

What Does a Housing Crisis Sound Like? A Review of *Réverbérations d'une crise*

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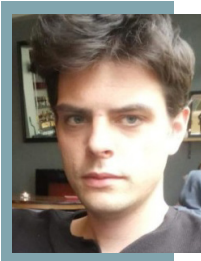
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David LeRue is an artist, educator and PhD candidate based in Montreal, Quebec. He holds a BFA from NSCAD University and an MFA in Painting and Drawing from Concordia. His painting practice connects landscape theory to the built environment, with a particular focus on how sporting events such as the Olympics permanently change their host cities. His SSHRC funded doctoral project studies Montreal's Peel Basin developments through community-engaged art teaching and research-creation. He is currently a painting instructor and collaborator with the Pointe-Saint-Charles art school, a sessional instructor at Concordia, and workshop leader at Ross Creek Center for the Arts.

What Does a Housing Crisis Sound Like? A Review of *Réverbérations d'une crise*

David LeRue

How does a housing crisis reverberate through sound? On one of the first chilly evenings in Autumn 2022, about fifty people huddled into Montreal's Casa Del Popolo show venue and bar to commemorate the website launch of *Reverberations d'une crise*, a project by Montreal-based sound artists who self-describe as a collective of tenants conducting a "sound inquiry on the housing crisis in Montreal" (*Réverbérations d'une Crise Du Logement: Sounding the Housing Crisis in Montreal*, 2022). This project, available for free on their website, contains a mini-documentary, a podcast, and an album of sound pieces featuring 10 individual and collaborative tracks by 8 members of the collective. The bilingual evening sampled this work through multi-modal performances, with live sound performances, excerpts from the work, guest speakers working within housing insecurity, and moments of provoked reflection which invited the audience to interject their own ideas through various audience participation methods.

The power of the work lies in its success in telling human stories of the housing crisis, and using sound as an approach was more fruitful than one might expect. On their website, the collective claims that their approach "postulates that paying attention to sound can make neglected dimensions of this issue perceptible" (website). Montreal, like all major Canadian cities, has seen skyrocketing property values and rents which have put most citizens, but especially those on lower incomes, at increased precarity as the cost of living in cities and across Canada have been aggravated in recent years, with the most extreme exasperation coming during the economic effects of the pandemic. As such, cities continue to change in both obvious ways, such as increasing renovations, increased homelessness, and restaurants with chic aesthetics, but also in less perceptible ways, namely, how these changes have affected the social fabric in the city, especially for those living in precarity. The work investigates the sound of new condominiums, traffic, construction, and restaurants, in addition to testimony from inhabitants describing and reflecting on the conditions of their lives.

The centerpiece of the project is the album featuring 10 individual and collaborative works. Tracks include narration, soundscapes, and musical elements to examine different aspects of the housing crisis. *À la multiplicité fragile d'une ruelle de Parc-Ex* overlays musical elements over the sounds of ruelles, the name of the alleyways behind houses in many older Montreal neighborhoods which are used for parking, play, socializing and leisure. The work captures distant voices chatting and singing, children and playing, doors creaking and birds chirping over the strumming of what sounds like a guitar. Other works, such as Amanda Harvey's *How We Negotiate Worlds* and Claude Périard's *Les lieux disparus*, sample sounds from the city to create an ambient track which resembles what one might expect from sound art.

Other tracks are direct in their message, with some pieces using clear monologues and dialogues overlain with sound and music. Christine White's *The Price of Precarity* begins with the narrative of a tenant identifying problems with their lower-end rental who seems resigned to several inadequate half-fixes by their landlord out of fear of retribution and displacement. Narration is overlaid with the sounds of the objects requiring fixing, before



Photo Credit: Marjolaine Lord



Photo Credit: Marjolaine Lord

breaking into a rhythmic drum-track overlaid with a whistling kettle and an extensive soundscape that ebbs and flows. The track closes with the narrator asking a powerful question: “Who was the first person to make profit off land? Who did they owe?” The track *Housing and care for all (Down with real-estate vultures)* features a nearly seven-minute monologue by scholar and housing rights advocate Mostafa Henaway, whose words tell of displacement and re-development in Montreal’s Chabanel district, overlaid by a consistent drum beat that plays throughout. While the music might on first listen feel like a needless addition, the music reminds us of the rhythmic nature of urban development and heightens the urgency in Henaway’s voice. The didactic works quilt the abstract and concrete concerns of the project, keeping listeners suspended between sonic reflection and the human reality this project entails.

Given how the work humanizes the depersonalized, macro housing trend within the city, this project offers an entry point that educators could use to discuss how the Canadian housing crisis is impacting their local community. As art, *reverberations d’une crise* is a project that rewards listeners for prolonged listening and reflection, offering space to slow down and contemplate. The presentation itself modelled an approach that could be similarly used in classrooms, with interactive talks, activities and guest speakers stoking audience response to the works. For example, in one instance a guest speaker spoke of working with homeless Indigenous people in Montreal’s Milton Parc. In another, the collective played excerpts from a track while inviting audience reflection and comments, writing down what was said on whiteboards. Excerpts from the podcast and the documentary help to explain the work to those encountering sound art for the first time and might be helpful in teaching what sound art does. It may also help teachers attune students to the soundscapes of their neighborhoods, offering clear and helpful examples in teaching the creation and appreciation of sound art. By attuning an often-overlooked sense in the housing crisis, this project helps its complexity reverberate in new educational contexts.

References

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