

A Tiny Field for Soundscape Design: A case study of soundscape museum in Hirano, Osaka

Atsushi Nishimura

Hirano Soundscape Museum (Osaka, Japan)
email: atsusi@yo.rim.or.jp

Keywords: design, community, soundscape museum, soundmonograph

Abstract

The author worked out his idea of 'soundscape museum' as an experiment in order to put into practice the soundscape design that can be joined by any individual citizen. And he actually started Hirano Soundscape Museum (HSM) as part of a grass-roots activity for community development in Hirano, Osaka, Japan, in 1998. In the thesis, the author will report on the activities in HSM and discuss his concepts and his methods of soundscape design he has gathered from the case.

1 Introduction

In this section, the purpose of the study and the author's understanding of the term "soundscape" will be mentioned.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of the study is to indicate concretely how the soundscape exists in our real life. Although soundscape has been an object of study for a long time, it seems that there is little agreement as to the question what the soundscape actually is. The author aims to find out what we can actually do under the concept of soundscape. He believes that it is a key to making clear a method for studying or designing soundscape. In this paper, the author will report on his activities as an experiment in soundscape design and will discuss his concept behind the activities.

1.2 Theoretical Background

In this paper, the author will use the term "soundscape" to refer to a meaning of sound to individuals. His usage follows basically the definition by World Soundscape Project:

SOUNDSCAPE: An environment of sound (sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by a society. It thus depends on the relationship between the individual and

any such environment. The term may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an artificial environment. [Truax, 1978, p.126]

As mentioned later, the author would be obligated to make the applicable area of the definition narrower whether the sounds actually exist or not. The core of the questions is to make a clear distinction between soundscape and sound. If not, we would not be able to treat properly the soundscape as an object of our study or design. Therefore, the author regards the term "soundscape design" as a design of soundscape. A special emphasis will be placed on the processes in which the individuals form their philosophy of relating with sounds. [Nishimura 2002]

2 Brief Review of the Case

The author has been involved in a case study in which he has tried to make a soundscape museum for soundscape study as one of the community development activities in Hirano, Osaka. In this section, the overviews and the backgrounds of the case study will be mentioned.

2.1 Study Area

A Lost District

Hirano in this paper means an old district of "Hirano-go" which had prospered as a self-governing town on the background of their economy until the early twentieth century. At present, the area is located in Hirano ward, Osaka city, Japan. Figure 1 shows the geographical location of Hirano ward in Japan. "Hirano-go" has the area of approximately 1 square kilometer. A lot of new buildings including factories, shopping centers and residences are growing in number rapidly, while the historical buildings are going to be reduced. Against the urban development, the preservation of the historical landscape is an important problem to be solved in the area.



Figure 1 The location of Hirano ward. The study area of “Hirano-go” is located in the central district of the ward.

In the period of ‘Sengoku’ (the age of civil wars in Japan, approximately 1467-1568), the people of “Hirano-go” had constructed a moat for their self-defense from enemies or plagues. In figure 2, an old map of the district shows the moat around the town.

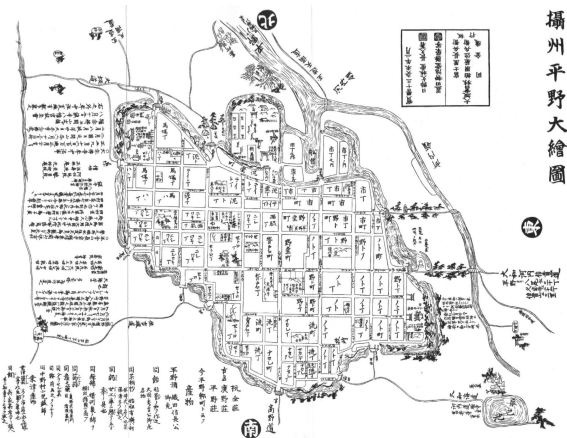


Figure 2 An old map of “Hirano-go” published in 1763.

In 1925, the name of “Hirano-go” had been lost by the incorporation into Osaka City. Most of the moats have been lost by the reclamation for urbanization. And in 1949, most of the administrative districts had been modified following the establishment of Hirano ward. Once “Hirano-go” disappeared from the maps and remained mainly in the memories of the residents.

A Grass-roots Activity for Community Development in the Spectrum

In Hirano, a community development movement has been run since 1980. The citizen’s group ‘Hirano People’s Network for Community Development’ (HPN) started their activities by doing a campaign for preservation of a train station in the district when the line was abolished in 1980. Although the preservation campaign could not be accomplished, the solidarity of the participants produced a good result as the continuation of their activities for community development over twenty years. A lost district has also survived in such activities.



Figure 3 A bird’s-eye view image of the study area in the present. The historical landscape is going to be lost.

HPN has a unique motto: “no representative, no rule and no membership fee.” A kind of voluntary nature has been highly rated in the activities in HPN.



Figure 4 One of the 15 museums “Hirano Film Archive”. The upper shows an exterior of the museum. The bottom shows the director of the museum. This film archive includes a satellite of HSM.

HPN started Hirano Ecomuseum Project in 1993. The project consists of a lot of tiny museums utilizing the ordinary facilities (i.e. temples, shrines, stores, public spaces and private houses). Each director of the museum decides his plan for the exhibition in the museum not from some academic sense of value but from the director’s own sense of favorite.

The aim of the museum project is to give visitors some kind of holistic image or invisible atmosphere of the town through scrolling around the district. And what they want is that participants can enjoy the museum project.

2.2 History of the Soundscape Projects

In HPN, the first project for the soundscape had started in 1994. They gathered the various kinds of sounds around their every day life (i.e. traffic noises, music in traditional festivals, sound streams in supermarket, voices of cash dispensers in city banks, and etc.) They said that any sounds could be an object of their recording. They, however, could not find their way in which they utilize the recording matters for their activity. Finally, although some tapes were left over, the project has been discontinued.

Since 1996, the author has participated in HPN. At the time, he was a graduate student who studied soundscape. He was interested especially in the sound archives for soundscape study. Because he thought that describing soundscape on the media that can appeal directly to our sensation is indispensable for soundscape study. At the same time, however, he thought that recording matters are not always the description of soundscape. From the first, both the members of HPN and the author recognized the common necessity to describe something more than sounds.

At the beginning of the participation, the author supposed that the area and the HPN activities could be an object of his soundscape study. And moreover, the author thought that the concept of soundscape could be useful for the HPN activities. The reality, however, was entirely different from his groundless hypothesis. Because the members of HPN always considered the area as a bundle of the experiences, it was difficult for the author to learn the area conceptually. The answer to the question “what the area is for someone” depends on what he/she has ever seen, heard, felt, imagined, considered and done in the area. Therefore, the first task of the author for studying soundscape around the area was to feel and to do whatever he encountered in the area.

As a result, HSM started as part of Hirano Ecomuseum Project. The author thought he could find something to do for soundscape study by standing himself on the same ground as the members of the HPN community.

2.3. Overview of HSM

HSM has six facilities for exhibiting its original soundmonograph. One of them in Senkoji temple plays a role of the core facility in which all information of HSM are integrated. At other facilities, the soundmonograph for each place is being displayed. In those facilities, various types of CD players are used (i.e. visitors can listen to CDs using an FM radio receiver).



Figure. 5 CD listening system in core facility at Senkoji temple. A multi disc changer is combined with an antique telephone.

HSM exhibits the soundscapes of the area not only on recording matters but also on another kind of media. The sound map gives the geographical position of the facilities, the purpose of HSM, the testimonies of “earwitnesses” [Schafer 1974], a sound walk report around the area and the listening points where the characteristic sounds of the area could be heard. The website has given us a lot of opportunities to communicate with others. Figure 6 shows an example page of the site. Especially on international exchanges, WWW is extremely fruitful. In the future, it will be an interface between users and the digital archive section of HSM via Internet.



Figure. 6: a page of the HSM website.
<http://www.omoroide.com/soundscape>

3 Discussion on the Concepts and Methods behind the Case

Through the activities of HSM, the author gained several concepts and the method in order to put the concepts into practice. The concepts and methods took shape in “soundmonograph” and “soundscape museum.” [Nishimura and Hiramatsu 1999a,b]

In this section, the concept and methods behind the case will be discussed on the two viewpoints respectively.

3.1 Soundmonograph

The author calls the description of soundscape as “soundmonograph” and defines it as a kind of monograph on recording matter. (Nishimura and Hiramatsu 1999a)

Sounds often excite our imagination and bring back vivid memories. When a sound is heard as a background for some visual image, the sound itself hides away from our consciousness. But when we listen to a sound consciously, the sound takes us to a world of images or meanings that exist behind the sound.

The directness of sound can reveal things to us that are impossible to discover through other media. The soundmonograph is not only for acquiring knowledge, but also for sharing the great feeling that can never be described visually. (i.e. animated sounds of a bustling street, the charm of children's voices, the sounds of nature that often relax us,... etc.)

In soundscape study, the relationships between an environment and its subject can be recognized from a holistic point of view in which image, mood and memory are included. Therefore, the descriptions of soundscape have to include some elements by which the experiences and the imagination of the listeners can be evoked.



Figure 7 A scene of the recordings for making a soundmonograph. A lot of important information was acquired from the free discussion.

To make a soundmonograph, it is necessary to gather both sounds and the comments that were acquired from the listeners of the sounds. Figure 7

shows a scene of the recording to gather some information about a specific sound.

The following story of the author is a typical example that shows the quality of such information. In a recording, the author tried to record the sounds of a well. He operated the pump of the well by himself and made sounds. Some other day, the author recorded around the same well. In this time, he ran his recording with an informant who used to use the well usually. When the author asked her to operate the pump, she made the sounds, he realized that his recording in the last time was completely wrong.



Figure. 8 An old pump of a well in the area. If we are ignorant of the way to operate the pump, we cannot hear the original sound of the well.

3.2 Soundscape Museum

As mentioned above, HSM is not only a sound archives but also a soundscape museum. The author has realized a problem that any sound would be just a mere sound without our imagination and memory of life, from the beginning of the case. In the actual activities, what exists between sounds and soundscapes came to be realized by the author.

Sounds are most certainly the result of some event. To know the sounds of a specific spectrum is to know the things in the spectrum. All the sounds --- the sounds we hear each day, all the sounds that we have heard, and everything we wish to hear in the future --- are the keys to discovering our history, to recognizing our present situation, and to thinking about our future. The clear attitude, that the purpose of HSM should exist in a more comprehensive field than in the soundscape, brings a series of tasks to gather sounds in HSM into a project of community development.

The author's concept of soundscape museum takes a hint from a kind of new museum movements (e.g. ecomuseum, community museum, integral museum, etc.) Especially, HSM seems to resemble the neighborhood museum in the characteristic point that people not only study but also create their own culture in the museum [Riviere 1974].

Most recent project in HSM is to produce a soundmonograph for blind people. The recording matters seem to be suitable for blind people. However,

the world spread in blind people when they hear sounds is often completely different from the author's own feeling.

4 Conclusions

HSM is a tiny progressive step for the experiment of soundscape design. Therefore, it is impossible to estimate the effectiveness of HSM for the soundscape design with sufficient validity. However, the significance of HSM can be summarized in the following two points: (1) the problems of sonic environment have been treated in an actual project for the community development, and (2) HSM has been interested not in the sound itself but in the meaning of sound. [Nishimura 2001]

The author has considered that the most important experience in the case was to touch directly the voluntary nature of the community development activities in HPN. That voluntarism in that context is one of the most important concepts of soundscape design, in which any individual citizen can participate.

There are a lot of matters that we cannot see without hearing. There are, however, a lot of sounds that cannot be heard without knowledge. The goal of HSM is to give some fields and tools for soundscape design. According to the author's opinion, designing soundscapes is to form some audio media to which a kind of mindscape of each individual can be projected. It is also to allow each individual's soundscape to be diverse and autonomous.

References

- Nishimura, A. and Hiramatsu, K. 1999a, *Sound Monograph: A case study towards the method for capturing soundscapes*, Soundscape (JSAJ), 1, 63-72. (in Japanese)
- Nishimura, A. and Hiramatsu, K. 1999b, *Soundscape Museum: A report on the method for sharing and preserving soundscapes*, Soundscape (JSAJ), 1, 99-106. (in Japanese)
- Nishimura, A. 2001, *Hirano Soundscape Museum: A voice from the field of community development*, Soundscape (JSAJ), 3.
- Nishimura, A. 2002, *Soundscape Museum and Community Development: A memorandum based on the voice from the visitors to Hirano Ecomuseum Project*, Soundscape (JSAJ), 4, 93-102. (in Japanese)
- Rivière, H. 1973, *Role of museums of art and of human and social sciences*, Museum, 25, 26-44.
- Schafer, R. M. 1974, *Tuning of the World*, Vancouver: A.R.C. Publications.
- Truax, B. (ed.) 1978, *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, Vancouver: A.R.C. Publications.