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Future sound of cities



Domain:
Climate Action
and Environment



Place:
Helsingborg,
Sweden



Duration:
One day including a walk and a
workshop



Target audience:
General public, public
authorities, researchers

Mission

In Sweden, efforts to reduce car dependence are closely tied to the vision of creating 15-minute cities, where daily needs can be met within a short walk or bike ride. The presence of cars shapes more than mobility: it fills public space with constant noise that affects health and wellbeing, often without people being fully aware of it. By paying closer attention to the sounds that define urban environments, municipalities can gain valuable insights into how streets and neighborhoods are experienced, opening pathways to design cities that feel more livable and human-centered.

Engagement activities

As part of an EU funded research project (UVAR4US) about reducing car dependence to enable 15-minute cities, researchers at RISE had an interest in working with participatory experiences through multiple senses as a way to engage citizens in co-designing the future of their urban environments. The interaction was held during the kick-off meeting of the research project, ensuring that all researchers would be aware of the importance of engaging citizens to co-design.

Artistic activities

The interaction was built on a collaboration with sound artist and musician Richard Widerberg, leading to two activities performed at the same time as visiting the city of Helsingborg: a soundwalk, and a sound recording workshop.

IMPACT

Co-designing the city
with citizens

Dialogue on people-
centered urban areas

Linking mobility reduction
to livability

Raising researchers and
policy makers awareness on
one of the impacts of mobility



WHAT HAPPENED?

The UVAR4US project explores how Urban Vehicle Access Regulations contribute to achieving the vision of a 15-minute city and affect the liveability of neighbourhoods. If such regulations aim to reduce car dependency, an underlying question emerges: what new social practices will fill the spaces once occupied by cars?

To engage citizens in co-designing the future of their urban environment, we first need to understand, and experience, the city through different senses.

The artistic intervention, developed through a common research process and discussions on the past artworks and experiences of a sound artist, revealed the importance of sound in shaping urban life, not just as noise to be removed and controlled, but as a defining part of a city's experience and identity.

PARTICIPANTS ENGAGEMENT

To a sound artist, cities soundscapes are like a musical composition with harmonious and dissonant elements that can be recombined in different ways. Artistic methods such as soundwalking help people to become attentive of how we are affected by sound and noise when living in cities, and how they shape our experience, sometimes even without us knowing it.

Such approaches have been explored in Helsingborg, in connection with, and during the kick-off of UVAR4US, with researchers, municipal representatives and citizens.

Two activities were organised by a sound artist: a soundwalk, open to the public through municipality channels, and a sound recording workshop.

What is a soundwalk?

A soundwalk is a guided walk that focuses on listening to the environment, all the sounds around us, and the atmosphere they create. Unlike walking with headphones, participants are invited to slow down and open their ears to the city's natural soundscape. It's a way to experience, based from many point of views. In Helsingborg, the soundwalk concluded with a group reflection on what participants had heard and how they felt.

The sound artist arrived on location prior to the activity to explore the city, learn about its history and related soundscape, and identify contrasting sound environments to prepare the route.

For the sound recording workshop, project consortium members had been asked to prepare audio recordings from their cities. Some participants emailed or uploaded these audio beforehand, while others played it from their phones during the activity.



Artistic activities

Richard Widerberg, the artist, has worked for years with cities, urban experiences and participatory sound exploration in artistic and pedagogical settings. This long experience nourished the two activities designed for the interaction:

Soundwalk

A public soundwalk was hosted with researchers and local resident citizens. He had curated a path through the city that the group walked together in silence behind the artist with the instructions to pay attention to the sounds and how they made you feel. The walked mixed busy intersections with silent back streets and both indoors and outdoors environment. Just as the artist said, learning to become attentive to soundscapes takes a while and as the activity progressed participants slowly entered a different state of mind, almost meditative, where more and more sounds became present and identifiable. The walk ended with participants standing in silence with closed eyes and taking in a soundscape down in the harbour that Richard had selected. Afterwards, the artist led a discussion about sound and urban environments. Participants shared their experiences of the walk, what was pleasant or unpleasant as well as memories of sounds in the city and how urban soundscapes evolve over time. It led to broader conversations about the changing environment of cities and the future soundscapes.

Sound recording workshop

The second activity took place the day after, with researchers and municipality representatives from 4 cities. Researchers and city representatives from 6 different countries that gathered at the kickoff, previously had been asked to walk through their cities and record two sounds from their home cities with their mobile phones: one sound that they enjoyed and want to hear more of and one sound that annoys them and that they want to hear less of. These were used as a basis for a discussion about how we want soundscapes to be transformed in our cities and what interventions would lead to them changing. Interestingly, most annoying sounds consisted of traffic, highlighting the issues that the research projects wants to address, while the enjoyable sounds featured a great variety of both calm and busy locations.

Find the artists:

- [Richard Widerberg](#)



Impact of the interaction

Both the reflection with citizens after the soundwalk and the workshop with the sound recordings provided researchers with valuable insights into how people experience sound in cities and what it means to them. Those insights would not have been possible without the artistic method, which first enabled participants to become attentive to how sound is experienced through embodied activities. Indeed, walking together as a group and following a sound artist makes it easier to focus on listening rather than getting lost in your thoughts.

The research project will explore participatory methods in different phases of urban transitions and the collaboration with the sound artist has transformed the approach for how to engage citizens with artistic methods and how the project will work with incorporating different senses and experiences in working with citizens about future urban spaces.

The method of working with sound artists in urban transformations is a method to be promoted further since local sound artists are probably the residents of a city that have paid most attention to how the city sounds and how those soundscapes affect us. Given the importance of soundscape for health, well-being and enjoyment in cities, and the ability of artistic methods to engage citizens in an emotional and embodied way, these collaborations could form important components of transformations of urban spaces to more livable and enjoyable environments.

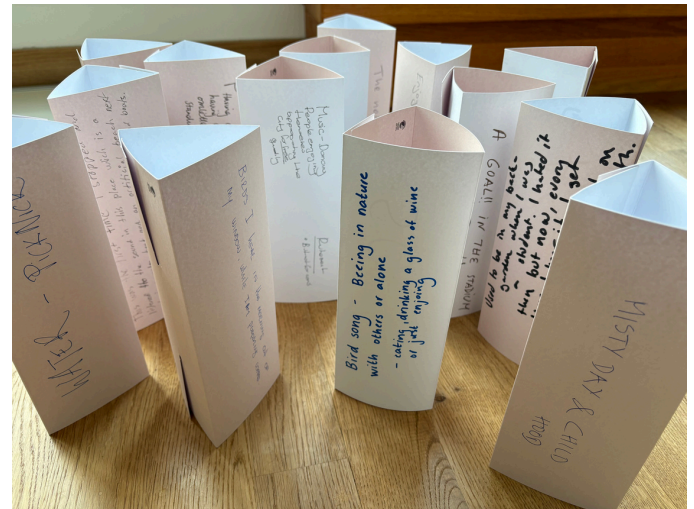


A sound walk opens up our perception on several levels and always sparks engaged and interesting discussions. That was also the case this time in Helsingborg.



Looking to replicate this impactful experience?
RISE has identified a few key ingredients to ensure success:

- Do not share the route in advance and let participants simply follow the guide/ the artist and focus fully on listening.
- The soundwalk should last at least 10 minutes, as it often takes around 5 minutes for participants to start noticing sounds they hadn't heard before. It can last up to 30 minutes, or even an hour in some cases.
- Choose an obvious place to meet up, somewhere well-known to locals.
- Be ready to adjust the walk depending on the weather. Tell the participants to dress accordingly for an outdoor activity and plan an indoor place to gather and end it if it starts raining.



Resources

Intervention of a sound artist
for two days : 2 500€



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