
Silence in the city: The quest for tranquillity amidst urban chaos

Author: Haji Mohamed Dawjee

There is a cacophony in the air. It is relentless and it reigns supreme, but in the background that very cacophony is being countered by the desperate hum of something far more superior, the sound and pursuit of silence.

Amidst the ceaseless buzz of traffic, the shrill calls of the stressors of everyday life, and the constant earworms of machinery and man, a growing number of cities are embracing the idea of quietude as a necessity rather than a luxury.

While the need for silence has long been revered, the preference for it, both pragmatically and even aesthetically, has evolved into an urgent response to fight noise pollution in cities and its scientifically proven detrimental effects on the well-being of citizens.

As urban dwellers grapple with a relentless assault on their senses – from the blare of car horns to the clamour of construction sites – the quest for tranquillity has emerged as a pressing issue – a protest even – and a primary driver to develop innovative solutions and redefine the urban landscape.

It used to be that going to the park and meditating under a tree – listening to only the hum of our breathing – was enough to recentre us, but now, with bigger populations and the need for more infrastructure, even little pockets of nature no longer offer solace in silence. As a response, technology has created impactful ways to find quiet anywhere so that noise can be cancelled wherever we find ourselves. But while these technologies promise to transform the auditory environment of cities, are cutting-edge earphones, for example, enough? Or should we be redesigning sound, so to speak, from the ground up because systemic changes are more sustainable?

In several cities globally a more structural movement toward silence is being embraced and these societies are experiencing its benefits.

In Tokyo for example, a city renowned for its bustling streets and crowded intersections, experimental sound barriers equipped with state-of-the-art sound-dampening technology have been installed along major thoroughfares, offering respite to weary commuters amidst the din of the city. Several train stations have been designated as quiet zones so that commuters can quite literally get to work in peace. Similarly, in New York City, where noise is a constant companion that never sleeps, pilot projects have been launched to test the efficacy of noise-cancelling devices installed in public spaces, such as parks and plazas, providing urban dwellers with a sanctuary from the urban uproar.

Holistic approaches to urban planning that prioritise peace and quiet are slowly becoming essential elements of the urban experience. Quiet zones in public spaces are small but purposeful changes that are being implemented by city planners in Copenhagen and Melbourne. These quiet zones, often located in parks, waterfronts, and residential neighbourhoods, are meticulously designed to minimize noise pollution through a combination of greenery, sound-absorbing materials, and strategic placement of buildings and infrastructure. The result is a harmonious blend of nature and urbanity, where the soothing sounds of rustling leaves and chirping birds prevail over the discord of the city.

In the private sector, architects have started to incorporate designs of advanced acoustic systems that actively neutralize unwanted noise, these innovations hold the potential to create pockets of silence amidst uncontrolled chaos.

Acoustic glass is one such material. It incorporates layers of glass interlocked with sound-absorbing material such as EVA (ethylene vinyl acetate), to reduce noise transmission through windows. More eco-friendly and innovative ideas like recycled mineral wool or denim insulation are designed to absorb sound waves and noise transmission through walls in apartment

buildings and office blocks for more calming indoor environments. And then of course there is the aesthetically pleasing green roof. Covered with vegetation and soil, this natural intervention provides insulation and sound absorption, reducing noise levels both indoors and outdoors. In addition to mitigating noise pollution, green roofs also offer environmental benefits, such as reducing the urban heat island effect and improving air quality.

The benefits of creating quieter urban environments extend far beyond mere auditory relief, encompassing profound psychological and societal implications. The detrimental effects of noise pollution on human health cover the gamut – from increased stress levels and impaired cognitive function to sleep disturbances and cardiovascular problems.

When we think about quiet, we think about how it reduces stress, enhances concentration, restores the body and promotes mindful living. We think about Mohamed in the mountains and Moses in the Cave. We think of Buddha on a hill or the writers Rebecca Solnit and Joan Didion trudging along on extensive walks with just their thoughts as a soundtrack. Yet something that never crosses our minds is the potential impact that no-noise environments can have on human connection.

In the absence of noise, opportunities for meaningful social interactions and intimate conversations exist without the need to compete with everything that affects our ability to pay attention to things like empathy, true listening and the most basic of human skills – sharing. The knock-on effects of not needing to fight for a peaceful face-to-face conversation foster interpersonal connections and community cohesion.

If mitigating noise pollution and fostering environments conducive to contemplation promotes mental well-being and enhances the quality of life for residents, and if quiet spaces have been shown to promote social cohesion and community engagement by providing opportunities for serendipitous encounters and meaningful interactions among urban dwellers, there is very little argument that can be made against its powerful impact on social change and a more harmonious future.

Silence, please. City at work.