

## Acoustic Space, Sign and Community Identity

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**Abstract:** The contribution of soundscape studies is a way to understand local cultural identity and gives importance to local communities of a specific place. Through public art and acoustic communication, a system of signs and symbols presented by a community can be mapped and/or created. Sound as a tool allows the community identity of a place to be defended, while its inherited cultural values, knowledge and traditions are evidenced.

**Keywords:** Sign, Soundscape, Acoustic space, Public Art, Sound, Identity

This research text is developed in the context of author creation and the use of space as a community place where cultural identity settles and forms through sound. The various areas of study are approached with the intention of serving the cultural identity of a population of a given place through public art. For the construction of the text will be addressed uses of signs and signals in acoustic spaces in order to build community identity.

We consider the acoustic space as a place of sharing that marks the interaction of an acoustic community. An acoustic space coincides with the soundscape, defined as “[...] any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape. We can isolate an acoustic environment as a field of study just as we can study the characteristics of a given landscape” (Schafer, 1977). By approaching the acoustic community as a sharing of sound experiences related to the sharing of private and common space (Schafer, 1977) we introduce the communication model proposed by Barry Truax in *Acoustic Communication*, which is useful when considering the grouping of information and designation of specific actions that will be essential for the reception

of the same. At its core, a community interacts through systems of signs and symbols so that the stakeholders gain information about the surrounding space. The use of signs is thus evidenced when there is sharing of meanings as forms of communication, as Metzeltin defines:

“[...] a sign is an object or a process – for example, a stone, a drawing, a gesture, etc. – to which man ascribes a concept and which serves to raise awareness and express a different object or process distinct from the former. [...] In order to serve the interindividual communication this relationship, must be sanctioned by two or more individuals, that is, it is conventional.”<sup>1</sup>

Deely posits that intentional signs “[...] are used by animals and by men for the purpose of communication – including language and its substitutes [...]”<sup>2</sup> (Deely, 1995). Using sound as a tool in an already built system of signs can stimulate the community through acoustic space for the purpose of creating local cultural identity. As Catarina Carvalho refers, Connerton (1989) in Featherstone (2001) book “Reafirmar a Identidade Cultural Local: O Património Cultural Imaterial Local como Recurso” states

that the community builds a sense of belonging to a place that “[...] sustains a collective memory, that in turn, depends on ritualistic and commemorative practices and ceremonies [...]”<sup>3</sup>.

We can conclude that it is through value and representation that signs provide the potential for a population to be defended and that identity is created by inherited knowledge, as well as their traditional form as the basis to reconstitute their sense of belonging to space.

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1 – Original text in Portuguese: “um sinal é um objecto ou um processo - por ex, uma pedra, um desenho, um gesto, etc. - ao qual o homem atribui um conceito e de que e serve para consciencializar e exprimir um objecto ou um processo distinto do primeiro. [...] Para que possa servir à comunicação interindividual esta relação tem que ser sancionada por dois ou mais indivíduos, quer dizer, é convencional.”

2 – Original text in Portuguese: “[...] são usados pelos animais e pelos homens com o propósito da comunicação – incluindo a linguagem e os seus substitutos [...]”

3 – Original text in Portuguese: “[...] sustenta numa memória colectiva que, por sua vez, depende de práticas e cerimónias ritualísticas e comemorativas [...]”.

## Visual Signs and Cultural Analysis

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Nonverbal manifestations by a person or a group of people towards elements in a city conveys a message. It is worth the effort to recognize the type of messages being communicated, their relevance, and whether they are related to a larger social movement – perhaps reflecting a behavioral shift or trend – because they may contain useful information to government agencies, companies, and the society at large.

In this article, I discuss how the visual signs present in a territory and cultural analyses are related. We may consider that “territory is a concept generated by people organizing space for their own aims” (GOTTMANN 1975:1). Visual signs are studied in the field of semiotics, which seeks to understand the “relationship between the sign and the object or signifier and signified” (SMITH 2011:229), using visual code (image, painting, etc.) to send a message that, importantly, may “be hidden or largely unnoticed, even by the people using the code” (SMITH 2011:236). Culture is all human being manifestations that occur through habits, values and attitudes – “the way of life of a particular people living together in one place” (EAGLETON 2000:112).

The same sign might have multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is embedded. As Maria Isabel Castro states, “A careful look at the signs in different parts of the world allows us to deduce that they are not always universally or directly interpretable and that, on many occasions, they require knowledge of the cultural context in which they are located” (CASTRO 2008:89). This in itself sets the close connection between signs

and context. Street art, for example, charged with visual signs, expresses the context in which is embedded, but also intervene in the territory and its culture.

An example is the Ana Botella Crew case, a movement that started in Spain in 2009: a template with the ABC signature was spread collaboratively and rhetorically through the internet, giving anyone access to download it. Spontaneously, people brought the template out into the streets (see Luis Menor for more on this case). In this case, the current increase of collaborative practices in Spain reflected in the artistic intervention.





Source: Flickr

Through this example we see that visual signs and the local or tribal culture feed one another, establishing the following cycle: the visual signs in a territory represent and broadcast (connotatively or denotatively) their cultural context, and at the same time are an important elements that set the culture itself, constituting an important source of analysis.



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