Listening to buildings: exploring the Lucerne Culture and Congress Centre through sound

To debate

▸ **What questions arise when experimenting with sound as a method for the first time?**

▸ **What is the role of sound in the design, the atmospheres and the life of iconic buildings?**

▸ **In what ways can sound be used as a method to research buildings?**

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The Culture and Convention Centre Lucerne, KKL Lucerne, is a state-of-the-art concert and convention hall located at the shores of Lake Lucerne in Lucerne, Central Switzerland. Our work on KKL Lucerne is part of a larger project where we investigate cultural flagships as global objects emerging from relations spanning the world. In this article, we present how sound is both a productive object of study and a research tool in our aim to think of cultural flagships as multiple, vital and assembled buildings (Kraftl, 2010). The workshop "Making Noise - Sound in Urban Research Practice" at the University of Lausanne took place a few weeks before we went to Lucerne for fieldwork. It inspired us to reflect on the role of sound in the design, the atmospheres and the life of buildings (Berrens, 2016). Drawing on data from our exploration of the KKL and walk-along interviews, we study the multiple lives and relations that have shaped the building from genesis up to the present day. This article retraces our experiment with sound in the KKL through three moments and tells a particular fieldwork dynamic where sounds, spaces and affects are untangled to make sense of buildings.

Listening: our first encounter with the KKL

On November 17th 2021, as we walked out of the Lucerne railway station, we found ourselves in front of a large roundabout. While looking for a safe way to cross, we recognised the KKL standing behind the bus station and surrounded by traffic jams of cars trying to access the underground parking. From that angle, the building seemed rather different from what we imagined based on the photos seen online, mostly presenting the building's facade visible from Lake Lucerne. The noise of traffic, the chaotic atmosphere of the roundabout and the metal cage structure of the building eclipsed the iconicity of the facade. Through its location and design, the KKL seemed cut off from the rest of the city reinforcing the impression that iconic buildings operate in a vacuum and are often detached from their urban environments.
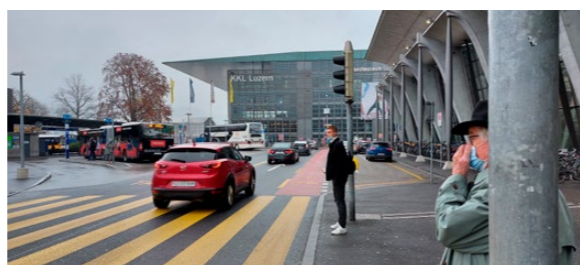
View of the KKL from outside the train station. November 2021

Moving forward to better see the facade and iconic roof of the KKL, we headed to Europaplatz - the esplanade in front of the building that becomes lively and busy when locals and tourists gather on sunny days. The atmosphere changed, the lake appeared and immediately pushed the urban chaos into the background; it was suddenly possible to hear seagulls, boats, the lapping of water and even have an impression of silence. To our own surprise, we were experiencing some of Jean Nouvel's architectural ambitions, namely designing a building in which the main element is the lake. This is achieved by both bringing water into the building and projecting the building towards the lake. Sound plays an important part in this design as the water is stirred mechanically in order to produce a permanent splashing sound in the background. This sonic illusion becomes even more unsettling when one stands inside the main hall as the splashing echoes in a vast and enclosed space that

smells of chlorine. This might remind one more of a swimming pool than of Lake Lucerne, but the illusion is strong enough to affect one's conviction of being in an iconic venue hosting classical music events.

In the rest of the building, sound played a less obvious but equally important role in helping us tend more closely to the materiality of the building. Indeed, listening to the sonic atmospheres in and around the KKL led us to focus on the building's construction materials. For example, the sanitised atmosphere of the main metal staircase where every sound echoes off the glass walls of the building contrasts with the welcoming and muffled atmosphere of the fourth floor, dedicated to the Museum of Art Lucerne and its café, which is predominantly designed using wood. Our first encounter with the KKL through its contrasting sounds and its engineered atmospheres broadened our comprehension of iconic architecture.

Recording: an attempt to resonate with the KKL

During fieldwork, we aimed to capture the various spaces and functions of the KKL using sound both as a representative and performative method (Gallagher, 2015). The multi-functionality of the building resonated through its sounds, which invited us to question the harmonies and disharmonies of its soundscape. We reflected on the possibility for an outside listener to hear common features in this soundscape and understand that all these sounds originate from the same place. Apart from the splashing of water, other artificial sounds such as the chirping of birds in the café Piaf and the tolls of the bells of the conference halls contribute to a dissonant soundscape that blurs the sonic features that one associates with a building. The main elements that give unity to these recordings stem from the lives inside the KKL: the absence or presence of people inside the building manifested through footsteps, voices speaking in Swiss German or the echo of our solitary footsteps. Examining the (dis)harmonies of building soundscapes encourages further studies of the relation between engineered atmospheres, practices of the built environment, and everyday atmospheres.

## Lucerne Culture and Congress Centre (Kultur- und Kongresszentrum Luzern)

The Culture and Convention Centre Lucerne, KKL Lucerne, is a state-of-the-art concert and convention hall in Lucerne, Switzerland. The building is designed by architects Jean Nouvel and Emmanuel Cattani and is located in the heart of Lucerne right next to the railway station, designed by Santiago Calatrava, another prominent architect. The actual KKL Lucerne was built to replace the former Art and Convention Centre designed by Armin Meili, considered unfit for renovation. The construction of a new iconic centre also ensured that the city of Lucerne would continue to host the Lucerne Festival, an annual classical music festival of international significance. Construction began in January 1995 with a groundbreaking ceremony and was completed in March 2000. According to the final report, the total cost for the construction reached 226.5 million CHF, 32.5 million more than planned. The total habitable area of the building is 22,000 m² and has four halls: the concert hall (1840 seats), the conference hall (1300 seats), the Lucerne Hall (850 seats) and the Auditorium (270 seats). The construction and operational funding of KKL was approved through a local referendum. In 2014, a financing arrangement for the long-term maintenance of the venue was extended until 2028. Special conditions and reduced rental fees ensure that Lucerne's local associations and non-profit organisations use the facility for 145 days a year. Today the building hosts a variety of events. It is home to the International Lucerne Festival but also the Museum of Art of Lucerne, while keeping to its original promise of remaining accessible for everyone also by including mass culture events.

In the bottom floor of the KKL. November 2021.

Recording these sounds also made us further reflect on our own positionality in our research while in turn observing, collecting, and assembling the multiple stories of buildings. One of the sounds that we captured is particularly telling in this regard: while we were visiting the Museum of Art Lucerne, we were struck by its peculiar aquatic atmosphere. In the recording, one can hear the sounds that we intended to document - the muffled sound coming from the room where a movie played, a quiet conversation in front of a painting or somebody's audio guide as we pass them. However, these elements are attuned by the sounds made by the researcher who was recording: one can hear the researcher exploring this space, choosing to follow a certain noise, deciding to change pace or direction. By amplifying these sounds, the biases of our technical device raise issues relative to the active presence of the researcher in the field. Gathering multiple or participatory soundscapes could help to better understand the multiple affective relations people have towards a building.
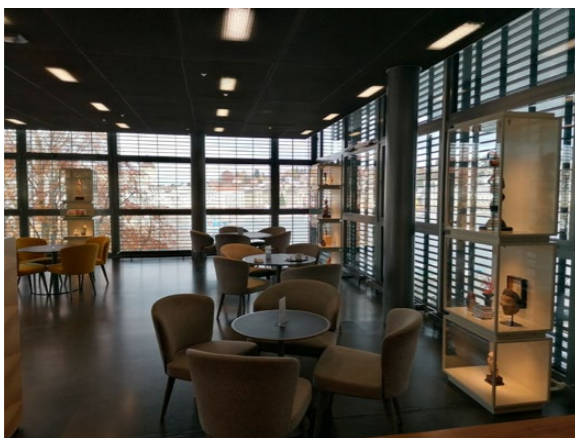
Inside the Museum café of the KKL. November 2021.

Listening again: exploring the background sounds of the KKL

When we returned from fieldwork, we listened to the audio recordings of the walk-along interviews we had made and doing so discovered the variety of ambient sounds that were accidentally recorded. The decision to conduct walk-along interviews was motivated by our interest in the link between our respondents' stories and the environment in which they were told. In our approach to the materiality of buildings, we had nevertheless underestimated the importance of sound as part of these walk-alongs. During these interviews, we had the privilege of accessing various public and restricted spaces of the KKL and ended up with a consequent collection of background sounds - urban noises, chatters, water noises, elevator noises, and orchestra sounds. Thus, instead of neglecting these moments, we decided to code them in the qualitative data analysis software and add them to our catalogue so that they could be used at later stages of our research. We believe that these pieces can be helpful in long-term research processes as they both enable going back to crucial memories from the field, and encourage to re-imagine object(s) of study (Gallagher, 2015).

A first analysis demonstrates that these ambient sounds can be used for more than just portraying the building. When considering them in light of the content of our interviews, they manifest dynamics of (in) accessibility inside the KKL. They highlight moments and spaces of transition such as the engineered passage between the reception area and the main concert hall that aims to 'clean' the visitors' ears before concerts. The many doors and the airlock effects they create can also be heard in these recordings; this not only reinforces the impression of there being multiple spaces inside the building but makes the barriers inside the KKL audible. Depending on who we interviewed in the KKL, one hears negotiations to access certain halls, the rattling of keys to open doors to restricted spaces or the sudden liveliness of a place. The

recordings from the walk-along interviews allow us to listen to the KKL in a different way by taking up the position of an observer who both follows how someone relates to the building and examines its agency.
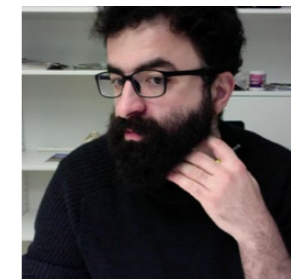

Main staircase of KKL. November 2021.

Conclusion

Our first experience of working with sound during fieldwork in the Culture and Congress Centre in Lucerne demonstrates how sound is both a productive object and method for researching buildings. We think that collecting and analysing sounds in and around buildings helps to explore their multiple components and profiles. Looking into elements such as (dis)harmonies, engineered atmospheres, sounds of materials, affective responses to sounds, or relations between practices and soundscapes deepens our understanding of buildings as vital and assembled. Engaging with the KKL at distinct moments and through various methods allowed us to take up novel stances; this enables new forms of listening, the emergence of specific trends and arguments, and the possibility to re-imagine one's fieldwork. Working with sound has enhanced our sensitivity in the field and has also made us more aware of the ways one can, without being a sound engineer or artist, combine sound with other research approaches. As such, this article testifies to our first experiment that hopes to outline possible directions for further research on sound and buildings.

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