

# Sounding out Place and Cultural Memory in *Tempelhofer: Human Scale*

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## Abstract:

With the increase of sonic life in digital spaces, new platforms for the exhibition of sound are emerging; from multisensory web interfaces, open access databases, apps for playing with sound, to experimental locative and geo-located pieces. From iPods, mobile phones, and noise cancelling headphones, new technological tools are constantly remediating how we listen and relate to the sonic spaces around us. The collaboration between digital humanities, sound studies, locative media and cartography holds many possibilities for challenging silent and text-centric cultures of communication into rich multi-sensory experiences that accommodate diverse knowledges and abilities. By thinking through new modes for staging cultural memory and presenting ephemera like sound, digital mapping tools can facilitate alternative forms of sensory relationships to the social and physical spaces around us.

*Tempelhofer: Human Scale* is a web-based and locative sound mapping project based in Berlin's Tempelhofer Feld. What was once an airport, military base, and monument of Nazi Germany, the grounds have only recently been transformed into a public park, recreation area, and event space; a blank slate for human potential. On the north side, a Shaolin Temple lies just opposite a mini golf course made up of 18 interactive sculptures designed by local artists. DIY garden communities make up another corner. Recreational activities such as cycling, Segway clubs, and kite flying roam in and around the empty airport runways. A "grillplatz" barbeque area accommodates hundreds of families and youth, emitting thick clouds of smoke that mirror, in a historical juxtaposition, the airplane exhaust of a once operating airport. Bearing the aroma of a new Berlin, Tempelhofer Feld now embodies a melting pot of different foods, activities, and cultures coming into sensory contact. In the shadows of the massive airport structure lies a refugee camp, producing complex questions around heritage, conservation, and the politics of public space.

Tempelhofer Feld is a space that is highly politicized with its own contentious history and questions of preservation. Originally designed as a cornerstone for Hitler's "world capital," the airport sought to "crystalize claims of racial supremacy and world domination through architecture" (Parsloe 2017). Locating a refugee camp on this site not only creates complex associations between past and present but it also illuminates the tensions around living conditions on a site upheld by many strict heritage and conservation bylaws. Tempelhofer Feld is Europe's largest protected historical monument, meaning complex tensions around preservation/conservation and development/change are consistently playing out. To explore these tensions, my project utilizes mapping technologies to trace how new emerging ephemeral activities are interacting with place, along with its complex politics, preserved history, and cultural memory. These ephemeral activities emerging out of the public spaces of the park produce fascinating tensions between the vital idealism of Berlin's present and the turbulent history of its recent past. Recycled and reactive spaces like Tempelhofer Feld display the complex tensions between the re-adaptive and ephemeral nature of the park against its permanent state of preservation and commemoration of history. It underscores how charged public spaces in the city can be: "how should Berliners remember the past in a way that will most intelligently inform how they will move forward into the future?" (Malamud 2013).

The series of sound recordings focus on the quiet, intimate, and ephemeral scale of human activity – from walking, jogging, barbequing, lounging, kite-flying, socializing, gardening. These different sound activities are placed as destinations on a map that can be explored on a web interface as well as through geo-located points when walking through the park. To recreate the locative experience of the park on the web interface, sound clips are set against photographs of the different landscapes of the airport; expansive, barren, and sometimes empty of human activity. The intimacy of these sounds set against the open landscapes is meant to invert a space originally designed for technical infrastructure, transportation, and nationalist domination – a scale in which the individual human body often becomes erased. The question of scale is central to these explorations: how can sound on the intimate human scale be used to invert the scale of a massive airport/urban park? How does sound, with its embodied/sensory functions, invert questions around remote sensing that goes into mapping satellite imagery? What aspects of human sensory experience are erased or go unnoticed through remote, vision-based satellite and mapping technologies?

Soundscapes embody the complex relationship between human and environment in a complex system of information exchange. To the World Soundscape Project, soundwalking is a method for deep listening and participation in our

everyday soundscapes: it involves “not simply a passive monitoring, but an active mental and physical participation in the ongoing composition forever being created” (Truax 1974, 38). This idea that the soundscape is not only something we passively listen to but something we also actively engage in and contribute to is central to the interactivity of this project. Sound can be activated through the user’s touch (on the web, through the mouse and in person, through their location). Different sound nodes can be activated simultaneously, building up a more complex and layered soundscape. By interacting with these different sounds, the user can acoustically design and recompose the soundscape around them, contributing to a greater sense of spatial and aural awareness.

The ephemeral nature of these activities/happenings is also emphasized through sound’s own elusive materiality, intangibility, and ephemerality. How the temporal and ephemerality of sound can be used as an archival tool to map out the contingent and ephemeral nature of memory is an essential question to this project. In Mark Smith’s theorization of sonic geographies, he states, “if we listen to it, the landscape is not so much a static topography that can be mapped and drawn, [but] a fluid and changing surface that transforms as it is enveloped by different sounds” (Bull and Back 2016, 11). The sonic geography of Tempelhofer Feld therefore represents its transformative and constantly evolving surface. While urban spaces (and its associated cartographic technologies) have dominantly been understood as visual spectacles, sound mapping foregrounds the vital role that sound plays in understanding the everyday cultural, political, and physical spaces around us.

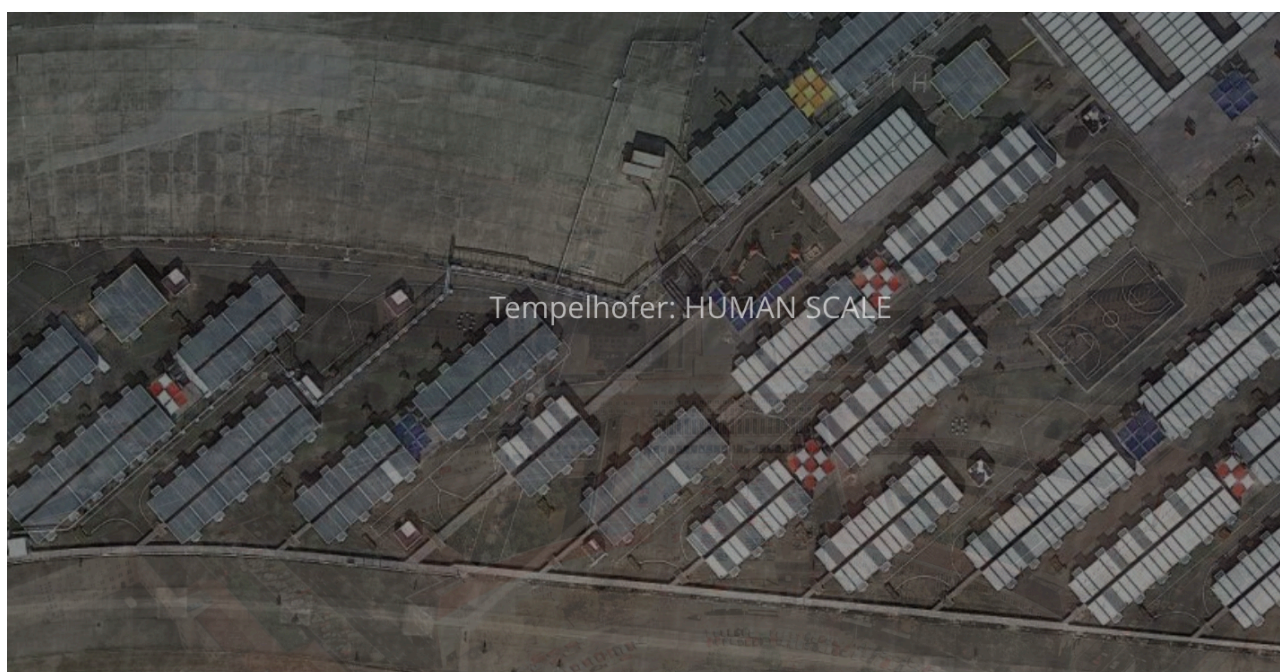


Figure 1. Image from *Tempelhofer: Human Scale*. Full project can be accessed at: <http://lexelmedia.com/tempelhofer>