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KEYNOTE

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# Stolen Silence: Listening to the History of Quiet Areas in Urban and Rural Environments

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## Introduction

In the late 1980s, when I had just started working as a PhD student at Maastricht University and still had some spare time to go for lunch walks, I soon discovered that the quietest urban spaces in town were to be found in the court yards of Maastricht's many churches and cloisters. One of these was located near a busy main road leading to and fro the city centre. It was a former abbey turned into a residential home for retired congregation members. The area had a large, beautiful park-like garden that was not only calm because it was little used, but also because it was surrounded by the huge cloister building itself, a row of high terrace houses, a small church, an old hospital and the romantic ruins of a thick wall. These structures created 'acoustic shadows', areas in which sound waves cannot freely propagate due to physical barriers. As an expert in the auditory sciences explains it, 'any large object placed in the path of a sound will cast an acoustic shadow' in which less of that sound is audible.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, I could still sneak into the private area unseen, or by politely nodding at the porters, pretending I was going to visit one of the residents. Nowadays, the area is closed off by a huge fence and a barrier. It will soon be renovated into an area with luxury villas at its borders and apartments for senior citizens with care

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1 C.J. Plack, *The Oxford Handbook of Auditory Science: Hearing* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 126.

needs in the former cloister. It is as yet unknown what will happen with the garden. It might or might not become a semi-public area again.

It would, in fact, be an ideal candidate for the ‘quiet areas’ that the European Union (EU) has stipulated its member states to establish ever since it published its Environmental Noise Directive (END) in 2002.<sup>2</sup> Today, both policymakers and citizens keep calling for constituting such quiet areas in order to create relief from noise-as-unwanted-sound for urbanites. Although the specific measures policy makers have in mind are relatively new, the idea of establishing quiet zones is not. While Western societies have long struggled with their response to public complaints about noise, they have also tried to protect particular areas from noise, such as spaces in and around churches, schools, and hospitals (‘islands of silence’) in urban environments and to designate quiet areas in the countryside.

Acknowledging the contestation of quiet areas – hence the notion of ‘stolen silence’ as in reclaiming something against the grain, like in a ‘stolen moment’ – this paper explores what we can learn from historical traditions concerning urban quiet areas and more recent experiences with rural quiet areas for how to create, preserve and protect quiet in modern-day urban environments. It critically discusses recent EU discourse on quiet areas, and argues for bringing quiet areas, especially micro-sites of quiet, to the built environment rather than assisting urban dwellers to travel to quiet areas outside their own neighbourhoods. It does so by building on sources from the Netherlands, Flanders and Germany published as of the late 1970s, and by drawing on the ‘paradox of [noise] control,’<sup>3</sup> the implications of ‘de-sacralizing silence,’ and the already mentioned notion of ‘acoustic shadows.’<sup>4</sup> The research for this paper is far from exhaustive. The key sources analyzed, however, show some significant shifts in the conceptualization and experiences with quiet areas.

## Promoting Quiet Areas in Europe

In 2002, the EU published the Environmental Noise Directive that requires member states to send in action plans to reduce the exposure of humans to environmental noise, itself defined as ‘unwanted or harmful outdoor sound created by human activities.’<sup>5</sup> Such action plans, to be submitted every five years, have to

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2 Directive 2002/49/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 June 2002 relating to the assessment and management of environmental noise, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 189, 18.7.2002, 12-25.

3 K. Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*, (The MIT Press, 2008).

4 A. Corbin, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the Present Day*, (Polity Press, 2018).

5 Directive 2002, 13.

include noise mapping data, strategies to reduce the number of people affected by environmental noise – such as limit values for the noise emission of specific sources – and plans for designing and preserving quiet areas in ‘agglomeration[s]’ and ‘in open country.’ In the first type of quiet area, the noise has to be lower than a particular value set by the authorities, while the second class of quiet areas has to be ‘undisturbed by noise from traffic, industry or recreational activities.’<sup>6</sup>

Eighteen years later, in 2020, the European Environment Agency (EAA) conceded that many countries were substantially behind schedule in providing data and plans, and that only a few per cent of the plans included information on quiet areas, usually in cities. One reason, the EAA believed, was that the END did ‘not provide a clear definition of quiet areas, which leaves countries with ample discretion in its interpretation.’<sup>7</sup> As the EEA had it, drawing on a previous good practice guide,<sup>8</sup> quiet areas could just as well be described as ‘tranquil’ or ‘calm’ areas: places with a ‘pleasant soundscape,’ that is without a dominating source of unwanted sound. Places experienced as calm were usually also ‘safe and clean,’ with a nice view on greenery or water. In urban settings, these areas were to be found in parks, gardens, leisure areas, courtyards or amidst building blocks. ‘In rural areas, they often coincide with natural parks or protected areas, but they may also be part of an agricultural area or unused land outside the city.’<sup>9</sup>

By that time, the EAA had already developed the Quiet Suitability Index (QSI) that had to assist EU countries in finding rural quiet areas, where both urbanites and wildlife could find relief from noise. Areas scoring high on the QSI partially overlapped with Natura 2000 areas, which in turn opened avenues for policy convergence.<sup>10</sup> Yet, while the idea behind the QSI was to solve the definition problem, the EAA identified another issue, being the lack of access to such potential areas for people with a lower socio-economic position (SEP).

Intriguingly, the solutions it suggested for this problem – to be discussed below – point at the same “paradox of [noise] control’ I have also identified in *Mechanical Sound*, my monograph on the history of noise as a public problem in the long twentieth century. This is the paradox: While noise control policies ask for discrete measures suitable for legislation, in which spatially defined regulation fits very well, sound itself crosses boundaries very easily, or travels on the ground in unforeseen ways. Today, policies that define zones deserving protection usually draw on complex indices that create strict boundaries, for instance around airports. Yet

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6 Directive 2002, 14.

7 *Environmental noise in Europe — 2020* (European Environment Agency, 2020), 68.

8 *Good practice guide on quiet areas* (European Environment Agency, 2014).

9 *Environmental noise*, 69.

10 *Quiet areas in Europe: The environment unaffected by noise pollution* (European Environment Agency, 2016).



“Reading between the lines” - landscape artwork by architect duo Gijs Van Vaerenbergh located at Borgloon, Belgium. Locally, also known as the “See-through-church.”

Photo: Ba Nanas. CC Licence CC BY-SA 4.0.

these boundaries easily clash with the everyday boundary-crossing experiences of citizens. Moreover, exactly because law requires discrete measures, forms of noise that are seen as hard to regulate nationally or locally through spatial zones, curfews or maximum noise limits are left to citizens’ own resources. An example is the noise of neighbours, about which many people hardly dare to communicate with each other, as the history of the Dutch campaign *‘Laten we zacht zijn voor elkaar’* (‘Let’s be Gentle with Each Other’) has shown.<sup>11</sup>

In case of the EU’s research and policy suggestions concerning quiet areas, the paradox of noise control manifests itself in three ways. The first is related to the phenomenon, mentioned by the EAA, that housing prices in residential areas exposed to relatively low levels of environmental noise are higher than those in areas exposed to relatively high levels of noise. However, the EEA itself noticed that once it examined the ‘relationships between the number of people exposed to

11 Bijsterveld: *Mechanical Sound*, 184-187.

high noise levels and socio-economic indicators,' it found 'only weak associations for unemployment and household income level'.<sup>12</sup> It suggested to refine the spatial scale of future research, especially for road traffic noise, because 'the shielding effect of buildings' could make all the difference.<sup>13</sup> Its spatially-acoustically defined noise indicator – in area x inhabitants are exposed to sound level y measured or calculated in terms of unit z – thus did not match with socio-economic indicators at employment and income level. The acoustic shadows of high-rise buildings – both a sign of luxury business areas and of poor neighbourhoods – seemed to literally interfere.

The second manifestation of the paradox of noise control relates to the EEA's 2016 recommendation to improve accessibility of quiet areas in rural areas for people with a lower socio-economic position by creating road infrastructures facilitating travelling to quiet areas. The paradox is that such roads might ultimately exacerbate rather than reduce the levels of environmental noise. Even though the EEA identifies this as a 'dilemma' itself,<sup>14</sup> the only, rather implicit solution alluded to is the idea to have the roads function as 'transport corridors' to quiet areas.<sup>15</sup> This notion of *corridors* suggests tunnel-like, friction-free and silent roads to quiet, but neither their high construction costs nor the implications of these roads for the noise levels in the areas crossed are mentioned. Furthermore, the 2020 report defines access to quiet areas in the urban context as the ability of citizens to access green or blue areas – as *potential* quiet areas – within a ten-minute walk,<sup>16</sup> yet leaves open what this would exactly imply for the urban transport infrastructure.

Third, the EAA clearly struggles with what should be the responsibility of authorities on the one hand and that of citizens on the other. While authorities need to identify quiet areas, and protect these from the noise of roads, railways and industries, '[a]ll the rest could be regulated by the residents themselves', such as playing football, talking, or listening to music 'as long as it is not too loud or as long as it is restricted to certain previously designated periods for loud activities'.<sup>17</sup> However, inhabitants of residential areas often disagree about what is loud and annoying or not, and, as we have seen, usually find it hard to talk about this with each other. In fact, EAA's 2020 report mentions that cities report that their populations show a 'lack of interest' in quiet areas.<sup>18</sup>

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12 *Environmental noise*, 54-55.

13 *Quiet areas*, 55.

14 *Quiet areas*, 21.

15 *Quiet areas*, 29.

16 *Environmental noise*, 72.

17 *Quiet areas*, 7.

18 *Environmental noise*, 69.

Finally, an issue unrelated to the paradox of noise control, yet relevant for my discussion, is that the EAA 2020 report lists criteria for ‘designating quiet areas in agglomerations’ that do not only mention acoustic criteria (areas with less than 55dB Lden environmental noise), land cover type, location, accessibility, size, visual qualities and soundscape perception (‘pleasant’), but also urban functionality. Regarding this functionality, it distinguishes between “health-sensitive’ sites (such as hospitals and schools), recreational sites, parks, and cultural heritage sites (castles, churches, and archaeological sites for example), and public areas (cemeteries, urban squares).<sup>19</sup> Intriguingly, these sites largely overlap with sites that have a long history of societal protection from noise, yet are now classified following modes of logic very different from those in the past.

## A Brief History of Urban Islands of Silence

For those interested in urban soundscapes of the past, the history of quiet areas in towns and cities is highly intriguing. As places that were supposed to be relatively tranquil, the sounds sanctioned as permissible in such ‘islands of silence,’ as I called them in *Mechanical Sound*,<sup>20</sup> spoke loudly of existing power relations and social hierarchies. As I have explained there, spatial solutions for public problems of noise were among the first strategies authorities developed for noise abatement, adding up to attempts to civilize those assumed to display noisy behavior such as drunks, travelling street musicians or others considered of lower class or foreign origin. These zoning strategies either restricted particular activities – such as those of hammering craftsmen – to particular areas remotely located from inner cities, or protected specific zones around particular types of buildings from noise-making activities. This protection pertained to three types of buildings in particular: schools and universities, hospitals, and churches. This initially happened through local ordinances, yet from the late nineteenth-century onwards these sites were mentioned as worthy of protection in national nuisance laws that did not only, or not even in the first place, talk about noise, but about smoke, stench and other harmful effects of industrial activities. Basically, new industries needed permits for their sites that would not be granted if these would be located near the buildings just mentioned.

The idea behind securing a relatively quiet environment for schools did not so much concern health protection, as the EU is flagging now, but communication – lessons had to be heard – and contemplation. Keeping silent in these contexts,

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<sup>19</sup> *Environmental noise*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*.

Alain Corbin has explained, was a sign of respect for institutional leadership, of the ability to show discipline and of paying attention.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the learned university elite had been entitled to a tranquil environment for ages. In early seventeenth century Jena and Leipzig, for instance, noisemaking handworkers were not allowed to open a workshop at places where a law professor was residing.<sup>22</sup> The quietude near hospitals drew on the longstanding idea that those who were ill could only recover through taking rest and proper sleep. Hence the habit of adding a layer of straw on the pavement before a house of a seriously ill person, especially if this person was of high social standing, as straw muted the noise made by the wheels of carriages. Finally, protecting churches from noise was rooted in the deeply felt need to secure the communication of sermons and the contemplation of worshipping. As God was ‘unknowable, absolute silence should be maintained in his regard.’<sup>23</sup> In institutions such as schools and churches, ‘talking too much and making too much noise’ were ‘seen as serious signs of a malfunctioning natural order.’<sup>24</sup>

Religious and worldly elites could thus withdraw from the world of noisiness if they wanted to for a long time – regulations and the thick walls of their homes, castles and monasteries protected them from attacks as well as unwanted sound. The nuisance laws confirmed this status quo to a large extent. These defended the property of the possessing classes against the material harm of industrial activities by the upcoming bourgeois elites. Would other residents object against the expected or actual noise of industries in their residential area, however, the arguments about their ill health hardly ever counted.<sup>25</sup>

Alain Corbin has claimed that some past practices of quietude have been transposed from religious spheres to non-religious spheres, such as keeping two minutes of silence in memorial events at, say, football stadiums, a process he has coined as “desacralizing silence.”<sup>26</sup> One might also see these shifts as a sacralization of practices that once were non-sacral, but it important to note that the transpositions of sacral silence have not only affected *moments* of silence, but also *spaces* of silence.

In the EU documents analyzed, churches are now classified as sites of heritage rather than sites of religion, cemeteries as public areas rather than spaces for individual or communal commemoration, and schools as health-sensitive sites – just like hospitals were in the past – rather than sites of communication and contem-

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21 Corbin, *History of Silence*, 56-57.

22 Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 56.

23 Corbin, *History of Silence*, 57.

24 Corbin, *History of Silence*, 57.

25 Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*.

26 Corbin, *History of Silence*, 57.



plation. In this way, the EU repurposes the former, largely elite islands of silence in urban settings into quiet areas for all, at least in its choice of wording. The reports, as we have seen, also flag that not all classes have equal access to these sites, yet without discussing the historical roots of this situation, and only mentioning the potentially detrimental effects of transporting all city dwellers to quiet sites in passing. I will turn to these issues and the potential alternatives below. But let me first address what the EU can learn from the past of quiet areas in open country.

## The Contested Past of Quiet Areas in the Countryside

Although EU policy reports stress the fact that in most countries today, the establishment and protection of quiet areas is more developed in urban settings than in the countryside, the notion of ‘quiet area’ itself was first thought in terms of rural areas. The 1970s saw the rise of environmentally inspired nation-wide (noise) nuisance laws that incorporated previous as well as novel noise abatement policies.

In the Netherlands, for instance, the 1979 *Wet Geluidshinder* announced that on top of noise emission limits – such as for cars – to be established, future *im*-mission limits for ‘noise sensitive buildings’ such as ‘schools, libraries, hospitals, health resorts, nursing homes, and institutions for the mentally retarded, as well as offices, museums, theaters, and concert halls’ were optional.<sup>27</sup> While this was fully in line with previous islands of silence policies, be it extended to a wider variety of buildings, the law also contained a new element: It allowed provincial authorities to allot quiet areas – in Dutch *stiltegebieden* or silence areas – that were not conceptualized as being literally ‘silent’, but, according to its explanatory memorandum, as areas where ‘natural sounds’ should not or only to a limited extent be disturbed by ‘man-made’ sounds.<sup>28</sup>

Although such silence areas were indeed established, a 2006 evaluation by the Dutch Health Council showed that in the silence areas examined, motorized traffic had been audible during 30–50 per cent of the monitored time periods, and created an ever-expanding ‘blanket of sound.’<sup>29</sup> Those who visited the areas generally valued natural sounds higher than man-made sounds, and noted that the sounds of agrarian activities distracted them to some extent from the ‘silence’, but did not find these sounds really disturbing. They also tolerated sounds created by other people recreating in the areas.<sup>30</sup> Expectations were key, however. Visitors whose purpose

27 Neuerburg and Verfaillie 1995, 360, cited in Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 246.

28 *Wet geluidshinder*. Den Haag: SDU uitgevers, 1976, 510, cited in *Stille gebieden en gezondheid* (Gezondheidsraad, 2006), 25.

29 *Stille gebieden*, 40.

30 *Stille gebieden*, 70.

was to enjoy the peace and quiet, were more negative about a particular soundscape than those visiting that area's soundscape for other reasons. The type of visit (short visit, long walk, alone or in a group) also impacted the evaluation of the soundscape.<sup>31</sup>

In West Germany, the 1974 Federal Immission Protection Act (*Bundes-Immissionsschutzgesetz*) defined maximum noise immission levels in terms of dB(A) per type of area, with spas, hospitals and nursing homes assigned as areas with the lowest permissible levels.<sup>32</sup> The 2002 Environmental Noise Directive, however, inspired only 30 per cent of the German communities to designate or plan quiet areas, and only to a very limited extent in urban areas. Yet urban dwellers, so the Working Group Noise (ALD) of the German Society for Acoustics (DEGA) claimed in 2015, do look for quiet places in order to find relaxation. For such places, it stressed, acoustic criteria do not suffice.<sup>33</sup> Three years later, the German Federal Environmental Department (*Umwelt Bundesamt*) stipulated that quiet areas should be *relatively* quiet compared to their surroundings, and that these had to be green, accessible and not too small – during a walk one should not re-enter noisy areas too quickly.<sup>34</sup>

When reviewing both the history of quiet areas in cities and the countryside, it becomes evident that EU agencies learned from the past that quiet areas involve more than just the perception of sound. They also took from previous experiences that visitors' expectations of the areas had to be managed carefully.<sup>35</sup> Yet they struggled with the issue of access to these areas, and left agreement about which sounds should be audible or not in quiet areas to the inhabitants themselves. There is also something to learn from recent initiatives though.

## Towards Micro-Sites of Quiet

In its willingness to offer corridors to quiet areas, the EAA aims to address that most people of 'lower' socio-economic class have less easy access to quiet areas than those of higher class, a spatial distribution that has grown in part, as we have seen, from historically rooted social hierarchies. Yet rather than having everyone travel to these existing quiet areas, adding up to environmental noise for both humans and wildlife, I would like to suggest bringing new quiet areas to poorer

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31 *Stille gebieten*, 70.

32 Bijsterveld: *Mechanical Sound*, 244.

33 'Stille Örtchen und Ruhige Gebiete', Arbeitsring Lärm (ALD) der Deutsche Gesellschaft für Akustik (DEGA), 2015. <https://www.ald-laerm.de/ald/projekte-des-ald/2015/stille-oertchen-und-ruhige-gebiete>, n.p.

34 *Ruhige Gebiete: Eine Fachbroschüre für die Lärmaktionsplanung*. (Umwelt Bundesamt, 2018), 12.

35 *Quiet areas*, 12.

residential areas by making use of acoustic shadows as well as the popularity of urban allotment gardens.

Making use of the acoustic shadows that the built environment already has on offer or that can be created through architectural and urban design is exactly what authorities in Flanders aim to do in their policy to create “micro-sites’ (*microplekjes*) for “oases in the lee’ (*luwte-oases*).<sup>36</sup> In addition to designating the quality label *stiltegebieden* to areas in open country, Flemish authorities – the Department for the Environment (*Departement Omgeving van de Vlaamse overheid*) in collaboration with several knowledge institutes – have developed a methodology for finding, preserving and creating “functional, accessible and reachable’ *luwte-oases* where urbanites can find peace and quiet in a densely populated world of noise and other forms of sensory overstimulation.<sup>37</sup>

Compared to the EU reports discussed above, the Flemish documents create an entirely new vocabulary such as *luwte-oases* and *micro-sites*, in which “oase’ elicits the positive connotations of a place with shadow and water offering modes of survival in an environment of drought, while the notion of “lee’ connotes protection from the wind. Such positive associations are in line with the thought that in contrast to “negative’ noise control and abatement policies such as maximum noise emission limits, creating *luwte-oases* is a *positive* form of policy.<sup>38</sup> The conceptualizations, or imaginaries, of these sites, are additionally adorned with qualities such as “stillness’ or *verstilling*<sup>39</sup> and “unwinding’ or *onthaasting*,<sup>40</sup> and defined in terms of other sensory perceptions as well. For instance, the sites should not only be imbued with natural sounds such as those of burling water, rustling leaves and birds, but also present pleasant views, and afford shades of shadow (*donkerte*), a good air quality and agreeable smell.<sup>41</sup> In any case, they should create a sensory contrast to their environment, with a level of sound of 6-15 dB below that of their surroundings.<sup>42</sup>

Intriguingly, the sites are no longer described as public, but as *semi-public*, which subtly expands the reach of local authorities into spaces such as gardens governed by private organizations. The report also underlines, however, that citizens and visitors themselves should be involved in finding the right spots, as wandering around

36 Methodiek voor de verkenning en vormgeving van *luwte-oases* in woon- en werkomgeving. (Departement Omgeving van de Vlaamse overheid [etc.], 2021), 4.4.

37 G. Pée, K. Smets, A. Verdeyen and N. Vanlessen, ‘Dossier Stilteplekken in de Stad’, *Tijdschrift Publieke Ruimte* (2019), January-March, 29-31, 31.

38 Pée et al.: *Dossier Stilteplekken*, 30.

39 Pée et al.: *Dossier Stilteplekken*, 29.

40 *Methodiek 2021*, 2.1.

41 Pée et al.: *Dossier Stilteplekken*, 30.

42 *Methodiek 2021*, 4.15.

is seen as beneficial to citizens' health.<sup>43</sup> The sites should allow for safety, social interaction and physical exercise, and the routes for walking to these spaces should be just as important as the sites themselves. Examples mentioned are parks, slow roads, riversides, rooftop gardens, residential homes, schools, courtyards of abbeys, churches, beguinages (*begijnhofjes*) and cemeteries, as well as canopies and colonnades.<sup>44</sup>

Remarkably, the Flemish authorities stress that it is not always helpful to explain these spaces' religious and historical backgrounds to all groups and generations—as this might reduce the sites' mysticism and appeal.<sup>45</sup> Apparently, this is to make the sites more culturally inclusive. Suggestions that the sites should be timeless, untouched, and unregulated<sup>46</sup> also seems to point in this direction. However, a study by a team of Italian scholars on the potential of historical cloisters and courtyards to function as quiet areas with restorative value to citizens *does* consider the historical meaning of the sites relevant. In its view, such information contributes to the sensory richness that helps people to free their attention and recover. The study also considers other aspects of the sites important, such as large dimensions, protective entrances, water and greenery, as long as the places are not disturbed by a high intensity of activities causing enhanced sound levels.<sup>47</sup> An example might be an inner-city, publicly accessible, richly decorated villa with a lush garden behind a solid wall.

The Flemish authorities posit that the micro-sites of quiet should also remain *hidden* spaces to some extent,<sup>48</sup> although that is clearly at odds with their advice to have municipalities and citizens map them. The idea however is that discovering urban quiet areas is just as worthwhile as actually being there.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the sites must not become tourist destinations – which would, of course, undermine the quietude – as has happened for several of the most popular Amsterdam *hofjes*, but everyday spaces that are within a few minutes reach by walking.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas the report flags that urban dwellers and visitors should be involved in finding potential urban quiet areas, and includes ample references to research in which citizens have indeed been interviewed about such spaces, it is not clear from the report's research summaries to what extent inquiries have been made among the more vulnerable groups of the population that have limited access to urban quiet

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43 *Methodiek* 2021, 4.5, 4.9.

44 *Methodiek* 2021, 3.1, 3.2, 4.19.

45 *Methodiek* 2021, p. 4.21.

46 *Methodiek* 2021, 3.1.

47 M. Massulo, F. Castanò, R. Adina Toma and L. Maffei: 'Historical Cloisters and Courtyards as Quiet 2020: Quiet Areas', *Sustainability*, 12 (2020), 2887, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su1207288>.

48 *Methodiek* 2021, 4.21.

49 *Methodiek* 2021, 4.16, 4.20.

50 *Methodiek* 2021, 3.2.

areas.<sup>51</sup> That it is important to take the sonic meaning-making of those groups into account has not only become increasingly clear from sound studies scholars asking for a decolonized diversification of perspectives,<sup>52</sup> but also from popular publications illustrating the “whiteness” of the appreciation of quiet spaces. Recalling his experiences as a former student, a journalist of color explained how the quiet behavior his white bourgeois peers at an Ivy League college demanded from him clashed with the loud voices, car alarms and music he had felt at home with in Brooklyn.<sup>53</sup>

Working with urban allotment gardens as another form of quiet space in cities might be one way to move beyond such issues of racial and social differences. Urban allotment gardens are already appreciated – at least in the Netherlands – by a socially and culturally diverse range of groups.<sup>54</sup> In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the allotments offered food and respectable leisure activities to the poorer parts of urban populations in many a European country, and to middle class gardeners in the United Kingdom, but today finding relaxation, a natural environment, *sustainable* food, heritage and social interaction have additionally become important for increasing groups of gardeners.<sup>55</sup> Yet the waiting lists for such allotments are often long – in Bath (UK), for instance, these were 14+ years until an organic farmer started to offer no dig allotments on land owned by King Charles.<sup>56</sup> One might also think of establishing such allotments in the acoustic shadows of high-rise flats in less wealthy neighbourhoods, thus combining the need for green and quiet areas-for-all with the wide popularity of garden allotments.

## Conclusions

While EU reports keep asking for action plans aiming at establishing quiet areas, including areas in urban environments, their current suggestions for making these quiet areas accessible to all socio-economic classes may be less effective for reducing environmental noise. In fact, having city dwellers travel to these areas may result in an increase of transport noise. Drawing on suggestions for *luwte-oases*

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51 *Methodiek* 2021, 4, 22.

52 G. Steingo and J. Sykes, *Remapping Sound Studies*, (Duke University Press, 2019).

53 X. Gonzalez, ‘Let Brooklyn Be Loud: Why do rich people love quiet so much?’, *The Atlantic*, September 2022, 15-17.

54 See <https://www.volkstuinen-leeuwarden.nl/MoestuinWebsite/locaties/> and A. Kootstra, ‘Koester niet alleen de biodiversiteit van de volkstuin, maar ook de mensendiversiteit’, *De Volkskrant*, November 5, 2021.

55 L. Poniży, M.J. Łatkowska, J. Breuste, A. Hursthouse, S. Joimel, M. Kůlvík, T.E. Leitão, A. Mizgajski, A. Voigt, E. Kacprzak, B. Maćkiewicz and M. Szczepańska, ‘The Rich Diversity of Urban Allotment Gardens in Europe: Contemporary Trends in the Context of Historical, Socio-Economic and Legal Conditions,’ *Sustainability*, 13 (2021), 11076, 1-19; L. Acton, ‘Allotment Gardens: A Reflection of History, Heritage, Community and Self’, *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 21 (2011), 46-58.

56 Roots allotments, <https://www.root sallotments.com/our-story>.

in Flanders, I have therefore suggested to bring the urban quiet areas to poorer neighbourhoods rather than their inhabitants to the quiet areas.

This would not solve all contradictions concerning the idea of establishing quiet areas for urban dwellers. First, finding micro-sites of quiet should not go at the expense of reducing noise at its source, but develop into forms of preservation and design that take the sonic environment into account. Second, rather than disregarding the tensions between mapping quiet sites and keeping them hidden, and between regulating and keeping the sites unregulated, I would like to plea for a plurality of micro-sites of quiet, and for the involvement of citizens in the creation of at least some of these sites, such as new garden allotments. Third, the history of quiet areas in the country flags the importance of managing expectations while not leaving all regulation to residents and visitors.

Municipal authorities might also do their best to preserve the cultural heritage of quiet areas in the tradition of islands of silence, including the religious and former religious buildings still around, and using the history of sound to identify these sites. This might prevent that former churches and monasteries fall prey to investors that actually have noise-making activities in mind for these buildings, such as dance clubs. In this way, stolen moments of silence, in their traditionally sacral and desacralized form, remain available as quiet spaces. Yet rather than hiding these sites' sacral and cultural histories, as some authorities seem to be after, adding stories about the history of *sound* of these sites – and about other forms of sensory history – might actually enhance their restorative value.

At the very same time, we should do more to understand to what extent and in what ways groups of people from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds want their environment to be quiet, as these groups may perceive different levels of comfort in quiet surroundings or attribute different meanings to particular sources of sound, although we should attend to intra-group differences as well. The upcoming exhibition *Listen! Sounds of the Capital* at the Museum of Copenhagen, scheduled for 2025, offers an occasion to bring people from different walks of life together and explore the diversity of their understandings of sound. The exhibition aims to have visitors listen to and experience sound, noise and silence, past and present. Through tailored events and evaluations, the Museum of Copenhagen intends to simultaneously gain knowledge of visitors' own auditory experiences. I hope and expect that a rich sonic past and present will speak to each other.

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