
The World Soundscape Project

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Update on the Project

The World Soundscape Project (WSP) was founded by R. Murray Schafer in the late 1960's to study the acoustic environment and the impact of technology on it. The WSP established an international reputation through its innovative approach to sound, as well as its numerous research publications and tape documents. Through systematic and critical study the project has endeavoured to contribute to and co-ordinate research on the scientific, aesthetic, philosophic, architectural, and sociological aspects of soundscape ecology. The project's focus is to find solutions for an ecologically balanced soundscape where the relationship between the human community and its sonic environment is balanced.

Following the departure of Schafer from Simon Fraser University in 1975 after the publication of his book "The Tuning of the World", the project essentially wound down and completed the publication of its works through ARC Publications: *The Vancouver Soundscape*, *Five Village Soundscapes*, *European Sound Diary* and the *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*. The project also left an impressive archive of 300 audio tapes of sound environments throughout B.C., Canada and Europe, plus numerous written documents.

After the original research group -with Howard Broomfield, Bruce Davis, Peter Huse, Barry Truax, Hildegard Westerkamp, and Adam Woog - was dissolved, distribution of the WSPs publications as well as maintenance and expansion of its archives were continued by Barry Truax and Hildegard Westerkamp. Both have since disseminated and developed the project's legacy through publications and recordings of their own work as well as through courses in Acoustic Communication at the Communications Department at Simon Fraser University. Gradually, and also as a result of Schafer's continued lecture and workshop tours to many parts of the world, the WSP's work has taken root internationally among a variety of groups and individuals of many different professions.

Thoughts, ideas and visions

The WSP has taken the position that listening and soundmaking stand in a delicate relationship to each other. This relationship becomes unbalanced if, for example, what we hear is louder than our own sounds, or if the atmosphere of an environment allows us only to hear or to listen, but not to speak or express. A noisy environment and an authoritarian environment can both have this effect: a noisy environment drowns out our footsteps, our breathing, and our normal speaking voice; an authoritarian environment does not have to be loud for us to lower our voices or not to talk at all. The soundscape or sonic environment is an intimate reflection of the social, technological, and natural conditions of its area. One of the main tasks of soundscape ecology is to maintain an acoustic balance in the environment and ideally to determine how its quality may be improved. The WSP's most important strategy towards balancing and improving the quality of the sonic environment is educational. Raising awareness of the present state of the soundscape through active listening and "ear-cleaning" exercises is one of the group's major strengths. Such "soundscape" listening encourages questioning and evaluation, and ideally listeners are provoked to act upon their perceptions. As a consequence they also become aware of their role as soundmakers and their responsibility towards the soundscape.

Our listening capacity always becomes refined in an acoustically clear environment, such as a hi-fi soundscape, and we often experience a desire to listen as well as to make sounds. Under those conditions we can find a balance between listening and soundmaking and this balance gives inner vitality. All too often, however, the modern soundscape is "lo-fi"—too much urban noise thus creates loss of energy. Both voice and ear are neglected and stress is a common experience for the urban person. Music in our sound environment has always played a special role. Soundscape ideology recognizes this and the irony of musicians, who are all too often concerned with the details of their art only, deaf to a world out of tune, and ignoring the social, political and environmental context and the implication of their work. The WSP actively counters this situation by connecting diverse and disconnected disciplines dealing with sound, and thus placing music within the larger context of the sound environment. Soundscape ideology recognizes that when humans enter an environment, they have an immediate effect on the sounds; the soundscape is human-made and in that sense, composed. Soundscape is the acoustic manifestation of "place", where the sounds give the inhabitants a "sense of place" and the place's acoustic quality is shaped by the inhabitants' activities and behaviour. The meanings of a place and its sounds are created precisely because of this interaction between soundscape and people.

Beyond fighting sound pollution, the task of sound ecologists is to design healthy and attractive sonic environments, sonic places. Continual sensitization of the ear, creative town planning, legislative action (noise abatement regulations), the design of acoustic parks and playgrounds, and the innovative preservation of worthwhile sounds of past and present may be among the means to achieve such ends. This turning of the negative spectre of a polluted sound world into a vision where the sonic environment becomes a place for renewal and creativity has been the genius of the World Soundscape Project.

(An expanded and slightly altered version of this text is published shortly in the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada, Second Edition.)
