

Matadero Memoria Aural: Recovering a Lostscape Aurally

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Abstract

The present paper tries to summarise the project Matadero Memoria Aural focusing on pivotal themes such as urban transformation, sound or collective memory. Throughout theoretical references, the collective has established the essence of the project in which the importance of oral history, sense of place and community converge. In this sense, Sound Readers have been experimenting with sound, urban practice and different methodologies; eventually, they have launched an accessible online database with the results of their research.

Keywords: Soundscape, urban memory, history, sound studies, oral history, site-specific stories

1. Introduction

Over the course of 2013, thanks to a subsidy granted by the Department of Arts of Madrid City Council, the Madrid-based collective Sound Readers complied the research for *Matadero Memoria Aural*¹. The aim of the project was to reconstruct through sound the *lost-scape* of the former municipal slaughterhouse (Figure 1) – currently a contemporary creation centre which conserves the name of its original purpose: *Matadero Madrid*² – and its surroundings in Arganzuela district. This paper will expose different aspects of the development of the project in this once vibrant working class area, regarded between the mid-twenties and the late eighties as the belly of Madrid due to the presence of the slaughterhouse and the livestock market, as well as of the main wholesale fruit and vegetable market.



Figure 1. Municipal slaughterhouse under construction (1916). Source: <http://www.memoriademadrid.es/>

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1. Hereinafter referred to as MMA.
 2. *Matadero* is the Spanish word for slaughterhouse.

2. Sound Readers and the beginning of MMA

Sound Readers is an interdisciplinary collective formed in 2012, whose members³ come from various fields, including sociology, art history, music and design.

During a residency in Matadero Madrid cultural centre, Sound Readers decided to launch MMA, in part as the result of a series of shared interests. These included the potentialities of experimental podcasting; walking as an aesthetic practice – from the rediscovery of the city through the flâneur’s strolls to the situationist drifting exercises; and, above all, a wish to address memory-related topics from a sonic perspective –but at the same time inspired by the practices of collectives like Ultra-Red or Escoitar.

As a matter of fact, Sound Readers’ name alludes to the writings of Walter Benjamin, in which he invites one to read the history of what is not yet written. Furthermore, the project is also inspired by Andreas Huyssen’s texts, especially in his urban memory and palimpsest concepts in which he proposes that “we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests” (Huyssen 2003, 7) since:

“An urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.” (Huyssen 2003, 7)

Taking into account the theoretical background and the importance of the urban memory and landscape, we will now explain the area of Arganzuela where Sound Readers experimented and created the project.

3. There have been several members since the foundation of Sound Readers, but the ones active and who have made MMA possible are: Rubén Coll, Pablo D. Costa, Irene López and Piluca Martínez. Regarding this paper, it was conceived and written by Coll. López proposed some valuable modifications. Costa and Martínez are equally credited as authors due to their vital contribution to the MMA project and their technical support.

3. Describing the area

MMA was not only a project focused on the municipal slaughterhouse and livestock market turned into a cultural centre. Its impact on the environs was equally important in the re-search process (Figure 2). It was much needed considering the neighbourhoods of Chopera (where the “Pico del Pañuelo” housing colony, built in the early 1920s, is located: a total of 1500 dwellings for workers) and Legazpi (where the fruit and vegetable market was active between 1935 and the mid 1980s – and also Madrid Rio, a space which merges with the boundaries of Matadero Madrid. This is a large recreational and pedestrian area created over M30, one the main highways of the city, which runs parallel to the Manzanares river’s flow. Madrid Rio and the second life of the slaughterhouse are a result of the city’s land-use plan, responsible for the urban renovation of this zone and in some ways of the forthcoming gentrification of this traditional working class area.⁴

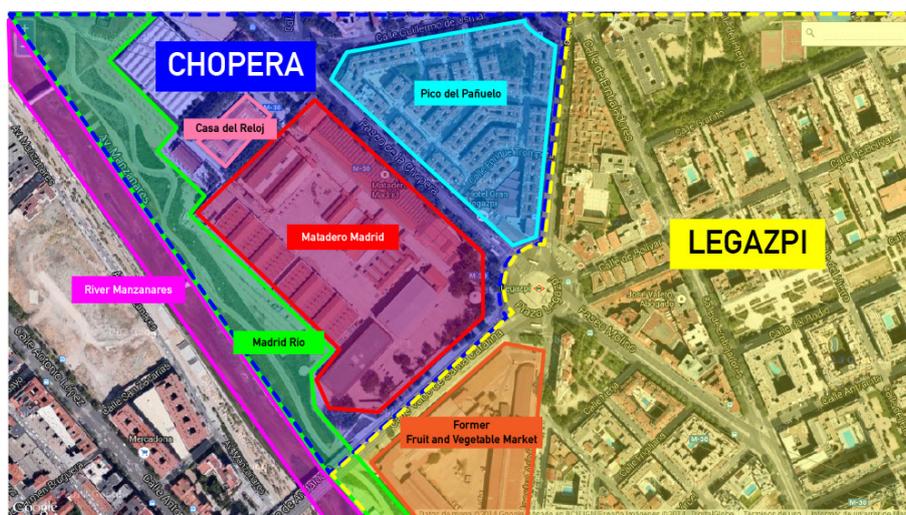


Figure 2. Map of the area.

Today Matadero Madrid is one of the most important cultural platforms of the Madrid City Council, thanks in part to its strategical location. But this centre has not always been a space devoted to the cultural production. Only since 2006 it has been in use as a cultural

4. The two neighbourhoods closest to the slaughterhouse are Chopera and Legazpi, both of which have traditionally sheltered migrant people. First after the Spanish Civil War – receiving people from other regions of the country – and later between the late twentieth and early twenty first century with the arrival of new residents from abroad, mainly Latin Americans. The Dominican community, for example, is quite important.

center. Its 165.415 square meters were designed during the first third of the twentieth century by architect Luis Bellido (1869-1955), who aimed to build a “small productive city” (Azurmendi 1979, 591) which would be active from 1924 to 1996.⁵ Besides its crucial role for Madrid food’s supply during part of the twentieth century, the bibliography and documents about the daily life around such an idiosyncratic space are scarce⁶ and practically nonexistent on the sonic side.⁷

The activity of the ever-present bulldozers could be considered in Murray Schafer’s terms a soundmark of the zone.⁸ But at the same time, bulldozers are not erasing everything. The Madrid City Council has declared the slaughterhouse and the Pico del Pañuelo housing colony as a cultural heritage site. This initiative could be regarded as part of the musealisation process of some of the oldest sites of the city, as well as a tactic to enhance them. This is a process in which Sound Readers have paradoxically and unintentionally contributed to with MMA.

4. Early phases of the project

The early steps – circa late 2012, early 2013 – of MMA consisted of a first contact with the area subject area of our research. An exploratory approach was taken, based on taking strolls without a precise direction, in the vein of the situationist driftings, although far from the subversive aspect of that practice which focuses on questioning the never-innocent urban planning. Sound Readers took advantage of its explorative potentials, trying to pay more attention to our ears than to any other sense in those walks.

5. In 1996 the municipal slaughterhouse was closed definitely due to the lack of proper infrastructures demanded after Spain entered the European Union. Its functions would be replaced by the creation of Mercamadrid Meat Centre in 1999, one the largest in Europe.

6. For their historical approach two references were very helpful since the beginning. First, the documentation for the refurbishment project of the municipal slaughterhouse published in 2005 by the Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid (COAM). Second, the photography-based project *Muta Matadero* (2007) by No Photo collective.

7. Nonetheless, one must keep in mind that in the recent past there were other sound-based projects developed by other artists who worked on the same area. In 2010, *La Stargate* by Carolina Caycedo, a community-based project which employed excerpts of field recordings from Arganzuela district, sometimes using interviews with some of the neighbours. One year later, *Metros cuadrados de sonido* (Square meters of sound) was another interesting effort to try mapping sound snippets of the former slaughterhouse and the surrounding area. But none of these sound-related projects were really focused on the memory of the place or oral history.

8. For example, in the audio trails with Pedro, Juan y Ramón or Avelina it is easy to listen to the sound of the bulldozers in the background.

After some days walking across the different edifices of the slaughterhouse, and doing field recordings indoors, Sound Readers realised that the resulting audio files were not enough to explain what actually happened during decades in those buildings and their surroundings. Each one of the buildings had been designed for a specific purpose – slaughtering, quartering, storage, etc. – or for a particular animal – calves, pigs, lambs, poultry, cows. Listening to the echoes or reverberations of those enormous halls did not provide enough information about the different professions, the relationships among the workers (for example, the strong bonds of solidarity as we were later told), the interaction between the surrounding neighbourhoods and the slaughterhouse (closed for the non-workers but not strictly hermetic, permeating the everyday of the environs). Sound Readers' dilemma was how to reflect sonically that continuous flux during decades in a particular area which had become a sort of palimpsest.

As a project MMA did not aim to elicit nostalgia, but rather to bring alive stories or events – pleasant or not – happened in the past in this particular and constantly shifting area. Sound Readers produced a series of sound pieces that offer a very subjective and personal – almost musical – take on the acoustic properties of some of the buildings inside the slaughterhouse complex. Musician and audio technician Pablo D. Costa created the sound pieces inspired by the original purpose of the different slaughterhouse edifices (Figure 3).⁹ These compositions were played back at loud volume in each one of those usually empty and large spaces, in order to activate them through sound, recording them with a set of microphones scattered in different points of each building.

Despite this highly demanding effort and although satisfied with the results, Sound Readers thought it was necessary to deepen the sonic approach to the memory of the place from a different perspective.

9. They can be listened to on the MMA website layer entitled *Piezas Sonoras*.

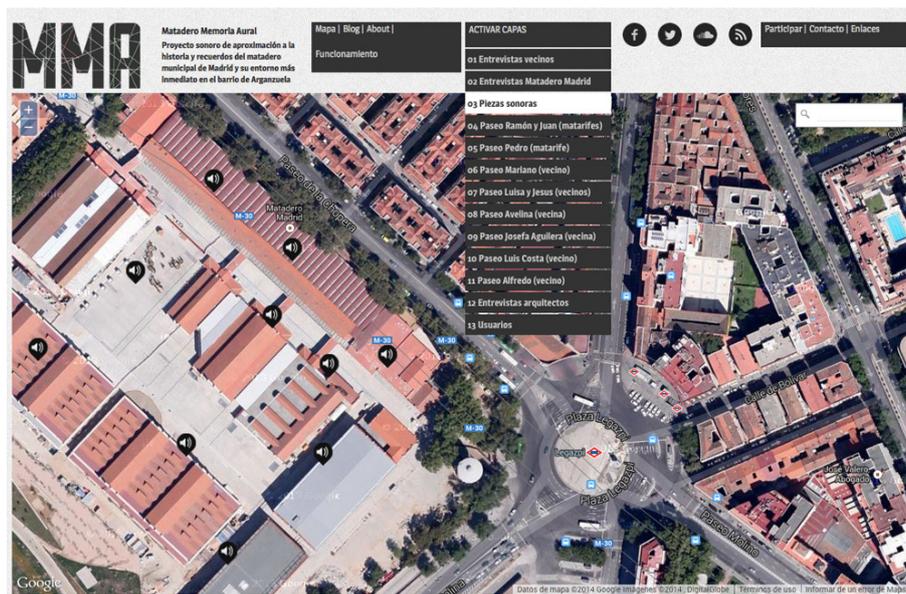


Figure 3. Sonic reinterpretations of the different slaughterhouse buildings.

5. Theoretical references

For that reason, referencing the work of Toby Butler and Isobel Anderson would be helpful. Both authors decisively influenced Sound Readers in engaging with a more oral history based project as a way to set out an hypothetical description of the long lost soundscape of the considered area.

On one hand, Sound Readers took from Butler's *Memoryscape* project his approach as an urban geographer who was trying to integrate through new technologies different practices from the fields of art, landscape and oral history. *Memoryscape* was the name chosen by Butler for a series of audio walks involving oral history recordings that allow (re)discovering the river Thames and its complex and mercurial history which was something unlikely from a more traditional and static perspective focused on the memorial and monumental aspects. The landscape was "interpreted and imagined using the memories of others" (Butler 2006) due to "the ability of spoken memory to make connections with other times, symbols and places." (Butler 2006)

Sound Readers adopted his concept of expanded audio guide as a tool that can transform a particular territory in a sort of site-specific piece. For this researcher, "the walks seemed

to engender a feeling of identity with the landscape.” (Butler 2006) For that reason, whenever possible, life interviews were carried out while strolling. The totality of the contents (interviews and sonic reinterpretations) were recorded in order to be listened to while going through the area, since the audio walk are an ideal resource “providing opportunities for people to build identity and empathy with their surroundings.” (Butler 2006)

On the other hand, Anderson’s text: *Voice, narrative, place: Listening to Stories* was equally influential. This was partially, owing to her vindication of the overlooked role of storytelling in sound art¹⁰ through the concept of site-specific stories, characterised by the fact that they “require the listener to engage creatively with their narratives and, therefore, induce a productive listening state.” (Anderson 2012) This particular kind of listening is crucial for the creation of identity bonds with the landscape because, through it, “the audience construct new meaning within their physical surroundings, transforming it from merely ‘space’, into ‘place’”(Anderson 2012), achieving one of the goals aimed by Sound Readers for MMA project: “Listening to stories of place, in place” enabling “the listener to see alternative landscapes intertwined with what is taken for granted as ‘reality.’” (Anderson 2012).

6. Methodology

The theoretical references mentioned pushed Sound Readers to search for residents of the neighbourhood (preferably long-term ones, but not exclusively so) and former slaughterhouse employees, as well as current cultural workers who could narrate how the area and their lives in it had changed. The task was not easy because most of them are very old,¹¹ and a lot of people had moved to other areas of Madrid, especially during the eighties, the decade that was the beginning of the decline of activity in the area.

Although, the goal was to do interviews while going around the area, sometimes it was not possible: the delicate health of some of the elderly interviewees or the impossibility of going out due to job obligations were not petty factors. And a good proportion of the time invested in field work consisted of earning the confidence of the potential interviewees. It

10. In fact, Sound Readers share her critique of Alan Licht’s words about the long prevailing definition of sound art as a medium that “rarely attempts to create a portrait or capture the soul of a human being, or express something about the interaction of human beings (Licht 2007, 14)” being its main focus the “sound as phenomenon of nature and/or technology.” (Licht 2007, 14)

11. One of our contacts, Jacinto, died some weeks after interviewing him. He was 92 years old and he worked most part of his life in the slaughterhouse as a meat deliverer.

was not an easy task to persuade the former slaughterhouse workers to return to their job place almost two decades after its closing (Figure 4). It was not necessarily a comfortable experience to revisit a place where they had spent the bulk of their lives working. A lot of them refused the request of being interviewed there.

A list of subjects was prepared as a guide for conducting the life interviews. That list included the following topics: Spanish civil war and post-conflict years, transformations on the urban landscape, sense of community, immigration, politics, solidarity between workers, etc.¹²

Sometimes Sound Readers asked the interviewees if they were able to remember a particular sound that could be identified with the area. Interestingly, most of them were notable to remember any sound from the past, nor from the present, although they didn't find it difficult to remember the unpleasant smell of dry skins from the slaughterhouse.



Figure 4. Sound Readers interviewing Ramón, one of the former slaughterhouse employees.

12. This is reflected in the use of tags in the mma.soundreaders.org web site, which makes a subject-based search easier.

7. Making the research accessible

The result of seven months of field work, from March to November 2013, of intense field work was uploaded into the mma.soundreaders.org internet domain, an exclusive web site designed to serve as a sort of repository for collecting the different recordings which included: sonic reinterpretations of the slaughterhouse spaces and life interviews. The web site presents all of these sound materials geo-located on a map. Among the interviews, a part of them were conducted while rambling, appearing displayed on the map as individual trails (Figure 5). The remainder appear geo-located on singular spots. But almost all the recordings were assigned to the locations where they were recorded.¹³



Figure 5. Display of one of the audio trails.

The MMA website was not only designed to be used for archive or compilation purposes. It was also conceived in order to transform the aforementioned area in a sort of site-specific piece. Through the use of mobile devices like smartphones and tablets (Figure 6), the latter freely available to the visitors of the current contemporary centre for several months,¹⁴ – the MMA website could work as an interface which allows the public to find many *site-specific* stories. It is possible to see on the screens which geo-located contents are closer in order to

13. There are a few exceptions: the Josefa Aguilera and Luisa & Jesus audio trails. They were interviewed in their homes because they were not able to go out due to health issues.

14. From 29th November 2013 to 28th February 2014, the period the project was showcased.

listen to (with the help of headphones) *in situ* the life narratives of some Arganzuela district inhabitants or the sonic reinterpretations of some spaces of the slaughterhouse.¹⁵



Figure 6. Tablet, headphones and leaflet available to the visitors of Matadero Madrid.

8. Oral/Aural

Up to this point, one could question whether a project like MMA – sound-based but mainly oral – was actually effective in recovering the sound of a definite lostscape, especially when the answers to the question about identifying a specific sound were not particularly fruitful.

Nevertheless, taking a wider definition of sound, the collected life interviews turn out to be really helpful in the reconstruction of that particular soundscape, always keeping in mind that sound could also be understood as “all that might fall within or touch on auditive phenomena (...) sounds heard by everyone or imagined by one person alone.” (Kahn 2001, 3) In that way, interviewees in their descriptions of daily tasks from the past provided, almost

15. Due to the totality of interviews collected in the MMA website are in Spanish, Sound Readers have created a video which try to summarize the aim of the project. It is a selection of excerpts from the repository of life interviews combined with images of the places where they were recorded. English subtitles are provided in order to overcome the linguistic gap and the video could be watched on line in the following link: <http://vimeo.com/100896895>

without realizing it, a huge amount of information about how the sound of that shifting urban landscape could be heard across decades.

Of course, it is highly speculative, but not less interesting that “Sound is also about associations, memories, feelings, experiences, imagery and thoughts.” (Anderson 2012). Thus, while strolling guided by the MMA interface, it is possible to listen to or imagine the sound of the shootings and bombings that affected the zone during the Spanish Civil War in the late thirties.¹⁶ Similarly, it is possible to imagine, during the after-conflict, how the soundscape was marked by the reintegration of the routine of productive life: the hubbub of the workers inside or outside their workplaces (for example: crowding the bars for lunch),¹⁷ the arrival of beasts to the slaughterhouse¹⁸, their sometimes sonorous slaughtering (specially pigs¹⁹) and quartering (done by hand without the help of mechanical devices²⁰), and the comings and goings of trucks and trains.²¹ Perhaps also the sound of political prisoners forced to work in the Manzanares river could be imagined.²²

Or sounds depicting different moments of the social life, like: children playing after school on the streets;²³ summer nights where neighbours talked until late in front of their houses²⁴ (a custom lost in the sixties with the arrival of television);²⁵ weekend gatherings not far from the river where the youths danced to the music played back on portable turntables;²⁶ the whispering of clandestine street sellers (*estraperlistas*) during the years of shortage.²⁷ And any other kinds of events like popular festivities²⁸ or incidents such as a fatal burning of several shanties²⁹ (today completely disappeared) or the expropriation of cultivation lands³⁰ leaving some families without a chance of making a living, (both in the fifties).

16. Listen to the interview with Antonio, owner of La Alcubilla bar and also the interview with Julio.

17. Listen to the spot number 3 in the audio trail with Mariano and also the interview with Nati, owner of Venta Matadero bar.

18. Listen to the spot number 4 in the audio trail with Pedro.

19. Listen to the interview with Josefa Ocaña.

20. Listen to the spot number 15 in the audio trail with Ramón y Juan.

21. Listen to the spot number 4 in the audio trail with Pedro.

22. Listen to the spot number 11 in the audio trail with Avelina.

23. Listen to the spot number 1 in the audio trail with Alfredo.

24. Listen to the spot number 7 in the audio trail with Josefa Aguilera and also the interview with Mari Carmen Rosa.

25. Interestingly this is a custom really missed by the elder residents that mourn the lack of a closer community life. In the last years the new Latin American neighbours in the area have recovered it but since then, and paradoxically, it is often criticised by the elder residents.

26. Listen to the spot number 6 in the audio trail with Luisa y Jesús and also the spot number 15 in the audio trail with Alfredo.

27. Listen to the spot number 3 in the audio trail with Luisa y Jesús.

28. Listen to the interview with Natividad.

29. Listen to the spot number 2 in the audio trail with Mariano.

30. Listen to the spot number 13 in the audio trail with Avelina.

The categorization by tags of the different subjects collected in the life interviews helps set out hypothetical soundscapes in different decades in a particular spot. This is a task in which Sound Readers currently work trying to set out how the explored area sounded in a more detailed way, in the vein of works like Reinhard Strohm's *Townscape Soundscape* or others inspired by it, for example, Miguel Ángel Marin's *Sound and Urban Life In a Small Spanish Town During the Ancien Régime*.

Although the field work process has ended, it does not mean that MMA is a closed or finished project. Sound Readers hope that other researchers find the MMA website helpful and that the public feels the wonder of rediscovering parts of Arganzuela's district through the voices of its inhabitants. Input from researchers, as well as the public, will determine the future of this project, in which the intertwining of the historical and the biographical as a set of geo-located narratives will hopefully contribute developing knowledge of an area in constant change.

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