

Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture

By Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth S alter
The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006
ISBN: 978-0262026055, 436 pp
Price US 39,95 (Hardcover)

As the title, "Spaces Speak, Are You Listening," suggests, this book brings a greater awareness of the audible attributes of the physical surroundings around us. Important cues can be ascertained if one were to use the sense of hearing to its fullest. In other words, an audible picture is possible through the listening and detection of the spatial geometry that surrounds us. The sound of spaces has always played an important role in the historical and social fabric of humans. This has been demonstrated by the projection characteristics of the open air Greek theatre, the reverberation in a cathedral or church or the exacting abilities of a recording studio. What the authors of this book attempt to do is to bring the many disciplines of aural investigation and research together, and then demonstrate the interdependencies and many meanings of aural architecture.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the reader to the fundamental concepts of aural architecture. It becomes evident that we are all aural architects, which is demonstrated in the many choices that we make in everyday life. These decisions may include the position in which we place a television set within our living room or the location of a seat at a restaurant. It is evident that the acoustical cues of our surroundings influence our emotions and the decisions we make. The descriptions used by the authors to illustrate these points are written in a very simple and descriptive manner, which makes the book particularly suitable for those without a technical background. Instead, the approach is more a philosophical one.

Chapter 3 takes the reader on a journey through history with numerous examples of the relationships between aural architecture and culture, religion, early scientific thought, and industrialisation influences. This is perhaps my favourite section of this book as it truly brings the intended interdependency of the various aural architecture relationships to light with the illustrative discussion.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide more similar examples with an emphasis on the musical arts and the spaces in which they are performed. It can be said that the musical experience is more highly dependent on the aural space than other facets of life. For a truly satisfying experience, the musical environment needs

to balance many different acoustical properties including appropriate reverberation and reflections patterns, spectral balance, as well as delay and decay times. A discussion of the artificial musical space is given through the use of studio electronics and spatial synthesisers. The point here is that modern science has recognised the need for tuned aural architecture and has attempted to recreate specific aural experiences in the absence of a listening space.

Chapter 6 discusses the breakthroughs and outstanding challenges that the scientific community has with its struggle to better grasp the relationship between the physical observations of the perception of the aural experience. Architects and acousticians have struggled to obtain the right balance between spatial design and the aural experience. A discussion of some of these challenges is given. Also presented is how difficult it is to describe fully in qualitative terms ones perception of whether a sound is good or bad. This is further complicated by the different adjectival meanings of words used in different cultures. In this chapter, the point emphasised is that one must also be cognisant of the divergent goals of art, science, and engineering, and have an appreciation of how knowledge of spatial acoustics is used. In other words, the priorities and considerations given to the design, construction, and use of a concert hall will vary significantly from the perspectives of an architect, musical composer, and an audio engineer. This concept is further explored in the subsequent chapter, which has a specific focus on aural architects as people.

I found the initial chapters of this book to provide both a captivating and refreshing perspective of the aural experience. I found the final chapter to conclude the presentation of these ideas with what appears to be a more personal point of view of the author. From this, a sense of renewed awareness and importance of our surroundings from an aural perspective is instilled in the reader. While there lacks a specific target audience for this book, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening* is a book that would round out the collection of musician, engineer, architect, musical historian, or philosopher. If one were looking for reading material presented from a different perspective from most other books on acoustics, then one should consider obtaining this book.

Colin Novak

Department of Mechanical,
Automotive and Materials Engineering
University of Windsor, Windsor, ON, Canada