

Aural Architecture and the iPod Generation

Barry Blesser, author of *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture*, reports on one of many discussions that he has had with those who recognize the universal importance of sound and hearing.

The younger generation's love of portable listening systems, such as iPods, is actually a manifestation of a new type of aural architecture. Although our auditory system evolved without ear-lids in order to maintain an ever-present connection to social and physical events in our immediate environment, iPods transport the listener to a far away space. With respect to the here-and-now, these devices produce functional deafness: the inability to hear events as they are happening.

As deafening loud machine noises of industrial cities in the early 20th century have been reduced, we now have a generation that replaces quiet with loud music. There is some preliminary research suggesting that continuous exposure to loud music has an addictive quality, and a small percentage of these people show withdrawal symptoms when placed in a quiet environment.

Aside from producing social isolation, continuous loud music also produces serious damage to the inner ear. Headphones are usually not very good at reproducing lower frequencies, and these are responsible for the perceptual sense of loudness. Listeners therefore turn the sound level up still higher. But the accompanying high frequencies, at these loud levels, literally burn out the hair cells of the inner ear. Functional deafness now becomes physical deafness.

Just as we had a generation of soldiers returning from WW II with major hearing disabilities, we will now have a generation with self-inflicted damage. The consequences of embracing social isolation as well as the functional damage caused by using portable listening systems is likely to change our culture significantly in the coming years.

The iPod is multi-dimensional. It can be nothing more than a portable tape recorder that stores an almost infinite amount of music. But among the younger generation, it enables an addiction to continuous loud sounds. Just as a fine wine does not imply alcoholism, an iPod does not automatically imply auditory damage. The iPod is just a symbol.