

# Soundscape

By Collin Schipper



Just outside the Milwaukee Art Museum, still in the downtown area, across Lincoln Memorial Parkway, the city is full of noise pollution. R. Murray Schafer in his book, “The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World” discusses this issue. The streets are filled with jackhammers of construction, honking horns of the uptight Milwaukee driver, late and in a hurry, diesel busses, people yelling and the numerous other noises of a city. This is especially true right now, with O'Donnell Park under reconstruction, which has closed down the bridge.

When a visitor enters the Cudahy Gardens created by internationally recognized landscape architect Dan Kiley in front of the Milwaukee Art Museum, there is a slight change in aural landscape. Ten compartments, each 50 feet long, contain graded low slopes, contained by hedges, and in each of these is a water wall. The Water Wall is a five-hundred foot long row of 2,000 fountain jets, set in black stone. At the end of the row of fountains, sitting in front of the main entryway to the museum, is a much larger fountain in the center of a shallow pool. These all gradate their height dependent on the speed of the wind, raising in calm winds, lowering in high, and also on the height of the shrubs next to them. What is created between the wind whipping in off the lake, the wall of shrubs that will one day be ten feet tall, and the water wall that will match it is a fairly effective barrier to the oppressive sounds of the city. Once the viewer crosses a certain line, much of the sound is cut out and replaced by the low gurgling of water, or what sounds like a spraying waterfall, mimicking the sounds of surf just on the other side of the museum in the lake. The sounds of seagulls can suddenly be heard over the tops of the waves, and while still somewhat loud, the soundscape appears more natural and calming.

In the entryway of the museum there is a large round hole in the floor, providing a glimpse down to the lower level. When descending the stairs to reach this space, sound reverberations are slowly altered, bouncing back in odd ways. Once inside the circle, an odd phenomenon occurs. Just outside the center, sound bounces back and forth, echoing and expanding. A person's voice coming from directly in the center could be a whisper, yet fills the space with the sound. The true oddity is that the person standing on the dot in the center of the round room, looking up at the Alexander Calder mobile, experiences sounds negate. A sudden quieting occurs, sounds interacting and cutting each other out,

the echoes subsiding, so that the space is quieter, and contemplation is enabled as the viewer watches the giant mobile, inspired by Piet Mondrian, slowly rotate.

The main area of the Calatrava addition that expands out towards the lake provides a beautiful viewing point of the lakeshore, framed into little vignettes by the many planes of glass, but it creates an interesting sound experience as well. Footsteps, particularly those of high heels, strike sharply against the marble floors, creating rhythmic staccato snaps. In a large space one would typically expect the sounds to echo off the expansive walls, but the sound is sharp, highlighted, but dies almost instantly, absorbed by the rising ceiling, which goes up like a parabola to the mast, and also absorbed by the massive concrete structure.

Both buildings that form the MAM, the Calatrava and the earlier Eero Saarinen structure, are built of formed concrete, though the Calatrava is a much more adventurous exploration of the medium. This acts much like a mausoleum, absorbing sounds and creating a peaceful place of contemplation for the art housed inside, and the grandeur of the lakefront, which seems to pour right into the space, and the greatness of human accomplishment. The guests tend to keep their voices down, talking quietly and reverently amongst themselves, and the overall sound character is not quite silence, but far below a din.

The War Memorial by Saarinen is a different matter. It is silent on this rooftop space, the only sound the lake and its noises. The building acts to shade the courtyard from the noises of the city, absorbing it all and removing it from the sound palette. The space asks the viewer to look out at the eternity of the water, going out and meeting the horizon, or to look up into the clear sky, unperturbed by the reverse beeps of trucks and the groans of heavy machinery. The space creates a silence - a true memorial space. Overall the design of the Milwaukee Art Museum is very connected to the city it is such a part of, but it sonically is capable of removing itself from the everyday aural chaos of the bustle and hustle of the city through careful planning and design. This gives the viewer the chance to experience the museum, the setting and surroundings, and the history it holds without interference.