

OUT OF THE BOX

The Sound of Greater Lafayette

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How does sound shape our perception of place and community? Philosopher George Berkeley believed that all that exists are minds and ideas, that is, perceiving beings and their perceptions. One perception, which is given a spot in the acclaimed five senses, is sound. In this piece, I will explore how Lafayette and West Lafayette perceive sound, how those perceptions influence sense of place, and how that sense of place influences the perception of sound.

Campus

In *Empire of the Senses*, David Howes (2005) observes the Kaluli people of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, and notes the remarkable ability of the Kaluli to physically orient themselves and learn about their location by listening. He notes that in the dense forest, much of the surroundings are out of view, and the sound environment can often be more diverse and more telling than the visual environment of any given place. The Kaluli develop acute hearing out of need.

From a biophysical perspective, the Kaluli have the same inner ear structures as all humans do. There is variety in the range of frequencies each person can hear that is determined by genetics, age, and ear damage. However, the Kaluli did not hear sounds that Howes could not hear; they simply interpreted them with far greater detail than Howes could. The Kaluli learn about their surroundings by listening, which likely is not some genetic phenomenon, but an acquired skill. What listening abilities do students acquire in their college environment?

In the realm of formal education, the vast majority of students learn from language. An excellent mechanic can diagnose a broken car simply by hearing something that others can hear but not interpret. In a similar way, anyone who understands English can hear the words of a lecture at Purdue, but only a student trained in that field may be able to fully interpret it.

How does language influence sense of place? More specifically, how do lectures influence a student's sense of place within their school? In my interviews with Purdue students, no one identified listening

to lectures as a sound of Purdue; yet lectures are certainly a large part of what students listen to and actively interpret. Perhaps sounds that are deeply interpreted and translated are no longer remembered as sounds. It's possible that because they are translated so quickly into the language of the mind, none of the students thought to mention that their lectures are an important sound of their environment. As the Kaluli learn about their environment through the sounds of nature, so students are taught to navigate their field of study.

When students do not understand the language of the lecture, they feel lost. In the same way, understanding the language of a lecture may establish a feeling of place for students, in both a physical and intellectual sense. Why did the students not mention the lectures they hear so often when I asked them about their sound environments at Purdue? As Merleau-Ponty (1963) claims in *The Structure of Behavior*, "to be situated within a certain point of view necessarily involves not seeing that point of view." Perhaps a student's place is so involved with learning and the language of learning that they do not see, or rather hear, the connecting power of listening to a lecture.

Another important sound environment for students is the one they use for study. Sabrina, a student, and Ben, a Lafayette resident, both identified the quiet of computer labs and study areas as a significant sound of Purdue (personal communications, November 2016). Although this is true, a quick observation of the students in those labs shows that most of them wear headphones. While the lab is indeed quiet, each student is in his or her own chosen musical environment. This is a bit of a paradox—why would students choose to study in a library if they can plug in their headphones within their own rooms?

Of course, a simple numbers check shows that, out of all the students at Purdue, most are not in the library. There is also probably some element other than sound influencing the place of the library. The social drive to study, because everyone else is studying, is probably a significant factor. Nevertheless, we are still left with an interesting paradox: why did Sabrina and Ben mention the quiet of study areas although any given student there is most likely listening to music? Why is quiet so important to study even though the people studying are not "hearing" the quiet?

OUT OF THE BOX

Sabrina and Ben's idea of the place of a study area overshadows the reality, and perhaps this is true for the students studying there. Each student enjoys the benefits of music, but also the benefits of the perceived quiet. In my own experience, I study better with my music playing from my headphones instead of my speakers. With the speakers, I lose the perception of my room being quiet because the music pervades it. I am sure not everyone has had this experience, but it may give a little more validity to the idea that although the library is not truly quiet, it gives students a *sense* of quiet. In this case, place shapes perception and sound, and both the real sound of music and the perceived sound of quiet affect the student's productivity. Maybe some students perceive the quiet better in the library than in their own rooms, so they choose to study in the library, even though the sounds they are actually receiving are the same.

Purdue has a variety of symbolic sounds associated with it. When I asked students for the sounds that made them think of Purdue (not their place of residence at Purdue, as I did earlier), they frequently identified the Boilermaker Special, the Bell Tower, and the marching band. There were some other responses from some students, such as wind, birds, or construction, but they were not shared by most of the interviewees.

One student, Connor, had an interesting insight. In my interview, I asked him to share with me the sounds he heard in his dorm at Earhart. Like most other students, Connor mostly heard his air conditioner, his neighbors, and people walking in the halls. However, he also would hear the marching band practicing in the courts by Shreve. Although the sound of the band practicing is something only heard by those close enough to hear it, namely, students living in Earhart and Shreve, Connor pointed out that he associates that sound of the band with life at Purdue, not life specifically in Earhart. This contrasts with the sounds of his neighbors, which he associates with dorm life (personal communication, October 2016).

Most students do not regularly attend Purdue football games (especially in these last few seasons), and the Boilermaker Special is only heard on game days. The Bell Tower is probably the sound most frequently heard by the students, but not as frequently as they hear lectures or the air conditioner in their room. It is clear that the significance of these sounds does not lie in their frequency, which is not very surprising. What is interesting is how all of these sounds

were sounds specifically chosen to represent Purdue. What makes them effective symbols of Purdue? It's not because the sounds are always being made, and it's not because they are the only shared sounds among the students. A bell tower and a marching band are not uncommon sounds for universities, so why do they symbolize Purdue to the students here?

First, all of these sounds are designed to be loud and clear. In fact, the Boilermaker Special has a bad reputation for waking students up in the morning. Despite the annoyance, it is still held with affection by those students. Second, these sounds are also visibly established symbols of Purdue.

Does the sound shape the symbol, or does the symbol shape the sound? The symbol seems to give the sound meaning. Without the symbolism, the sound of the Boilermaker Special would only be a nuisance. One student, Rina, mentioned the sound of the tornado alarms being tested, but she did not feel any affection to that noise as she did for the Special (personal communication, November 2016). While the symbols give the sound significance, the sounds give the symbols more impact. The band has its uniforms and "The World's Largest Drum," but a band is nothing without its music.

The place of Purdue is conveyed through the sounds of its symbols, which make that sense of place stronger. However, the content of the sounds does not seem to influence how that sense of place is defined. Student life can be trying and full of annoyance, but most people seem to hold some affection for their universities, despite the struggle. In the same way, despite the Boilermaker Special disturbing that precious Saturday morning sleep, it is still held close to the students and their sense of place.

Courthouse

In *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan (2002) explores the ways in which architectural spaces guide our actions, teach us the purpose of a place, and establish our social roles by defining and structuring our sensations. At the Tippecanoe County Courthouse in Lafayette, sound is manipulated in several ways to shape the building's place. Marble floors make footsteps echo, the low ceilings of the lower levels confine the auditory space, and the wooden walls soften the tones of the marble, but the harshness remains. Voices carry in unusual directions, bouncing off curved walls to be heard in

OUT OF THE BOX

surprising places, travelling through unexpected corridors, like the circular light well in the middle of the building, connecting one floor to the next. Near the courtrooms upstairs, chains are bolted to the floor to hold the waiting defendants. When they are brought in, the rattle of the metal resonates, and the large wooden door closes firmly.

This sound environment accomplishes two things. It sets the courthouse apart from the open outdoors and cozy coffee shops, and it integrates a harshness, an immovability, and perhaps even a truth. The sound of justice gives power to the judge and takes it from the prisoner, who hears her chains, the solid door, and the gavel, all of which scrutinize her.

The lower levels are enclosed, but the upper levels have open space overhead, reaching up like a church. They also keep the sounds of the courthouse grounded and earthy, while the upper levels open up to the heavens. The light well carries the upper space to the lower, carrying the sounds of judgement down to mankind and establishing the courthouse as a place of justice.

The courthouse is also a center for history. This too is conveyed through sounds. Though the elevator uses a modern hydraulic system to run, the chamber itself is the original from 1906 (“Tour the Courthouse Additions,” n.d.). The clanging sound of the wrought iron doors is very distinct from the cushion of modern elevator doors. The heavy wooden doors are also an antique choice, as most public buildings today have glass doors. Additionally, the sound of wood furniture is something uncommon in modern public buildings.

However, the most historic material is the stone and marble, passed down from archaic Greek architecture, which replaced the mud and wood of early archaic structures. The sound of this material not only enforces justice, but also draws attention to the permanence of the building. The historical sounds enforce the authority of the courthouse, just as they enforce its judgements.

Downtown

Across the street from the courthouse is Java Roaster. Sarah, the barista, shared with me the rich and diverse sounds of downtown Lafayette. She mentioned trains, buses, the courthouse clock

and flag, festivals, bicycles, and a hawk recording that plays after about 5 p.m. to keep birds off the courthouse lawn. She reminisced to a customer, with excitement in her eyes, about the band Kansas performing right outside in the street. She good-naturedly complained with him about the hawk recording. She even asked her patron if he noticed that the clock had stopped chiming since the courthouse started undergoing construction (personal communication, December 2016). I could see that the sounds of downtown were giving her a sense of community with the customer.

However, her responses did not resemble those of individuals living in the downtown area. Jake mentioned church bells, street cleaners, and garbage trucks (personal communication, December 2016). He resides two blocks from Java Roaster, and right next to the farmers market, so it is of great surprise that he did not mention any sounds of festivals. Jon mentioned trains and said there wasn’t much else (personal communication, December 2016). In *Space and Place*, Tuan (2002) discusses mankind’s use of architecture to establish a sense of outside and inside. “It is true that even without architectural form, people are able to sense the difference between . . . private and public,” he writes. “Architectural space—even a simple hut surrounded by cleared ground—can define such sensations and render them vivid.” Why do Jake and Jon seem to perceive fewer sounds of their surrounding area, which is so similar to Sarah’s environment?

Although Sarah is also in an enclosed architectural space, she is not at home. As a barista, she is very much in public, which may give her more perception of the sounds of her community. As a businesswoman, she desires to draw customers in from the outside, so perhaps she pays more attention to the outside, even with her ears. Maybe the residents are paying less attention to what is outside their homes.

What does this mean for Lafayette as a whole? I first speculated that those living in the downtown area, where everything is happening, would have a better idea about the sounds of Lafayette than those living in the suburbs. However, I could not confirm this, especially with Jon’s response that he only hears trains (even when I asked him twice). Perhaps Jon and Jake are so immersed in their soundscape that they cannot analyze it, as Merleau-Ponty (1963) suggested. On the other hand, perhaps it is because their time

OUT OF THE BOX

downtown is spent in an interior, private sound environment, while Sarah's is exterior and public, even though she is also indoors.

For Lafayette, this may mean that while there are connective sounds of community, they don't enter the interior or reach the private ear as effectively as, for example, the Boilermaker Special, which is essentially a siren. Lafayette does have significant sounds of communities, such as the church bells and the festivals, but they aren't as pervasive as Purdue's sounds. This isn't to say that Lafayette has a weaker sense of community; it merely does not utilize sound to the extent that the University does. Perhaps Lafayette doesn't need to do this; it doesn't have to establish community amongst transience, while Purdue must.

The sound of trains was universal among my Lafayette interviews, and this is no surprise, because trains are loud and the track by the Wabash River is very active. According to Jon, who has only lived in Indiana for a few years, "Indiana exists because of trains." More accurately, Lafayette exists because of steamboats, but trains could very well be one reason Lafayette has outlived steamboats.

Growing up in Indiana, I know that many natives are of the mindset that Indiana doesn't have many reasons for being populated, it just is. It's just here, the "Crossroads of America," existing in between more interesting states, existing because of steamboats and trains. Does the sound of trains embed this notion into the minds of Lafayette citizens?

In a conversation with Jake that was not about sounds at all, he joked with his housemate about the "homeless people" that walk about, headed from the train to the bus station, or from vice versa. Whether those people are homeless or not, it gave me insight into how the people of Lafayette might view the trains and their passengers. Perhaps the sound of the trains is a reminder that we never know what kind of people will get off the train, and if the people are "homeless," we don't know why they are here. Maybe the train does give Lafayette a sense of oddity and misplacement.

Interestingly, the mascot of Purdue is a train. Even more interesting is that many people, even students, believe Purdue Pete is the school's mascot. A train is a rather unusual mascot, causing confusion just as the mere existence of Greater Lafayette confuses

its residents. In another interview unrelated to sound, a thirty-year Lafayette resident told me that the city is set back, behind the times, and a normal Indiana town (personal communication, August 2016). Perhaps the train speaks to all of these views, and perhaps these views are assigned to the train, causing Jon to conclude they are the only reason Indiana exists.

Afterword

In this exploration, I learned a lot about the difference between sound and sound perception, as well as the subjectivity of the experience of sound. Nevertheless, sound did give me insights into the community of Greater Lafayette. I observed students manipulating their sound environments to enhance their study, and the subtle power of lectures to establish a learning environment. I observed Purdue's use of sound symbolism to establish a sense of community, and how Lafayette does not use this tool to the same extent, perhaps because it is a more permanent community or because it doesn't need to constantly draw in new students to survive as a business. I observed the use of acoustics to establish historical authority and rigid judgement in the Tippecanoe Courthouse. I also speculated that trains might be symbols of Lafayette's place within its state and country.

The biggest change in my civic identity is my increased awareness of how manufactured my own sound environment and community is. Yet, even a manufactured sense of community is a real community, and it is something I appreciate. The sounds of the Boilermaker Special and marching band are powerful tools; even when they are playing in the early morning, they still have a positive effect. Maybe this is because any sense of community is wanted in an environment that changes every semester.

References

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