

How Does This Sound?

We live in clamorous times. Barking dogs, honking horns, lawn mowers, leaf blowers—about a third of the nation is regularly exposed to noise pollution above the level the EPA considers safe. And that’s just the obvious din. The low roar of ventilation systems, the sigh of highway traffic, and the hum of electronics are nearly inescapable in the modern world.

And yet few human experiences are as sublime as deep listening. In a concert hall with fine acoustics, the end of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony can be a revelation. Rain on the roof, the first spring peepers, a lover’s voice—these are sounds we want to hear unmediated.

Not even the Garden of Eden was silent. But our soundscapes today are so cluttered that Congress passed a law in 2010 requiring manufacturers of the Prius and other quiet hybrid cars to build sound *back in* to their engines. Sponsored by Senator John Kerry, the legislation addresses the safety hazard to pedestrians of cars that can’t be heard above ambient street noise—a surrender in the decibel wars if ever there was one.

Quiet is such a scarce commodity that people will pay a premium for it. Property values increase as communities become more peaceful; call it a serenity surcharge. The World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, with chapters in eight US cities, argues that access to quiet is a universal human right, albeit one mostly observed in the breach. “More and more, the acoustic environment is becoming a question of power, and of money with which to buy silence,” the organization wrote in one of its founding manifestos.

When sound becomes noise, it can undermine shared social goals. Transit-oriented housing development in Dorchester was nearly derailed by complaints about the screeching trolleys making a sharp turn at Ashmont Station. Opponents of wind farms often cite turbine noise in their legal appeals. (In January, a panel of independent experts convened by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection found no adverse health impacts associated with wind turbines. But we surely have not heard the

last whirl on that.) Hospitals struggle to create the tranquility their patients need to heal.

We all need to listen better, to sound and silence alike. Architects and designers can help if they elevate the aural aesthetics of their work to the same plane as visual and spatial concerns. The first step, as always, is awareness.

This is my first issue as editor of *ArchitectureBoston*, and so far it’s a thrilling ride. I’ve known the magazine for several years, I subscribed to it, I even wrote for it as one of the nonpracticing “Other Voices” (September/October, 2006). Now I am honored to be at the helm of such a beautiful and well-regarded publication. I don’t plan major changes, at least at the start, but I do hope to broaden the magazine’s appeal and bring it more fully into the community conversation. And I hope to engage you all in this adventure: writing letters to the editor; attending sponsored public discussions; offering advice and cheer.

I once heard Tom Winship, the legendary late editor of *The Boston Globe*, give advice to a group of young reporters. “Make love to the city every day,” he said. I took that to mean become *intimate* with it, learn its many moods and secrets, protect it but also help it grow. I try to live those words as a journalist and citizen of Boston. I look forward to deepening that relationship as steward of a publication that so clearly shares those values. ■

Renée Loth
Editor



PHOTO: Conor MacDonald