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Spaces Speak, Are You Listening – Experiencing Aural Architecture

By Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter

MIT Press, 2007

Blesser and Salter’s message can be summarized very succinctly – the experience of sound is crucial to the experience of space. All of our life experiences are influenced by the soundscape of the place in which they occur. Even our social relationships are influenced by sound. Blesser and Salter have combined information from architectural, musical, acoustical, evolutionary, anthropological, cognitive psychological, and audio engineering sources to illustrate how space, when it generates particular sound experiences, can enhance human well-being.

To describe aural architecture the authors state, “The composite of numerous surfaces, objects, and geometries in a complicated environment creates aural architecture.” Furthermore, “As we hear how sounds from multiple sources interact with the various spatial elements, we assign an identifiable personality to the aural architecture, in much the same way we interpret an echo as the aural personality of a wall.”

Blesser and Salter are determined to eliminate vision’s tyrannical hold on the design profession, and to make sure the sound-based experience of a space is also recognized as important. Sound and visual experience of a place can align and reinforce each other. The authors discuss how we listen to natural and constructed acoustics. They review auditory spatial awareness throughout our history and discuss current efforts to invent virtual spaces for music—via headphones, for example. Both performance and more general settings are examined.

Experience of sound in a place must be considered within its cultural context, and Blesser and Salter clearly illustrate the process of doing so. It is this focus on the cultural experience of sound, or “the way that listeners experience the space” that distinguishes aural architecture from acoustic architecture, which lacks aural architecture’s focus on human experience and addresses issues such as “the way space changes the physical properties of sound waves.” An interesting discussion thread follows the purpose and meaning of sound.

It is not surprising that Blesser and Salter have created such an interesting and generally applicable text. Blesser, in addition to working as an MIT professor, is a practitioner integrating audio, acoustic,

perception, and cognitive psychology while Salter's work has focused on the interdisciplinary relationship of art, space, culture, and technology.

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