Spaces speak: are you listening? Experiencing aural architecture, by Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2007. 437 pp hardback. £25.95. ISBN 0-262-02605-8.

This is about the almost universal experience of hearing. We are invited to be aware how the surrounding 'aural architecture' contributes to its enjoyment. Professor Blesser has worked for 40 years at the junction of audio, acoustics, perception and cognitive psychology, in the recording industry and in the pioneering of digital technology within it. Linda-Ruth Salter's field has been inter-disciplinary relationship of art, space, culture and technology. There are links to over a dozen related disciplines including archaeology, anthropology, acoustics and architecture, as well as to blind individuals. Over 600 references are given. Because the work is so inter-disciplinary, it is avowed 'there is something in it for everyone'. The layout is attractive and in the less technical parts the language is not difficult. The examples are imaginative, thus the 'acoustic horizon' limits the arena within which a group can enjoy 'sonic events' — it can be an auditorium, or one's immediate circle in a noisy cocktail party. I was interested most in the long history of aural spaces. It starts with pre-history, when a cave having a resonant voice could be perceived to be alive: 'caverns were nature's bequest of concert-hall acoustics to people who would otherwise have known only open-air acoustics'. Aural architecture either as found or as designed contributes to the success of later spaces: classical theatres, mediaeval cathedrals and Reformation churches. Plainsong developed to exploit the spaces in existing abbeys. The Reformers' smaller churches suited the limited range of a preacher's voice. Modern acoustic technology and recording practices allow immense ranges of aural experience including independence of actual perceived spaces. Other more technical chapters cover Aural Arts and Musical Spaces, Inventing Virtual Spaces for Music and Scientific Perspectives on Spatial Acoustics.

How might a chapel-goer react to this call to savour 'aural architecture'? The space must speak for itself, regardless of how it looks or whether anything is being performed in it. There is the recall of how well the space has served what has been said and sung (however well or poorly done and how assisted). There is the role of silence in worship. There are ambient sounds, with links to fellow worshippers and to the world outside. I have in mind open-sided churches in the tropics, and indeed the memory of the chapel in Pangbourne when in mid-sermon we regularly heard Concorde overhead. The chapel-goer can rejoice in being in a space not constrained by a uniformly low ceiling (under which he or she spends most of our present-day life). Interestingly one of the authors, in order to enrich the aural architecture of his own home, removed all internal ground floor doors and provided extensive noise-absorbing surfaces to achieve a series of small but private arenas. It is like the 'breaking out of the box' which architects attempt by varying ceiling heights and forming projecting bays when designing 'real' spaces — not aural architecture, but the sort to be enjoyed with the eyes open.

Raymond Honey