

every thing has its own silence

walking
alienation
listening
Paris
le flâneur

For in these deserted corners, all sounds and things still have their own silences, just as, at midday in the mountains, there is a silence of hens, of the axe of the cicadas.
— Walter Benjamin, *Marseille*

I was in Marseille last week. A lot has changed since Benjamin's visits to the city in the 1920s. A high-speed rail link from Paris has brought with it bankers looking for holiday homes, and helped along a process of gentrification that has been displacing poor immigrants from the city centre since the nineteenth century. The Vieux-Port is now a marine Disney-World, emptied of ships and sailors, and full of tourists and stalls where you can buy Marseille's heritage in the easily transportable form of a souvenir plastic ship. It is no longer the rhythm of the sea that determines the city's economy, but the ebb and flow of the holiday season, as Europeans arrive looking for some respite from a summer of economic crisis.

Up on the hill, though, you can still find something of Benjamin's Marseille. The church of Notre Dame de la Garde stands like a sentinel above the city, looking after the few sailors who remain. Its walls are full of pieces of ripped metal, jagged scraps torn from the hulls of ships by an angry sea. It is the church that will see the sailors of these vessels onto the final leg of their journey.

Below the church, long narrow streets lead the visitor down to the harbour. I pause on one such street. Partially shaded from the strong summer sun, the pastel yellows and pinks of the houses recall an ice-cream parlour. There is almost no sound, just the gentle tap of a lazily closed window shutter, the quiet scratch of a cat's claw against a door, and a dim hum from the port below.

In the sun, each object stands distinct, solitary. Each has its particular silence.

I recalled Benjamin's Marseille when reading Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*, where he describes the pleasure of going to the toilet. 'The parlour', he writes, 'may have its charms, but the Japanese toilet truly is a place of spiritual repose.' Tanizaki has exacting standards. The toilet must be in a grove fragrant with leaves and moss. There must be dim light. Most importantly, there must be a silence so complete that one can hear the hum of a mosquito.

It is a good definition of silence, which is not the opposite of sound, but rather its lining. This is a different sense of silence to that of Walter Benjamin: silence in Tanizaki is where one can hear what is there. John Cage knew this when he composed *4'33*, a composition that is not silent, but rather a frame that makes you aware of all that you dismiss as noise, or are not trained to hear. It allows you to appreciate that each thing has its own silence, just as, on a warm slow day in Marseille, there is a silence of the window shutters, of the cats lazily unwinding by doors, and of the busy tourist-port below. The silence that allows you to hear silence.

Back in May, the photographer Giulio Petrocco and I set out for a day's walk in Paris. Our task? To hear the silences of the city.

Measuring the City

Cities sound best in the morning, just as they are waking up. In the 13th arrondissement, I can hear each car resound out through the streets: a dull trembling, that rises to a screech as it passes directly in front of me, before fading away. I imagine a city in which the location and speed of each object can be known, simply from its sound.

The 13th is home to the oldest Chinese community in Paris, who look down from tower blocks that would not be out of place in Hong Kong onto their more recently arrived countrymen, who throng the city's northern districts. Amid the tower blocks, though, there are signs of an older Paris. Detached houses on small streets keep aloof company next to supermarkets that sell the *gai lan* and duck that make Paris a home away from home.

On these streets, every sound speaks of an intimacy. That morning, the birds have dominion, and their conversation seems frenetic, as if they are saying all they have to say before their aural battle with the traffic begins. Listen closely, however, and you can hear the signs of human life beginning amid the bird-song. Windows are carefully opened. There is the hiss of steam from behind a wall. I am just back from East Africa. There, life exists outside: shops, simple single-room concrete constructions, spill out onto the street; the interior doesn't have a life of its own, but provides shelter for a life lived under the hot sun. In Paris, everything happens behind high walls and closed windows. Standing on one of those small streets, Giulio and I can hear hints of the secrets of Parisian life. Footsteps upon stairs, the cats' insistence cries (food; now) – the sounds and the buildings are of a piece: quiet, slow, and domestic. Architecture is the envelope in which sound lives. It variously clothes it, reveals it, and sends it out into the world.

One might think that sounds are always be attached to their cause, but this is not so. Architecture can hide as much as it can reveal.

One last project

The Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) was one of Mitterrand's last great schemes, designed to embed the name of the president in France's glorious history. On a drizzly Sunday morning, the library's enormous towers, jutting out of the labyrinthine tunnels in which the books are kept, seem desolate. Housed in the 14th arrondissement, and surrounded by new architectural schemes, it is as solitary as everything that surrounds it: a series of towers, all exposed innards and characterless glass, which do not talk to each other.

The sounds are just as solitary. The boardwalks between the towers are immense, like a lost beach-promenade from an enormous sea, and, this early in the morning, there are just a few dedicated joggers running around and around. You hear them pass, their feet heeled in the latest trainers, pound into the wood, and then the sound escapes; the architecture here is less an envelope than a whirlpool, which sucks you back into something that feels like silence.

It would be hard though, to say there is a silence of the library. The library, like the towers around it, are a way of removing silence, and not cultivating it; their glory is too big, and too isolated, to allow things to be heard.



13th arrondissement: our small streets

giulio petrocco



From the Bibliothèque Nationale de France

giulio petrocco

The sound of the dead

The 14th is unlike any other arrondissement of Paris; its hypermodernist lines and clear avenues recall the small winding streets of Montmartre only as their antonym. It feels rather as if Haussmann – the architect who created those endless boulevards in the centre of Paris – has been updated for the twenty-first century.

If the 14th has a brother, it is La Défense, the financial district, which was placed just outside of Paris. Between enormous tower blocks there are small squares, full of elaborate restaurants, ready to serve bankers on expense accounts. The whole place – aurally and architecturally – can only make sense on a weekday, when it is full of people, and the chattering of clients over steak tartare mirrors the keyboards clicking in the towers above: there is money to be made, and people to meet. All the lines of the architecture are designed for maximum efficiency, and the restaurants and shops change without anyone much noticing; everything here is exchangeable, nothing particular. On a Sunday, it all seems without direction. There is a silence here, but it is the silence of a place out-of-time. The sounds don't belong to the place, but either to the drifters (a tramp, a plastic bag) that have stolen into the area – to be removed with the beginning of the working week – or to restaurant signs, hanging uselessly in the wind. It is the silence of ghosts.

In the middle of all this, in the centre of a French financial empire that looks increasingly likely to topple, there is a graveyard. While the former residents of La Défense found themselves priced out of the market, some things, it seems, are still sacred. Lines of trees mark the exterior, and provide a sort of sound barrier from the roaring traffic that surrounds it, like a city under siege. Here, I can hear the silence of those who are no longer with us, and it is punctuated by the rustling of the leaves, and the gentle lilt of flowers lain on graves. Here, each thing has its silence.

European graveyards are almost always silent. We need them that way, in order to hear those that are still talking to us; still shaping our lives. Who has time for that now, with so much money to be made? I look for a grave laid after the 1970s. Amid the war dead, and the family tombs festooned with commemorative plaques, there is an old grave. It is marked *en perpétuité*, which signals that this spot has been bought for eternity by the family of the deceased. I struggle to read the words, cut into the stone; they are gradually wearing away.

There is no sound

I wonder though, at the efficacy of our investigation. Do architects still think of their buildings as envelopes for sound, now each of us is the sovereign of their own ears? Perhaps this is the reason that La Défense and the library are not envelopes; sound is not proper to places anymore, but to people. We maintain the libraries of our ipods and music players almost as carefully as Walter Benjamin cared for the sounds of rough streets in Marseille.

I don't hate this world in which we each have our own life of sound. On the 6:30am train, full of tired eyes and red-rimmed anguish, it seems like a dignified way of bearing the solitude that one already has as a wage-labourer.

The existence of this world does, though, change how we think about architecture. Streets are no longer envelopes, and objects no longer have their silence. The sounds housed by buildings only functions as interruptions – the gentle throb of a train is now a distraction from the sound track to the film of our lives.

In *Thinking Architecture*, Peter Zumthor refers to “the deepest architectural experience that I know” – early memories of his aunt's house: small dark red hexagonal tiles, and the thin, cheap clatter of the door.

These sounds are not gone of course. People can't be listening to Ipods all the time. But in the BNF and at La Défense, I see a new relationship to sound, one suited to an age of individuals. If, for Walter Benjamin, each thing has its own silence, and one must be attentive to hear it, then in these spaces, each person can have their own sound, as the architecture drains everything else away, leaving people alone with themselves.

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In the graveyard, in the middle of the money

giulio petrocco



La Défense, the heart of France's crumbling financial empire

giulio petrocco