SOUNDSPACE

A MANIFESTO

Soundspace: A Manifesto
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1. LEARN HOW TO LISTEN

In order to better respond to the city's built environment as a whole, architects and urban planners must develop a listening practice that informs their understanding of, and approach towards, a site.

In music and sound studies, the concept of "soundscape" has critically transformed the ways in which the acoustic environment is understood and engaged. The World Soundscape Project, a research group founded by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer in the 1960s, developed the idea of soundscape as a means towards promoting acoustic ecology. Early concerns with noise pollution, however, gave way to myriad artistic practices that deployed soundscape as a creative tool: soundscape compositions, site-specific performances, environmental sound installations, sound maps, soundwalking, and other soundscape-oriented practices all form part of the contemporary musician or sound artist's toolkit.

Schafer proposed that "the way to improve the world's soundscape is quite simple. We must learn how to listen. After we have developed some critical acumen, we may go on to larger projects with social implications so that others may be influenced by our experiences. The ultimate aim would be to begin to make conscious design decisions affecting the soundscape around us." Our manifesto's concept of "soundspace" derives from this last aim: it brings together critical perspectives in architecture, planning, music and sound studies to enable critically informed approaches in the design of acoustic environments to emerge. As a means to interrogate the ways in which bodies and space interact, we see this interdisciplinarity as a type of transgressive practice, a "hybridization ...[a] mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories." The first edict of a soundspace manifesto is clear: we must, first and foremost, learn how to listen.

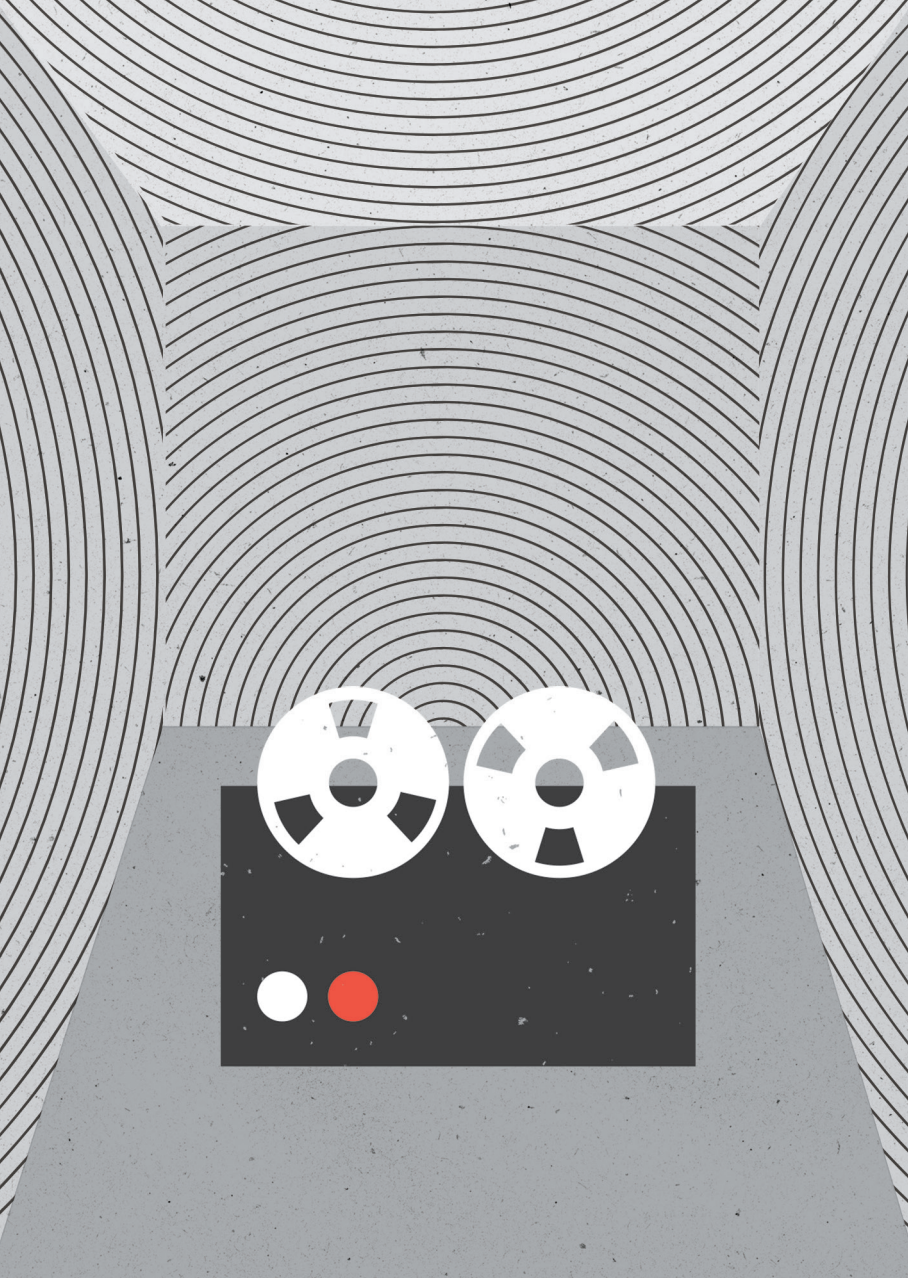
2.
TAKE THE PEOPLE OUT

One of the first sound artists to apply listening in a critical, even radical, way was Max Neuhaus, who in the late 1960s embarked upon a series of participatory works he titled, simply, LISTEN. Neuhaus invited audiences to a concert hall, where they expected to hear a concert of contemporary music. When audiences arrived, however, Neuhaus directed them not towards the auditorium, but away from it. Once outside, Neuhaus lead them on listening walks during which he did not utter a single word, but simply listened. In his conception, this simple act of focused listening could permanently alter audiences' listening habits, enabling them to become attuned in new ways to their everyday surroundings. Neuhaus stressed that, in order to truly affect people's listening habits, composers must not bring new sounds into the concert hall, but, crucially, "must take the people out."

Similarly, in evolving soundspaces, architects and planners must lift their practice off the page and into the lived environment. A soundspace cannot happen in theory or necessarily develop within what Tschumi calls the "stable institutionality" of traditional models of practice in architecture and planning. It must be taken out of the metaphorical concert halls within which these disciplines traditionally operate, and into the contingent and particular realms of everyday life. Soundspaces are critical, and even radical, spaces: they challenge the ways in which people understand, experience, and engage with the environments they inhabit. A soundspace is a kind of "attuning" towards an environment, as well as a kind of "tuning" of architecture.

3.
LISTEN DEEPLY

In Western art music, listening has historically been positioned as a receptive, passive, and appreciative act. In the mid-20th century, composers working within experimental traditions placed a new emphasis on listeners as active participants within the creative process; simultaneously, performers were newly reframed as listeners. As listening itself became incorporated into the language of musical composition, artists also made efforts to describe new approaches to listening. The composer Pauline Oliveros developed the concept of "Deep Listening" as a meditative listening practice: "Deep Listening is listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what you are doing. [...] Deep Listening represents a heightened sense of awareness and connects to all there is." Soundspaces invite active modes of listening, and they draw attention to modes and processes of listening as a means with which to creatively engage with a space.



4.
TAKE THE SOUND OF THE ROOM BREATHING

In 1963, Yoko Ono composed a tape piece that stood a world apart from Modernist tape music of the period. Ono's composition did not involve performing remarkable or laborious manipulations with pieces of magnetic tape. Instead, it entailed a simple set of instructions that, like other Event Scores by Fluxus artists, required a kind of conceptual attuning more than it did any specialised musical training:

TAPE PIECE II: ROOM PIECE
Take the sound of the room breathing.
1. at dawn
2. in the morning
3. in the afternoon
4. in the evening
5. before dawn
Bottle the smell of the room of that particular hour as well.

Here, Ono invites the performer to contend with the voice of a room – a breathing, presumably living element – as it evolves over the course of a day. Remarkably, it is the space itself that is the principal creative agent, and not the performer. The performer is, rather, one who observes and documents. Room Piece does not "happen to" a space, but rather derives from an intimate engagement with it. Space is repositioned as the creative locus of a musical work, and not merely its setting. Similarly, a soundspace does not necessarily entail bringing sounds into a space; instead, it evolves by bringing sound and space into a mutually productive, co-creative relationship.

5. LISTEN THICKLY

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's notion of "thick description" calls for both explanation of phenomena and analysis of the attendant context during any close observation. In this mode of practice, one not only examines the subject, but also the contexts and motivations that influence environment and behaviour. Some architects display an uncanny facility for thick description—a seemingly innate ability to connect with the specificity of places. Often their architecture is informed by the small, ordinary events and objects that might normally go unnoticed. This keen sense of observation, these antennae for rapidly grappling with and understanding a location, is elemental to any pursuit of finding a meaningful language within architecture.

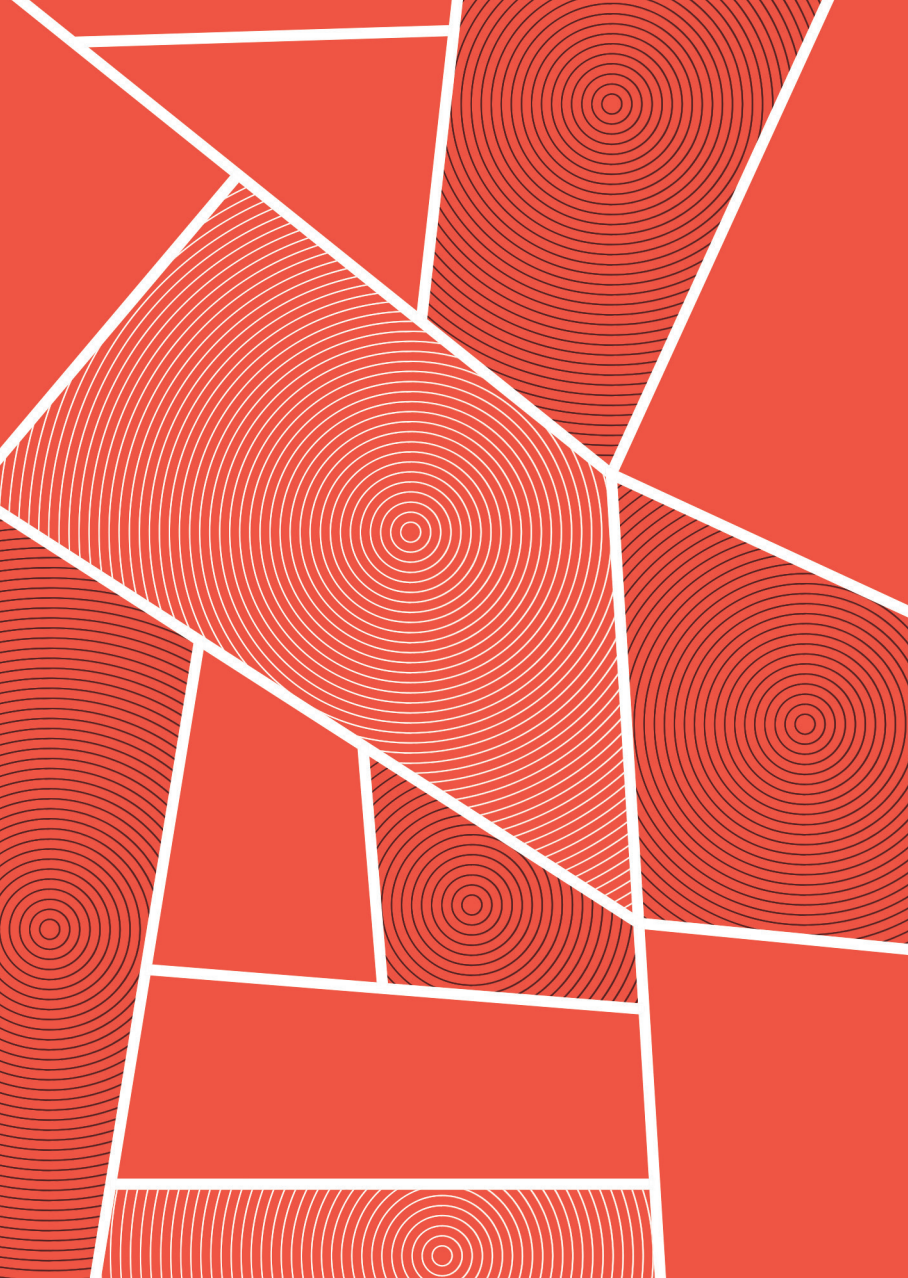
Listening thickly to place can add to this specificity, offering another facet with which to deepen the understanding of the possibilities of cities, and a method to move beyond form-making for its own sake. Carol Burns and Andrea Kahn ask designers to think beyond visually dominant facets of the architectural realm, to wonder more fully about the "constructedness" of site, what they view as a "complex interplay of forces (natural and physical, discursive and narrative and social and cultural)." Rather than begin and end with a method that focuses on the immediate aural territory of the present, listening thickly must involve hearing sounds' larger social, political and cultural contexts. These are all reflected in the sonic environment and must be incorporated into design thinking and planning.

6. LISTEN THROUGH HISTORY

Aural historian Emily Thompson asks "visually-oriented" architectural historians to "listen to, as well as look at, the buildings of the past." Architectural and urban historians must look to more subtle, but nonetheless pressing aural histories of place in order to uncover less stable, less concrete notions of past architectures. There are an increasing number of calls to bring multivalence to architectural design through sound; to this we must add an insistence that architectural and urban historians to do the same.

For decades, cultural historians have analysed aural histories by examining sound recordings. More recently, the urban sonic environment has been documented and archived using not only recording devices, but also network and mobile technologies, presenting new kinds of aural artefacts that invite new modes of cultural and historical analysis. The Montréal Sound Map by Max Stein and Julian Stein (2008-ongoing) allows anyone to upload recordings of the Montréal soundscape in the context of an interactive Web site. The recordings can be studied as a kind of urban composition, and equally as an aural geography. Among other kinds of aural mappings, the London Sound Survey by Ian Rawes features an "All-In-One London Map" that combines historical and contemporary sound maps, allowing the listener to explore aural histories of London through time and space.

An allegiance with these methodologies could build an untried aural architectural history that emerges from a sonic understanding of places. We know what a sound artefact can be; what can the architectural historian, in a mode of practice that exceeds traditional boundaries of his/her "normal" methodologies, understand as an aural architectural history?



7.
OPEN OUT

In 1984, Shuhei Hosokawa asked for a greater understanding of sound by those who make cities: "[p]lanners are in many cases exclusively engaged in the planning of the spatial dimension of their city, leaving the acoustic aspect to one side [...] neglecting what kind of tone the city has, that the habitants (are obliged to) hear." A decade later, Juahni Pallasmaa (1996) called for a far more phenomenologically-driven architecture, particularly in relation to sound. More recently, Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter (2007) proposed a new type of designer, the "aural architect" who designs spaces with sound as a key consideration.

In contrast to Hosokawa's earlier call, which drew attention to the urban scale, these later exhortations are principally concerned with how architects might better understand and integrate sound into interiors, rooms, enclosed spaces; they are focused on the building. These efforts must move further afield in relation to soundspaces, into the more complex, noisier, more dynamic spaces of the city, to seek out how urban environments can be similarly enriched by this attention to sound. In moving from the building to the city, architects and planners can draw inspiration from artists like Hildegard Westerkamp and Andra McCartney, whose soundwalks reveal the varying contexts and collective spaces of cities. The uncontainable and expansive nature of sound in the city makes it less reliable as a design tool, but it is this very quality that makes the urban sphere such a critical soundspace with which to work.

8.
THINK OF ALL THE SOUNDS LIKE THEY'RE A SYMPHONY

How is a city composed? Who creates the sounds of a city, who listens, and how? Who regulates the city's acoustic environments, who resists, and how?

In Her Long Black Hair (2004), an audio walk for Manhattan's Central Park by Canadian sound artist Janet Cardiff, the listener is cautioned that, "When you're in a city like New York, you have to think of all the sounds like they're a symphony... otherwise you go a bit crazy." Accompanying Cardiff's voice are pre-recorded sounds of traffic, ambulances, street music, footsteps of people and horses – a panoply of mechanical, electronic, and human utterances. These pre-recorded sounds, heard via headphones, merge with sounds that are simultaneously happening in real space. These spaces are further multiplied through Cardiff's narrative, which spans past, present and future, as well as real and imagined spaces.

In contrast to most conventional building materials, sounds can simultaneously occupy different temporal and spatial realms within a physically contiguous space. Sounds can also be heard dynamically, in layers and levels that may or may not connect in coherent ways. Listeners may choose to hear this multiplicity of soundspaces as meaningful, or not; their attention to the sonic environment can also change from moment to moment. A sonic chaos for one listener might be a symphony for another. The architect must account for the multiplicity and variety of soundspaces that occur in urban environments, as well as the different modes and levels of engagement they invite.

9.
THINK SONICALLY

For Jonathan Sterne, sound studies "can begin from obviously sonic phenomena like speech, hearing, sound technologies, architecture, art or music. But it does not have to. It may think sonically." In moving towards soundspaces, architecture and urban planning must not only engage new methods and concepts within design and development, but must embrace new modes of thinking as well. Notions of spatial agency and alternative practice have been well established by numerous authors such as Rory Hyde (2012). However there are few attempts by architects or planners to engage in this type of practice in relation to sound.

"Design thinking" is typically driven by experimentation and problem solving, with a view to improving and inventing. Thinking within musical composition and sonic art is often oriented towards engendering and eliminating possibilities: making choices in deciding musical moments, forms, structures, conditions, and so on. "Sonic thinking," by contrast, might embrace more receptive and responsive modes of thought, always emerging from the attentive posture of listening. Ultimately, sonic thinking is thinking through listening. In this sense, sonic thinking cannot be definitive or prescriptive. It must be alive, open to influence, responsive, aware and connected. As Brandon LaBelle writes, "as a listening subject I am already enmeshed within a greater network of animate forces whose spatializing efforts elaborate a form of place always already multiple, temporal, and contoured by others." The sonic thinker operates within this network of animate forces, and cannot think alone or in isolation.

10.
LIVE THE SOUNDSPACE

Soundspaces are not inert, fixed, contained or containable architectures. Like sonic thinking, soundspaces themselves are by nature alive and open to influence, and invite change, movement, and evolution into the design and planning process. Similar to Aldo Rossi's understandings of the long-term mutability of buildings like Padua's Pallazo dela Ragione, soundspaces shift as cities develop. Architectural and planning practices have historically been focused upon concrete materials and known or predictable elements -- site size, sun path, soil condition, elevation, client spatial requirements, local building regulations, and so on. In contrast, soundspaces compel spatial practitioners to account for the unknown and the unknowable within their scope, to question how their practice can operate within a realm of uncertainty, and to account for "outside" influences, what LaBelle describes as "a steady web of interferences" that operate within acoustical paradigms.

Cities are especially rich zones of interference. New York City-based improviser and composer Vijay Iyer writes that, for him, "New York's superpower is its chaos of interactions"; he describes the "everyday abundance of ephemeral interactions' that occur there, and the uneven "overlap of communities [...] juxtapositions, collisions, and ruptures" that combine to create the music that is New York. Ouzounian suggests that, "the city can be understood as a collectively generated, unstable and unfixed, imagined and experienced, lived and living composition: one that can be continuously heard and sounded [...] recombined, reoriented and recomposed."

Rather than the flash of lightning in the night that Foucault invokes as the means to understand the complex relationship between limits and transgressions, we see the urban soundspace being "lit up" by a crash of sounds. The architects, designers and planners who compose and recompose our cities cannot only imagine its soundspace; they must improvise and collaborate with it, change with it, and change by it; they must, above all, live the soundspace.

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