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Acoustic [eco]logy: navigating soundscapes in shifting urban contexts

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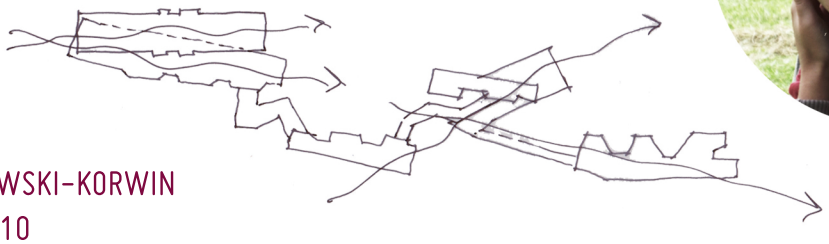
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ACOUSTIC [ECO]LOGY:

Navigating soundcapes in shifting urban contexts





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Our natural landscape can be excavated to reveal a history or story of the past through layering of matter. In the same way, our cities can be broken down into its components and analysed to reveal physical layers of history, by analysing built form as a metaphor for historical consciousness. Even our bodies can bear witness to events and become storytellers of the culmination of experiences we've been through. All of these in a sense tell us stories by revealing physical witness to memory, but how can we tell a story of urban soundscapes, when a storyteller, or a tangible form of physical representation of sound doesn't exist? How can we express sound identity in spaces that constantly shift? In a space such as a city context, made up of a variety of sound inputs, some which disturb, some which connect, some that form identities, form territories, and others that go by completely unnoticed. But also, importantly, how do we leave a story of this soundscape — one that is not 'recorded', and does not currently form a part of our physical history? Essentially: How can we translate or reveal a temperamental soundscape in a meaningful way?

The project began for me as an utter fascination of two things: Music and art, their intercepts, and how these boundaries are constantly pushed, and the Newtown double decker highway in Johannesburg, that contains significant urban spacial impacts, yet no formal site constraints or urban acoustic considerations.

As a result, this thesis has grown from a group of theories that underline the role that sound (or 'the invisible force') plays on our minds, bodies and spaces, while focusing on the site as an incredible urban object that can both benefit and challenge the role of sound in the city. The process can be seen as a combination of surreal ideas – the city spaces and its inhabitants realising sound and art as a vital urban and cultural agent – as well as a solution to a real challenge facing sound art spaces/galleries in the art world. The site is located in Newtown in Johannesburg, considered an arts and cultural hub of Johannesburg. The site specifically is the highway overhead, that divides Newtown into two parts. The building then branches off to consider and touch on surrounding abandoned and forgotten sites, using Mary Fitzgerld square as an activation point. The program includes large and small scale performance spaces, public installation, formal and informal exhibition spaces, artist's studios, workshops, research spaces and a partial acoustic barrier installation.

The project, therefore, serves as an exploration into how acoustic spatial identity is apparent – in the form of human impact, realisation of a 'forgotten' spatial sense, individual reflection (or echo), an exposure to a narrative we haven't yet heard, all while exploring the extents that urban sound has on our psyche, biochemistry and perception of place in the urban context.

