# Guides in the Nowhere. The (Un)Importance of Place in Audio-Guided City Tours

Torsten Wissmann

*Institute of Geography, Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz, Germany*

**Abstract**

Since the rise of mobile players and cell phones, audio recordings have become a popular alternative for guided tours in city tourism. The main purpose—like in traditional tours—is to experience the urban environment and learn more about the city itself. While the tour guide is a local expert who, apart from sharing general historic facts and background information, adjusts her/his presentation to the interests of her/his respective audience, for audio tours all relevant content is compressed into mp3 audio. Thus, the storyteller is always telling the same story in the same way. Listeners can rewind but never influence the narration. While landmarks and points of interest are described in detail, one important element is usually missing: place. This article aims to analyze and deconstruct the soundscape of audio-guided tours, and to reveal their possibilities, chances, and potential weaknesses, by adding to three different discourses: the implications of destination image and a location-based sense of place, the impact of audio media on co-shaping the world of the recipient, and the input of Acoustic Ecology in deconstructing environmental and media soundscapes.

Traditionally, the tour guide is of crucial importance because s/he is the one interpreting, translating, and explaining everything tourists encounter. In an audio tour the guide as social actor is missing. The voice of a prerecorded speaker cannot provide tourists with the same experience, or transport urban culture to the same extent, a human guide could. But a tour with a human guide shows downsides, too, many of which have been solved in the audio format. Visitors can set up their own timeframe, revisit particular stopping points, and are provided with a better acoustic experience due to earphones. The audio content can be downloaded to mobile devices like smart phones or be rented at places like the local tourist office along with a listening device.

There are two ways to analyze an audio-guided tour. First, you can take a look at the audio tour's soundscape. Second, you can analyze the narrative in the audio tour's script. The latter seems to be most promising for an analysis of the (un)importance of place in audio-guided tours. The narrator's voice has the potential to actively link the tour's stops to the city as a whole and create an acoustic map for further orientation.

Audio-guided tours vary from narrator-only sound files to rich collages containing music, speech, and other elements. The soundscape of such audio files can be divided into six categories, starting with the first three that derive from Schafer's soundscape studies: keynote,

signal, and soundmark. The *keynote* is composed of background sounds that provide the recording with a basic acoustic layer, like traffic noise, the crashing of waves, or the blowing of the wind. In an audio recording, the keynote can also be background music. A *signal* signifies a single sound event that, in the case of an audio-guided tour, is based on the narrative and not on the actual location of the stopping point. The *soundmark* is content based on and related to a stop's location, like the horn of a train at a railroad crossing.

To describe additional acoustic elements that are part of media soundscapes, Wissmann and Zimmermann introduced two new categories in their research on popular culture audio drama (2010). The *soundframe* signifies breaks in the storyline, like a change of locations within the story. Comparable to audio drama, a soundframe in audio-guided tours occurs whenever the listener is asked to move from one stopping point to the next. The *storyteller* in audio drama is another element of media soundscapes that cannot be found in real-life recordings. It equals the narrator's voice in the audio tour. A sixth term is required to fully deconstruct the soundscape of the audio-guided tour: *citation.* It signifies voices of experts and embedded interviews in the audio tour.

As mentioned above, it is the *storyteller* who unfolds the narrative in the audio tour. S/he plays the biggest role in helping tourists learn more about a city. The analysis and deconstruction of the *storyteller* shows the six major components of a tour's narration: general information, framing, additional information, information about the stop, information about the place, and guidelines for how to act. The article uses examples taken from the *Austin Walking Tour* to illustrate the composition of those elements.

Information on *place* is crucial for listener's to individually map their surroundings and learn not only about several stopping points, buildings, and structures. It is enriching to know how a stopping point and related information are embedded into the whole city's sense of place. If audio tours—as a variation of the traditional walking tour—are supposed to "valorize unexpected aspects of urban life" (Wynn 2012: 149), it seems strange that the examples used for the analysis in this article mostly lack place-related information.

Audio-guided city tours seem to have the potential to complement or even replace traditional guided tours. But examples show that even in a city highly focused on sound, like Austin, Texas, the potential of audio tours is reached only partially. They may provide a good opportunity for the listener to follow her/his own pace and open up the possibility to revisit stops and listen to the same content over and over again. But in its existing form the audio tour doesn't seem to be able to compete with the traditional tour. An interconnection of stops and, thus, the creation of a sense of place and an imaginative map of the city is almost always missing, leaving the visitor without an proper guideline to navigate within the urban environment.