

How Humans Listen (A Written Account)

By Paul J. McLane, editor of Radio World

Our modern technological society tends to devalue hearing and other senses in favor of the visual. But auditory spatial awareness is a significant part of our existence.

That's one of the lessons explored by Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, a husband-and-wife team, in *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* Blesser is familiar to us as the author of *The Last Word*, his column in Radio World Engineering Extra. He is a former professor at MIT; an AES Fellow and past president; the vice president/director of engineering for 25-Seven Systems; and a pioneer of digital audio, having invented the first commercial digital audio reverb system and helped to start Lexicon. Salter, an independent scholar specializing in interdisciplinary studies, provides a social science balance to Blesser's science and engineering.

Their topic in this 438-page book is "aural architecture" and how we experience space through attentive listening. "A real environment, such as an urban street, a concert hall or a dense jungle, is sonically far more complex than a single wall," they write. "The composite of numerous surfaces, objects and geometries in a complicated environment creates an *aural architecture*" Blesser calls this "the unifying concept of the aural influence of space on the social, behavioral and musical activities of the inhabitants."

The roots of this concept stretch back to primitive humans and up through modern high-tech electronic arts; Blesser and Salter devote themselves to exploring this architecture and how auditory spatial awareness has been applied to real and virtual spaces. In nine chapters they delve into topics such as aural space through history, the aural arts and musical spaces, inventing virtual spaces for music, "spatial innovators" and others.

As the authors tell us, the book will not turn a reader into an expert; it is "intended to provide a means of capturing and fusing disparate knowledge into a common framework: the human condition as seen through one particular prism." Learning to appreciate aural architecture by paying attention to auditory spatial awareness is one way to control and improve our personal environments, they argue.

Blesser is never what you'd call a "light read." He's a deep thinker and writes as you might expect a former MIT professor to write. He and his partner adopt such a tone in this book, to which Blesser devoted five years of research and writing.

Readers who can't bear the thought of cracking open another textbook in their lives can stay away. But "Spaces Speak" will intrigue theorists, educators and others who are interested in how we experience the world and how audio, psychology, history and culture interact.

Audio, mixing and sound engineers are among those targeted with this book.