

# THE SOUND OF ARCHITECTURE

*Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*  
Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter  
MIT Press, \$39.95

If civic buildings—courthouses, schools, libraries—provide a visual reference for collective values and shared political beliefs, can we then visualize how democracy might sound? Does democracy truly have a "voice"? What, for example, would the Freedom Tower say to us if it could talk?

Buildings are more than background noise. They communicate. They can even be downright boisterous. In *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, authors Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter argue that "aural architecture" adds another purpose, or another dimension, if you will, to built space. Sound communicates as much as the physical forms that contain it. According to the authors, the aural qualities of architecture can encourage or deter social interaction because "auditory spatial awareness merges with visual spatial awareness, together creating a holistic spatial awareness— a high-level cognitive process."

The most relevant examples are buildings designed for ritual acts: performance spaces ranging from Greek

amphitheatres to Gothic churches to contemporary concert halls. Despite technological advances that have improved sound quality, acoustic design is not a science, but a series of subjective choices. Moreover, visual beauty and good sound quality often contradict each other: For example, Hans Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonic Hall, while a celebrated example of postwar German architecture, is acoustically deficient. More often, according to the authors, the specific aural environments created in physical spaces are byproducts—sometimes happy accidents, sometimes not.

Awareness of the sound produced by buildings is perhaps best understood as a way to add a personal, phenomenological dimension to our experience of collective architecture. The authors argue that the sound produced by architecture can—and even *should*—influence our emotions. In addition to opening their eyes to buildings, users must animate their ears and become "active listeners." In *The Dynamics of Architectural Form* (1975), Rudolf Arnheim argued that our behavior is shaped by the experience of built form. Likewise, the experience of sound adds a temporal dimension to architecture that refutes the production of meaning by the formal qualities of static form alone.

Viewed more broadly, sound can have cultural relevance when it is connected to rituals or performances that animate built form, such as the practice of liturgy. Or think of civic architecture, even so-called Fascist architecture which, for all intents and purposes, was just neoclassicism writ large. The true symbolic value of such buildings was activated during demonstrations when buildings such as the Nuremberg Stadium were illuminated by searchlights and throngs of swastika-touting, Sieg-Heiling party members. It was through ritual that these buildings became invested with meaning.



installation mimicked the inherent tension in architecture between purpose and creativity.

Just like creative gestures in architecture, sound may not always serve a specific symbolic purpose per se. However, by adding sound to the roster of criteria by which we evaluate and reconcile our relationship to the built environment, it can alter our experience of the physical places that we inhabit.

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But let's take a more positive approach. Sound can bring out the more elusive and unexpected qualities of physical space. Recently, this happened at Madison Square Park with a temporary installation called *Panoramic Echoes* by Bill Fontana. Using a series of loudspeakers perched on buildings surrounding the park, Fontana reverberated the sound of the bells on the Met Life clock tower. A melody from Handel's *Messiah*, played by the bells, was interspersed with taped recordings of birds and the urban din of New York. The result was a musical architecture that enhanced the time-telling function of the bells and made the skyscrapers "talk."

The listeners' enjoyment, in this sense, was experienced as a process of negotiation between the functional and artistic qualities of the bells. By producing sound, the buildings encroached on the sanctuary of the park. In that sense, the