

How do Soundwalks Engage Urban Communities in Soundscape Awareness?

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ABSTRACT: This paper summarizes the intent, conduct, and outcomes of an experiential workshop, for conference participants, in soundwalking and public engagement. Through listening, dialogue and responsive exercises workshop participants learned about concepts and strategies for activating communities. Benefits and opportunities in government, civic and cultural partnerships for sustainable professional research and meaningful public engagement are shared in a context of creative social practice in contested urban spaces.

KEYWORDS: listening, urban, soundscapes, wildlife habitat, embodied listening, citizen science, race, segregation, gentrification, community, cultural identity, fundraising, tourism, public art, land use, ethnic, diversity, biodiversity.

1. Introduction

The authors' concern is public engagement in urban soundscape awareness based on our recent collaborative experience in the [Night Out In The Parks "Soundwalks In the Parks" series](#) and [The 606 Soundscape Project](#). These soundwalks were funded by the Chicago Park District and the Trust for Public Lands respectively, in partnership with Midwest Society for Acoustic Ecology (MSAE). We also share ideas and experience about our identities as teaching artists with a socially-engaged, transdisciplinary approach to collaborative making.

Following introductions between workshop participants, we, Amanda and Eric, gave an overview of the history and concepts behind our approach. Our colleague and co-author, Norman W. Long, was unable to travel to attend Invisible Places, but is a contributor to the presentation and the soundwalk experiences described in this paper.

A slide presentation and a brief [video](#), "What is a soundwalk?" (2016), prepared participants conceptually for an actual soundwalk outdoors, along a route that Amanda and Eric had designed the previous day. Given that soundwalks are best understood by **doing**, it was important the workshop have an experiential component. Departing from the classroom on the university campus, we led our group to a lovely outdoor garden. The significant spatial and auditory transition from the traditional and surprisingly reverberant classroom space to the open air outdoors, with its large trees, grass, and pools was refreshing acoustically and architecturally.

Eric engaged the group in a few listening exercises drawn from the Deep Listening practice of Pauline Oliveros¹ and R. Murray Schafer's playful approach to "Ear Cleaning"² that himself and Norman have employed in the past with students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and many events organized by the MSAE. Both approaches aim to "recalibrate" sensitivity to the current soundscape.



1. Oliveros, Pauline (2005). *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. iUniverse.

2. Schafer, R. Murray (1992). *A Sound Education: 100 Exercises In Listening and Sound-Making*. Arcana Editions.

After the listening exercises participants were led on a soundwalk around the periphery of the University. The context of the workshop opened a conversation about the significance of soundwalk practice to acoustic ecology. Our Azores soundwalk took into consideration the significance of sonic awareness in urban planning as the embodiment of our observations as pedestrians and citizens.



After the soundwalk we returned to our start point and participants were prompted to create their own maps. Each person drew a map which depicted their subjective experience of the soundwalk. Sharing these maps facilitated the development of personal narratives, associations, and memories triggered by unique soundscapes at specific points on the walk. Meaning was constructed via sonic metaphors — the experience as an abstract interpretation of the space. These conversations incorporated other subjects and disciplines such as urban planning, critical tourism, and environmental ecology, among others.

In answer to the basic question, “How do soundwalks engage communities?” the workshop began with exposition, followed by an empirical, embodied experience of a soundwalk, thereby balancing and correlating theory and its practical application. Activities that prompted visual and linguistic reflections at the end of the soundwalk addressed specific instances of sounds in relationship to our listening, sense of place, and physical structures, such as streets and buildings, that characterize the signature sounds of Ponta Delgada around and in the campus of Universidade de Açores. Attendees lived these experiences rather than simply hearing about them. This basic sequence parallels the structure the Chicago public park soundwalks series addressed in the second portion of the workshop.



Eric shifted the discussion to the potential impact of artists and others who may use soundwalks in their work. From the standpoint of an artist-run professional practice, community engagement employing soundwalks affords teaching artists an opportunity to provide a beneficial experience to a wide demographic in their own soundscape or others unfamiliar to them. Significantly, soundwalking is a non-exploitive practice that helps local communities tune in to themselves. Various forms of social practice arts are becoming recognized by funders as having valuable impacts on challenged neighborhoods, which in turn helps support and promote the work of professional teaching artists.

Though successful in fundraising for local efforts to activate communities through soundwalking, Eric was surprised that not all funding institutions actively promote the very efforts their sponsorship is meant to support. General lack of knowledge about the value of listening, our human roles in creating global soundscapes, or any notion of what a soundwalk is or its social value, present a “public relations” challenge to marketing departments. This communication work needs to evolve as its impact is significant and can place burdens on teaching artists’ limited capacity, while simultaneously allowing the communities these institutions are mandated to serve to miss wonderful opportunities.

Deploying soundwalks along the Chicago Park District’s “The 606” and Bloomingdale Trail seemed to be an isolated case of soundwalks being funded because it “sounded good” at a time when various constituents, including longtime and new residents, realtors and community activists, were all feeling unheard by each other. Located along a redeveloped former railway line, the trail traverses a range of gentrifying and working-class Latinx neighborhoods with one endpoint near a major commuter train station in the already transformed, expensive Wicker Park/Bucktown neighborhood on Chicago’s northwest side. Its well-maintained pocket parks are designed for visual attraction as a commuting corridor.

The common use of headphones and mobile amplifiers by bikers, runners, walkers and skateboarders alike, indicates a common approach to creating imposed soundscapes or curated, private listening experiences. Rather than inviting ecological listening, the tidy, manicured paths attract high-speed cyclists and calorie-burning joggers, rendering any slow moving group of soundwalkers into physical obstacles to their “progress”. This treatment is also observed with large multi-generational families from other cultures, often female and including young children or babies, who may be considered a nuisance if taking a stroll as they might do calmly in a more socially connected space. While it was an honor to be awarded a grant for cultural programming, the lack of collaborative goal setting, planning, promotion or feedback from the Trust was disappointing. This was an isolated case, as will be noted in the later section on work with some of the city’s nature preserves and citizen scientist programs. The experience was hugely instructive and included one large event on World Listening Day 2016. An installation of paid musicians and sound artists, some of whom reside or work in neighborhoods along the trail, in the 606 pocket parks at dusk, managed to draw walkers and some youth cyclists off the path to engage, and others to smile as they encountered these unexpected elements in their regular soundscape. Eric, in his role as president of the World Listening Project, broadcast to listeners across the globe from one of the pocket parks to conclude 24 hours of international World Listening Day programming.

In contrast, is the exciting role the Chicago Park District’s Park Advisory Boards, comprised of local citizen volunteers, has played in enriching the second year of programming in Chicago public green spaces in 2017, with a third year in the works for 2018. These relationships have created a new network of soundwalkers and attracted new leadership to the Midwest Society for Acoustic Ecology.

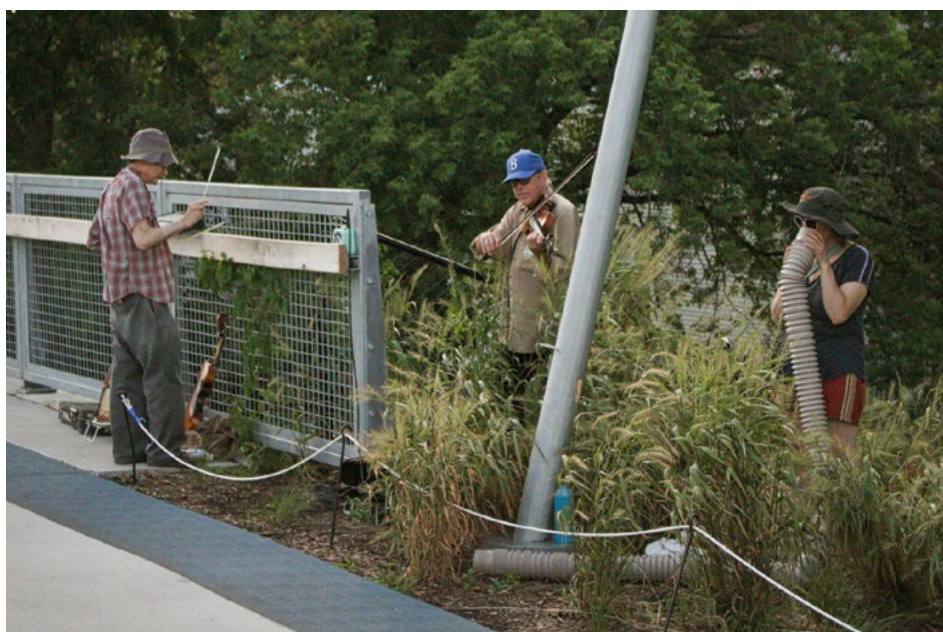


Photo by Dan Mohr.

Questions of Inquiry

I. How do soundwalks address and activate a city's more vulnerable and underserved communities?

Soundwalks can be connective and empowering, especially for people of color. Begin by identifying the cultural landscape, history of the community and locus of everyday activity, festivals and actions. Listen to these areas as a way of learning about, and establishing a new entry point to participating in the community. A soundwalk can be a catalyst for activation, engagement and planning by the community. Usually these walks are experienced as touristic site-analysis by outsiders who have plans or designs for a community. If we insist on walks that include the community who are already present, these constituents may acquire a new tool for understanding their own community. Once a community gains a sense of ownership of this knowledge, it can take more control in setting community goals and participating in decision making. The sense of ownership and real authorship is crucial as more black and brown spaces become gentrified and divested.

II. How does knowledge transfer from artists to communities, particularly underserved communities, in soundwalking and soundscape awareness?

- Knowledge is transferred through experience. We and fellow teaching artists *demonstrated* ways to effectively and actively engage people in their unique abilities to listen and make sound.
- Repeated opportunities provided by a series creates the possibility of developing self-generated community practices in acoustic ecology.
- Consistent presence creates the opportunity to identify and mentor emerging local leaders who might begin their own series and to connect them to new networks.

III. To what extent can artists-as-social activists acquire public funding to effectively, ethically, and sustainably support acoustic ecology and soundwalking practices in cultural spheres driven by tourism and real estate industries.

Our experience collaborating on the Night Out In The Parks soundwalk series and The 606 Soundscape Project, funded by the Chicago Park District and Trust for Public Lands, in partnership with Midwest Society for Acoustic Ecology, was an opportunity to explore the relationship between funding, intent and outcomes. Eric observed that local arts, citizen science, and tourism funding can help make soundwalking a sustainable practice and acoustic ecology a publicly recognized field. While meant to activate residents and enhance community benefits, it is necessary to be aware of the potential risk when such efforts are spearheaded by funding organizations or artists who “parachute” into a community, potentially amplifying suspicion and conflict. Funded activities in communities where gentrification puts real

estate development interests at odds with the needs and aspirations of low-income families, including long time homeowners, trying to sustain skyrocketing property taxes or seeking affordable housing, are sometimes used for PR purposes rather than to spark authentic connections through committed and ongoing placemaking. Paradoxically, artist and social activist residents can be, and have been, caught in between and perceived as the “other” in such communities, while they may share the need for affordable housing and already sustain long term ties to a specific neighborhood.



Public Soundwalk Programming In Chicago

I. Soundwalking with communities, Little Village (social spatial awareness)

Amanda’s approach to Chicago’s Little Village emerged through her experience as a teaching artist. She had been teaching occasionally on the west side of Chicago at a Chicago Public School and two non-profit organizations that serve Latinx youth. In the summer of 2016, Amanda developed an art workshop involving Sound Ecology with the non-profit organization [Yollocalli Arts Reach](#). The teen workshop emphasized the role of sound in the acoustic territories of Little Village, which borders the economically challenged and predominantly African-American neighborhood of North Lawndale, where Amanda had previously taught video classes, also to teens. Though she had lived in Chicago for 15 years, Amanda’s experience of North Lawndale remained limited, perhaps due to the pervasive misconceptions and fears about safety in that neighborhood.



In their video documentaries, her previous black teen students had expressed fear, anger, and frustration as individuals who are regularly confronted by police brutality and gang violence. Amanda's knowledge of North Lawndale had been constructed solely through their memories, photographs, and interviews shared in a regulated high school classroom.

Amanda's current research explores the links between oral history, architecture, and memory released or articulated using soundwalks and the *dérive* as research tools. The concept of community is a fundamental topic that brings these key questions of inquiry: *Is it possible to get a sense of historical and cultural immersion through sound? How can the existing soundscape reveal the personal narratives of a space?*

With the young Latinx women from Arts Reach, Amanda touched on some shared challenges faced in Chicago. Walking through its streets and near the border of an expansive Chicago Park District space that encompassed multiple gang lines, Douglas Park raised questions about her own prejudices and racial stereotypes. Soundwalk reflections from teenage youth residing in low-income, racially-segregated neighborhoods, included frequent references to fear and anxiety about crossing the streets that demarcate neighborhood borders. Urban youth are growing up traumatized. Soundwalks allow participants to give voice to aspects of crime and generational poverty not often addressed by public media. Hearing one's own truth, positive and negative, and being able to share and amplify is empowering.



II. Soundwalking in Parks, Washington, West Ridge Nature Preserve, and North Park Village Nature Center (human environments in nature)

Washington Park, on Chicago's south side was designed by American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in the 1870's. Norman's inspiration for this project were black speakers of diverse religious and political persuasions, in particular, Sun Ra and the pamphlets he handed out while he was preaching in the park in the 1950's.³ The DuSable Museum of African American History, an indispensable resource for Chicagoans, is located in the park, adjacent to the University of Chicago. The park has long been a conduit for creative thought, cultural history, ecological diversity and preservation, and recreation. In 2017 the museum hosted the kick off for the centenary of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Chicago icon Gwendolyn Brooks.

Along with 2016 and 2017 walks Norman has recorded a sound map of the park using Radio Aporee http://aporee.org/maps/work/projects.php?project=el_sun_snd_wlk. Norman's are the first professional, mapped sound recordings of a black neighborhood on Chicago's south side. He has used these recordings in a series of compositions.

Norman posits, "To map sounds from the south side is to write black existence into the consciousness of the rest of the world, to expand black subjectivity and to frame our community in a non-essentialist context. Our soundscapes connect our experience to that of a diverse community that goes well beyond 'otherness'."⁴

3. Corbett, John and Anthony Elms (2006), co-editors, *The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra's Polemical Broadsheets and Streetcorner Leaflets*, Whitewalls

4. Long, Norman W. (2016) *Into_the_breaks: World Listening Day - Soundwalks- Reflections* <http://intothebreaks.blogspot.com/2016/07/world-listening-day-soundwalks.html>



Soundwalks led by Eric in West Ridge Nature Preserve and North Park Village Nature Center, on Chicago's north side, focused on biological diversity and species monitoring by citizen-scientists. Both parks are managed park staff and well-organized volunteer groups to retain their woodland prairies and wetlands within the City of Chicago.

North Park Village Nature Center has a built-in nature education culture, with rich yearlong programming and a beautiful building and outdoor spaces for convening, but is difficult to access without a car. Walking and listening have been part of established activities at the center for many years. Our "Singing Insect Soundwalk", with naturalist Dr. Carl Strang, drew more participants than all of the soundwalks combined on the well-funded and visually spectacular 606 and Bloomingdale Trail.

This success was possible because North Park Village Nature Center and the surrounding park, a managed urban wildlife refuge, has regular offerings of embodied listening, biodiversity and citizen science supported by pre-existing staff infrastructure and strong volunteer capacity. Similarly, the West Ridge Nature Preserve, despite not having an indoor space and being very new, has a dedicated Park Advisory Council that reflects the diverse constituents of the surrounding community. Relationships with both parks led to new opportunities. All of this activity makes for makes great storytelling, attracting students, teachers, local journalists and *funders* who identify with the artistic, scientific, and inherent social justice potential of our soundwalks. Such projects are becoming attractive models for younger soundscape ecologists eager to create public programming and advance the field of acoustic ecology.

2. Conclusion

Participants in the Invisible Places workshop departed with a reiteration of the most practical questions of inquiry: *How can we proceed as artists, social scientists, researchers, naturalists, chroniclers, environmentalists, and critical citizens to actively respond to our soundscape, connecting this phenomenon with global concerns for a better world?*

A soundwalk can be used as a catalyst for activation, engagement and planning by the community. We and fellow teaching artists demonstrated ways and offered examples of how to effectively and actively engage people in their unique abilities to listen and make sound.

After numerous soundwalks in Chicago parks on World Listening Day 2016, Norman poignantly wrote, “As I reflect on World Listening Day, I am also thinking of how soundwalks can be connective and empowering, especially for people of color. When so many of us are angered and/or fearful of what we see and what has been done to us, I feel that finding time to walk, breathe and listen quiets the mind. Along with seeking safe places and supporting communities, these walks empower us to be present and courageous. I am one with the ground on which I stand, the air I breathe and sounds I hear. Making sure I am present when my presence is at best problematic.”⁵

Soundwalking and deep listening alone or in company, are democratic and potentially healing practices accessible to anyone willing to enter a soundscape with newly open ears. Norman’s reflections remind us how we as artists can empower others through soundscape awareness and the socially shared connection through the listening and understanding that Invisible Places encourages.

5. Long, Norman W. (2016) *Into_the_breaks: World Listening Day - Soundwalks- Reflections* <http://intothebreaks.blogspot.com/2016/07/world-listening-day-soundwalks.html>

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