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Much of human history can be defined by the visual architecture with which we have surrounded ourselves. These structures reflect what was valued politically, socially, and religiously at the time they were built. With these visual structures, however, comes another, sometimes more complex, type of structural design that cannot be seen but instead is heard: aural architecture. In Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture, Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter outline and explore the history and significance of aural architecture and how humankind perceives it. Ambitiously, they weave together an interdisciplinary understanding of the phenomenon of auditory spatial awareness while attempting to appeal to several different audiences throughout. The book’s nine chapters explore the idea and phenomenon of aural architecture from one or multiple disciplinary standpoints, consequently creating a patchwork image of how aural architecture is fully woven into our way of life and how we consciously or subconsciously perceive its effect. Blesser and Salter blend physical, social, scientific, musical, and artistic perspectives to present aural architecture as an often unnoticed element shaping the ways in which people interact with their physical environments in a variety of historical and cultural contexts.

The authors equip the reader with all the necessary terminology and basic
concepts in the first chapter, making the later chapters much easier to follow. The second chapter discusses a broad range of topics while focusing on “auditory spatial awareness,” which Blesser and Salter define as the ability to perceive changing sounds in a space as well as the emotional and behavioral experience of an individual or group that results from these sounds. This chapter also focuses on the social and anthropological science related to aural architecture. One particularly fascinating phenomena discussed is the ability of blind persons to “see,” or perceive the physical boundaries and obstacles of a space through acute listening. The authors use several anecdotal examples, including the personal experience of musician Ray Charles, who navigated by echolocation throughout his life. This chapter also examines how humans aurally understand and interpret different types of space, and how different attributes, such as aural embellishments, can change one’s understanding of their environment.

The next several chapters discuss the artistry of acoustics. Selecting key moments in the history of Western aural architecture, the third chapter adeptly illustrates the changing influence social and political factors had on acoustics over time and how those changes were reflected in architectural design, both aural and visual. This chapter also examines corresponding changes in cultural tastes, particularly the way people preferred to listen to music. The authors use the example of religious spaces frequently, such as the shift from long, awe-inspiring reverberations of large medieval cathedrals built by the Catholic Church, to the intimate, short reverberations of the Protestant Church, which made it possible to understand the sermons in the vernacular languages of the congregation. The following two chapters are spent exploring the musical spatiality of both real and virtual spaces respectively, which the authors describe as: “the merger of the acoustics of a space with [a] sound source that creates a unified aural experience” (11). Blesser and Salter discuss both how a space is designed to give a certain effect as well as how musical sound travels through that space. The most important factor in their equation is how long a reverberation lasts, which they demonstrate through examples of both ideal and unsatisfactory acoustical balances. The authors also discuss how the aural architecture and musical spatiality of a space are heavily influenced by the other functions of the space. The text gives a history of various composers’ and audio engineers’ expansion and exploration of the definition of virtual space, but Blesser and Salter make the point that humankind’s “grasp of virtual space is, at best, rudimentary” (214), and the number of people with the artistic sensibility required to explore virtual space is rather small. The sixth chapter attempts to link the scientific and artistic attributes of aural architecture by “interpreting the science of acoustics in terms of its artistic implications” (236).

In the last three chapters of the book, the authors examine aural architecture
from a behavioral standpoint, beginning with an examination of the ways that personal and social behavioral patterns affect progress and study in a discipline. Blesser and Salter emphasize that folk and formal sciences must be equally considered to form a clear, accurate picture of aural architecture, because aural architecture is largely based upon human experience. Blesser and Salter also consider the unavoidable human subjectivity that creeps into scientific observation, along with the conservatism that both allows and hinders advancement in a field of study. In the next chapter, the authors consider the relationship between evolution and auditory spatial awareness anthropologically, and the human social and emotional reactions to that awareness are discussed. Blesser and Salter also attempt to tease apart nature and nurture in relation to those reactions. They revisit echolocation, this time comparing humans with animals such as bats and dolphins. In their closing comments, Blesser and Salter identify the unifying theme of the book as the influence that aural architecture has upon social cohesion. Throughout history, the two have played off of each other, molding the culture that we live in today. Blesser and Salter also remind the reader that, “unlike other art forms, we cannot escape the influence of aural architecture because we live inside it” (364). These are experiences that have unified us since birth.

In *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* each chapter presents a different layer of the three-dimensional portrait of aural architecture. Taken together, the reader can develop a complete sense of the aural world that surrounds her/him and how to better understand it. What makes this book so accessible is the wide range of disciplines presented in each discussion, and the number of real-world examples provided. It could possibly be difficult, however, for someone with a limited background to engage consistently with the text. This book brings to our attention the potential power that sound possesses to change the way we live our lives, and gives the reader the tools necessary to take a more active role in creating that change, not just personally, but socially and culturally as well. It raises many questions about how sound is perceived, questions which will hopefully inspire the search for answers in all related disciplines.