get to grips with the complexity of the sounds within which we live and why they may affect us in specific ways, why we might actually be being affected at all times by things that we don't even realise. So again, question of kind of not just listening to the music, but listening via music to what's

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going on around us, listening within particular acoustics, understanding what the acoustic space, the acoustic properties of a space may be doing to the way we hear the city, listening via our own memories, thinking back, listening to people's voices without always being able to see them, listening to stories that people tell you, listening to structures and materials, but also that simple thing of using your mobile phone as a research tool and actually capturing your experience and seeing that as important information as you around city, capturing it with voice notes on your phone and hearing those, all of those conversations and things I've mentioned kind of via this simple piece of technology that we all carry with us.

So I think this is a really powerful set of tools and ideas, the revealing of different acoustic spaces that all of these works do, which I hope can mean that this edition is also not just kind of something to listen to, but a set of ideas that can be mobilised and used. All of these works, they've been kind of generated by being in and working in either London or Beirut, but actually all of them are kind of a way of thinking and a way of working as well that could be equally applied elsewhere, maybe the next project is to swap every piece and do it in the other city. But I suppose I wanted to ask, ask you to kind of think a bit more, talk a little bit more about those ways of listening that your piece proposes and what you think you can learn about the city, what you can learn about the city that you might not usually understand by inhabiting the everyday sensory capacities that we become accustomed to using.

What has listening to the city via music revealed in the different places you have done this?

**Younna Saba:** This exercise that I did here for this piece was extremely challenging just in a sense that I was singing and I was hearing myself in my earphones all the time, and I could hear all the sounds amplified at the same time. It was very frustrating at the beginning and I thought that it's not going anywhere, but then when I listened back to what I recorded, I realised that there are so many details that I had missed when I was actually just focusing on remembering the words and trying to improvise a melody, details that sounded good over the sounds of the city. So after re-hearing the recording, I started noticing patterns that are repeated, and repeating from different sound sources. For example, it was very interesting in one of the recordings, there's the sound of pigeons and they're singing, I don't know what the sound of pigeons is, if it's considered singing or not, but they were singing in a certain rhythm, in a certain rhythmic pattern which is a 5 over 4. And then a car passes and it honks exactly the same pattern. In another example, a lady was walking her dog and the dog runs onto the road, and then she yells 'no, no!' And then a lady on her phone, she says exactly the same 'no, no!' So, I felt there is this constant feedback between sounds, and the sounds are kind of leaving traces that we're picking up on, and we're repeating them and echoing them. So it's not haphazard, it's not a dying sound, it's not

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like a burst and then it disappears. This is how I tried to translate it in the piece: it's all based on feedback and it's based on an old recording of feedback that I had, and it's always this interplay of actual sounds and the trace of that sound and how to take it, pick it up and then take it somewhere else.

**JBH:** So by kind of playing music and using that as a time and a space to listen, you started to hear the rhythmicity and conversationality, I guess, of these things.

**YS:** Exactly, especially that I was looking for something I needed to submit for the project also, so I was looking for something that it would actually be interesting, and then I found that everything was in there, even the sound of the rain. I was walking, I picked different times of the day and different neighbourhoods on different days, different times of different days. One of the days it was really raining so I was recording under my umbrella and singing, and it was the most shielding to me. You could hear that I'm singing much more freely than when I was walking in between people, so it kind of sounded like synthesised sound, the sound of the rain.

**JBH:** Merijn, I loved the phrase that you've used of the Egg as a mixing desk for the city, that brings in all of the sources from different places, and it does something strange with them that you wouldn't hear anywhere else. But then you've also used your project to do that, to offer these sounds as a set of materials to literally be put through a mixing desk. I wonder, there's only so much we can say as outsiders to Beirut I guess, but what is your sense of the Egg and what it could be for the city? By listening to its acoustics, what kind of public value do you see in that?

**Merijn Royaards:** I think first of all, the Egg and maybe spaces like the Egg are really just about listening. What really struck me when I was there is how vision and hearing interact, and that contrast is especially sort of significantly felt in Beirut because sonically, even if you're on a street where you can see the mountains in the distance, you can see at least along the street's length, quite often there's a wall of sound, like a curtain that's impenetrable, you can't really get past. The Egg does sort of the opposite, so you go inside this very enclosed space and all of a sudden, soundscape becomes really vast, so to me, what's really interesting about the Egg is, how it mixes and layers, but also how it messes with how different perceptual horizons move. Sonic horizons could move away or towards you, and a visual horizon may do the opposite, but how that would work in an urban context? I mean, of course the Egg does work like that in an urban context, but it's a derelict building that people don't really go to. It's just an experience I've had that I really felt compelled to try and share and communicate, but how to bring that into a public space, I'm not sure.

**JBH:** I don't know too much about it but would be fascinated to

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hear the thoughts of people from Beirut, having heard this space and this piece of architecture in this way, what ideas that brings up in terms of its future. I don't know if there are plans for its future, perhaps the Beirut contingent among us can tell us more perhaps?

**Joan Baz:** Its future varies. We don't know what state it's in right now. I think architects would know better. Sometimes that's a mall, right? I don't know now what they've decided to do.

**JBH:** I mean we should show them this, it'll hopefully become some kind of listening.

Joan, I was really interested how in your piece, you don't show the face of the people telling these stories. Really listening to their voices becomes very important, hearing memory via the voice. What do you feel is revealed about the city through this kind of storytelling that you facilitated?

**JB:** I don't know what it reveals about the city, but what's interesting it was an exercise firstly to understand a person more. So what it did, it created the space for them to start remembering first, and what's interesting is seeing what they actually do remember. So the first thing is them in front of these blocks that are so playful, that remind them of something so childish and accessible, and then them going back to a place they've actually lived. Most of the time it was the first place they've actually lived then, and it was very natural for a lot of people to go back to that place. So, that was at the first stage and then the second stage was them actually re-constructing the space and deciding what to build from it, and this showed me a lot about how we actually remember space. So whether a person built something 2D and flat, or whether someone would actually build a wall. I was really surprised that my mum, who is not an architect at all, actually built an architectural plan and she took me through a house in Saida that is no longer there. So this is also telling us about how we perceive space, how we inhabit and how we remember it, and how we decide to talk about it. Because a lot of times, it was just an excuse for them to tell me more than just what they showed me with the blocks, like when someone would just start with the exterior because they don't want to let me in. Even going as far as details, like the cement blocks that you use to actually build the houses, they were quite specific, someone would actually tell me this is the entrance and it's actually 5 metres long, normally trucks cannot enter underneath, and so on. So they were really specific about certain details and then they would either stop at this, or actually take this conversation further and tell me something about what actually happened there and this would only come in an hour later. So, I think it's also this relationship with them, their intimacy and what they decide to tell me and how they decide to remember.

**JBH:** Seems like the vocalised conversation plays such a big role in this unpacking of an architectural history. We don't often think of the voice as a tool for understanding architecture, even how the

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act of hearing yourself talk about it allows you to remember details. Maybe listening to people's voices could be really important for understanding how spaces work.

Speaking of which, Mhamad, it strikes me that your work also has a real concern with how real materials and structures tell a political story of what the city has been subjected to, by revealing the sound patterns within those materials. So I wondered if you can talk a little bit more about that mode of listening, to the inside of structures almost?

**Mhamad Safa:** So, the idea of looking at the structure in my case works as a kind of evidentiary method to a certain extent, to understand that sounds within specific structures can be deployed, they can turn into an act of violence. So the idea of passive listening, the idea of someone being exposed to specific forms of sonic or specific frequencies within specific intensities, even if they're not being harmed physically, is an act of violence. So the piece is 15 minutes long, but no-one was able to stay in the room for more than 2 minutes. So I was just thinking about a situation where you're under the building that is collapsing, that the building is not, the basement is not gonna collapse on you because it's extremely fortified, but I'm just thinking about this form of collateral damage that is being conducted through the structure. The structure functions as a kind of evidence of the fact that you're inside this building, you're safe, but sonically, the sound is always leaking. The idea of the sound moving physically, as a kind of a physical event, moving all throughout the structure and being directly absorbed by the ears of the people that are hiding, is a really strong act of violence. I'm just constantly thinking about how to approach this legally as well, what could we do about this, how can we talk about people being subjected to specific sounds that is a result of a bombardment or sonic booms. Unfortunately, in international law, there's nothing that addresses, so I'm trying to look into these facets of sound as well.

**JBH:** So seeing sound here as a material for harm and for violence and revealing how that can happen is very important. In some approaches to sound studies, there's a sense that sound is often the basis for a quite intimate coming together, it's this way of being sensorially connected to one another. But obviously, it can flip and become something that pushes people apart, pushes people inside of themselves as well.

**MS:** I mean, it's interesting as well to look at where the sound is being used and how it's moving throughout the space, or within which spaces, how it's reverbing, how it's reverberating or how it's resonating inside different spaces. So, the space by itself should be understood as a kind of vehicle that can transform the sound from a sound that is maybe normal at one point to a sound that is extremely violent as well, so this is how space can be as well understood to a certain extent.

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**JBH:** Chrissy, in your work you were saying, let's listen, but also let's use this storytelling, these conversations to hear about where people feel excluded from, or pushed out of the spaces they're trying to be in. So I wonder how would you describe the kind of the way of listening that you proposed and what you've learnt through that?

**Christabel Stirling:** There were big challenges with trying to deal with a city as big as London and also to deal with big, large collectives of people, crowds. How do you capture the kind of quality or nature of those really, monstrously complex things that are constantly moving, constantly changing. I think that using my phone as a tool to make these field recordings, it really felt like I was able to get right up close to the fleeting aspects of that and the multiple sensory aspects of them. I think it is often hard in writing to convey discursively, because it sort of really gets to the minutiae of kind of urban experience, musical and sonic experience. But at the same time, as you say, I think these small, micro moments also tell bigger stories and they are often indicative wider conditions that are imposing on the city. So, for example, I don't know if it was really audible but talking in that recording about the intense crowdedness of these spaces, you can also hear that. How people are forced together and this can be humorous, but often quite antagonistic - exasperated conditions where you don't feel part of the collective at all, you just feel quite angry. That is directly tied to the economy of music and how these venues are under increasing pressure to oversell their events in order to break even, because of intensifying security, extremely high rents, this kind of thing. That experience of being in a collective actually becomes quite an isolated one, quite an individualising one, so that's an interesting one.

**JBH:** Obviously the idea of the mobile phone and kind of taking these voice notes really democratises research, because it kind of gives validity, and I think this is true in Joan's work too, to spoken narratives. The fact that the speech is ephemeral, and it disappears because it is sound, has meant that it hasn't kind of been as valued as writing or other visual media as a source of knowledge for the ways that we deal with and design the city. And that means the everyday ways people talk about their own experiences do not become part of the public sphere. Music is the same as well, I guess. I wonder if you could all think about how these approaches challenge the way that research about cities is produced. I'm taking research here as a very formalised field that generates the information that gets used to make decisions about what to do. So how might these different approaches challenge, democratise, politicise, decision-making in the city.

**CS:** One other thing I was going to mention, going back to what I was just saying about how the small can relate to the larger level. In the reggae spaces that I was researching something that really struck me, when recording there and what I tried to get a sense, of is the way that these spaces function as public homes basically.

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They're comprised of these really homely materials. The events take place in specific kinds of cultural spaces that have been run by the Caribbean community in London since the 1960s. They started to come up then, and there's been this incredible longevity of these spaces, they've survived through time outside of the mainstream music economy. I think there's something quite powerful about being able to capture that, the kind of mediation of sound through their spatial properties and how important those spaces are. There's a long history with that, going back to the 1950s, the exclusion of black people from music venues and how they had to create their own venues. That started out in their living rooms and then they brought their living rooms out into the public space, which is why it recreates this homeliness. It doesn't really answer your question as much, I would say maybe it's just an indicator of the importance of continuity and survival, as well as change in the city.

**JBH:** But also having a sensory experience of what the continuity feels like. It makes me think of Nathalie Harb's project for this edition as well, the idea of creating a public living room. That doesn't just consist of a certain kind of space or a certain kind of access, it also consists of an ambience that is formed not just by sound and music, but also who chooses what sound and music that space is constituted by and who has the right to programme and form that ambience as well. Chrissy's work, in which we hear music transformed via an architectural structure, it touches also on yours Mhamad, and thinking about how you've taken that sound work to different places, where in Beirut it is of that place but elsewhere it is a sonic element introduced into a different context. It made me wonder whether we can think of music having a certain place, whether it's helpful to think of music or soundscapes coming from a certain place. There's this idea of using soundscapes to kind of understand the truth and the character of that place more deeply, but then what Youmna's work proposes is introducing new sounds into a place to change it and understand it better. So I wonder if you can reflect a bit more on that, and what it does to bring music to a place, to play it out of place?

**YS:** I'll answer differently by talking about something else and then I'll try to answer your question. Music is very present, I think, and ambient. The idea of humming in tune while walking in this piece was actually very inspired by the fact that a lot of people that do it and I hear it all the time. People sitting next to the shops and just singing out loud. So this was a part of the sonic identity, if you want, of the city of Beirut. When I was abroad, when I was in Madrid to do a similar exercise, I was consciously looking for changes to the original tune, which is a different exercise than the one that I did now. So I was seeing how this tune is morphing according to the sounds that I was hearing. Another example, comparing Madrid to Casablanca, Madrid had a continuous rumble, it was just one sound to me, and I couldn't even discern different sounds in it, whereas Casablanca was peace, and this kind

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of shows in the tracks somehow, in the transformation of the tracks. But I had one problem in Casablanca which is I couldn't really have done this exercise just anywhere, because performing music outside, even here in Beirut busking is kind of not really accepted, so this is also having the public space defining what kind of sound you can emit. I think it's very political and something we should look into more.

**JB:** I wanted to ask which way do you think it censors you to perform here, in Beirut?

**YS:** The act of performing in a public space? It's just you can't just do it without being asked why you're doing it and why you're sitting here and not there. You can't sit here, so it's very problematic and even walking and humming in tune with the recorder, I felt so self-conscious doing it. I felt very comfortable doing it under the rain, under The Corniche because it was empty and I was under my umbrella and the rain was amplified so I couldn't hear anyone else. And you can hear in the recordings, for example, sometimes I'm singing very freely and it's mostly in a semi-private space, like in a car, garage, or something.

**JB:** Did you only feel this restriction in Beirut?

**YS:** No, in Casablanca it was almost impossible to go on the street and just perform. I didn't just feel it, it really was difficult and even taking musicians with me, that wasn't really a good idea.

**JBH:** What you've all been saying and showing highlights the fact that we can never think of just we're listening to sound, and then there's a kind of a city, you're always already hearing the city, or the environment, or the space when you're hearing any sound, when you're hearing your voice, you are hearing whether you can sing freely or whether you're constrained in what you can sing. When you kind of listen in the Egg, you're hearing so much history, you're hearing the emptying out of space. You can't separate these things, you're always hearing memory in the built environment. There's a small quote that Gascia Ouzounian brought into a collection of excerpts of theory about listening that we brought together for a different workshop, which was a quote from Vijay Iyer about music not being subjects to listening to objects, but subjects listening to subjects. Even if you think you are, you're never just hearing this detached object of sound that's separate from anything else. You're always hearing via and into a whole set of material conditions, of music styles and who has the right to bring them into where, of political and moral restriction in public space, of memories of certain places. So hopefully by people exploring these works online with that in mind, you can really start to think about not just what they are as a set pattern of sounds to listen to but kind of where they come from, what politics have generated them, what materials have generated them. I also want to open up to anyone who wants to ask any questions of the artists or throw in thoughts about how these kinds of ideas and these



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ways of thinking touch ground in Beirut or whatever other city you may come from. I think there is one up there?

**Audience member:** Hi, first of all, thank you so much for everything everything you've said was so interesting and it provoked thoughts in me because I've actually experienced Beirut and London both for extended periods of time, and what I thought, the first thought that occurred to me was when Chrissy made us listen the track that she recorded that's made of all these snippets of sounds and things like that in London, and people speaking in bathrooms and the kind of vibrations in the bathrooms and stuff, I thought that it's very interesting, actually, because to me, maybe your, your intention was to go from space to sound to create this track, and then to me, it was more sound to space, so the sounds that you've made us listen to and you combined informed, informed us about, like at least me, I interpret it like that, but the scale of the space, the materials used but also the profile and the kind of background of the space that the sounds were recorded in, that's very interesting and then you said something about not being able to perform in Beirut because in the street, because of all the interruption and then I realised something when, when John, you said something like you've asked why it was not possible to perform in Beirut, and you've also said that in Casablanca it wasn't possible to perform, I've realised that in London there is this space to perform because everything is so paced, and people just follow the flow and get to places, and sound kind of paces their everyday lives, like the sound of the tube going through and then the intermittence, and then in Beirut it's more like interruption and this constant disparate sounds coming together, you'll never know what sound is gonna come out from where, and I think so, in a sense, I think the soundscape of the city can really pace the way we function, just like sound can inform you about the space, and the cultural background.

**CS:** I just wanna say thanks so much for those observations really, really powerful and I think you've touched on something very important, which I guess I didn't really mention, but the kind of encultured nature of cities and how the, what I'm talking about in my, in the specific realm that I've been exploring is so kind of local in a way, it's so, as you say, it's so reflective of particular culture, particular city's culture, and what is possible in one city isn't is not the same in another and I've found that myself in trying to put to use certain techniques and methods in one city that, where they worked and then going to another where the culture is completely different. Even if it's like, in terms of it being someone walking on the street in North America that's not really a part of the culture, so focused on driving so you just find yourself in the middle of nowhere with no people around, and things like this, you only realise when you transport it and you test those thresholds of what's possible in one place and not in another. And also, I think that on the kind of micro level as well, in terms of the different spaces I was moving through certain techniques would work a lot

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better for me in some spaces than they would in others, and in some of those spaces I was viewed in quite a suspicious way for trying to kind of make recordings and ask people. I think a lot of people thought I was undercover or something when they saw me, so happens on a microscale too. I think it's the cultural difference, it's a really important point.

**JBH:** I thought also this idea of whether soundscapes characterised by flow or by interruption, it's quite interesting. We've actually discussed it a little bit yesterday and thought it could also be something valuable that could also snap you out of a certain track and give you a moment of paying attention.

**YS:** Actually, I just wanted to clarify what I meant by it wasn't possible to perform here, on the city. It wasn't because of the noise, it was because of people's interruption. Okay, so because the pics and the surprises are kind of useful, and they're part of what we're absorbing and what we are translating, and how we're translating, just wanted to say that.

**Audience member:** There seems to be a couple of things here. On the one hand we're talking about freedom to make noise potentially, and on the other hand Mohammed, you were talking about potential for legislation where noise becomes an act of violence. So I haven't fully formulated something but I'm just thinking of that as a potential dichotomous issue. I'm just old enough to remember in the UK, there was a piece of legislation back in the 1990s, called the Criminal Justice Bill, which was to clamp down on the rave culture. I think it was to stop a big group of people meeting in a particular place, outside of cities of course, people going to fields to have big raves, and I think where there was a repetitive beat, that was a specific criterium for the legislation, sort of linking to your research into when certain groups are perhaps excluded, and how there's some contradiction in there perhaps. How do we define what is freedom and how do we define what is the opposite through noise.

**MS:** It's a really good question, it's a really good observation because actually, the whole last year I was researching this idea of prohibiting noise as an act of oppression, and deploying the idea of prohibiting noise as starting from rave culture. It's interesting because out of this example you gave stemmed different musical acts that were really responsive to this. Aphex Twin created this piece that was responsive to that idea of prohibiting certain sounds from clubs, and it's interesting as well that in the UK there was the use of the Mosquito. The Mosquito is a kind of device that creates specific kinds of frequencies so kids won't play around specific places, and there was a piece of legislation or a kind of text in international law that can re-question the idea of this tool as violence. So both things: the idea of prohibiting sounds can be deployed, and the idea of using sound [as a form of control] can be deployed. For me, looking at who's actually doing this, who's starting to do this, who's the person that's actually creating the

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noise, who are the people that are prohibiting the noise. Actually, to be honest, it's looking at where the state is standing, and how the state apparatuses are being used in this case, because if you look at the history of noise oppression, how they call it, there was a massive militarisation that was basically class-based. There were specific classes that were complaining about lower classes, that they were annoyed by them, so noise abatement and noise, noise control acts were actually influenced by a classist decision. It was not until later that the decibel was discovered, and noise meters were invented, and they realised that all noise is a kind of health hazard. But initially it was totally discursive, the idea of what noise is and what sound is, and how sound is violent or not. It's really a discursive thing, so what you're saying is really interesting about looking at both, and that's what I am doing, but in this work I was looking at the facet where we should be thinking about making less sounds in this case.

**JBH:** I think it's a really important question across all of the works, but also generally as well, is noise evidence of freedom? It's a kind of democracy, in a way, noise. But then quietening, controlling, this also then gives the possibility for the quieter things to be heard or for people, these issues around quality of life and mental health. But then who makes those decisions what quality of life means and who gets suppressed by controlling those things? It goes beyond these works and becomes a really political question. What we do about that? Should there be noise control? Who should decide how the city sounds? Can a city try to decide, or can it only ever be a collective work, in a sense?

**MS:** I don't think it should be controlled, the idea of city noise shouldn't be controlled, but the idea of deployed noise as, a tool for torture or tool for violence. Or these examples of interrogation techniques with songs that were saying "I love you" 100 times, where prisoners were exposed to the songs and become violent. So it's not about noise, it's about how it is used. But it's like the city, the idea of city noise, or environmental noise is a kind of a thing to understand. But controlling noise in the ways that they are being controlled now is not the answer in my opinion because it's another political tool, another tool for oppression.

This panel discussion took place at the launch of the [Acoustic Cities: London & Beirut](#) curated by [Gascia Ouzounian](#) and John Bingham-Hall. It took place at Sursock Museum in Beirut on 25 April 2019.

The edition is a collaboration between [Institute for Global Prosperity UCL](#), [Recomposing the City](#), [RELIEF Centre](#), [Optophono](#) and [Theatrum Mundi](#), produced by [Gascia Ouzounian](#).

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# ACOUSTIC CITIES

LONDON & BEIRUT

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