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Q&A WITH BARRY BLESSER

Saturday, June 28th, 2008 @ 04:42 | **Allgemein**, **Anthropology of Sound**, **Aural Architecture**, **Event**, **Format**, **Philosophy**, **Research**

Here is an unabridged version of the interview I recently had with Barry Blesser, author of "Spaces Speak, are you listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture". More information on Barry Blesser can be found here: **http://blesser.net/**

This interview will appear in abridged form in the next edition of the **Sound Studies Newsletter**, slated for July 1, 2008.

Yukio King: Spaces Speak Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture, written by yourself and Dr. Linda Ruth-Salter, has been cause for a lot of discussion in academic circles and design communities alike. Right off the bat, what is Aural Architecture?

Barry Blesser: Aural architecture arises from those objects and geometries of the environment that change the experience of Sound sources. In natural environments, sound is always change by spatial acoustics as the sound wave moves from the source to the listener. There is no pure sound because both the source and the listen exist in a real space. Conversely, we cannot hear aural architecture without sonic "illumination" because passive objects and geometries do not produce sound.

From another perspective, aural architecture is the other half of a soundscape, which traditionally focuses mostly on sound sources. One can hear objects and geometries that themselves are not a source of sound. We can hear an open doorway, the depth of a cave, the volume of a cathedral, the small size of a bathroom, the echo from a wall, the cavernous avenues
in a metropolitan city, and the unique acoustics of a forest. The forest soundscape includes the sound of birds that have been changed by the forest acoustics. A listener can focus on the sources, the illuminated aural architecture, or both.

YK: Many would say that interesting sound phenomena are happenstance occurrences that can't really be controlled. Does Aural Architecture result from intentional or unintentional design and planning decisions?

BB: In all the research that I did on the subject of aural architecture, I never found a case where aural architecture was the result of an intentional design. Similarly, I never found someone who considered himself an aural architect. While there are thousand of cases of ocoustic engineers creating designs, these people are not deciding what is desirable. They are design a space based on specifications. In contrast, an aural architect determines what properties match the needs of the inhabitants and sponsors, while an acoustic engineer creates a physical design that matches those needs. For example, the degree to which a space enhances public or private attributes is the responsibility of the aural architect, who balances the needs of the users.

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On the other hand, there is much evidence that aural architecture, which arose from unrelated cultural activities, was then evaluated, modified, replicated, and used as a reference for other designs. Hence, historically, aural architecture was reactive rather than proactive.

Creating an aural architecture from a blank paper is almost impossible because human beings do not have the ability to hear an imaginary sonic concept in the same way that a visual architecture can create a visual picture in his head. The cognitive and neurophysiologic basis for hearing and vision are not symmetric.

However, by establishing the language of aural architecture, the design process can become more active, rather than reactive. It remains to be seen if such conferences as the Tuned City contribute to this change.

In a sense, the language of aural architecture strongly suggests the use of a list of questions that can be answered by people without specialized skills. Consider such questions as the following. How large should the acoustic arena be? Should a space emphasize public or private? How much aural texture is aesthetically pleasing? Should a particular location amplify aural mass?

YK: Coming from Boston yourself, you know that cities can be loud places. Berlin is by no means an exception. Is sound pollution a valid concern that designers and planners need to take into account? How many decibels are too many for normal city dwellers?

BB: As you present the two questions, there are no possible answers because the critically important assumptions are missing. Let me illustrate how the question needs to be transformed.

How much exposure to a given sound level over extended periods of time will produce hearing damage in certain percentage of the population? There are studies that argue that exposure to 85 dB spl for 40 hours per week, year in and year out, will damage the inner ear. This is a medical question.

Should a motorcycle be allowed to emit sound at 75 dB at 3:00 AM in a residential area of a city? This is clearly a political question that has nothing to do with hearing damage. Similarly, should public spaces allow commercial interests to produce continuous advertizing messages even if the level is relatively low. This is both a social and economic issue because the commercial organization may be paying the city. Would residents prefer higher taxes, saturating advertizing, or to do without some services.

Changing traffic patterns can dramatically reduce the degree to which a given aural architecture is sonically illuminated. One can change the physical design, by construction norms, or one can change the sources of sound, by regulating traffic. In a restaurant, one can change the amount of sound absorption or one can change the density of dinners. Either
change can reduce the runaway effect of positive feedback in shared spaces.

Ultimately, all questions of soundscapes in urban areas reduce to politics and social values. An aural architect, functioning as a social scientist, can evaluate what the population wants in terms of trade-offs. Once that information is available, urban designers can make the physical reality match the social values.

To illustrate the difficulty, some residence in New York City may enjoy the continuous noise of city life because it creates the stimulating experience of living in a dynamic social context. Other individuals may find that the sound of the city allows unwanted sonic events to enter their private space.

YK: In my own personal work in Sound Urban Planning I am interested in the possibilities inherent to integrating sound considerations into standard neighborhood practices here in Berlin. A new research project here at the University of the Arts, entitled "The Aural City", is also focusing on this question. In your book, you talk about the concept of Acoustic Arenas as experiential zones with common aural properties and meaning. How is it possible to design and plan spaces that make effective use of Acoustic Arenas to create a more interesting and qualitatively better Aural City?

BB: The problem with designing an acoustic arena is that the size and shape are strongly influence by two factors: the spatial acoustics of the physical space and by the type of sound being injected. The inhabitants are also aural architects. To design an acoustic arena then requires the skill of a social scientist to influence the sonic behavior of the inhabitants and it requires acoustic scientist who creates the spatial acoustics. Both play a role and neither alone is sufficient.

The corresponding activity in a home is easier because everyone in the family can forge a set of social rules. In our house, we have removed the doors from the commons spaces to create a relatively large arena, but we have the social rule of limiting the amount of sound that can be generated by everyone. This insures the large arena does not get overpowered by a single sound. On the other hand, we could have built the space with sound isolation techniques, which creates numerous fixed arenas without regard to social behavior. Regardless of how designed, arena are public resources that can be abused. Walls limit abuse; social rules limit abuse.

Unlike classical architects, who own the spatial design, aural architecture requires a dialog among all the participants. While there may be lead aural architect, the result is always the result of many contributors.

And finally, to examine your final question, making a "better" aural city requires everyone to agree on what better means. I have a personal definition of better, but that definition may not be better for you. I have no idea of the degree to which my personal values are shared by how many other people. The same process takes place with classical architecture: what is better? Are tall buildings better than short buildings? Is uniform design better than variety? Is historic preservation
better than efficiency? Are strong colors better than indirect lighting?

YK: Many would associate your work with Acoustic Ecology, the theoretical movement first developed in the late 60s and 70s that called for a drastic "re-tuning" of the world soundscape. On July 1, 2008 you will be giving the opening lecture of the "Tuned City" festival here in Berlin an on the day before you will be giving a seminar here at Sound Studies Berlin. Just how much do our cities need tuning and how would you differentiate your work from that of the so-called Acoustic Ecology movement?

BB: Regardless of the particular focus, we all share with a common set of values: raising the importance of sound and hearing. In our visually oriented culture, we have forgotten the importance of hearing. It contributes to our sense of place, It allows a conscious connection to sonic events. And hearing is a critically important part of our emotional and psychological stability. Sound and hearing is far more than the means to be entertained by music and to acquire information from verbal speech. The sensory anthropology literature clearly shows that the uses and meaning of the senses arises from the culture not biology. The acoustic ecology movement is a group that seeks to change the culture.

My work is adding to the dialog and momentum by expanding focus to include the physical environment, which contributes to the experience of sound. I am advocating an expanded definition of the soundscape and the aural environment. I have also introduces the concept of auditory spatial awareness, which compliments our awareness of sonic events. I have also
introduced a bridging language between acoustic architecture and the aural experience of spaces. It is only a beginning.

When I began my research, I realized that I not only did not have the answers, I did not have the questions. The book began with a blank piece of paper without assumptions. I have taken a similar approach in looking at other sonic topics, such damaging loud music in entertainment venues.

Rather than argue that it is bad, which it is, I explore the personal rewards for that behavior. I strongly believe that hidden assumptions limit our ability to find productive answers.

YK: Thank you for your time, Professor Blesser.

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