

Books

Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture

Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter
The MIT Press, 2007
Reviewed by Matthew J. Kiefer

Unless you're an acoustician or a concert violinist, your auditory experience of built space is probably intuitive or even unconscious, at least until sound becomes noise that disturbs you. So it may surprise you to know there is a proto-discipline called “aural architecture”: the properties of the physical environment that can be experienced by attentive listening.

It has its own language, grounded in audio engineering, cognitive psychology, and sensory anthropology, and the authors—a former MIT professor and digital audio pioneer, and his wife, an independent scholar—speak it fluently. In fact, they seem to have invented it, or at least synthesized the coinages of others, in this comprehensive, lucid, and insightful account of a discipline you may not even have known existed. And yet it is unavailable as an audio book!

Auditory spatial awareness, though it varies widely among listeners, is innately human. It helps us navigate, influences social behavior, enhances our perception of voices and music, and affects the sensory experience of our environment. It can't really be taught, but it can be learned, as the almost extrasensory spatial awareness of some blind persons attests.

For millennia, the acoustic commons promoted social cohesion. The Greek amphitheater spread oratory and drama to the masses; cathedrals were

reverberating sonic instruments for Gregorian chant. Until transportation arenas replaced acoustic arenas in the 20th century, towns were bounded by the reach of the church bells or the chiming of the town clock.

As Quakers know, quietude preserves the acoustic arena as a common resource. Yet we have mostly let “sonic power”—noise from vehicles, machines, and loudspeakers—disrupt acoustic geography. Broadcasting, recording, and amplification have largely converted the shared experience of music, drama, and public speech into private activities, reflecting the larger societal shift from belonging to autonomy and privacy.

The acoustic attributes of built spaces can be shaped intentionally (say for a concert hall), but they mostly arise incidentally. In fact, as the authors admit, aural architecture is barely a recognized discipline. Although they are more interested in explication than exhortation, their book provides a persuasive argument for being more intentional about the sonic effects of built space—and for abating noise pollution.

Since auditory spatial awareness seems to work just fine even when you're unaware of it, if your nightstand is already sagging, you may not feel compelled to add this book to the pile. But it's absorbing reading, and if you're designing space where sound quality is important—not just concert halls, but restaurants, libraries, public buildings, and places of worship—you really should learn this language.

One wonders if Boston City Hall would be less reviled if its visually compelling but acoustically challenged spaces had benefited from such fluency.



Matthew J. Kiefer is a land-use attorney at Goulston & Storrs in Boston. He teaches in the urban planning program at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage

Hayward Publishing, 2010

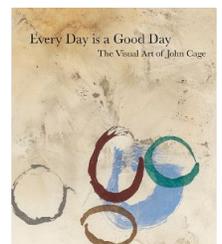
Reviewed by Andrew Witkin

John Cage brought a nonjudgmental approach to the highly opinionated world of modern art. For a man supposedly apolitical, his example is a bold one. This does not mean that we have to look at his work with the same approach.

This book appears, at first, to be just like any other on Cage: reverential, referential, and lacking much in-depth investigation. The good news is that it is far more informative than just reverential, and far more educational than just referential. It claims to be the first

to present the full swath of Cage's visual output and does a solid job presenting a good number of works to illuminate the growth, changes, and alternate paths Cage chose.

Consisting of six essays, an index of sorts, and a slew of color plates, *Every Day is a Good Day* provides firsthand accounts of those who assisted Cage (Kathan Brown, Ray Kass, and Laura Kuhn); those who had experiences with him in the visual art world (Irving Sandler); those who helped formulate presentations for or with him (Julie Lazar); and an artist, Jeremy Millar, who conceived of both the book and the accompanying touring exhibition to present Cage's work, explain some of it, and to treat it with a Cage-like approach.



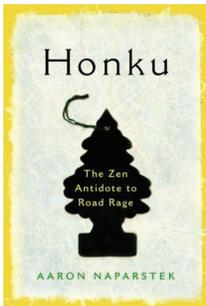
Andrew Witkin is director of Barbara Krakow Gallery in Boston, a working artist, and a voracious consumer of all things Cage.

Throughout the book, several references are made to Arnold Schoenberg demanding that Cage devote his life to music (and so he did), but there is little in the way of real discussion of where Cage's visual works (begun in 1969) fit in to the greater world of the arts. 4'33" is well known; the use of chance procedures in composing, the event/circus/performance at Black Mountain, prepared piano, use of live radio, and on and on are all elements of Cage's work that have their place in history (whether one likes the results or not). This book does not try to deal with that sort of question in the visual world, but it does provide a primer on who helped Cage when he was interested in making things.

In Cage scholarship, there is much assumed. This

book does an excellent job of ignoring that approach and presenting some basics: the primer in the back of the book that serves as a loose dictionary of Cage terms; the information Kuhn lays out; and the essential (though rather abbreviated) explanation by Lazar of how Cage's last great action—*Rolywholyover A Circus*—was conceived, how it began, and what it was. For all these reasons and for the opportunity to see images of some dynamic and layered works, *Every Day* is a welcome addition to the world of Cage literature.

Let's hope the next one takes the information available in this and, much as Cage would have appreciated, asks more questions without worrying about what the answers would be.



David Scharfenberg is news editor at *The Providence Phoenix*. He drives a rusting Mazda with a working horn.

Honku: The Zen Antidote to Road Rage

Aaron Naparstek

Villard Books, 2003

Reviewed by David Scharfenberg

The car horn, despite its ubiquity—or, perhaps, because of it—retains a remarkable capacity to enrage.

Take Aaron Naparstek, a writer and Web producer parked in his one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn around Christmastime. No stranger to honking, he suddenly finds himself seized by anger when some punk in a crappy blue sedan outside his window lets out a piercing, nonstop blast of particular violence.

To the fridge he goes and comes back with a carton of eggs—determined to make contact with the windshield. One, two, three. By the time he hits glass, the guy is out of the car, shouting obscenities and threatening to make a deadly return that night.

“I realized,” Naparstek writes, “that I had snapped. I had crossed a line. I had soaked up so much honking and road rage that I had become the honking.”

Determined to find a yolkless outlet for his anger, he begins crafting honku—haikus about honking. His first:

You from New Jersey
honking in front of my house
in your SUV

Soon he is posting the poems in the neighborhood—inspiring honkus from neighbors, “please stop honking” leaflets from 76th Precinct cops, and, eventually, Naparstek's book, *Honku: The Zen Antidote to Road Rage*.

The slim volume occasionally descends into cliché. I

could have done without the verse about the guy in the sports car with the midlife crisis. And the swipe at our fair city is of eye-rolling predictability:

Nearly ran me down
then flipped me the bird as well—
welcome to Boston

Flip this, Aaron! (OK, maybe you're right about us.) But all in all, the book—perfectly sized for your glove compartment—is a clever, self-conscious, and biting take on all things automotive.

Gruesome hit-and-run
fatalities up ahead
how awful—I'm late

All claim innocence
in line at the impound lot
above, wing'd pigs soar

Ignorant boyfriend—
honking in the driveway does
not impress my dad

Some of these poems seem aimed at inducing a knowing laugh—no more, no less. But the best of them, like the verse on the misguided boyfriend, tap into a fundamental truth: The automobile is not mere conveyance, not just transportation from one meaningful spot to the next.

No, it is a meaningful spot itself: a place for a jerk in a blue sedan; a clueless beau; and, yes, a bird-wielding Bostonian to reveal something essential—and maybe a little ugly—about his character.