# The sonically open city

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| Format | Article | Project | Sonic Urbanism |
| Published | 11 July 2017 | Share | Twitter |
| Author | Richard Sennett | | Facebook |
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*In a response written to the Atelier TM workshops asking "What is a sociable acoustic?", hosted by the Global Cities chair at Collège d'études mondiales, Paris, on 30th May and 13th June 2017, Richard Sennett develops his theory on open cities to show how the porosity of urban form can be thought of in sonic as much as spatial terms.*

## The Edge Condition

The city is a good home for what Immanuel Kant called in 1784 the "twisted timber" of humanity. A truly open urban place is full of people who differ economically, ethnically, politically, or in ways of life — all packed together. Should this crookedness be straightened? Hitler's architect Albert Speer thought so; he sought the re-cast the streets, parks, offices, and houses of Berlin in an orderly Nazi mould. Today, other forces are doing the work of straightening. Economic inequality, ever increasing, undoes previously mixed neighbourhoods; racial, ethnic, and religious groups live as segregated lives in the mid-20th Century. Straightening can be sought as well as imposed: the most popular housing today lies inside gated communities. It's come to seem normal and natural that people who differ should live apart.

Kant, I think, would not like much what's happened to today's cities; he wrote that "out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." He counselled that the good citizen, following this precept, should accept as they are those neighbours who differ without trying to "straighten" them; he believed that diverse people could live peacefully together; he imagined that people might even enjoy a crooked place, with all its nooks and byways of unexpected experience. Rather than the arid Reasoner depicted in school text-books, he subscribed to the ideal of a society able to dwell in complexity.

Can people who differ in fact live together? That promise seems faint, because powerful forces keep people isolated or disconnected. Wealth inequalities isolate people; racial, ethnic and religious divisions set them at odds. High-tech can lighten the

weight of difference: if you don't like what you experience on-line, click and go to the next window.  Affirmations of difference have become similarly light-weight, the terms "multi-cultural" or "inclusive" being now worn-out clichés.  And spiritually, the fractious, complicated, messy street seems no place to put oneself in order, no site in which to find inner balance.  Or is it?

I am going to argue it is.  An open city would be a good place in which to live: economically more just, socially more engaging, personally more character-forming than existing reality.   When arguing for a near-impossibility, the usual thing is to maintain that existing reality has such deep cracks and defects that only a panacea will do.  But this policy way of thinking can be self-defeating; the critic can become stuck in sheer critique.  of existing reality, or depressed by its sheer weight.  The alternative is to explore an ideal in itself so that it becomes common-sensicle, comprehensible, tangible, reasonable, and so, perhaps, compelling.  That's the journey I want to take: to imagine what an open city could be like and how to build it.

The creation of a complex city requires more than sheer good will.  It entails developing certain skills which enable people who differ to co-exist; Kant's ideal, cosmopolitan citizens have learned how to handle complexity.  Nor does a complex built environment, which fosters these dwelling-skills, just happen; it has to be designed in certain ways.  To make cities as I imagine Kant would like them to be — diverse, complex, cosmopolitan– means focusing on the relation of how people live to the built form of the city.

## The edge condition: borders and boundaries

One spatial condition which helps us engage actively with openness in the city is the edge condition. At the cellular level, the difference is between the cell membrane, which is a border, and the cell wall, which establishes a boundary. The cell wall functions as a container holding things in, while the membrane is at once porous and resistant, letting matter flow in and out of the cell, but selectively, so that the cell can retain what it needs for nourishment.  This is an ambiguous distinction at the cellular level, in part because cell linings can sometimes switch function; again a wholly-sealed wall would cause the cell to die.  But the difference, in degree, between wall and membrane is important for our understanding of "openness" as a condition: it is never simply free flow, it resembles the membrane in combining porosity and resistance. This ambiguous condition which has great consequences for more complex structures.

If we make a big mental leap from cells to natural ecologies, we find the difference between borders and boundaries to take on a new character.   Now the boundary-edge, as in the marking of territorial edges by tigers or bears, become zones of low

interaction between species, whereas border edges, as in the meeting of water and land along the sea-shore, are high activity zones, places where creatures feed off other species and where the pace of evolution speeds up.  The contrast between cell wall and cell membrane becomes, in natural ecologies, the difference between less intense and more intense life.

Steven Gould draws our attention to an important distinction in natural ecologies between two kinds of edges: boundaries and borders. The boundary is an edge where things end; the border is an edge where difference groups interact.  At borders, organisms become more inter-active, due to the meeting of different species or physical conditions; for instance, where the shoreline of a lake meets solid land is an active zone of exchange where organisms find and feed off other organisms. Not surprisingly, it is also at the borderline where the work of natural selection is the most intense. Whereas the boundary is a guarded territory, as established by prides of lions or packs of wolves.  No transgression at the boundary: Keep Out!  Which means the edge itself is dead.

Let's make a further large leap.  This ecological difference marks human communities, too.  Gated housing estates, isolated business campuses, shopping malls places surrounded by boundaries. These are in one way low-intensity habitats, because they are not much stimulated by difference.  They have a single function and that's that.  Left-wing planners like myself are tempted simply to open them open, letting all sorts of "inappropriate" activities and people seep in, but it's not quite so simple.  The model of the cell membrane cautions against taking sheer openness and lack of barriers as the corrective; there must be some combination of porosity and resistance, as in a mixed street of shops, flats, and small businesses, each distinct in purpose and activity within, yet contributing to the mix of people out on the street.  We commonly say such compound places are "full of life" and that's more than a metaphor; it reflects a certain kind of edge.

This combination marks the experience organisms have ecologically at the border's edge, and defines the condition of openness, then, in human systems.  Urban design provides examples of how porosity and resistance can combine.

# The sonic wall

If you think of a medieval urban wall like that surrounding Avignon, for instance, you might imagine from its stony bulk this wall to be an impenetrable barrier, a boundary of the most life-ending sort.  You see it as inert and you don't much think about using it.  In fact, Avignon's walls, far from the centre, were places where Jews, prostitutes, and other outcasts tended to congregate, places as well where the unregulated black economy of the city flourished. Their inhabitants needed to know how to navigate these forbidden, complicated, often dangerous edges; more precisely, the

inhabitants needed to become skilled in dealing with ambiguities of policing, black-market trading, and squatting at the wall.  Knowing how to make the space work made the solid wall function as a membrane.

Just as in stone, so in sound.  A sonic boundary would be one which divides an absolutely silent place from a place full of noise: in construction, that would mean triple-plated glass windows or thick floors and walls; in design, it would mean the removal of sleeping quarters far from the places in which people are active during the day.  In urbanism, the sonic boundary suggests, removal of the domestic sphere from the convivial or the productive spheres.  "Peace and quiet" are the ideology justifying sonic boundaries.

A sonic border is, on the contrary, a zone which mediates different levels of noise, but does not entirely separate them.   In a street, low levels of sound alert us to the presence of others, whereas absolute silence is perceived as threatening.  This public-space works equally within domestic space, different sound levels alerting us to the presence and needs of others, and of other activities.  [It turns out that absolute silence can be an impediment to sleep, for many people; certainly, New Yorkers like myself fall asleep more easily to the muffled wail of sirens and shouts in the street than to the eerie, scary silences of the countryside.]

A noise wall-membrane is the structure or the spatial passage which mediates between different levels of sound.  it is the zone, that it, in which we sense how complex the soundscape of a city to be.  Emerging from the Metro or passing between inside and out buildings we sense how much difference it contains – a heightened awareness which disappears as we describe underground or close the door.  Correspondingly, this heightened awareness diminishes by becoming pasteurized as the ear adjusts to sounds in space.  The membrane is the site of heightened sensory life.

## Sonic liminality

The assemblage of visual complexity occurs by paying attention to events and images at the edges of vision, rather than focusing the field to a centre.  So too in the acoustic realm. Dissonant sounds. as in a baby crying somewhere out of sight, or sounds with different rhythms, as with the speech of people audible far away, are more important in creating sonic an experience of complexity that immediate sounds.

Here, we are focusing on the edge condition, the periphery of sensation, the liminal state.  William James is the source of what's sometimes called the "spotlight" version of focal attention, in which the brain lights up a central object, problem, person, to dwell on, and pushes aside objects, problems, or persons who seem, as we say casually, not central to the problem at hand.  A variant of this Jamesian idea is that the brain "zooms in" on a problem, magnifying it, again pushing other material out of focus.

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This is the opposite of liminality.

This is an unsatisfying model neurologically. As a body moves forward, for instance, the eye is accounting peripheral information even as it moves straight ahead. Peripheral vision is natural to most animals. In humans, the cone of vision is 60º, whereas the depth of field is 30º, so we are always taking in more information than is focus. So too auditorily: fainter sounds function as neurological alerts, the ear seeking to understand them, whereas high decibel noise from a readily-identifiable source is not stimulating mentally. Musicians know the truth of this in working with loudness: sheer volume, either a tenor bawling out a high-note or an orchestra blasting a climatic FF, excites the listener, but doesn't draw him or her in as does playing a key passage more softly, more elusively, as though the meaning was there to be grasped – but the listener needs to work to grasp it>

Liminality can take on a deeper character in social experience. When people make the transition from one kind of experience to another, they often become aware of a dissonance or difference; this happens to children in the the transition from dealing with parents to dealing with teachers; as adults, we feel the transit from an initial sexual encounter to a long-term love. It is a rough passage rather than smooth, an ueberbruchen. The liminal passage forms a kind of "transitional consciousness." R.W. Winnicott first alerted psychologists to the importance of transitional moments which establish the borders between experience for children. Some recent studies of long-term memory compliment this, pointing to the ability of elderly people to recall sharply moments of shift in their lives, even as the contents within each time layer have become fuzzy. Think, in a related vein, of the stimulations of shift, the provocations of transition, which occur in the poetry of Rimbaud or Rilke. The marker of value in all these cases is a rupture, a tear in experience, rather than a smooth shift of scene, which creates than edge of experience.

A big issue in urbanism today how to design just that provocation. It matters because we want to counter that design of cities which separates and isolates different functions and different kinds of people; in place of clarity, liminality. This is true of the eye, and of the ear.

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