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# Resonance as an Urban Artistic Research Method

Ricardo ATIENZA<sup>1</sup>, Monica SAND<sup>2</sup>

1. KONSTFACK, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm, Sweden, ricardo.atienza@konstfack.se

2. ARKDES, Swedish Centre of Architecture and Design, Stockholm, Sweden, monica.sand@arkdes.se

**Abstract.** *Through the research project 'Playing the space' we have developed 'resonance' as a site-specific method and a theoretical concept. Resonance involves all senses and relations in a space; it manifests the overall experience of daily life within its immaterial, continuous and elusive expression. As an artistic/research method, resonance intensifies an extended listening that takes place between bodies and space in its full complexity. By composing and recomposing the rhythm and the resonance of daily situations through collective improvisations, interventions, disruptions and further out-of-place reactivations, new situations emerge which establish another awareness of urban qualities, limits, forces and meanings.*

**Keywords:** *resonance, playing the space, in situ, collective intervention*

## How to approach complex urban environments?

Traditional research approaches to urban complexity are limited, as commonly based on individual knowledge, socio-cultural background and experience of the researcher. They will certainly expose relevant fragments while hardly reaching a general understanding of place. And this also affects the kind of knowledge explored: academic approaches are typically in search of a description (written if possible) of characteristic conditions, situations or configurations to be extrapolated to similar spaces; in search of urban archetypes. This is a knowledge that will hardly provide a valuable feedback on local place and users, as in search of the general. Opposed to this model, our research project concern daily users' situated knowledge, i.e. an intuitive and multiple experience of place hard to categorise or even describe due to its almost instinctive and ever-changing nature. Therefore, it will necessarily be about and take place through multiple and collective in-situ experiences of place. And the main result of this research process will be the experience itself, making sense of place. Being in friction with each place leaves a trace on the researchers, as well as, on the users encountered, and these multiple traces are per se a main result of our approach and not just a methodological side effect.

Such trace(s) requires an extended and active presence in situ, passing time and getting immersed, being a part of, as well as intervene and transform the many activities happening, i.e., making sense of the place by being a part of it. This active presence finally creates an intuitive embodied knowledge of place: we get to know

(in corporeal terms) how to interact with a specific place, how to integrate, use it, move in it, what to expect, how to react and how to activate potential possibilities; we thus enact the place through common actions, as intuitively decoding and appropriating its key working modes, its routines and maybe even ritualistic aspects. By corporeal knowledge we consider here an enactive one, acquired through action and presence (senses) but affecting all corporeal dimensions and expressions (sensorial/sensitive/sensible). And this learning process requires time, being exposed while repeatedly exploring the place, getting lost and receiving unexpected reactions. If to find a concept for such process: *entering in resonance* with the place, acquiring and allowing between both a 'sympathetic' form of vibration (=communication) generating a particular form of presence, rhythm, corporeal awareness, etc.

### *Entering in resonance*

Resonance works as a method that places the researcher in the middle of society and the urban situation we take part in and create. Often resonance is defined as sound (re-sonare, sounding again), and this must include vibration. What we call sound is not only perceived through the ears. Our bodies are by default in vibration together and with the environment. Every situation is resounding through the body; even without hearing humans are able to recognise sound through its induced corporeal vibration (e.g. the deaf drummer Evelyn Glennie). Already on cell-level everything is vibrating, thus resonating with itself and to everything else (Gershon 2013). In our research, the historical image of the researcher as a distant viewer, disconnected from the situation and place, has been re-placed by a *vibrating researcher*. As a consequence, moving-bodies-in-place are the most important tool for knowledge production, with the researchers/artists reacting to a situation while re-activating its historical and present social rhythmic issues/questions (Lefebvre 2004, Sand&Atienza 2012). The *vibrating researcher* proves a strong connection to specific situations, society as a whole and place as the main condition for making sense of the research. At the same time the vibrating bodies-in-space-system exposes the human bodies dependency and fragility.

With this awareness of a situated resonant body, the concept of resonance raises also the issue of the response-able research and researcher, able to respond to a given situation. This response-ability is at the core of our research; if cities today are built to attract tourists, business and consumption, who is able to respond to the, often, neutralised places those activities offer? Resonance is not only a concept and a methodology; rather it defines a continuous experience of interconnectedness between human bodies and place. Such an inclusive position of the researcher, opens and proposes other ways of researching, beyond the attempt to avoid influencing a system that is anyway affecting the researcher's body and thought.

When entering in resonance, each researcher becomes an actor who intervenes in local daily life. Its role is far from an idealised neutral observer as embodying a critical experience of the place aiming at activating a response to everyday modes of inhabiting a public space. A public space whose significance needs to be deeply reconsidered in our consumer society; starting with its own 'public' character, and following with its primal democratic function as an open space for the expression of multiple social, political and cultural forms.

We cannot aspire to the experience of place acquired by everyday use, and that is not even our aim: as 'outsiders' we embody the role of the naïf denuding the place through basic but unposed questions, in the form of actions. And inducing thus an accelerated immersion that will focus on other dimensions than daily users' perspective, more inclined perhaps towards a functional understanding of place. The concept of resonance as an in situ methodological premise becomes particularly relevant here, as describing an open and responsive attitude ready to 'vibrate' with the surrounding situations, moods and physical configurations. An accelerated immersion requires from the researcher to temporally renounce to its personal inclinations in favour of the envioning conditions and forces, being guided by the place. As such, openness is rather unattainable individually; our method grounds on a collective approach to the place, where each researcher's questions and methods are confronted to the group, exploring the same context from different angles. This group of researchers, architects and artists will collectively appropriate, enact and discuss each one of the methods in action. The intention of this collective acting is not to evaluate each method, but to create a kaleidoscopic experience of place, as it is with situated experience, composed of many individual fragments of perceived 'reality'.

### ***From the place to its enactment: a research itinerary***

Our research process on resonance evolved from open collective improvisations in the public towards more structured interventions collectively planned in advance; the following lines describe, from the place towards its re-enactment, some of the key steps (non-chronological) of such action-based research itinerary:

#### ***Urban improvisations: listening and responding***

Our first explorations focused on elementary forms of sensorial and corporeal interaction with the space. We explored here the physical dimension of resonance, first through sensing, listening to the space, and then entering in a dialogue with it. Such dialogue took the form of improvised urban sessions where a group of researchers and artists was invited to explore the space with their instruments, voices or bodies; resonating the space while entering in resonance with it were just two faces of the same exchange. Several sessions were organised exploring different spaces in Stockholm that presented uncommon sonic physical properties and/or specific conflicts (e.g. heavy presence of traffic near main pedestrian paths, etc.). Away from traditional music or dance improvisation codified 'languages', the aim was here to sense and respond, to get in touch, in friction with the space and a particular situation, establishing a sensorial and sensible exchange. The place becomes here subject and object of communication, form and content, suggesting a particular tempo, intensity, rhythm, register of sound and motion, etc. This unusual situation generates a tension, sometimes even a conflict with the non-written code of public space, with the way such spaces are supposed to be used: no trace is expected to be left, even if just immaterial. And such tension suspends the daily users' routines, revealing thus their presence and operational mode.

#### ***Collective interventions: a response-able response to public space***

The aim with these actions is to share different intervention methods in the public by performing them collectively in a given space and time. In these interventions, all

participants take part in each contributor's action along intensive in-situ sessions. In these encounters, the core idea is to share methods through sharing actions, as a form of practice-based dialogues and exchange of ideas. By self-embodimenting each one of the different approaches, we can intuitively appropriate and assess their specificity and significance within a given context. As described previously, this collective methodology is grounded on the need of multiplicity (multiple approaches, methods, bodies, etc.) for addressing the complexity of urban environments.

Several of such collective interventions have been organised along our research project *Playing the space*, ending with *Re(s) on-Art*, an international artistic research conference organised in Stockholm in 2014 ([playingthespace.wordpress.com](http://playingthespace.wordpress.com)). Contrasting with the traditional conference model, based on the compilation of independent written papers and oral presentations, *Re(s) on-Art* followed a collective practice-based model, in search of a placed, in situ, discussion grounded on shared and experienced methods. This situation promoted an intense and fruitful exchange of concepts and methods as well as a deeper knowledge of place based on the juxtaposition and contrast of different artistic research approaches. The space selected for these investigations was the popular and multifaceted square of *Medborgarplatsen* (the Citizen Square), in south Stockholm; 13 actions by different groups of artists and researchers took place along two days.

Other previous organised actions allowed us to test and explore the relevance of such multiple collective interventions. This was the case of *Mind the gap*, a collection of interventions realised in Stockholm's subway and taking place along two days in different platforms, stations and trains; seven interventions were conceived and planned as a series of events configuring an underground trip in one of the most codified public spaces in contemporary cities. By altering such codified environment through subtle interventions that staged common but improbable situations, we aimed at convoking another consciousness of the individual in relation to the social and built environment. The rigour of the daily routines characterising such environment was to be revealed by other displaced or augmented routines that became thus some kind of unexpected rituals for casual observers and passers-by. Not much was required for disrupting the non-written but respected code of public space, and this disruption exposed the structures and mechanics of everyday usage.

### *In place/out of place: from a situated to a displaced experience*

The previous paragraphs presented different actions which specificity was to take place in situ and to consider this situated experience as its core component. Texts, videos or other forms of representation derived from the actions were a documentary effort realised to try to communicate what happened in situ; in any case were they conceived and could they be considered as a 'result' per se. But in other interventions the focus was also placed on these different forms of documentation or after-construction, approached now as a tool to apprehend everyday urban life through a displaced and delayed experience of place. A main aim was here to explore methods for communicating a specific experience of place mediated through action. And this does not only affect the form of communication: the actions to conceive and execute had also to be thought according to this displaced frame of experience; grounded in situ but projected out-of-place. The resulting representation will still be linked to its original situation but as a non-presential–

virtual – disembodied experience. Which kind of new metaphorical presence do we articulate here? How to reengage the body within the re-presented space?

Such questions were at the origin of LUR, Live Urban Radio, a series of twelve interventions to be transmitted through sound, as short radio pieces. In May 2013, a group of artists and researchers was invited to share intervention methods, first through preparatory discussions and then in the public, for finally producing a radio piece from each action. Two different situations were thus to be considered: i) the situated experience of place, ii) its displaced and disembodied reception. Sound as the chosen medium was particularly relevant here as inviting participants to experience the disparities between a full corporeal and sensorial experience and a severely mediated one, just sonic. It operates in fact as ‘re-presentation’ (i.e. present again) rather than as common representation, with focus on selected aspects of the experience, in a new listening situation. The sonic choice was also done as a counterbalance to the extremely visual common forms of representation in our daily culture.

### *Re-acting everyday urban life, out-of-place re-performance*

Along the previous modes of intervention, physical presence and exploration of place have always been constituting elements. In this new phase we finally made abstraction of the everyday physical city in favour of its re-enactment. Different urban daily situations were performed out-of-place, in an exhibition context, allowing this distance to re-act and re-present ephemeral forms of everyday life. This new form of playing the city, acting it out, was once more a collective exploration as the city is indeed, including here the active participation of the audience. A group of researchers and artists acted here as activators, promoting the emergence of this re-acted city, inducing different urban situations through sound and motion improvisations, open building workshops, playground activities, etc. But as a main condition for the success of this re-acted city, the audience needs to have the main role, even if ‘unconscious’. They will create the new city through their spontaneous actions, appropriating the space and generating different unexpected situations. The leading group needs to restrict its presence for this spontaneous city to take place; if not, the result will just be another after-constructed city, with a very limited presence of the ephemeral and irrelevant actions composing daily ambiances. For this exercise there is a privileged audience, kids, whose natural and instinctive explorations and rare prejudgements regarding appropriate behaviour in an exhibition guarantee the open emergence of a reacted city. We explored this re-acted city in several interventions, first as a part of the exhibition LIVE, at Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm, where an audience of kids and parents was invited to corporeally create and build a city along one week of collective work together with dancers, musicians and sound artists.

This re-action and re-presentation method has been developed as well in public walks and interventions in the city, in which we have studied historical and contemporary urban aspects. Walks that resonate historical urban places have been used as a main exploration tool in Walk in the Steps of Rubicon. In this research collaboration we collectively re-activate the public places used by the historical dance performance group Rubicon, as well as re-act their work in contemporary choreographies (Meskimmon, von Rosen, Sand 2014). While literally walking in the

steps of Rubicon, we re-activate relations between body and space as a crucial memory process.

In a recent intervention at Färgfabriken, a group of students from Konstfack, Stockholm, improvised a city in an exhibition space employing all different corporeal expressions in terms of sound and motion, exploring the possibilities and limits of improvisation techniques for the representation of daily urban situations.

### *A mediated space; resonance in a disembodied experience of place*

At the end of this itinerary into displacement of daily urban experience, it is time for a last disembodiment. When corporeal presence and displaced re-enactment are both suppressed, other forms of mediated experience are possible. The 'place' becomes here vague and ambiguous, as represented through evocation and metaphorical relations; in particular when no visual information is involved. The situated experience of a specific place is thus substituted by the experiential expression of memory and imaginary projection of possible places; multiplicity becomes an attribute of place. The reduction of its physical dimension reveals its kaleidoscopic nature, exposing a network of interrelations among experiences, places and situations.

For this displaced mediation of 'place', sound is once more a relevant expression as bypassing our common visual methods and tools of representation, while imposing a new form of presence based on the listening scale of the immersed body in terms of time and space. Listening recites a time in space and a space in time, both indivisible dimensions of the same perceptual experience. This exigency of a coherent experience of an absent time and space is a remarkable schizophrenic condition of sound as a solo sensorial experience: an experience of place(s) in absence would emerge if the listener can make sense of the time and space represented. The new emerging experience necessarily convokes a more fragmented and complex image of our relation to the enviroing world. This kind of multifaceted sensorial experience is what we aimed at exploring with the composition of a final collective soundwalk made of the fragments of our different urban experiments along these years.

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## Authors

Ricardo Atienza, architect, researcher and sound artist. Lecturer and researcher at University College of Arts Crafts and Design. PhD in Urbanism/Architecture 2008, by UPMF-Grenoble and by UPM-Madrid. Associate Researcher at Laboratoire CRESSON.

Monica Sand, artist, senior researcher and research coordinator at the Swedish Centre of Architecture and Design, Stockholm from 2011. PhD in Architecture 2008, School of Architecture, Royal Institute of Technology. Post Doctoral Research Fellow at the University College of Arts Crafts and Design 2009/11.