

Listening for Ekbatan: an experimental acoustemology

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I'll begin with a story. It is 2018. I am researching the contemporary Iranian experimental electronic music scene. I am sorting the list of my interviewees according to their place of residence and I realised that the name of one particular place in Tehran shows up more frequently than others: **Ekbatan** 2. Eight out of the 45 people I interviewed lived or used to live in **Ekbatan**. These interviews were conducted online with musicians and others in Iran and the diaspora. I had chosen my interlocutors at random from a much larger list. So, I am surprised to find out that 18% of my interlocutors came from one place in West Tehran, **where I happened to live** for 14 years, between 1992 and 2006 3. The discovery leads me to explore links, for instance, between the various characteristics of Ekbatan and the aesthetics of the music scene I am studying 4. In particular, I become interested to investigate possible connections between Ekbatan's soundscape 5 and the musical or sonic aesthetics of the music made by Ekbatani producers. But I soon realise that my data is insufficient for such speculations. So I settle on merely suggesting such connections as possible avenues for further research in my 2019 thesis.

In the spring of 21, an opportunity arose for limited research in Ekbatan. In line with the UK government's advice on avoiding all travel to Iran, I asked one of my contacts in Ekbatan – Navid Soltani who's a poet, musician, writer, and hobbyist field recorder – to help me with field recording. I wanted to look and listen for the Ekbatan that I had known until 2006 when I left the town, to test 6 how the town's current soundscape differed from my and other residents' older memories of it. **How could** the effects of social/generational and economic change, for instance, new international sanctions on the Iranian economy, Covid, and the widespread use of digital technologies be traced **in the soundscape?** To explore these questions, I conducted a series of field recordings, sound walks, contextual research, and ethnographic interviews with current and former residents. I am going to share some of my notes on this process with you today.

Let's begin following the 'convention' by meditating on how the term soundscape will be used in this report. As we know, in contrast to its varied popular applications, **Schafer's soundscape orthodoxy is charged** with instructions concerning what sounds do/not matter and how one ought to listen to them. It suggests strategies for **integrating** urban sound and modern culture into a harmonious whole; similar to how sounds intermingle in 'nature'. 7 After **Ari Kelman**, however, I find this concept productive broadly for its evocation of a 'sonic landscape', which encodes complex relations between sounds, environments, materials, events and processes. In this approach, sounds are treated, according to **Kreutzfeldt and Søchting's** theorising as **signs** understood by ways of their **affectual** potential following Deleuze's affective regime, whereby a sign is above all considered in light of its capacity to **affect** something or **someone**. 8 So in my interviews, I asked participants about sounds that for them characterised Ekbatan; sounds by which Ekbatan was remembered.

Locating Ekbatan

9 Ekbatan is a planned town located close to Mehrabad International Airport in west Tehran. Built on an approx. 600 square km piece of land, it is home to about 45000 mostly middle- and working-class people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. It is bounded by two highways one in the north and one in the south; two residential complexes on the east; an aviation exhibition space on the West and Mehrabad airport on the southwest and south. It offers urban amenities and public spaces including schools, shopping centres, leisure centres, medical clinics, football stadiums, gyms, cinemas, a general hospital and a **mega-mall**, all within a walkable distance. 10 In architectural terms, it is an open-ended self-reliant brutalist megastructure, composed of two sites that are divided into three zones: the Eastern site consists of Phases 1 and 3 [show on the picture] and the Western site is called Phase 2 [show on the picture] that's where my fieldwork was mainly conducted.

Named after Ecbatana, the capital city of the ancient Median Empire that existed around 700 BC, Ekbatan's idea emerged in the early 1970s from the convergence of several economic, (geo-)political, sociocultural, and technological flows. 11 By the time its design began (1974), all the major stock markets in the world – particularly in the US and UK – were facing the worst crash since the Great Depression, whose effects had been intensified due to the oil crisis since a year earlier. Meanwhile, in Iran, a significant increase in oil revenues accelerated industrialisation and urbanisation, which, in turn, encouraged a massive rural-urban migration, particularly to the capital Tehran. In response, a master plan for the design and implementation of large-scale housing projects to accommodate the professional class began, of which Ekbatan was **a result**. 12 The pilot project had started in 1972 by the Tehran Redevelopment Company (TRC) under the leadership of a young Iranian architect, Rahman Golzar Shabestari.' 13 The TRC employed the US-based Gruzen and Partners architecture firm in 74, which had been building the Galaxy Towers in Guttenberg, New Jersey 14, to design the Eastern Site and the South-Korea-based Space Group Architecture Office in 76 to design the Western Site. Mr Golzar and his Iranian team were particularly instrumental in designing the public spaces, including a bazaar-like environment in Phase 1 15 that was meant to activate the public life of residents at ground level, with integral gardens and parks. Although the 1979 Islamic revolution disrupted the construction process and led to the removal of some public facilities 16 such as outdoor pools and pavilions, the full layout was finally implemented with some changes between 1976 and 1992.

Sound, Resonance, and Belonging

In Ekbatan, sounds moving among concrete blocks interact with each other and with the unique structure of the town. 17 They collide with the concrete, metal, and glass worked in the buildings. The Y-plan slabs 18 in the Eastern site and the semi-hexagonal super slabs in the West guide sounds towards the greenery and public spaces, where they get diffracted around the edges and absorbed by the obstacles on the way. They are herded as such by the towers, but so are the wind and humidity. The humidity caused by the vegetation 19 and the irrigation system mixed with air currents that flow in semi-circular

paths among the blocks refract sounds and attenuate their pressure level. The ways in which sound and noise are herded and managed contribute to a unique soundscape often identified by residents as **'quiet with a distinctive hum.'** ²⁰ This **hum** seems to be central to the residents' memory of the place. ²¹ Although hums, sounding close to pink or brown noise, are familiar features of the sonic environment in urban settings, Ekbatan's hum seems to be remembered as distinguishable and unique, a familiar backdrop against which the community resounds. **Niloufar, an interior designer and computer programmer based in Ekbatan says this about the hum:** 'It sinks in your body. Starting at the experiential level, over time it becomes part of your soul. It gives you joy or melancholia depending on the circumstances in which it is evoked.' Farhang, a metallurgist who's currently based in Copenhagen, also uses similar terms to describe it: 'Ekbatan's hum was peacefully quiet but also slightly melancholic.'

Ekbatan is designed to resist noise, heat, seismic activity, and residential burglary. ²² Inside apartments, double-glazed windows and insulated walls filled with polystyrene and plaster control the sound pressure levels and heat. Such measures create a sense of comfort and privacy, which seems to ultimately contribute towards a sense of community and belonging. Mo says: 'Because typical city noises are filtered in Ekbatan, partly due to the town's distance from the busy hubs, it is mostly community life that resonates in the foreground.' As a neighbourhood, Ekbatan offers a unique and vibrant social life, particularly to children, teenagers, and elderly. The rather uniform distribution of the socio-economic aesthetics – to the extent these can be determined by architecture and design – seems to also contribute towards a sense of community and belonging shared among the residents. As an assemblage composed of uniform towers, shared public spaces, and a noticeably unique soundscape, Ekbatan seems to eradicate socio-economic hierarchy to a meaningful degree, while immersing residents in an immediately distinguishable whole, which differentiates their lifestyle allowing them to identify with each other through shared perceptions, experiences, and memories.

Soundwalking in Ekbatan

²³ If you were interested, some of these are uploaded on my **SoundCloud** and can be accessed via the private link on the screen.

Listening **for** the Ekbatan **I used to know** in the recordings, I recognise changes in multiple directions in the soundscape. I hear, for instance, new bird species and new forms of musicking. I'm also pleasantly surprised to notice some familiar sounds such as those of playing children. ²⁴ **The length of the walk is around a kilometre and consists of a U shape route laid out on Phase 2's cobblestone footpath.** Such footpaths in Ekbatan link up various public spaces, embedding greenery, playgrounds, shopping facilities, and a broad range of urban amenities. They **encourage commuting** on foot or leisurely strolling and create ample opportunities for socialisation. **We start from a spot between Block 16 and 18**, near *Jabir Ibn Hayyan* high school, and move northward. It is Thursday, June 1st, 2021, and the clock shows 19:55. Zoom H4n recorder is turned on. We set the levels, put a limiter on the output and press record. It is a busy time of the day, though it is rather quiet where we are.

25 The first sound that catches my attention is that of the Common Swift. These high-pitched shrieks in the evening that cut through the house sparrow choir immediately signal Ekbatan, but the shrieks sound much fuller and richer than my memory of them. The town seems to have become home to a larger population of common swifts, who appear **a few days before the Spring** every year and stay for about three months. There's also another bird sound that catches my attention. I don't remember ever hearing that one before in Ekbatan. The locals say it is *bolbol-e kborma*, which means date palm nightingale, **but it's known more commonly as the white-eared bulbul**. They say these birds have migrated to Ekbatan in the past few years, **possibly due to increasing urbanisation** in Tehran and nearby areas and to favourable conditions for breeding, mating, and accessing food in Ekbatan.

Apart from the common swift and white-eared bulbul or crow, city pigeon, and house sparrow, who often are regular residents of urban environments, Ekbatan's soundscape also includes **the rose-ringed parakeet shrieks** and a range of **captive** bird sounds, such as those of canaries, other parakeets, and Mynas. These can be heard particularly **on summer evenings** when the human captivators place captivated bird cages on windowsills to help the poor birds cool down and share their blues.

26 We arrive at a space between blocks 14 and 16, which is a popular children's playground [**the slide shows a picture of that spot from another day**]. As we get closer, the children's sound becomes louder. We encounter a group playing *stop-bavāyi* – a native game – **with a deflated soccer ball**. Hitting the ground, the ball creates pulses around which children's activities get organised in the space. A plane engine roars and a metal-cutting electric saw buzzes as the ball hits the ground and excites the children, who scream joyfully and move around in relation to the ball. **Westward opposite the blocks**, there is one of Mehrabad Airports' hangars, which is mainly used as a scrapyards, **where the planes** are parked **as spare parts**. In the background, the engine of one of these planes is being tested. **As the engine roars**, the children scream louder and the game intensifies. **Providing children** with ample space and opportunity for play, **there is a culture** of playing throughout the town that's unique and hasn't changed a lot, despite the onslaught of digital devices on outdoor playtime. Different segments of **public spaces** are chosen and occupied creatively by groups of children, who play a wide range of games – from all kinds of ball games including native ones such as *stop-bavāyi* and *haft-sang* to cycling, skating, and hide-and-seek. **Encircled by the towers** the sound of children echoes and gets amplified, creating a distinctive feature of the soundscape that vividly resonates in the residents' memories.

27 We continue eastwards, towards the space between blocks 15 and 16. This area is a segment of a linear cobblestone footpath that is stretched in **a south-north direction**, connecting even- and odd-numbered blocks. It is often referred to by the residents of Phase 2 **as 'the stretch'**. Laid in between two rows of 12-storey towers, **the stretch appears** as a valley that evokes a futuristic image of the ancient city of **Ecbatana** in absolute grey, where the public life of the residents echoes and resounds in their everyday business. **The soundscape of the stretch** is composed of the sound of people who are walking, interacting, or eating on the **terraces of the surrounding cafes or restaurants**, children playing, planes taking off, rotary sprinklers doing their evening business, music,

and delivery motorcycles. **Although the stretch** is supposed to sound like a car-free zone, **it's** filled with delivery bike sounds. **After all, fast food** must be delivered through the shortest possible route in the shortest possible time. **These vehicles** deliver material from Kowsar and Golha shopping centres in the northern part of Phase 2 to other shops or residents' apartments. **Motorbike repertoire in Ekbatan, and throughout the city,** is dominated by one model: Honda CG 125. This model was first produced in 1976, following market research **that had been** conducted two years earlier in Tehran and a few other cities by the company's **Einosuke Miyachi** and **Takeshi Inagaki**, who were in charge of designing and developing motorcycles for developing countries. And it's clear that **they indeed did a phenomenal job**, as CG 125 still reigns supreme in Tehran. A CG 125 is a basic economic unit in the city. **One who owns** it can make a living by transporting goods **and** passengers.

28 Moving northward, there's music in many directions. It comes from teenagers' smartphones, cafés' PA systems, and buskers. When I left Ekbatan, listening to music was still largely confined to people's homes or cars. **If cafés and shops** had playback music, it could not be heard outside their space except in a few areas. Nowadays, not only music can be heard everywhere, a lot of it is **performed live**, although solo woman's vocal is still a red line for the regime and there still is a myriad of cancelled concerts and 'confronted' shops or street musicians.

Some of the music in the distance sounds 'live'. We walk towards it. He is standing with a guitar behind a microphone placed on a stand. His small amplifier is on the ground a few meters to his right. He is performing a famous pop tune *Meshki Rang-e Eshgh-e* **on a backing track**. The crowd is gathering as we reach the spot. Watching the scene from Navid's iPhone camera via Whatsapp, I realise that a previously private experience is so casually transferred to the public domain. The small audience of women, men, and children participate in the performance by listening, dancing, and humming the lyrics. A musicking experience as such, in a country where musical expression in the public domain is still confronted by the security forces, **effectively manifests as** a momentary attempt at community-making and political dissent. In the background, life goes on as usual. A teenage street vendor is advertising his plums: 'Ālu ālu 20 Toman, ālu ālu 20 Toman, and another person is **asking for directions** to a *sangaki*.

Conclusion

29 By taking up sound walking as a method of fieldwork, I wanted to engage in an activity that forms a congruity **with and allowed me to** participate in residents' social life. In doing so, I recognised that Ekbatan's soundscape signalled 'change' in multiple directions. It was noticeably busier than in 2006 when I left the place, mainly due to the opening of the Mega Mall and an underground train station, **which draws traffic in** from surrounding areas. As a result, Ekbatan's **famously quiet** 'hum' has likely become a few decibels louder. **Ekbatan's street cat and bird** populations seem to have grown. *Bolbol-e Khormā's* sound is, for instance, a new addition. There is also much more music in the air. Up until 2006, if the music was heard outdoors it was because it leaked from **inside a house, a car, or a shop**. Our soundwalks show, however, that music can now be heard in Ekbatan very commonly, **for instance through people's smartphones**. In

addition, buskers are now a common phenomenon, supplementing the soundscape with **live** sounds.

Despite Covid measures, Ekbatan's soundscape expresses a diverse and rich ground of sonic-social interaction that is composed of contrasting dynamics. Further research can reveal how this space is mediated by digital technologies and gender and class relations. Its wildlife can also make for a rich domain of eco-acoustical and sonic-social exploration. **From an urban noise study or urban psychology** perspective, the town's louder hum and its effects on **residents' lives** can be investigated in relation to recent urban developments. As a community-oriented environment that inspires relationships, especially among the youth, Ekbatan encourages subcultural formations, that can be subject to further research. These manifest, for example, **in how young people listen to music**, pay attention to their outfits or socialise in certain ways.

Operating as an insider to the culture, I experienced it as a system of signs functioning as vectors of **change and continuity**. I also tried to show that reading soundscape through a semiotic lens sharpened by ethnographic fieldwork and auto-ethnographic reflection, can provide a robust context for comparative analysis. The autoethnographic perspective **enabled a perceptual map** upon which sounds were traced and read as signs. **In other words**, attending to sounds for analytical purposes was realised based on an already available perceptual map. **On its own, however, such a map** would not be immune to bias, it would lack diversity, and would not include the latest updates. First-hand accounts and contextual research data were, therefore, included to balance the picture and filter out idiosyncrasies as much as these were detectable.

Ekbatan's soundscape has been radically transformed since the death of Mahsa Amini on the 22nd of Sep 2022 and the social protest movement, widely known as the Woman Life Freedom movement, that followed. PAUSE and Breath!

Ekbatan has been one of the main hubs for resistance; it has repeatedly made headlines in the media. **In Ekbatan**, people march and chant slogans ritualistically at night in various parts of the town and move through the security forces and mercenaries, risking their lives against the security forces' brigades. People also play **protest songs** and sing along, or they chant slogans at the window of their apartments **after** sunset. **Through chanting** and marching, Ekbatanis transform the soundscape in favour of their movement and, as such, recruit more people for their uprising. **As the apartheid regime ramps up oppression**, the residents increase their presence and refine their **sonic tactics**. They sometimes create unbearable choirs of demoralising and offensive slogans at night, which render the regime's **forces perplexed** and leave them with no choice but to shoot randomly at windows or destroy public spaces, but Ekbatan still sounds Woman Life Freedom.