

BOOKS

Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter. *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*
MIT Press, 437pp.

by Max Ritts

The term *aural architecture* refers to the properties of a space that are experienced by listening. "The composite of numerous surfaces, objects, and geometries in a complicated environment creates an *aural architecture*," writes Barry Blesser, audio engineering consultant and former MIT professor, in his new book *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* When we create new spaces—whether by erecting skyscrapers, refurbishing basements, or designing cars—we function as aural architects, determining, however consciously, the aural properties of a given construct. A major current running through this informed study of human awareness and constructions of aural space is our cultural favouring of the visual over the aural. The author considers many reasons for this: the fleeting nature of sound, an insufficient lexicon of description (for which Blesser offers biological and cultural explanations) and an ingrained sense of the illegitimacy of the aural and the legitimacy of the visual. It is often in memory alone that the particular aural architecture of a given space is registered, a skill which requires considerable practice. Indeed, the book itself can be seen as attempting to circumvent a fate to which much of aural understanding has been relegated: it centres on how to communicate a concept whose experience requires so much description and is supported by so little tangible material.

Blesser's answer to this question, tartly put, is to say everything: "I have chosen to explore the broad phenomenon of auditory spatial awareness without regard to a specific discipline, culture or time period." The result is a surprisingly well-informed essay on all matters having to do with sonic perception, psychological, social, historical, and technological. Occasionally, Blesser's wide-net approach trawls up something a little unwieldy, an idea either too nuanced or vague from which to adequately glean a point: "Take a moment to visualize the world from its sounds, the songs of birds heralding the onset of spring in a forest park, the creaking of rocking chair on a front

porch, the sound of laughter..." Poets have shown us better ways to listen to leaves and Blesser knows this well enough. Wisely, he devotes most of the book to exploring the fascinations he understands best: the technological innovations that permit us new levels of auditory spatial awareness.

In one of the most engaging chapters of the book, "Inventing Virtual Spaces for Music," Blesser considers the social conventions of music and how our preference for private musical spaces has been advanced by new technologies. "With enough loudspeakers, sufficient signal-processing power, and the freedom to customize a space, could you reproduce any musical space in your living room?" he asks. "The answer is yes." Blesser gets right into the nitty-gritty, citing numerous touchstone experiments that have redefined our understanding of how reverberation works, how sounds can be encoded, and how engineers envision new spaces of aural architecture. But in a tone befitting a discerning scientific study, *Spaces Speak* reserves special respect for the role played by chance in the creation of aural architecture: most often, the templates for agreeable aural architectures are the pre-existing buildings we have come to know and love.