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# Unseen boundaries: listening to domestic environments

Vanessa Vanden Berghe 

In 1932, two years after the completion of her home (Gayfere House, Westminster, London), Lady Mount Temple wrote an SOS letter to her architect, Oliver Hill, expressing her frustration with the persistent noise in her dining room. This letter highlights a critical but often overlooked issue in the history of domestic architecture: the intrusion of noise into spaces designed for privacy and comfort. This article examines how noise disrupted the domestic environment during the interwar period, using Gayfere House's ongoing acoustic issues as a case study. The interwar years saw increased attention to housing and domestic life, with state intervention aiming to improve living conditions. Despite these concerns, the role of noise as a factor shaping domestic spaces has received little attention in architectural and design history. By exploring the sonic landscape of

**Gayfere House, this research will show how noise undermined the intended privacy and functionality of domestic interiors, challenging the notion of the home as a protected, peaceful refuge. By considering the sonic dimensions of domestic life, we can access new ways of understanding the lived experience of interwar homes, expanding beyond the visual and material evidence that typically dominates architectural studies offering a more holistic view of the domestic sphere.**

KEYWORDS: noise; interwar period; domestic interiors; listening; archives; sensory research

## Introduction

Writing the foreword to *Architecture Illustrated* in August 1931, Lady Mount Temple<sup>1</sup> was clear to let the magazine's readership know that: "We must realise just what we want from our surroundings, what settings our possessions should have" (Wilfrid 1931, 36). Just how readers could imagine such surroundings was illustrated by Lady Mount Temple with the interiors of her new Westminster residence, Gayfere House, London, which she designed in collaboration with the then highly fashionable architect Oliver Hill (1887–1968). Gayfere House and its photographed interiors would soon make regular appearances in a variety of magazines, ranging from *Vogue* to the *Architectural Review*, and still lives on as one of Hill's most well-known interior designs (Figure 1).

Encountered through publications, such as the aforementioned, the domestic interior was not experienced directly but through its mediated counterparts. Photographs and accompanying texts were carefully composed to communicate editorial intention and social aspiration. These representations offered an image of coherence and control, in which materials, furnishings, and spatial arrangements appeared resolved and harmonious. Yet such images remained mute on the sensory conditions through which these interiors were inhabited. Sound, despite being fundamental to the experience of the interior, is largely absent from these accounts, and, more broadly, from architectural histories that have tended to privilege vision over other sensory registers (von Fischer and Touloumi 2018, 873–874).

This article addresses that absence by considering how the domestic interwar interior can be understood through its acoustic conditions. Rather than treating noise as supplementary to the visual, it approaches it as integral to how interiors are experienced, negotiated, and maintained. It will demonstrate how listening to images through archival research reveals the auditory dimensions of the lived experience of these interiors. In doing so, it draws attention to the ways in which noise was implicated in the construction of



**Figure 1**

Gayfere House drawing room, Dell & Wainwright/RIBA Collections, 1931.

domestic order during the interwar period, particularly in relation to questions of privacy, control, and social distinction. As contemporary debates around noise suggest, listening was not a neutral act but one shaped by cultural expectations and social hierarchies, through which certain noises were tolerated while others were rendered problematic.

Gayfere House provides a particularly revealing case through which to explore these dynamics. While presented in contemporary publications as an exemplary modern interior, archival correspondence associated with the project reveals a series of sonic disturbances that complicate this image. Complaints relating to noise suggest that the house did not fully achieve the conditions of control it appeared to embody. These tensions point to a broader disjunction between the idealized domestic interior as represented and the interior as experienced.

These tensions will be examined here through three interrelated perspectives: the relationship between the house and the surrounding city (London), the conditions of social interaction within its spaces, and the presence of those who remained visually absent yet sonically perceived within the archival material. Through this structure, it will be argued that the domestic interior was not a sealed environment, but one continually shaped by the movement of noise across its porous boundaries. By attending to these sonic conditions, the article reveals how the interwar home was both produced and unsettled by noise, exposing the limits of design in its attempt to secure comfort, privacy, and control.

### **Listening to the mediated image and project correspondence: a methodological approach**

If encountered only through the mediated image, Gayfere House would appear as a resolved and successful domestic environment. However, archival material reveals a more flawed experience. Lady Mount Temple's letter of complaint to Hill, expressed her frustration with the persistent noise in her dining room. She consigned him to "eternal perdition or, better yet, to forever have your meals in my dining room!" (Lady Mount Temple 1932). In a profession which ultimately needs to deliver on the clients' needs, complaints such as these are inevitable and are a recurring theme in well-known and lesser-known project correspondence. However, less attention has been given around what happens when we start listening more closely to complaints such as Lady Mount Temple's. As Sara Ahmed highlighted: "to hear complaint can be to hear silence: what is not being said, what is not being done, what is not being dealt with" (Ahmed 2021, 7). Within the context of the architectural archive this silence has become shorthand for absences in archival records. This process of listening to the archive opens possibilities to give back a voice to subjects which, within the context of architectural archives, are disappearing within official project correspondence.

The study of the interwar interior mostly relies on visual and written archival project correspondence as primary forms of evidence. While such material offers detailed insight into spatial sequencing, material arrangement and aesthetic considerations it also imposes limits on how interiors can be understood. In foregrounding what can be seen, they tend to obscure other sensory dimensions of space, such as sound, which remains largely unrecorded yet fundamental to how interwar interiors were experienced. One notable exception to this approach is the recently published edited volume *The Senses in Interior Design: Sensorial Expressions and Experiences* (Potvin, Marchand, and Beaulieu 2023).

Work within sensory history and sound studies has demonstrated that the senses are neither fixed nor universal but historically constructed and culturally shaped. Scholars such Howes and Classen (2013), and Mark Smith (2007) have shown that sensory experience varies across time and context, and that understanding the past requires attention to the full range of sensory conditions through which environments were inhabited. Amongst these factors, and emerges as a particularly significant yet often overlooked dimension of the domestic interior. While rarely documented directly, it nonetheless played a central role in shaping how space was experienced, negotiated, and understood. Sound, in this sense, is not absent from the historical record, but differently encoded within it.

Within architectural and design history, scholars including Emily Thompson (2004), James G. Mansell (2017), Sioli and Kiourtsologou (2022), Blesser and Salter (2007) have further demonstrated that built environments possess acoustic properties that shape how they are

experienced. These properties are not incidental to design, but constitutive of it, influencing how space is inhabited, perceived, and socially organized. More recent work in design history by Emily Candela has extended this position by emphasizing that sound is not an inherent quality of objects or interiors, but emerges through the interaction of materials, bodies, and environment (2024). This article builds on these approaches by treating both images and archival documents as sites through which acoustic conditions can be interpreted. Rather than approaching the absence of sound as a lack of evidence, it considers how sound is indirectly present within visual and textual material. Approaching the interwar interior through a combined visual and aural sensibility, means recognizing that spatial experience operates across sensory registers rather than within them. We do not isolate vision from hearing; instead, perception unfolds through their interaction. Or as Steven Connor asserted: “the senses are multiply related; we rarely if ever apprehend the world through one sense alone” (Connor 2005, 153). To analyze the interiors of Gayfere House is therefore to attend not only to what is visible, but to the sonic qualities embedded within what we see and read. In this context, archival materials (letters, specifications, and photographs) can be understood as containing latent sonic information, even when sound is not explicitly described.

Listening to the archive, therefore, involves attending to these latent sonic dimensions embedded within the mediated image and project correspondence. Such material can therefore be approached as filled with inaudible traces, enabling a further understanding of the sonic qualities of interiors such as those of Gayfere House. The archival material is thus not a mute record but a performative site, where the auditory dimensions of the interwar interior can be reimaged. As Candela has highlighted, “attending to sound can enrich explorations of existing concerns and themes within design history” (Candela 2025, 258) therefore enabling a rethinking of how interiors are understood, shifting the focus from static visual representation to a more dynamic sensory interpretation. Or as Marie Thompson put forward: “As a component of mediation, noise is also implicated in the visual; it can be seen as well as heard, infecting writing, photographs and digital screens” (2017, 14). Positioning the researcher as an active listener therefore allows for an engagement with sound not as something directly present, but as something inferred.

Building on this premise, it is important to highlight that listening to the archive does not involve reconstructing historical sound in a literal sense. Instead, it engages with the traces through which sound becomes perceptible: moments of disruption, material descriptions, and spatial arrangements that indicate how sound moved through the domestic environment. At the same time, listening is understood here as a generative practice. As Salomé Voegelin has argued, writing about sound does not reproduce what was heard but produces a new auditory imagination in the act of engagement (Voegelin 2014, 3).

Listening to the archive therefore allows the domestic interior to be understood as a sonic environment. Noise, within the context of this research, becomes perceptible not only through what is described, but through what is implied, excluded, or contested. In this way, the interwar home emerges not as a sealed refuge but as a porous environment, shaped by the movement of noise across material, spatial, and social boundaries. By integrating visual and aural analysis, this approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the domestic interior as mediated.

### **Listening to Gayfere house: domesticity under siege**

Listening to the domestic interior begins beyond its walls, in the wider acoustic environment of the city. During the interwar period in Britain, concerns surrounding noise intensified, positioning noise as both a social and political problem. As James G. Mansell has argued, the First World War acted as “the catalyst for a shift toward state intervention in housing, which included, as one of its core principles, an attempt to perfect ideal sonic conditions for domestic life” (2017, 117). Noise was increasingly understood as a threat not only to physical well-being but also to psychological stability. The Cambridge psychologist F. C. Bartlett, for instance, suggested that “noise’s intrusion on the privacy of the home intensified its attack on the private interiority of the mind” (2017, 118).

Such concerns were echoed by organizations such as the *Anti-Noise League*, which warned that the “nerve-force of the nation” was at risk from the growing intensity of urban sound. Interwar cities, such as London, were increasingly characterized by what contemporaries described as a persistent “din” produced by the expanding presence of motor cars, horns, airplanes, trains, and ongoing street works (Snaith 2025, 329). Noise, in this context, became synonymous with unwanted communication: a form of intrusion that could not easily be ignored or controlled. Within this context, the domestic interior was approached as a space that should offer protection from the noise pressures of the city. For households such as that of the Mount Temples, this awareness would have been particularly acute. As Minister of Transport and prominent social hosts, they occupied a position in which the management of noise (both public and private) was of heightened importance. Their domestic environment was therefore not only shaped by aesthetic or social considerations, but by an acute sensitivity to what constituted acceptable and unacceptable noise.

Such concerns were tied to broader processes through which the senses themselves were regulated and differentiated. As has been argued by Simeon Koole in relation to Virginia Woolf’s writing on Oxford Street (London), the early twentieth century saw an increasing intertwining of sensory and social distinction and its management through the urban environment (Koole 2024, 12). Sensitivity to noise, in particular, became a marker of distinction, as the growing middle

classes framed certain sounds as intolerable intrusions rather than inevitable features of urban life. What could be accepted as part of the city's everyday environment: street musicians, traffic, mechanical activity, was increasingly recast as a problem requiring intervention. Koole further argues that this shift was supported by new medical understandings of the body as porous and vulnerable, alongside emerging cultures of expertise, measurement, and regulation (Koole 2024, 12). The 1920s, for instance, saw the invention of the decibel which meant that noise could now be accurately measured but also controlled (Snaith 2025, 328). As a result, the management of sensory environments became a means of organizing social order. 'Hearing', as Mansell importantly points out, "is not a passive experience; nor is it free from ideology. Choices about what to hear and how to hear it are part of the historical process of self and social formation" (2017, 11).

Urban planning, architectural design, and domestic space all became sites through which these distinctions were materialized. Architectural responses to urban noise were widely explored during this period. Experimental houses such as A. Trystan Edwards' *Silent House* and *Hush-Hush House* (Figure 2), exhibited at Olympia in 1930 and at the *Ideal Home Exhibition* in 1931, proposed a range of strategies aimed at insulating the home from the city. The *Hush-Hush House*, for instance, eliminated street-facing windows and was wrapped in soundproofing materials such as *Cabot's Quilt*, while also incorporating insulating linings like *Treetext*. The prominence of these houses within popular exhibitions demonstrates that noise reduction was not a marginal concern, but a widely recognized aspect of modern domestic design.

Gayfere House can be understood within this broader context as part of a wider effort to negotiate the relationship between interior and exterior noise. One immediate example of this negotiation is the



**Figure 2**

'Hush-Hush House' designed by A. Trystan Edwards, at the May 1931 the *Ideal Home Exhibition*. 'Hush-Hush!' House: *Secrets of Silence*, *Daily Mail*, 2 April 1931.

inclusion of a mechanical turning platform positioned beside the main entrance. While the operation of such a device would undoubtedly have generated noise, this noise was preferable to the uncontrolled din of the street. At the same time, its placement allowed coming-and-going to take place away from public view, affording a greater degree of privacy than would have been possible at the street front. It is, however, also important to point out that wealthy people such as the Mount Temples contributed equally to the very conditions they sought to retreat from. As Cathy Ross has shown, the early 1920s saw increasing numbers of wealthy residents settling in central London, particularly in luxury developments around Hyde Park and Mayfair, areas that also attracted car manufacturers establishing prominent showrooms (Ross 2003, 127). The rise in private car ownership among such groups contributed directly to the intensification of urban noise. In this sense, households such as the Mount Temples were not only responding to the noise of the city but were also implicated in its production.

Despite being presented as exemplary in terms of modern interior design, Gayfere House also reveals how the house worked against its occupants, particularly in relation to noise. Rather than providing a controlled acoustic refuge from the city, the house itself became a source of disturbance. The project correspondence records a litany of complaints, in which noise emerges not as an external intrusion alone, but as something generated from within the fabric of the building. Materials such as mirrors and flooring were not only seen but heard, creaking and shifting in response to use. Cisterns were described as excessively noisy, prompting requests for larger replacements, while floors required additional pugging to reduce transmission of sound. Doors failed to remain shut, opening unexpectedly and allowing sound to travel unchecked between spaces. This would have been quite noticeable in Lady Mount Temple's boudoir (which was one of the doors highlighted). Once the door would open her sense of privacy would disappear as her acoustic arena would now blend with the sonic events outside her boudoir (Blessner and Salter 2007, 2–3).

These disturbances were further intensified by environmental conditions. Temperature fluctuations affected the behavior of materials, with glass elements loosening from walls and bath mosaics beginning to flake when exposed to excessive heat. Similar problems would also be experienced by Syrie Maugham in her all-white party room at King's Road, London. One wall of the 'party room' displayed a 'a tall folding screen made of narrow mirror panels set in chrome-plated frames' (Metcalf 2010, 84). The reflective qualities of the different angles of the mirror panels would have made the atmosphere in the room ever-changing and not always in a positive way. The delight offered by this key piece of decoration must have turned to worry as 'the glue holding the chrome strips tended to melt if the room became warm, and pieces of glass would fall off' (Metcalf 2010, 84).

Sound, in this sense, was not a stable or predictable phenomenon, but one produced through the interaction of materials, construction, and climate. The house, far from acting as a barrier to noise, became an active participant in its production.

As Blesser and Salter have argued, aural architecture operates not only at the level of measurable acoustics, but also through its influence on mood and emotion. At Gayfere House, the instability of the sonic environment would have directly shaped the experience of those inhabiting it. Lady Mount Temple herself expressed being “extremely distressed” by the behavior of the house, indicating that these acoustic disruptions were not merely technical issues, but deeply affective ones. The domestic interior, intended as a space of comfort and control, instead became a site of uncertainty, in which sound continually undermined the conditions it was meant to secure.

### Listening to each other

Listening to the domestic interior also involves attending to how space is experienced collectively, through conversation and social interaction. In 1928, the *Dundee Courier* described Lady Mount Temple as being “admired for her lovely clothes and for the scintillating conversation” that characterized her gatherings (1928, 12). It is through such scintillating conversation that many guests would have experienced Gayfere House: animated by voices, music and social performance. Listening, in this sense, operates between individuals, shaped by proximity, material surroundings, and the capacity of space to carry or contain sound.

Guests arriving at Gayfere House would first pass through a relatively small vestibule, a space that functioned as a decompression chamber, preparing them for the spectacle of the black and white marble staircase beyond (Figure 3). Many visitors may already have been familiar with this staircase through its circulation in magazines, encountering it first as a visual image before experiencing it in person. This visual anticipation, however, would have contrasted sharply with the immediate acoustic conditions of the space. As Blesser and Salter suggest, visual and aural experience are not always mutually supportive, in spaces such as the staircase they may diverge (2007, 3). The arrival of guests would therefore not pass quietly but would be audibly announced. Upon entering the hallway, hard and reflective materials (glass, marble, and polished surfaces) would have amplified footsteps, movement, and voices, producing an environment in which sound was heightened rather than contained. Through the use of such materials, the hallway can be approached as a semipublic space within the house, one that broadcasts presence and movement rather than enclosing it.

The acoustic atmosphere created in the staircase would not have been comfortable for all guests. While the materials that were chosen may have signaled the Mount Temples modernity and refinement, their acoustic properties could equally have been experienced as



**Figure 3**

Gayer House entrance Hall, Dell & Wainwright / RIBA Collections, 1931.

challenging. Through its visual and aural presence, the hallway had a direct influence on those who occupied it. Hill himself described the house as representing Lady Mount Temple's "portrait in marble, glass and steel" (Hill 1931) suggesting a strong alignment between material expression and personal identity. Yet responses to such a space would have been varied, as "culture, context and the listeners individual biases, histories and personalities" (Blesser and Salter 2007, 66) all shape how sound is and was perceived. The hallway, therefore, emerges as a space whose meaning is not fixed, but contingent upon how it is heard as much as how it is seen. Some visitors may have longed for the more contained sonic environments associated with more traditionally decorated interiors.

This acoustic exposure contrasts with the more private spaces of the house, such as the boudoir, where softer materials such as carpets, textiles, and wood would have absorbed sound, producing a quieter and more contained atmosphere. These material differences would be seen, heard but also felt, contributing to a sensory distinction between public and private zones within the domestic interior influencing moods and associations (Blesser and Salter 2007, 2–3).

In the case of the hallway at Gayfere house, the space might have been experienced as cold, independent of its actual temperature, with this sensation closely tied to the cultural values and social functions of the space. “In different social settings” Blesser and Salter point out “the same acoustic features have different meaning, which then influence the mood and behaviour of the people in those setting” (2007, 2–3). People arriving to attend one of Lady Mount Temple’s parties featuring a “dress show” would have experienced the hallway akin to a fashion runway. Here people would be introduced as one journalist noted to: “a number of evening dresses that all had organdie capes. Perhaps the most effective dress of all was worn, however, by Lady Mount Temple herself. Of black elephant-skin, it had huge balloon cuffs of white organdie, which reached from elbow to wrist, and a matching white organdie collar” (1933, 6). The number of people gathered in such moments would also have altered the acoustic conditions, as bodies themselves absorb sound, subtly transforming what might otherwise have been a highly reflective acoustic environment.

The relationship between visual and aural experiences is further intensified in spaces such as Lady Mount Temple’s bathroom (Figure 4). The room was adorned according to the latest innovations with glass and electricity. The walls were decorated by two shades of deep grey silvered glass and the floor was covered in glossy black Belgian marble. Hill once recalled that Lady Mount Temple had said “she could see herself in 47 different places in the bathroom! To which he said that he didn’t know there were 47 different places in the bathroom” (Holland 2011, 465). The kaleidoscopic effect of the mirrors on the walls was further enhanced by glass shelves reflecting the blue colored opaline vessels holding white Madonna lilies; glass Lalique basin taps made to resemble motor cars and dragonfly wings for the shower and mirror faced dressing table (Powers 1989, 65). While these features created a visually expansive and fashionable environment, they also had significant acoustic implications. Glass and marble, as highly reflective materials, do not absorb sound but return it, producing an environment in which even the smallest sounds are amplified. While glass expands the space visually, it compresses it acoustically. Having the walls covered in glass would have given the illusion of the space being much larger than it actually was. This illusion was important as the bathroom was a small space. Nevertheless, although this might have been experienced as such visually, the acoustic experience would have been the opposite as “a sound-reflecting surface is the aural equivalent of an opaque wall – a spatial boundary, a spatial reducer” (Blesser and Salter 2007, 56). The combination of visual expansion and acoustic containment would have produced a complex sensory experience, in which the perceived scale of the room was negotiated across both sight and sound.

The consequences of these acoustic conditions become most apparent in the dining room, where the success of social interaction

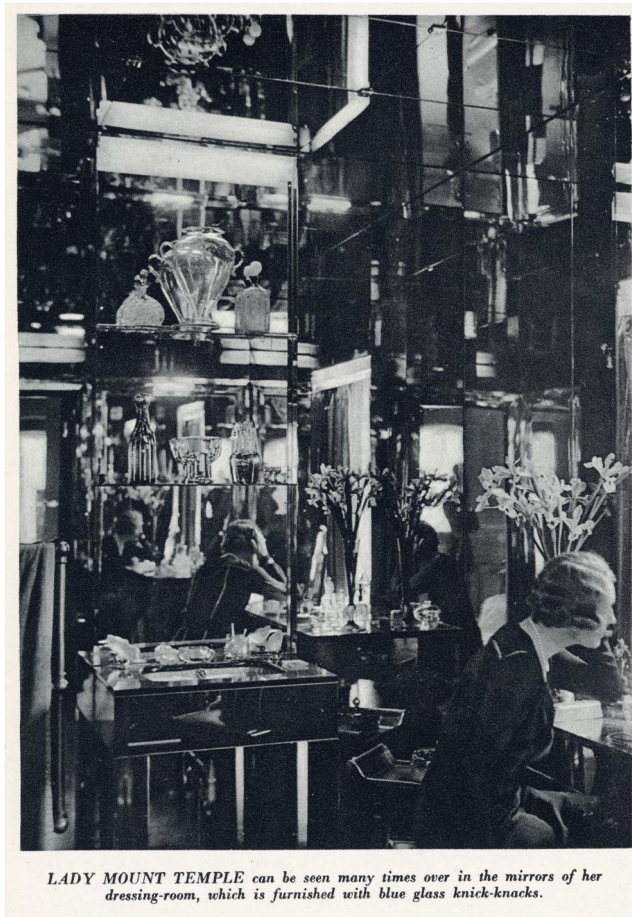


**Figure 4**

'Lady Mount Temple can be seen many times over in the mirrors of her dressing-room, which is furnished with blue glass knick-knacks'. Gayfere House, London, The Sketch, October 26, 1932, p.156, Photograph by Eizenstaldt of A.P. Mary Evans Picture Library.

depended on the ability to hear and be heard (Figure 5). As can be inferred from Lady Mount Temple's complaint." The fact remains", according to Lady Mount Temple, "that we cannot stand the dining room as it is, everybody hates having a meal in it [...] one ought to be able to devise some means of lessening the din in the room, and I am beginning to think that that money would be better spent on the walls" (Lady Mount Temple 1932). Conversation, often taken as a social given, emerges here as something contingent upon material and acoustic conditions. When sound could not be controlled, the ability to sustain shared experience was compromised. It is within this context of listening to each other that Voegelin's definition of noise is useful. Voegelin states that noise "has to be exclusive: excluding other sounds, creating in sound a bubble against sounds, destroying sonic signifiers and divorcing listening from sense material external to its noise" (Voegelin 2010, 43).



**Figure 5**

The dining-room of Lady Mount Temple, a famous London hostess. Lady Mount Temple prefers a more severe setting, and the walls in the dining-room at Gayfere House are hung with white material – to help the acoustics. *The Lady*, 1937, p. 957. Photographer not known.

The walls would indeed have been where the money was spent, as it was later reported in *The Lady*: “The walls in the dining room at Gayfere House are hung with white material to help with the acoustics” (1937, 957). More information as to the identity of this white material was hinted at in article for *The Queen* describing “The newest uses for modern materials” (Woolcombe 1932, 34). The author, Joan Woolcombe, highlighted that over the last eighteen months it had been possible to see a “a spate of explorers in the decorative and house-minded world”. These explorers were ‘modern women’ who started using ‘American cloth’ – or sheet rubber – in practical manners. Woolcombe continued that its use was not only to be discovered in small houses, but equally that “houses that agents describe as ‘noble’ are turning to inventiveness...as one may see from Lady Mount Temple’s own ideas” (Woolcombe 1932, 34). It is therefore quite reasonable to suggest that the dining-room walls at Gayfere House were hung with American Cloth or sheet rubber, as this material “was just ‘born to hang’” (Hill 1935). The fact that Lady Mount Temple was chosen as an example of a modern female explorer by Woolcombe further implies Hill’s and Lady Mount Temple’s awareness of the importance of noise abatement in relation to the domestic interior. Woolcombe, as the founding editor of The Noise Abatement League’s journal *Quiet*, would have chosen her examples carefully. Pre-Second World War, Woolcombe was involved in the public work of The Noise Abatement league to “indicate to middle- and upper-class women that noise abatement was a cause for them as well as their husbands” (Mansell 2017, 163). Through such interventions, the dining room can be understood as a space in which material choices were directly tied to the management of social interaction.

Understanding scale through noise was also central to questions of privacy. As an active member of parliament, the Mount Temples would regularly be hosting events for a variety of high-profile figures. Indeed, throughout the interwar period, London played a key role in a network of international conferencing with events such as the Round Table Conferences, the International Studies conferences, and the Pan- African Congresses regularly taking place in London. An important consideration for those hosting these conferences was the quality of the conference delegates' experience of the host city. Many delegates/politicians would spend time away from the conference table, and attend events organized by their hosts in their own domestic settings – referred to as 'at homes'. *The Leeds Mercury* issue of September 1923, for instance, let its readers know that whilst attending the Colonial Conference, the South African premier General Smuts and his daughter would be entertained by Lady Mount Temple (1923, 8). The success of these 'at homes' was highly dependent on the privacy that that was allowed in the spaces in which these events took place. It is important to point out here that the majority of Hill's clients did not opt for open-plan living, as propounded by Modernists such as Mies van der Rohe. Instead, they opted for living environments which accommodated both larger living spaces or more traditional enclosed rooms when the need arose. At Gayfere House, this privacy was not only spatial but acoustic.

The acoustic conditions were therefore central to the success of the 'at homes'. With a constant 'din' it would have been impossible for the delegates to tune in or out of what they want to hear making meaningful conversation difficult. Sound therefore shaped the limits of what could be heard. Delegates and guests were thus unable to fully control the size of their acoustic environment, as it was continually intruded upon by competing noises generated by materials, movement, and other occupants within the house. Listening to each other, in this sense, depended not only on social proximity, but on the capacity of space itself to support or disrupt communication.

### **Listening to the other**

Friends, family and guests would not be the only people experiencing the sonic environment of Gayfere House. Although entirely omitted from the images which circulated of the house, servants would equally be part of its environment. Yet, as with sound itself, absence in the image does not equate to absence in experience. By listening to the archive, these otherwise invisible figures become perceptible through the noise attributed to them, revealing how noise itself plays a role in shaping and regulating space both reinforcing and preventing the crossing of material and immaterial boundaries as will be seen later in this section.

It is important to highlight here too that the upper and upper middle classes wanted to free themselves from the noises of the street as these noises were more often than not linked with the working

classes. As Peter Bailey pointed out: “Freedom of noise became a defining characteristic of the English bourgeoisie, as much a mark of their nationality as their class” (Bailey 1996, 60). This freedom would also be sought within the house where noises such as those from the servants penetrated in spaces such as the dining room at Gayfere house disturbing private conversations especially when guests needed to be entertained. In this sense as Voegelin highlighted in terms of bad taste “noise is a social signifier: determining unseen boundaries and waging invisible wars” (Voegelin 2010, 45).

The intrusion of noise from servants into spaces like the dining room disrupted this carefully constructed environment. The punch cartoon “The Maid who was but human” (Figure 6) can help to



**Figure 6**

H.M. Bateman, ‘The Maid Who Was But Human’, Punch 13 December 1922.

illustrate how sound such as laughter penetrated the distinct private border of the dinner party. Shared laughter between employer and employee throughout a dinner party would simply not be permitted. Diners would have accepted servants coming in and out of the dining room, but the threshold of noise tolerance would have been crossed with the laughter and dropping of the food dish as presented in the cartoon. The clamor of the servants would have been experienced as the external working world intruding on the internal domestic world. Within the context of the dinner party such noise would therefore be experienced as a lack of control. Noise, in this sense, marked the point at which the boundaries of class and decorum became unstable.

These dynamics further extend beyond the staged setting of the dinner party into the everyday maintenance of the house. The movement of servants through circulation spaces, such as staircases, produced forms of structure-borne sound that were difficult to contain.

The interwar period saw a marked increase in the production of insulation material becoming part and parcel of the communication between architect and builder. In a letter to Messrs. Hall Beddall & Co. – the building company used at Gayfere House – Hill mentioned that he had dealt with the soundproofing of the servants' top stairs. Communication further urged the company to “wrap round the backs of the bookcases in boudoir, with seaweed felting, for sound deadening, and covering back with Uralite” (Hill 1930). Such insulation materials can therefore show which sounds were permitted within an interwar domestic interior and which weren't. The din created by carrying coal up and down stairs would also have been a familiar intrusion within such households. Although not explicitly documented in the correspondence for Gayfere House, such sounds form part of the broader acoustic context within which Lady Mount Temple's complaint can be situated. Efforts to mitigate these disturbances can be read in the adoption of alternative technologies, such as electric heating, which reduced the need for visible and audible forms of domestic labor. Having fireplaces powered by electricity (Figure 7) would also have avoided the need for servants on the main staircase. As the second president of the Electrical Association for Women, Lady Mount Temple would have been well aware of the ways in which such technologies could reshape the intrusion of noise within the home.

Freedom of noise was also sought from the increasing use of domestic technologies within the home which brought with them their own unwanted noise. The architectural acousticians Hope Bagenal and Alex Wood highlighted in their work “Planning for Good Acoustics” that the modern home was filled with sounds coming from new domestic technologies. “The force pump of the heating system, the electrical transformer, the ventilating fan, the refrigerator, the vacuum cleaner ‘all contributing’ their various screams, hums and tappings” (Mansell 2017, 120). Appliances such as vacuum



**Figure 7**

A. Boys, Fireplace feature at Gayfere House, Gayfere Street, London. A Chinese canopy carved in pine is the feature of this setting for an electric fire. This feature is set against white foliage on shell-pink white walls., R. Ellis, 'On Choosing the Design'. *Ideal Home*, September 1935, p.146. Photographer not known.

cleaners and dishwashers, promoted as symbols of efficiency and modernity, generated their own noise. Such noise would, during the interwar period, be understood as unnatural due to being generated by a technology assisted human activity (Thompson 2017, 38). Within interiors as Gayfere house in which areas such as the hallway and the bathroom were characterized by hard, reflective materials would undoubtedly have meant that these “unnatural sounds” would have been amplified, producing environments that could be acoustically challenging especially for those performing the labor needed in the upkeep of these spaces. The reduction of noise whether through design intervention, material choices or technological aids, required

financial means. Silence in this sense became something that could be designed, managed and ultimately purchased (Thompson 2004, 6).

The presence of non-human occupants further complicates our understanding of sound within the archive. Unlike noises associated with servants, which was more often perceived as intrusive or disruptive, the sounds of animals could be understood as more tolerable, even natural. As Emily Thompson has suggested in her work on modern soundscapes, distinctions between desirable and undesirable sounds were often framed through oppositions between “natural” and “mechanical” or human-generated noise. The barking of a dog, while potentially disruptive, did not carry the same social implications as the sounds of labor or machinery. Indeed, in his book “The City of Din” the physician and Anti-Noise League committee member Dan McKenzie described the bark of dogs as “[...] no noise, but a very soul of music.” He does add that this opinion generally depends upon “whether the dog belongs to me or somebody else’ as ‘other people’s dogs, however, may be, and generally are, even to a lover of dogs, noisy, ill-tempered, badly-brought-up brutes” (McKenzie 1916, 7–8). Guests encountering the Mount Temple’s Pekingese dog (Figure 8) would quickly have been able to make up their own mind whether their host’s dog bark was more akin to noise or music. The barking of a dog, while potentially disruptive did not carry the same social implications as the noise of labor or machinery



**Figure 8**

‘Mrs Wilfrid Ashley’s dress of emerald green suits her very well indeed. She is here seen as photographed outside Gayfere House, her lovely home in Smith Square’, London. *Vogue*, December 18, 1931, p.24. Photographer not known.

such as domestic appliances and would have formed part of the house's everyday sound environment. The barking of the dog in spaces such as the marble-floored hallway would have produced a distinctly different acoustic presence to that of servants' labor. The hard, reflective surfaces of materials such as the marble staircase would have amplified the sharp tapping of claws, whilst also creating a slippery surface underfoot, producing both noise and physical discomfort for the animal. At the same time, these very materials offered thermal advantages; the coolness of marble floors would have provided relief during warmer months especially for a furry breed as the Pekinese, drawing the animal into precisely those spaces where its presence became most acoustically pronounced.

Through listening to the archive servants, domestic appliances, and animals even though often absent from the mediated image and the archive can become perceptible through the sounds they produced, revealing the interior as an environment structured by uneven forms of audibility. Noise, in this context, does not simply disrupt the domestic setting but actively participates in the regulation of social relations, marking boundaries between class, labor, and acceptable presence. By listening to these sonic traces, it becomes possible to recover those who remain hidden within the archive.

## Conclusion

This article has examined Gayfere House as an interior shaped not only by design and representation, but by the acoustic conditions through which it was experienced. By attending to noise across different scales it has shown how the domestic interior was structured through ongoing negotiations of audibility and control.

The case of Gayfere House reveals that noise was not simply an external disturbance to be excluded, but a condition that emerged from within the house itself, produced through materials, technologies, and use. Despite its presentation as a fashionable and resolved interior, the house generated its own forms of noise, exposing the instability of attempts to fully regulate the domestic environment. At the same time, noise played a central role in structuring social relations within the home. The ability to hear and be heard was unevenly distributed, shaped by material conditions and social hierarchies. While certain noises were cultivated and sustained, others were minimized or suppressed. Through these dynamics, noise functioned as a means of maintaining distinction, even as it continually threatened to disrupt it.

By bringing together the mediated image and project correspondence, this article has demonstrated that the domestic interior cannot be fully understood through what is seen alone. The idealized images of Gayfere House obscure the complexities of lived experience, in which noise exposes a domesticity under siege. The interwar home emerges not as a stable or silent environment, but as one in which sonic conditions played a central role in shaping how the interior was

experienced. Listening to domestic environments opens up new ways of engaging with the history of interwar domestic interiors, suggesting that what remains unheard is essential to broadening our understanding of these interiors.

### Note

1. Mrs Wilfrid Ashley (née Muriel Emily Spencer) was the second wife Mr Wilfrid Ashley, a conservative politician serving as the British minister of transport between 1924 and 1929. Wilfrid Ashley was raised into the peerage as Baron Mount Temple in 1932. Mr and Mrs Wilfrid Ashley will from now on be referred to as Lord and Lady Mount Temple throughout this article unless referred to as Mrs. Ashley in quoted primary sources.

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### ORCID

Vanessa Vanden Berghe  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-6258-7273>

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### **Biography**

**Vanessa Vanden Berghe** is a senior lecturer in Architectural and Interior Design History and Theory and is currently history and theory coordinator on the BA Interior Design at Chelsea College of Art (UAL). She studied History of Art at the University of Ghent, Belgium and received a master's degree from the University of East London. She obtained her PhD from at the Modern Interior Research Centre, Kingston University, London where she undertook a critical analysis of the interiors of the architect Oliver Hill in relation to material and immaterial strategies. E-mail: [v.vandenbergh@arts.ac.uk](mailto:v.vandenbergh@arts.ac.uk)