

PARTICIPATORY ART AS INNER CITY WORKSHOP: THE URBANREMIX SOUND PROJECT

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UrbanRemix is a collaborative and locative sound project designed to engage inner city communities with their neighborhoods through participation in a public art event. The project consists of mobile and web applications that allow participants to explore the acoustic identity of their communities as they record and remix sounds from their surroundings. This paper presents the concept and realization of the project in three different cities.



Urban Remix, 2010-11 Times Square project, map interface for sound mixing (left); Art on the Beltline project, Travis Thatcher live performance on location (right).

The UrbanRemix project builds on the idea of participatory art as a form of citizen involvement that engages people with their neighborhoods by encouraging citizens to re-discover their surroundings in a new way.

Participation has been discussed as a key quality of a range of contemporary artistic practices. As part of what Kester termed “dialogical art” it engages the audience, making their involvement an integral part of the artwork itself. “[A] dialogical aesthetic requires that we strive to acknowledge the specific identity of our interlocutors and conceive of them not simply as subjects on whose behalf we might act but as co-participants in the transformation of both self and society” (Kester 2004). Bourriaud differs in his approach to this kind of process-based art but comparable to Kester he stresses the “realm of human interaction and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space” (Bourriaud 1998). He identifies global urbanism as a driving motor as well as the stage on which the “growing urbanisation of the artistic experiment” (Bourriaud 1998) unfolds. UrbanRemix relates to this kind of participation and engages citizens in a new form of acoustic dialogue with their neighborhoods

and each other. It not only connects to the urban space thematically but also uses it as a source and stage for the artistic process itself. Sound recordings are gathered by local communities, shared via an open web site, and remixed online as well as in live performances staged in the neighborhoods where the sounds were recorded.

UrbanRemix is a platform that provides for participatory locative sound recording, mixing, and sharing. It consists of three key elements:

- a mobile application for capturing geo-tagged sounds
- an interactive online map for exploring and remixing sounds
- a range of outreach workshops and live performance events.

The UrbanRemix mobile application for Android and iOS allows participants to record sounds, take photos, tag them, review them, delete them, and upload them to a central server. Every sound recording is stored with its GPS coordinates, a timestamp, the ID of the recording person, and other customizable tags. Sound recordings are limited to 60 seconds and are uploaded as uncompressed audio files. Before they can use the application, participants first have to sign up on the UrbanRemix web site, where they agree to release their field recordings under a Creative Commons license. The application itself is available free of charge on the Android Market and the iTunes app store.

The web site (<http://urbanremix.gatech.edu/>) provides access to the uploaded media and allows participants to further tag the files, search them, and download them. The main interface to access the recordings, though, is an interactive map, built using the Google Web Toolkit. Recorded sounds are represented as markers on maps according to their GPS location. Users can filter the content of these maps for IDs, recording dates, or tags. Most importantly, they can click on the map itself to draw virtual paths through these locative recordings. Any path is then rendered as an audio soundscape mixing together the sounds closest to the path and changing their amplitude, panning, and filtering over time to reflect movement along the virtual path.

Participants are free to add more paths and can gradually build up an increasingly complex soundscape based on a multi-layered virtual traversal of the city. UrbanRemix allows further, more detailed sound manipulation as participants can loop and change rendering and mixing parameters in each path's settings. The result is an online mix based on the sounds recorded in the city and assembled with the help of spatial tracks crossing the city's map. Each mix can be saved, downloaded, and shared with other users. Finally, users can batch-download sounds to their DJ software and remix them locally on their computer.

The third element of UrbanRemix is a series of workshops and live performances. In practice, UrbanRemix comes to life in individual projects that center around communities and events at a certain place and time. Each project typically starts with workshops to inform groups in the neighborhood about UrbanRemix and encourage them to begin the collection of sounds and images. Discovering and selecting specific sounds for their own collection encourages participants to explore their neighborhood. It literally asks them to listen to their surroundings anew. Once the collection is complete, two forms of remixes are possible: online, using the web site; or offline, in the form of live performances. To prepare a public live performance, DJs download the collected sounds and perform live remixes using only the contributed content. All sound mixes, from DJs and other participants, can be shared and are found on the UrbanRemix site as well as other sound sharing sites.

A number of locative sound projects have addressed the use of locative media in urban neighborhoods. (see also (Freeman et al. TBP)). These include projects like Urban Tapestries (Proboscis 2004), [murmur], the Tactical Sound Garden Toolkit (Shepard 2007), Sonic City (Gaye, Maze, and Holmquist 2003), and the Silence of the Lands (Giaccardi, Eden, and Fischer 2006). UrbanRemix stands in the tradition of these projects and shares many comparable technologies and concepts such as maps, GPS, and locative

sounds. A key difference is, that UrbanRemix focuses throughout on a community aspect in the creation, mixing, and sharing of the evolving soundscapes. Sounds are gathered by local communities in their neighborhoods, shared and remixed online, but also presented back to participants in live performances delivered by professional DJs on location. The city becomes both a place for production as well as performance. UrbanRemix does not constitute an immediate intervention in the form of direct action but offers the chance to rediscover and reinterpret the spaces surrounding us.

Since summer 2010, we have conducted a number of projects with UrbanRemix that involved different audiences, cities, and neighborhoods. These include a project in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, a project for the Atlanta Beltline project, and one at New York's Times Square. Various audiences have used the system, from High School students, to church community members, musicians, teachers, and media educators. Over time, UrbanRemix has proved to be flexible and portable and it has attracted some interest from artists and communities as an experimental platform for their own projects. In addition, UrbanRemix has been used as an educational tool in music classes during summer camps offered by the Atlanta Public Schools. The following paragraphs will focus on three projects in three different cities to discuss the project in more detail.

The Art on the Beltline project was part of a larger art program that addresses the multi-billion dollar redevelopment of the inner city of Atlanta. The art initiative is part of a 5-year plan developed by various communities and implemented in July 2006. As the development changes the city artists are invited to contribute projects that deal with the changing spaces and relate to what is marketed as "Atlanta's New Public Space." 270 artists contributed in 2010 and presented visual work, installations, and walks, as well as dining on the Beltline and musical performances on location.

As part of this program, UrbanRemix invited citizens to record sounds on the undeveloped locations before they will be reshaped by the upcoming development. The result is a form of acoustic virtual heritage that allows an audio-exploration of places whose character is bound to change rapidly in the near future. The final performance by DJ Travis Thatcher was held at a temporary stage on location at the Beltline on the border between the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood and Inman Park. The Old Fourth Ward is one of the oldest districts in Atlanta and has seen many changes in population and development. Today it houses the Martin Luther King Memorial site and is an example for gradual gentrification of inner city neighborhoods. Inman Park was Atlanta's first planned suburb and evolved into an expensive and largely historic neighborhood.

The biggest challenge during this project was to involve participants. Even though about 180 sounds were recorded, there were not many individual participants – possibly due to the way we announced the project as a "free for all" event instead of emphasizing more direct community involvement. The resulting sound collections might reflect a kind of virtual heritage or conservation of the location before the upcoming development, but they barely related to the socio-cultural conditions of the surrounding neighborhoods. This challenge of recruiting participants for the Beltline project informed our future work, making it clear that proactive solicitation of participation would be required. Still, even with limited participation, the outcome of this project is a collection of sounds that serves as a documentation of the acoustic identity of the space at one moment in the history of Atlanta.

A much closer collaboration with local communities was at the heart of the UrbanRemix project in San Francisco. The event was part of the City Centered Festival and hosted by the Glide Memorial Church. Originally founded in the 30s, the Glide Memorial Church developed into a thriving open community that actively supports often disenfranchised citizens of San Francisco. Since the 60s its program reaches out to a range of minorities in the city and offers housing, medical assistance, and educational programs. The surrounding Tenderloin district is a historic downtown area of San Francisco and a highly diverse neighborhood where inner city challenges such as crime and homelessness are found as well as historic buildings and thriving art communities.

Participants in the workshop included teen youth from the Glide arts program, instructors from that program, as well as interns and volunteers working at Glide for the summer. Over 170 sounds were recorded during the one-day workshop ranging from different voices in the neighborhood to detailed sounds, such as security keypads or traffic noise. During the project, a noticeable focus on recordings of voices emerged – as if the different citizens of the neighborhood were meant to find their way into the soundscape through their speech. Ken Ueno performed the public remix performance at a small gallery in the neighborhood. Because the project was part of a relatively short conference event, it faced a condensed schedule, which complicated the work of Ueno. He had only one day to familiarize himself with the recorded sounds for his live sound mix. While we managed to base the project better in the local community, the challenge remained to connect the process of remixing better to the chosen location. In large part this was due to the structure of the workshop, which emphasized sound collection over sound remixing. The lack of sound remixing after the project showed that we needed ongoing solicitation, even post-workshop events.

The UrbanRemix project at Times Square, New York was a collaboration with the Times Square Arts Alliance and combined the approaches tested before. Times Square is a renowned tourist attraction in New York, an extremely busy central hub that sees high traffic from both tourists and locals. The Times Square Arts Alliance regularly invites public art projects to Times Square. The goal is to let visitors encounter contemporary art and raise the profile of Times Square as a location. The invited projects include installations, projections, as well as live performances and are largely temporary pieces. UrbanRemix ran in April and May 2011, leaving the sound collection open for one month. The event was promoted online and through the Times Square Art Alliance on location to engage the audience. It also offered some prizes for the best online sound mix and the best sound recording to motivate participation. In addition, two workshops were held with students from the Jacqueline Onassis High School in immediate proximity to Times Square. A third workshop, co-organized by the New York media art collective Eyebeam, included local educators and media experts from museums, schools, and other institutions. Over 600 sounds were recorded and mixed by Thatcher and Damon Holzborn during a dual performance at the end of the project. They performed on a public outdoor stage in Times Square and in a second performance inside the visitor center nearby. The prize for the best online remix was won by a Brazilian artist, Osnildo Gesser Muller Junior, who had discovered the project online and had mixed his soundscape from his home in Brazil based on the recordings of the local participants. The prize for the best sound recording went to a local high school student. Thus, the project's outcome mirrors the double nature of Times Square as a lived neighborhood for its citizens, as well as a space of tourism and transit for a larger global audience.

No technical evaluation of user involvement has been conducted yet, but the informal feedback received in all three projects was largely positive. Participants often report new “finds” on their scavenger hunt for interesting sounds. This can be a discovery of something new in the all-too-familiar, like students discovering a fountain by “finding” the sound of water near Times Square in close proximity to their school, or it can be the documentation of a changing environment, as seen in the Art on the Beltline project.

Accordingly, participants showed clear signs of ownership of their contributed sounds throughout the projects. When they reviewed the sounds recorded for a specific project online, they often started with their own recordings, filtering out all other contributions on the web interface. At the same time, the live DJs were curious about the sound recording participants. Ueno stated after his performance in San Francisco that, “What I most wished to happen was to meet the people who collected the sounds and talk to them after my performance, which, unfortunately, didn't happen. I would have liked to have heard their impressions of what I did, and if they could recognize their contributions.” Different participants clearly engaged in the intended artistic musical dialogue “on” the location. This sense of shared ownership and personal connections was also visible in other UrbanRemix projects. In 2010 and 2011

UrbanRemix was used in music courses in summer camps with the Atlanta Public Schools. These camps allowed for a longer and more focused involvement. Students worked for approximately a week, recording and remixing sounds. Some students, however, not only created their own sound remixes but surprised us with their own dance routines based on their remix soundtrack. Reactions like these indicate that the engagement with their surroundings had clearly led to a new artistic dialogue.

Kester asked “How do we form collective or communal identities without scapegoating those who are excluded from them? Is it possible to develop a cross-cultural dialogue without sacrificing the unique identities of individual speakers?” (Kester 2005) Admittedly, not all boundaries for such a dialogue are eliminated in the case of UrbanRemix. Participation still depends on availability of relatively expensive smart phones, for example. Although we provide devices during the workshops, many other citizens remain excluded.

UrbanRemix succeeds in retaining the identity of individual participants within the sound collection and the evolving remixes. Participants not only pay special attention to their own sounds, but they also react whenever they identify “their” sound in somebody else’s remix. In that way, UrbanRemix provides an engaging platform for personal involvement with neighborhoods in a new sound-based dialogue.

Technically and conceptually UrbanRemix delivers a platform consisting of software, workshops, and on-line media. We constantly improve these core elements of the system, but to participants they appear as a “given” in any local project. Such a rigidity barely fits into the Dialogical Aesthetics outlined by Kester. It allows for a creative exploration of the surroundings, but only within the technical frame set by the underlying platform. On the one hand, this frees the participants to a playful involvement, on the other, it limits them to existent mechanics and restricts any alteration. For example, we do not teach how to change the code or hack the mobile application. In this regard, UrbanRemix constitutes a tool for artistic involvement that has an own rhetoric: what data is saved, who has access to the technology, what is the role of the administrator, how and where are projects publicized and conducted?

At the same time, each project is shaped by practical conditions depending on the participants but also on the conditions of the event, which include the scheduling of projects, availability of WiFi networks or electricity at the location. Even though they all used by-and-large the same underlying technical set up, each UrbanRemix project was unique. The system seems to encourage a ludic engagement that fosters a specific playful exploration of one’s neighborhood. This engagement should be seen as step toward Kester’s “cross-cultural dialogue” wherein performative and situated actions are integral part of the art piece.

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