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William H. Newell, Editor

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## **'Spaces Speak' looks at 'aural architecture'** *Interdisciplinary approach is good fit for authors' subject*

Review of *Spaces Speak: Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture*. Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006. 436 pp. 20 illus. Cloth. (ISBN-10 0-262-02605-8). \$39.95.

Reviewed by Robert R. Bell Jr., Visiting Assistant Professor, Architecture & Interior Design, Interdisciplinary Studies, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

For this book review essay I will look at the text in two ways. First will be a somewhat traditional book review discussing the structure of the book, its central arguments and accomplishments of its apparent goals and critiquing these aspects from my personal perspective. Secondly, I will examine the book as an interdisciplinary work using William H. Newell's framework of questions about writings of interdisciplinary pedagogy in his article "Professionalizing Interdisciplinarity: Literature Review and Research Agenda" (in *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature*, William H. Newell ed. The College Board, New York, 1998). This approach seems fitting to this book because as a text discussing a relatively broad subject matter, how space affects the experience of sound, the book will appeal to people for different reasons and from different disciplines. By its interdisciplinary approach, the text shows readers from specific disciplines that this subject matter demands attention from multiple disciplinary views, but it also helps demonstrate to any reader how interdisciplinarity benefits the understanding of complex topics. In this way I think it exhibits the potential for interdisciplinarity to expand the efficacy of one's work.

The authors Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter set up a successfully broad attack on a subject that is taken for granted and needs more attention. In fact I believe this book will get better with age. It may become the foundation for more investigations

of aural architecture through different lenses, some more discipline specific and some equally interdisciplinary but with more focus on a specific purpose that will reinforce or contest certain aspects of this book. Nevertheless, they owe this book recognition for its approach and for bringing this topic to the attention of a general (or perhaps a more specific yet larger) audience.

Chapter one, "Introduction to Aural Architecture," and chapter two, "Auditory Spatial Awareness," define many terms and concepts of the various disciplines of the acoustic sciences that will be used throughout the book. The terms used to describe aural architecture are explained thoroughly using analogies that anyone can understand. Some of the discipline-specific terms such as "resonance," "diffraction," and "reverberation" could use some explanation for a novice reader, but for the most part are terms understood by anyone most likely interested in the topic.

This introduction does set up one aspect of the book about which I have reservations. I must take a brief moment and disclose that I am an architect who practices and teaches at the university level. Thus my perspective differs from those more entrenched in professional practice on a daily basis. The authors set up a dichotomy between aural and visual architecture. While the predominance of vision as the sense of choice for most humans

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### Spaces Speak...

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experiencing space is an easy argument to make, the dichotomy, I feel, is a false one. The contrast proves useful for the authors to make their point on numerous occasions and in this function the dichotomy is essentially innocuous. However, the hierarchical binary sets up a misunderstanding in the reader's mind that architects are exclusively visual designers. While I agree with Blesser and Salter in broad terms, I hear an underlying mistrust of designers; an assumption that architects design with the visual in mind exclusively. This fear is reinforced by another review of the book found in *Research Design Connections*, Winter 2007 newsletter, in which an anonymous reviewer speculates on the authors' motivations: "Blesser and Salter are determined to eliminate vision's tyrannical hold on the design profession. (from the PDF file provided on the book's website, [www.blesser.net/spacesSpeak.html](http://www.blesser.net/spacesSpeak.html)). I think most architects would argue that they have a much more diverse set of concerns, including a desire to relate a sensorial experience of space.

The argument this book puts forth successfully is that the aural aspects are not sufficiently considered. Therefore, the criticism is more with the writing than the content. Unfortunately the authors also give the impression that the lack of attention to aural aspects is deliberate. This impression is reinforced by the use of the term *aural architect* to refer to someone who has designed a space with intentional attention to the aural aspects of the space. The implication is that a *traditional architect* is one who does not consider aural elements at all. I would agree more with an account of architecture as a profession concerned with the phenomenological experience that humans take in through all the senses, but the aspect of sound is often approached without expertise. While architects thoughtfully consider the acoustics of certain spaces such as

auditoriums, theaters, churches, etc, their process is a more inclusive one in which the aural elements are only one. Moreover, they tend to be secondary, and arguably less self-conscious than one would hope after reading this book. That is to say that architects tend to think about the topics taken on in this book, but often in an unsophisticated manner. All this defense of my discipline actually supports a criticism that this book points out, namely that architects tend to assume that considering the aural features constitutes addressing them sufficiently. Blesser and Salter put forth a substantial case for why this is so, or at least evidence of its existence.

The most important term given in the first chapter is, of course, *aural architecture*, which refers to the properties of space that can be experienced through listening. The authors are quick to point out that aural architecture is frequently the consequence of many factors. Every user of a space is actively making choices and changing the dynamics of a space that create the space's aural architecture. In this way Blesser and Salter place themselves in a tradition of designers, professionals and social scientists that recognize and advance the fluidity, flexibility, and unstable nature of our built environment. From the famous quote of Winston Churchill that "we shape our buildings and then they shape us," to more contemporary critical discourses in academia such as feminism, queer theory, and even hip-hop architecture the dynamic character of sound and its use is underscored in every aspect of this book. This also leads to the most important concept of the second chapter; the social aspect of sound.

While initially referred to in chapter one, the second chapter really focuses and reinforces the aspects of the social component of sound and the possible implications for such a malleable element. This chapter invites the

readers to rethink their relationship to the environment through sound or, as the title indicates, our *auditory spatial awareness*. Chapter three, "Aural Space for Prehistory to the Present," supports the discussion of the social implications of sound through an historical lens. Several examples of aural architecture are served up with the accompanying behaviors for the spaces. Blesser and Salter do a fine job of demonstrating how people choose spaces for their acoustic qualities as well as adapt their behaviors relative to sound based on the aural properties of a space. The authors contend that aural architecture was not designed historically; that beneficial examples of aural architecture were purely a matter of consequence. This is established in the final sentence of the introduction to this chapter: "By examining a variety of societies and showing how they incorporated aural space into their culture, this chapter supports the hypothesis that aural properties of spaces were not the result of conscious design" (p. 68). To me, this is undermined when they discuss early structures being selected or copied because of their aural qualities. Perhaps the fault I find with the authors' argument reflects a narrow definition of design. However I believe my argument can be supported through their own admission: "In a very real sense, we are all aural architects" (p. 6). While this quote was offered to argue the point that all users of space alter its aural qualities, certainly the early cave artists or church builders were acting intentionally when deciding whether to choose that space or copy an existing church.

Chapter four, "Aural Arts and Musical Spaces," concerns itself mainly with technical discussions of music spaces. The descriptions of reverberation are helpful to understand more fully the complexity of the experience of sound in space. The line of attack stays rooted in music spaces, specifically concert halls, and becomes slightly harder for the reader to think beyond this field of

application. However, anyone who has walked over a hardwood floor in hard-soled shoes should be able to imagine some additional applications for this information.

Chapter five, “Inventing Virtual Spaces for Music,” continues to focus on music as the preferred sonic event for its discussions. While contemporary music is often referred to, explanatory examples tend to be from the classical music tradition. Some direct reference to other musical traditions would help draw in a wider range of readers and perhaps break up this section of the book, which feels drawn out as the discussion sustained through examples and explanations that will approach the arcane for many readers. Perhaps this is where some readers will find the meat of the book if they are from the acoustic or music fields, but the rest of the book has much to offer readers outside those fields and will undoubtedly attract a wide variety of readers.

Chapter six, “Scientific Perspectives on Spatial Acoustics,” marks a transition toward laying out the specific interdisciplinary process undertaken for the book. This occurs when describing how investigations of the perceptual basis of quality for concert halls acoustics were “riddled with contradictions, ambiguities, assumptions, and confusions about the nature of the problem” (p. 219). This is also when the questions about the process of research begin, with a discussion of the limits of language. From linguistics the analogies move to examples of social science experiments and surveys to understand how we can or cannot quantify preference. This section is summed up by the authors by stating that different methods are but checks and balances for each other. “A strong perceptual phenomenon is likely to manifest itself regardless of the research method or choice of subculture, and a weak phenomenon, however real and statistically significant, may not be worth studying” (p. 228). From here

the chapter goes into some specific conversations about the science of perceiving acoustical qualities. This section shows a great understanding of acoustical science and explains why such quantitative disciplines such as mathematics and physics are important to include even when dealing with such speculative concepts as perception of quality. Once again the chapter concludes with bringing the discussion back to how these sciences give us data to relate and translate into the realm of the social. The explicit interdisciplinarity of the authors’ research process is taken on in greater depth in the next chapter. I leave the remainder of that discussion for the second half of the review.

The authors observe that “Evolution is a useful lens through which we can examine aural architecture, offering the potential of fusing contributions from diverse disciplines into a single picture” (p. 317) to open chapter eight, “Auditory Awareness as Evolutionary Artifact.” We now also get an explicit statement that the underlying current and motivation for the book is really about social cohesion. Since it is the last chapter of the book before a short conclusion, we can suppose that this look into evolutionary theory is deemed important to the structure of their argument. In what way may be given to us in the last sentence of the opening paragraph: “Evolution is fascinating just because it has the potential to offer explanations about phenomena that would otherwise appear to have no explanation” (p. 317). Whether or not this statement seems a scholarly argument, it acts as the catalyst to bring evolutionary theory, neurobiology and cognitive science into the mix. This gives a balancing effect to the book, taking on the sciences related to acoustics in the beginning and those sciences relating to the human body in the end. The chapter ends in bringing the social and biological aspect of humans together in a discussion of the interdependence of the evolution of both.

The authors end the book on this note of interdependence and evolution. A very short concluding chapter sums up the arguments of the book, but the last section of chapter eight also serves to tie certain themes together. “The importance of social intelligence and social cohesion aligns with the observation throughout this book that aural architecture and the subcultures of aural architects depend on social cohesion” (p. 359). Throughout the text Blesser and Salter refer to aural architects as anyone occupying space. Therefore this dependence of social cohesion falls upon us all. The more technical chapters aside, *Spaces Speak* lays out a lot of information for us to consider regarding our relationship to and responsibilities for our environment and sound. Now I would like to examine more closely how they approach the task of informing us. Specifically, how does this interdisciplinary text approach the idea of interdisciplinarity and how does it align with some ideas being discussed in interdisciplinary literature.

In *Interdisciplinarity: Essays From the Literature*, William H. Newell has pulled together a wide range of articles from philosophical and synoptic looks at interdisciplinarity to discussions of interdisciplinary teaching and various interdisciplinary subject matters. Newell wraps up this anthology with a discussion on how to engage literature on interdisciplinary studies by addressing the questions raised by the anthology’s contributions. This anthology positions itself as a tool to “scholars and practitioners working on interdisciplinary projects” (Newell, 1998, p. 530). Since *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* appears to be an interdisciplinary project itself, I will analyze the text through some of the questions on which Newell states the literature of interdisciplinarity is focused as a measure of whether the book might be considered a noteworthy interdisciplinary work by those claiming this *modus operandi*.

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### Spaces Speak ...

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Newell's first question asks for a definition of interdisciplinary study, and clarifies its differences from multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary. The key elements of the definition of interdisciplinarity are that the subject is too broad or complex to be understood through one discipline and the process leads to a more comprehensive perspective. Blesser and Salter do present different disciplinary views of the aural experience such as history, physics, arts, and neurobiology. The comprehensive perspective that underlies all of these is the social implications that include cultural, political, and behavioral ramifications. Simply including a wide array of topics, however, does not mean they are all necessary to the discourse. The authors carry a through line of social cohesion that they argue is influenced by sound through all these different disciplinary filters. Many examples are given within each disciplinary discussion, but the comprehensive understanding of social cohesion is not fully realized until much later in the book. The authors realize the complexity of this concept and construct this argument along the narrative; waiting until the end to address the full concept of social cohesion overtly.

In answering the question, "Why Engage in Interdisciplinary Study?" (Newell, 1998, p. 537), Newell states some of the cognitive skills attributed to interdisciplinary education. An excerpt of that list contains: synthesis or integration, contextual understanding, coping with complexity, and awareness of embedded values. Blesser and Salter skillfully demonstrate these qualities. I will address synthesis or integration later on. Contextual understanding and coping with complexity could truly be a subtitle to this book. While there are discussions of the context sonic events and the influence those contexts have on the listener's

technical perception and personal or cultural meaning of those events, a more relevant discussion of context occurs throughout the book. I am referring to the context of the research itself that went into presenting aural architecture as something that deserves a greater understanding and respect. The complexity the authors must cope with comes out of this context. The science of a sonic event and the acoustical properties of a given space (and to a certain degree the cultural underpinnings of both) fall outside the consciousness of the majority of listeners.

An example of the complexity of understanding an aural experience within the context of the research comes from a discussion of early-20th century performance venues in a section titled "Artistic and Social Conflicts in Concert Hall Design." After covering the aural temperament of the era as one in which "[d]ead acoustics were the cultural norm," (p. 115), the authors describe the discipline of acoustics splitting in two: one branch concerned with live performance, and the other with recorded. They explain:

Existing in parallel, the two branches were at once competitors and collaborators. Sharing insights and technology, listeners, artists, and scientists embraced spaces on both branches. Today, the two branches still influence each other. (p. 117)

But they then go on to quote Emily Thompson from *The Soundscape of Modernity*. "As science and architecture parted ways, the subject of architectural acoustics fell into the gap that opened between them" (p. 117) as prelude to infamous examples of unfortunate aural spaces. The disliked aural architecture in these examples was inevitably the result of forces outside the practice of acoustics such as politics and economics clashing with art and science. The

unexpected alliance of art and science here may be a clue to the complexity of the subject matter. The real ability of the authors to relate the complexity of their context comes through in how this section takes the reader from a cultural understanding in one era grounded in the history of (and fascination with) technology to another era rife with political and economic strong-arming by those in power. Ultimately, this is a discussion of the changing of values in our society. Blesser and Salter understand this and often illustrate the embedded values of our aural experiences. This occurs in examples of historical aural spaces, contemporary use of acoustic science, and the agendas of financial supporters of spaces.

From here we move on to the question of "What is Integration or Synthesis?" (Newell, 1998, p. 547). As Newell points out, interdisciplinarians have not reached consensus on this subject (at least not at the time of his edited volume). From the debate of interdisciplinary integration I focus on the question of what is changed. However I will reframe the question slightly from looking at the contributions of a discipline to the operator of the contributions. In other words, do the researchers themselves change in the process of performing interdisciplinary research? This changes the question from one of product to one of process. The contribution may in fact need to change in its understanding, context, influence, etc., to allow integration to proceed, but if interdisciplinarians making that judgment and choosing how to use a contribution do not change their process from that point on as a result of the contribution then there is, in my opinion, something missing from the process that calls the interdisciplinarity of the project into question. I take you through this exercise of rewriting the deliberation of interdisciplinary integration to draw attention to an interesting part of Blesser and Salter's work.

"Spatial Innovators and their Private

Agendas,” chapter seven, discusses the authors’ interdisciplinary process. They embrace interdisciplinarity as the only way to understand aural architecture. And the chapter does sound like an explanation of how to do interdisciplinary study.

Earlier chapters first gathered and translated, then fused insights from a wide range of disciplines. This chapter considers the nature of that fusion. By selecting, extracting, translating, and fusing insights from the disciplines that make up aural architecture, we create interdisciplinary bridges that overcome differences in these disciplines’ philosophies, theories, paradigms, methods, and epistemologies (p. 297).

They later talk about some of the thought that went into decisions of the process as well.

[B]y fusing scholarly fragments from different disciplines, this book hopes to produce a coherent, accurate picture of aural architecture. ... Sophisticated researchers appreciate that insight often begins from the anecdotal evidence of folk science. When intuition is tested and adjusted by careful experiments, formal theories appear as the final stage in understanding (p. 303).

Here, we see the authors dealing with the process of interdisciplinary work. The simplicity of the through line of social influences and implications of aural architecture is betrayed by this chapter’s exposition of the research process and contribution of suggestions for other researchers. The inclusion of this instructional information gives the impression that the process of the research demanded much deliberation and hard work. It is hard to imagine authors compelled to explain their

process and its framework in such detail not being transformed by it. The most compelling statement supporting my belief that Blesser and Salter changed as a result of the integration of material is found in the introduction where Blesser states: “Had I been able to write this book decades ago, I would have managed my career from a different perspective” (p. x).

Next we come to the question of “How Is Integration or Synthesis Achieved?” Newell says, “the majority of interdisciplinarians think of integration as combining disciplinary contributions.” The ensuing discussion concerns itself primarily with what different interdisciplinarians do with the contributions from multiple disciplines. However, I found the most intriguing material from Blesser and Salter regarding their process was their approach to gathering the contributions. The authors describe a “weak intellectual framework to allow the inclusion of insights and wisdom disciplines having a variety of frameworks” (p. 307-8). This statement appears straightforward and simple. The resulting list of five dimensions is in fact quite rational and effectual.

1. reliability, consistency, and repeatability of results
2. predictive power and utility of conclusions
3. strength and intensity of phenomenon studied
4. breadth of applicability of results to other situations; and
5. numeric quantifiability (p. 308).

They explain each dimension in relation to their project, but it is not difficult to see application of these dimensions to other types of work. The underlying rationale behind the creation of these five dimensions is revealed through a series of questions: “Are we better off if our data are reliable but have limited predictive power? Is a strong auditory phenomenon that can only be

described qualitatively as important as a weak one that can be numerically quantified? Is a reliable and predictive theory important even if it cannot be applied to larger questions” (p. 309)? Educators concerned with pedagogy ask similar questions. Architects researching any number of aspects for a facility ask similar questions. Scientists conducting experiments ask similar questions. There is an understanding that aural architecture is influenced by its use as well as construction. This twofold quality translates into data that are both concrete and ephemeral. Since *aural* refers to human experience, there is no way around this dilemma. How many of our disciplines can claim otherwise?

In this section especially, I find an effective example of the writing style of this book. The authors, one of them holding a PhD in interdisciplinary studies from Boston University, are obviously concerned with how interdisciplinary work happens and what the benefit of that process is. However, the text never abandons the subject matter of aural architecture. This topic is examined exhaustively and presented thoughtfully. So thoughtfully that their discussion goes beyond benefiting designers and scientists to creating more intentional aural spaces. The latter chapters, especially chapter seven, “Spatial Innovators and Their Private Agenda,” benefit anyone considering an interdisciplinary project of this magnitude. Also evident in this section where their process of integration is laid out is the ever present interest of the social influence and ramifications surrounding the subject of aural architecture. As an architect I believe that to be successful you must love people; you must attempt to understand humans and put their needs above your own. I find a similar attitude underscoring the manner in which the material of this book is presented. The reader

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## ***Klein named WSU Outstanding Graduate Mentor***

### ***Appointed Faculty Fellow for '07-'08 in Office of Teaching and Learning***

Dr. Julie Thompson Klein, internationally known teacher-scholar-consultant in interdisciplinary studies and cherished AIS member as well as past president, has been awarded the 2007 Outstanding Graduate Mentor Award in an interdisciplinary category by the Wayne State University Graduate School. Professor Klein is a longtime member of the faculty of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies (IS) at WSU.

Professor Marsha Richmond, Acting Chair of IS (Winter 2007), announced the award with great pleasure to the faculty and staff: "As noted in the letter of award, 'This award is made in recognition of your exceptional contributions to the mentoring of graduate students at Wayne State University.'" Dr. Klein was recognized at the Academic Recognition Ceremony on the WSU campus April 24. Members of her department and others from across the campus came to share the celebration of this high honor bestowed upon their colleague, friend, mentor, and teacher.

The Department of Interdisciplinary Studies launched its Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Program (MISP) in 1994. Dr. Klein was a founding member of the program and



Dr. Julie Thompson Klein

has taught in it regularly since that time. This is the first time that one of its faculty has been recognized with this prestigious award. Graduate Chair Dr. Richard Raspa wrote the nomination letter for Klein, and it was supported enthusiastically by others from the department, including several of her students, who represent countless others through the years who have been the beneficiaries of Dr. Klein's superb teaching and mentoring.

Typically, this coveted award goes to faculty in doctoral disciplinary programs. As such, it is an exceptional honor for Professor Klein as well as her department and college. Above all, it is testimony that interdisciplinary studies are gaining wider recognition on the WSU campus, as we know they are doing nationally and internationally.

In addition to earning the high honor of the Graduate Mentor Award, Dr. Klein has been appointed Faculty Fellow in Wayne State's Office of Teaching and Learning during the 2007-2008 academic year. Julie Klein will continue the collaborative project

initiated during preparation for the February 2007 Humanities, Arts, and Science and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC) Conference. This is a wonderful opportunity for Julie, for the university, and for colleagues and students who will benefit from the projects in which she will be involved. She states that she will concentrate on "developing curricular and pedagogical formats for University-wide use of the Libraries' Digital Projects Collections." In addition, she will collaborate with colleagues on "building a portfolio of external grant applications for long-term extension of the initial teaching and learning design during the fellowship period across disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts of the University." As Marsha Richmond emphasizes, "Julie will design a template that faculty can use to prepare components of traditional courses that incorporate elements of the university's Digital Collections, developing different modules that can be tailored to the needs of individual disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. [This opportunity] also fosters our department's connection with the Office of Teaching and Learning and the University Libraries."

Warmest congratulations and kudos to Julie Thompson Klein!

Submitted by:  
Roslyn Abt Schindler  
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Wayne State University ■■■

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## ***Martin Trow: In Memoriam***

In February of 1984, Martin Trow arrived in Oxford, Ohio, to give the keynote address for the Association for Integrative Studies, then only half a dozen years old. As director of the Center for Studies in Higher Education since 1977 and a political sociologist at UC-Berkeley interested in comparative education for 20 years before that, Trow had long been a keen observer of innovations in higher education and the political battles they had occasioned in academia—so the interdisciplinarians assembled in the new Marcum Conference Center on the Miami University campus were both eager and apprehensive to hear what he had to say about the future prospects for experimental higher education in general and interdisciplinary studies in particular. After all, Trow was known for his hard-nosed skepticism and not likely to pull any punches. At least he was in a good mood: earlier at lunch he had listened with Tom Murray and me to two of our Western College Program seniors talk about their interdisciplinary senior projects, and he offered one of them an assistantship at Berkeley when he returned to the head table and sat down next to us.

Trow's keynote did not disappoint. Indeed, "Interdisciplinary Studies as a Counterculture; Problems of Birth, Growth, and Survival" remains the authoritative analysis of the interdisciplinary studies movement in the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s. We have hoped for a synoptic overview and some advice on how to survive—remember when interdisciplinarians were an endangered species?—and we got both. Trow sagely observed that



Michael Burrage photo—Courtesy UC-Berkeley

**Dr. Martin Trow, professor emeritus of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, died at his home February 24, 2007. He was 80.**

interdisciplinary experiments must routinize if they are to survive, that interdisciplinarians must acknowledge the validity of the disciplines, that interdisciplinary studies is not for everyone, and that the disciplines excel at the creation of knowledge whereas the unique strength of interdisciplinarity lies in the "deepening of understanding." Those of us who were present at his keynote have taken those lessons to heart, and it shaped how we think about interdisciplinary studies to this day. What better tribute can one give a professional academic?

Bill Newell

### ***Spaces Speak ...***

*(continued from page 5)*

gathers a feeling that the motivation behind the book is not to show us what great scholars the authors are or share with the reader a lot of interesting facts for their own sake. The motivation, one feels, of the book is to foster change in the creation of our built environment regarding aural architecture to the benefit of humans' experience of their environment. I believe in fact that it is not just aural architecture they are discussing, but the reasons why our spaces exist the way they do. And as has been pointed out, both the builders and users of space create and influence it. ■■■

### ***UNC Asheville accepting proposals for 'Science and Humanities' conference***

The University of North Carolina at Asheville will sponsor a conference on "Science and the Humanities" October 17-19, 2007, in Asheville, North Carolina.

The conference encourages papers and proposals from professors, graduate students, and undergraduates, including proposals of collaborative work between professors and students. Papers will be strictly limited to 20 minutes.

The deadline for submission of abstracts is September 1, 2007. Please send proposals and/or abstracts to:

Gordon A. Wilson, PhD  
NEH Distinguished Professor  
CPO 2830  
UNC Asheville  
Asheville, NC 28804 ■■■

**Association for Integrative Studies 29th Annual Conference**  
September 27-30, 2007, Tempe, Arizona

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