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NOISE CONTROL FOR A BETTER ENVIRONMENT

Noises from others and the sound of the city: moralities of urban soundscapes in the private home

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Claudia has developed a sensitivity towards the sounds from her upstairs neighbor, whose bare feet steps makes her heart palpitate and leaves her sleepless in the bedroom of her apartment. On her couch in the living room, however, she can fall asleep with the television on and accompanied by the constant humming of cars passing by on the large street outside her building in central Copenhagen, Denmark.

I met Claudia during a fieldwork I am currently conducting in the framework of the project “What is neighbor noise?” exploring when inhabitants of multistory housing in Denmark experience the sounds of their neighbors as disturbing noise and mapping the societal discourses around neighbor noise.

In this presentation, I will explore the moralities of urban soundscapes as they have been described to me by inner city dwellers from the point of view of their homes. In particular, I will explore the schism of how sounds stemming from the outside seems to be experienced as less intruding and more “neutral” than the sounds of near neighbors.

A growing body of research documents the harmful effects of environmental noise and the ways in which traffic noise especially affects the sleep and hence the health of individuals adversely (WHO 2018). The health effects of exposure to neighbor noise is an under researched area, but research indicates that nuisance from neighbour noise has negative effects on health at a magnitude comparable to the health issues related to smoking (Weinhold 2016). Furthermore, Jensen et al. (2018) documents a connection between exposure to neighbor noise and experienced stress on a par with the stress experienced as a consequence of traffic noise exposure.

However, the traffic and neighbor noise respectively constitute two forms of noise that affects people who are exposed to it in unequal ways. Claudia’s different sensitivities to the steps of her upstairs neighbor and the cars passing by outside her window illustrates

this point. One way of describing the difference, between traffic and neighbor noise, is the differences in predictability and informational content. That is, neighbor noise is often considered to be “less predictable” and as having a “high informational content” compared to traffic noise (Weinhold 2016, see also Neimann et al. 2006). However, based on the accounts of Claudia and other inhabitants I have spoken to, I argue that the “lack of consideration [*hensyn*]” and “respect” they experience from noisy neighbors as well as what they perceive of as an unwillingness on their part to change behavior, contributes in important ways to the nuisances they experience. It is in the light of these perspectives I suggest that an exploration of the difference might benefit from an examination of the moral implications at stake.

In this study, I have so far found that issues relating to neighbor noise are usually defined as problems relating to inadequate behavior and often considered expressions of moral breaches. I argue that the notion of inadequate behavior being the source of the problem constitutes a key element in understanding why the inhabitants of multistory housing consulted in this study almost unanimously found that issues around neighbor noise should be solved through behavioral changes on an individual level. Issues around traffic noise on the other hand, tends to be addressed rather on a political level.

I thus suggest that when the sounds of neighbors seeps through the floors, ceilings and walls of the homes of others, they seem to have a high potential for being conceived of as immoral intrusions (see also Rosenberg 2016; Flindt 2004). Sounds stemming from the public space, however, are to a larger degree described to me as neutral and “to be expected”. This suggests inherent moralities at play that constitute sounds stemming from the public and the private as different in kind, accompanied by different practices and inviting for entirely different sets of actions in the case of nuisances, if indeed acted upon. Based on these considerations I will unfold the relationship between these moralities and understandings of sounds as related to the behaviors and materialities that partakes in producing the sounds in the private and public spheres respectively.

”What is Neighbour Noise?” is a research project that seeks to understand when the sound of neighbours becomes disturbing noise for residents living in multi-storey buildings. The project aims at supplementing the existing research on noise, which is primarily based on quantitative methods, with qualitative descriptions of how sound – and especially noise – is experienced.

Previous research has shown that noise nuisance can damage health and that noise affects individuals in complex ways – in relation to volume of sound, but also in relation to the character and content of the sound and the context in which it occurs. Noise is often the cause of disputes between neighbours, yet neighbour noise continues to be an underexposed subject in the area of noise research. In other words, neighbour noise is not the kind of noise whose nuisance is immediately measurable. As such, the anthropological, qualitative approach provides a special opportunity to contribute to this field of study.

It is the goal of this project to contribute to the existing research on noise by collecting descriptions of how residents living in multi-storey buildings experience the sound of their neighbours and identify overlaps and patterns that indicate when the sound becomes actual disturbing noise. It centers around six months of fieldwork in multi-storey buildings in the Copenhagen area and in Struer in Western Jutland, Denmark.

The project is primarily carried out by Ph.d., Postdoc Sandra Lori Petersen and runs between February 2018 and January 2021. The project is funded by Grundejernes Investeringsfond (Investment Fund of Landowners) and Realdania.

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