

# Social Spatiality Belongs in Radio Broadcasting

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During the last 5 years, I have been researching and writing a book called *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture*. MIT Press has just released it, and among other things, it explains how radio broadcasters ignore important aspects of the aural experience. I have extracted a few highlights to support the argument that the ambient environment could, and should be part of broadcasting, which extends the ideas introduced in the Last Word of (“CDs Prove Secondary Features Matter,” Aug. 25, and “New Audio Villages Challenge Ballistic Radio,” Oct 18).

Radio broadcasting, which is subset of audio, which is a subset of aural experience, can only be understood by examining the historic role of hearing. Unlike the other stimuli, sound originates from dynamic events; a static world never produces sound. Sonic events can originate from sticks banging against each other, strings made to vibrate, vocal cords under lung pressure, or children playing in the fields.

Our ancient ancestors viewed hearing as the means of connecting those animate and inanimate objects that were producing sonic events into their consciousness. One does not need to understand anything about sound to recognize its importance in sensing events. Even today, the average person has little understanding of sound, which remains ethereal and illusive. From this perspective, radio broadcasting is nothing more than a super efficient way of transporting sonic events over long distances. Ignoring scientific explanation, hearing allows us to become aware of events.

But sound never exists in isolation. Sonic events always take place in a space, which itself contributes a social and physical context to the aural experience. For example, sports programs almost always include the ambient sounds of the arena, thereby transporting listeners into the soundscape of the sports event. You are there in the stadium, not sitting in your den or automobile.

One of the earliest examples of transmitting spatial ambience was NBC’s broadcast of the New York Metropolitan Opera, hosted by the famous Milton Cross. These broadcasts, which began in the 1930s and continued for more than 40 years, explicitly transmitted spatial acoustics and background of audience activities. Unlike the sanitized spacelessness of studio announcers, elevated microphones at these live performances provided remote listeners with the same aural experience as the audience, which included the sounds of shuffling feet, muffled coughs, premature applause, and even rattling candy wrappers. Listeners, sitting in their farm kitchens, were part of the live audience in New York, which provided an emotionally charged social context.

Contrast these two examples with the more typical announcer in his dead studio with a microphone at his mouth. He is injected into the isolated space of an automobile stopped

in rush hour traffic. Neither the studio nor the automobile is like a street corner where people congregate. Unintentionally, and perhaps in the name of audio quality, the aural experience is stripped of its spatial and social context, which often has as much emotional impact as the content. We are all social animals, and through historic accidents, the social part of listening has been removed from radio broadcasts and reproduced music.

In contrast, even sanitized television uses a live audience when possible, or alternatively, canned laughter and applause to artificially create some kind of social context. News reporters are shown on location where events are happening. If radio broadcasting seeks to create Audio Villages, as I previously argued, this very important part of the aural experience cannot be ignored.

Transporting listeners into a new space is different for radio than for television. With vision, it is easy to create an external world, just point the camera. We never see anyone on television framed against a neutral gray background. Television always includes space, whereas radio has drifted away from placing sonic events in a soundscape. There are important exceptions, such as Morning Edition on NPR radio. Ambient sounds are social context, not noise.

Radio should be *the* high impact media. The media guru of the 1960s Marshall McLuhan argued that the imagery of radio is intrinsically “hot” because it requires the listener to actively engage in creating the aural experience. In his view, television is “cold” and passive. Even though radio has this unique advantage, broadcasters ignore the importance of creating social cohesion by removing the soundscape, which is the location for an Audio Village. Sadly, we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Early radio was always fighting against noise, and in 1920s all forms of ambience were treated as noise. Without thinking, we currently accept an odd tradition that originated a long time ago.

In the early days of broadcasting, soundscapes were a critically important part of radio theater. The special effect rooms at NBC were designed for the purpose of artificially creating the acoustics of specific environment, such as caves, haunted houses, and open plains. The first synthetic reverberation, albeit primitive by modern standards, was one of these effect rooms. Today, there are very sophisticated spatial synthesizers that can be used to select any kind of artificial space. While these devices are mostly used in music production as an effect or as a means for replicating the acoustics of a performance space, they can also be used as tools for creating the illusion of a social soundscape.

Two aural components contribute to a listener’s associations to a particular space: its unique sounds and its characteristic acoustics. For example, forests have the sounds of birds and rustling leaves. And forests have a particular acoustics resulting from the movement of reflecting surfaces, air turbulence, and thermal refraction. Both its sounds and its acoustics contribute to perceiving the space as a forest; and either aspect can dominate or complement the other. The same is true for other environments, such an urban city, an automobile tunnel, or a school classroom.

The notion that we can hear the passive material and geometries of a space is not obvious in our visually oriented culture. Sensing spatial attributes does not require special skills—all human beings do it—because a rudimentary ability is wired into the brain as part of our genetic inheritance. For example, when blindfolded, most everyone can approach a wall without touching it just by attending to the way the wall changes the frequency balance of the background noise. Similarly, as we walk into a room, the sounds of our footsteps hint at the location of stairs, walls, low ceilings, and open doors. Walk through your home while listening to loud music through headphones. Then, do it again without headphones. Notice how the clear sounds of hard shoes on wooden stairs provide navigational confidence, especially when the eyes are focused elsewhere. When crawling through underground caves, spelunkers can gauge the depth of a dark passageway by its resonances. Auditory spatial awareness, while relatively unconscious, is available to all of us.

In *Spaces Speak*, I have developed the concept of aural architecture. It is the auditory equivalent of visual architecture, but it is far more complex than its visual counterpart. To understand the aural experience of space, I took an interdisciplinary perspective, using concepts borrowed from music, acoustics, perception, psychology, anthropology, engineering, theology, archeology, evolution, neuroscience, history, architecture, and the accumulated traditions from diverse cultures and subcultures over thousands of years. When using the broad view, we find at least four components to aural architecture: social, musical, navigational, and aesthetic spatiality. Social spatiality belongs in radio broadcasting.

Long ago, hearing was king of the senses, and it is time to restore it to its rightful place in the sensory world. It is time to reexamine “modern” assumptions, most of which originated from historic accidents. While the status quo of radio broadcasting during a long period of stability in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was comfortable, social and communication changes invite us to reconsider those assumptions that are taken as predetermined givens. While tradition provides stability and predictability, it can become like a claustrophobic prison. Some of radio’s traditions are at odds with the sensory norms that evolved across the centuries and in a wide range of cultures. Our technology changes rapidly, but as a social animal, we are very similar to our ancient cousins.