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Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture

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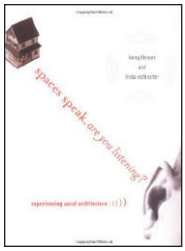
Reviews



Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture. *By Barry Blesser & Linda-Ruth Salter.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. 437 pp. ISBN 0262026058.

In communication models like Information Theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1998) or Sender Message Channel Receiver (SMCR) (Berlo, 1960), space is assumed (as environment or as noise) rather than an explicit element. *Spaces Speak* aims to increase readers' understanding of aural architecture or "the properties of a space that can be experienced by listening" (p. 5). The authors synthesize vast scholarship across disciplines to clearly articulate aural architecture. Blesser and Salter's aim is to remedy the dearth of knowledge of aural architecture as, "its language and literature are sparse, fragmented, and embryonic" (p. 6). First author Barry Blesser is a founder of digital audio, former MIT professor, and a technical and management consultant—effectively allowing the book to explore both scholarly and industry perspectives.

One strength of *Spaces Speak* is the scope of its research base. The work draws on the findings of engineers, architects, researchers, scholars, historians, anthropologists, theologians, social scientists, and audio industry experts. The resulting work cultivates an appreciation for space through attentive listening (i.e., "intensely focusing in the sounds of life in the immediate environment" [p.15]), aural awareness (i.e., when a listener is consciously aware of sound), and aural architecture. In addition, this book speaks to current trends within academia in its cross-disciplinary approach to knowledge and its advocacy of dismantling disciplinary barriers.

The book first orients readers by conceptualizing relevant terms and concepts, and then locates aural architecture within historical, artistic, scientific, industry, and academic frames. Blesser and Salter come across as persuasive though not heavy handed advocates for increasing aural architecture's legitimacy through standardizing ways of communicating, studying, measuring, and applying resulting knowledge. However, Blesser and Slater know the difficulties that come with achieving this goal. This goal presumes finding ways for scholars to work across disciplinary lines and making any scientific/academic findings practical and applicable to practitioners. Blesser and Slater note that a shared approach is needed because the belief systems that underlie disciplines focus on such divergent information that there is no one conclusive answer. They argue, "[w]ho asks the question is more important than the nature of the answer" (p. 305).

This work contains four interconnected parts. The first part of the book comprises Chapters One through Three (Introduction to Aural Architecture, Auditory Spatial Awareness, and Aural Space from Prehistory to Present, respectively). This section

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conceptualizes important concepts (e.g., aural architecture, auditory awareness, and attentive listening) and situates aural architecture within an historical framework. The second part includes Chapters Four and Five (Aural Arts and Musical Spaces, and Inventing Virtual Spaces for Music, respectively). This section speaks to the aesthetic and artistic experience of space and how technology unbinds it from actual space to give us virtual experiences. The third part includes Chapters Six and Seven (Scientific Perspectives on Spatial Acoustics, and Spatial Innovators and their Private Agendas, respectively). This is the most technically and scientifically detailed section of the book as it relates to acoustic science and research, sound industry standards, and professional practices. This section, especially Chapter 6, is clearly aimed at the scholars and professionals with expertise in the science of acoustics.

The final part includes Chapters Eight and Nine (Auditory Spatial Awareness as Evolutionary Artifact, and Concluding Comments, respectively). Chapter Eight constructs aural awareness as a product of evolution, and given that this discussion is prehistorical, at first glance it seems anachronistic given the book's previous focus on linear and chronological development of thought. However by taking an evolutionary approach, Chapter Eight effectively brings the work full circle by using evolution to impress upon readers the centrality of spatial auditory awareness to the earliest human experiences. Blesser and Salter explore these evolutionary roots in a way that is not redundant given earlier chapters. At the outset of Chapter Eight, the authors skillfully situate the evolution discussion as central to extending and developing five themes dispersed though previous chapters. For instance, the second theme speaks to social cohesion as coming from the shared experience of sound and an innate human need for survival. This builds upon earlier discussions, notably in Chapter 2, that explore sound's users as early organizers and regulators of social life.

Blesser and Salter's book communicates a complete understanding of aural architecture to the reader by seamlessly fusing a wide variety of literature into a single volume. It is central to their argument that an understanding of aural architecture requires understanding the many constituent disciplines and fields. Blesser and Salter argue for a more coherent voice for aural architecture, and their means for doing so allow the work to be accessible to a wide variety of readers.

Certainly this book appeals primarily to those with expertise in one of the disciplines supporting the discussion, which, as stated previously, are abundant and diverse. Those in Communication Studies will benefit from understanding the unique contributions of space—in particular to aesthetic forms of communication—which are often given limited attention in communication models. Individual chapters from this book would also work well as stand alone graduate readings. For instance, Chapter Three would serve as an engaging reading on the role that aural spaces and experiences play in shaping society. Additionally, music scholars would seem to be a natural audience for Chapter Five. Lastly, Chapter Six would likely prove an engaging reading for those studying acoustics and audio engineering.

Blesser and Salter urge us to consciously listen to achieve greater awareness of our natural and constructed environments. The work constitutes an attempt to immerse us in aural experiences of the world that we mindlessly evade. This experience

is central to the human experience, for as the authors argue, "we cannot escape the influence of aural architecture because we live inside it" (p. 364).

References

Berlo, D. (1960). *The process of communication: An introduction to theory and practice.* New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston.

Shannon, C.E. & Weaver, W. (1998). *The mathematical theory of communication.* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

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