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Research Memo SPP *January 2009*

Project SPP
SOUNDSCAPES IN PUBLIC PLACES
Sound levels and social interactions in venues with music
2004-2009

Brief summary of topics and outcomes so far -- Jan 2009

Research issue: Public places - such as markets, pubs and restaurants, music venues, cinemas, theatres, teaching venues, shopping centres, sport venues, transportation facilities - have a particular 'soundscape' which affects visitors' perceptions and behaviors. For example, people in a restaurant encounter several kinds of soundscapes: the sounds resulting from running the place, the sounds created by other customers, the sounds from outside (the street), and the sounds provided by the music systems which are run in most public places; none of these soundscapes are under the control of the visitors. Thus the question arises, what do they actually desire, and do they like what they experience in this kind of environment?

People-environment context: Almost all people going to a shop or restaurant or gym do so for a practical reason, e.g., eating or buying something or exercising; hearing music is not their primary aim. The music imparted there may entertain or disturb. So far, pertinent research mainly looked at two issues: impacts on the venue's function, and noise effects. Quietness as an environmental feature has obtained less attention.

Empirical investigation: In a series of socio-psychological field studies, demands and appraisals of supplied music were explored, surveying what sound levels do occur inside venues, whether customers want music to be present or absent; the desired content and level of music; their perceptions and evaluations of the actual music situation, and how the existing soundscapes relate to the purpose of their visit. In the first study, *"Influence of music in cafes & restaurants"* <MCR>, 6 cafes and restaurants were looked at, and data collected through personal interviews of customers (N=72). The study "*Sound levels and social interactions in music venues"* <SIM>, dealt with 3 types of venues: pubs, restaurants and gyms (3 each); N=32 qualitative interviews were conducted. In a further study, "*Music levels in Melbourne University eateries*" <MLU>, 17 venues were inspected. In all studies sound measurements were carried out, recording both peak and average sound levels. A final inquiry, *"Social interactions in eateries with music: Staff and management attitudes"* <SSM> in 8 venues has just been completed. Several of these studies were repeated in Germany and in Austria.

Findings and interpretation: The results from study <MCR> indicate that customers have specific preferences, and that their overall satisfaction with a restaurant visit is influenced by their evaluation of the music soundscape they encounter. Although the measured sound levels were substantial (L_{eq}'s up to 85 dB[A], with peaks well above 100), most customers accept these levels. In study <SIM>, the sound exposure was similar; the interview data suggest that communication behavior changes in loud environments, for example, the use of words decreases while facial expressions become more essential. Yet the tolerance for 'noisy' settings appeared to be considerable - they are liked or at least tolerated, and quiet situations not much searched for. Study <MLU> confirms the current trend of rather loud soundscapes in public environments. Finally, the results from <SSM> signal that those running a venue rather than customers steer what's happening.

Practical implications: These findings can be interpreted as part of a wider context: Quiet localities have become rare, and a need for music in about every kind of public place seems to be postulated. Yet their is a price: It seems that the quality of human interactive communication in music-dominated environments is impaired. Nevertheless, given the surprising acceptance of strident soundscapes - are they a principal feature of the contemporary culture? This thought leads to further questions - Do people who live in large-scale urban environments know and need 'quiet' soundscapes at all? What kind of soundscapes do humans 'really' desire? On-going research needs to explicate these facets.

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