Soundwalking

By Hildegard Westerkamp

originally published in Sound Heritage, Volume III Number 4, Victoria B.C., 1974
Revised 2001

published in: Autumn Leaves, Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice, Ed. Angus Carlyle, Double Entendre, Paris, 2007, p. 49.

A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are. We may be at home, we may be walking across a downtown street, through a park, along the beach; we may be sitting in a doctor's office, in a hotel lobby, in a bank; we may be shopping in a supermarket, a department store, or a Chinese grocery store; we may be standing at the airport, the train station, the bus-stop. Wherever we go we will give our ears priority. They have been neglected by us for a long time and, as a result, we have done little to develop an acoustic environment of good quality.

Listening in that way can be a painful, exhausting or a rather depressing experience, as our ears are exposed often to too many, too loud or too meaningless sounds. Trying to ignore them, however, makes even less sense. Since we cannot close our ears, we cannot help hearing all sounds. No matter how hard we try to ignore the input, the information enters the brain and wants to be processed. Physically and psychically, we still have to compensate for any noise even if our ears perceive it unconsciously. In addition and most importantly, we desensitize our aural faculties by shutting out sounds and thereby not allowing our ears to exercise their natural function.

Unless we listen with attention, there is a danger that some of the more delicate and quiet sounds may pass unnoticed by numbed ears and among the many mechanized voices of modern soundscapes and may eventually disappear entirely. Our first soundwalk is thus purposely exposing listeners to the total content of their environmental composition, and is therefore very analytical. It is meant to be an intense introduction into the experience of uncompromised listening.

A soundwalk can be designed in many different ways. It can be done alone or with a friend (in the latter case the listening experience is more intense and can be a lot of fun when one person wears a blindfold and is led by the other). It can also be done in small groups, in which case it is always interesting to explore the interplay between group listening and individual listening by alternating between walking at a distance from or right in the middle of the group. A soundwalk can furthermore cover a wide area or it can just centre around one particular place. No matter what form a soundwalk takes, its focus is to rediscover and reactivate our sense of hearing.

The first soundwalk can be done anywhere, at any time, and as often as desired. For the sake of intensity it may be wise to limit the walk initially to a small area or even to one particular spot. Different people may spend varying lengths of time on this walk. In each case it depends on

how long it takes to remove the initial hearing barriers, how deep the involvement is and how much fascination can be found in such an exploration.

Start by listening to the sounds of your body while moving. They are closest to you and establish the first dialogue between you and the environment. If you can hear even the quietest of these sounds you are moving through an environment which is scaled on human proportions. In other words, with your voice or your footsteps for instance, you are "talking" to your environment which then in turn responds by giving your sounds a specific acoustic quality.

Try to move without making any sound.
Is it possible?

Which is the quietest sound of your body?

(If, however, you cannot hear the sounds you yourself produce,
you experience a soundscape out of balance. Human proportions have
no meaning here. Not only are your voice and footsteps inaudible but also
your ear is dealing with an overload of sound).

Lead your ears away from your own sounds and
listen to the sounds nearby.

What do you hear? (Make a list)

What else do you hear?
Other people
Nature sounds
Mechanical sounds

How many Continuoussoundscontinuous Continuoussoundscontinuous

Can you detect
Interesting rhythms
Regular beats
The highest
The lowest pitch.

Do you hear any
Intermittent or discrete sounds
Rustles
Bangs
Swishes
Thuds

What are the sources of the different sounds?

What else do you hear?
Lead your ears away from these sounds and listen
beyond-----into the distance.
What is the quietest sound?
What else do you hear?

What else?

What else?

What else?

What else?

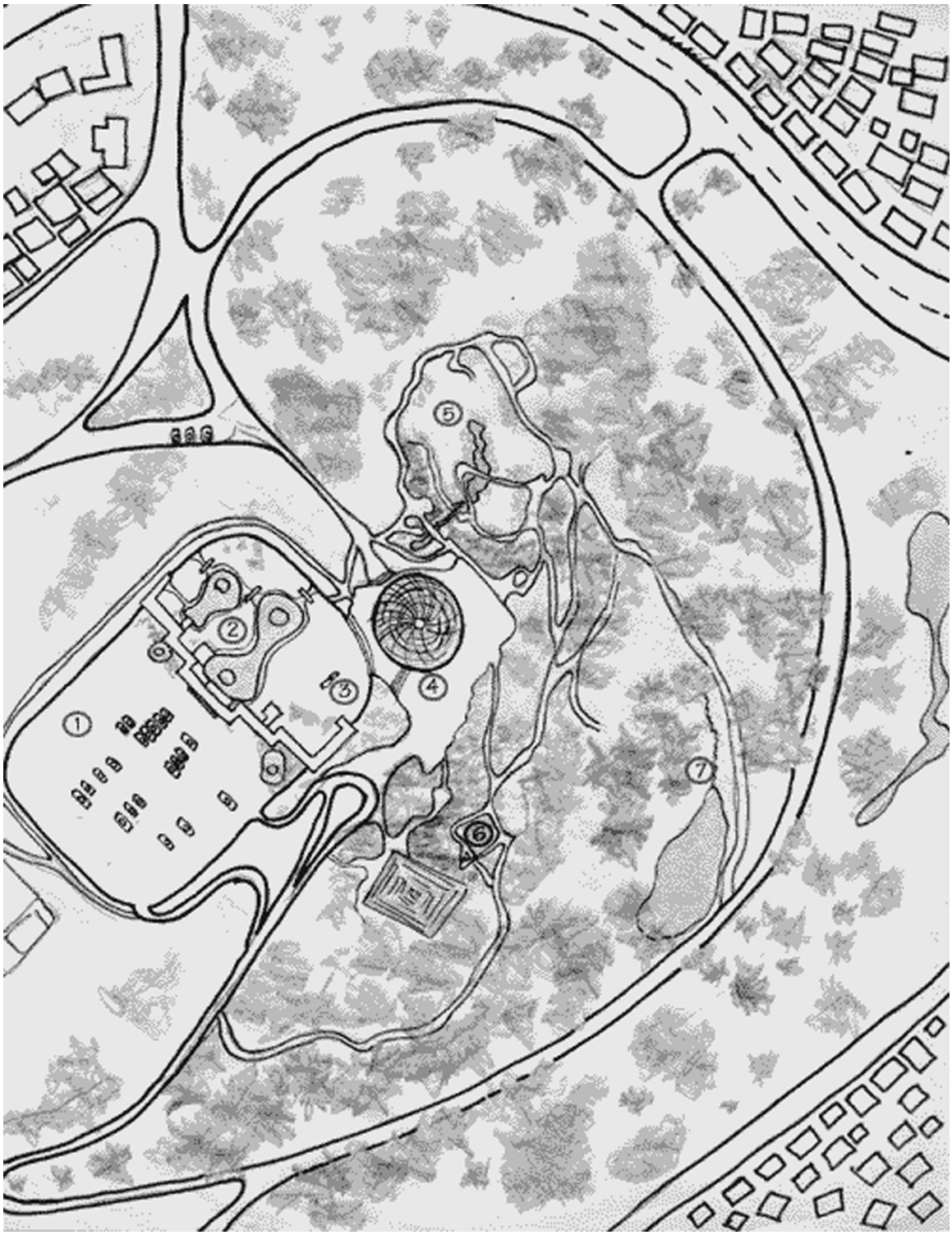
So far you have isolated sounds from each other in your listening and gotten to know them as individual entities. But each one of them is part of a bigger environmental composition. Therefore reassemble them all and listen to them as if to a piece of music played by many different instruments. Do you like what you hear? Pick out the sounds you like the most and create the ideal soundscape in the context of your present surroundings. What would be its main characteristics? Is it just an idealistic dream or could it be made a reality?

I suspect that the concept of going for a walk does not exist in nomadic tribes or in rural societies, as people are actively in touch with nature on a daily basis and their lifestyle is deeply integrated with the natural environment. In urban life, however, close contact with nature tends to highly reduced. Nature ceases to be a companion with whom one lives and struggles day after day, and becomes instead a distant friend whom one likes to visit on occasion. Going for a walk is one way by which urban people attempt to regain contact with nature.

When going for a walk is replaced by going for a drive-which happens more frequently than we may think-our contact with nature becomes purely visual: on the windshield two-dimensional landscapes appear; we are watching a film about landscapes to the soundtrack of a running motor or of music and voices from radio, cassette or CD; our visual experience is mediated by what we hear and our aural experience has no relationship to what we see. The contact that is made between environment and human senses is defined by the "skin" or bubble of the vehicle in which we sit.

Let’s climb out of our bubbles now, emerge from behind our screens, walls, loudspeakers and headphones and open our ears directly to the environment. Let's go for another soundwalk.

A Soundwalk in Queen Elizabeth Park in Vancouver



Queen Elizabeth Park is visually extremely attractive. It is a post-card park which captures the eye immediately. On this walk let us include our ears consciously, listen to the "soundtrack" of the park, and explore how much it harmonizes with our visual impression.

1) The most exposed area of the park is the parking lot. Start here and listen to the many sounds coming from all directions. Each city has its distinct sonic environment which contributes to its singular character. Can you find any sounds here that are typical of Vancouver's soundscape?

2) Walk toward the fountains and continue to listen to the city sounds until they disappear behind the sounds of water. If the fountains are not on, keep on listening to how the city sounds change. On your way you are passing through wooden arcades which give a particular acoustic quality to your footsteps, and to those of others. Steps on wooden walkways used to be a common sound not only in Vancouver but also in many small towns or old forts all over British Columbia.

Stop at a fountain and listen to the many different voices of water. How does the design of the fountain influence the sounds? Does it create any low-pitched gurgles? Can you hear the water flowing in the canals? What kind of atmosphere do the water-sounds create? Do you hear any sounds which do not seem to belong here? If the fountains are not on, imagine what they would sound like if they were running.

3) Close to the fountains you will find a metal sculpture ("Knife Edge" by Henry Moore). Explore it visually as well as acoustically. It consists of two pieces both of which have a different structure. Do they also differ in their sounds? What other relationships can you find between its form and its sounds?

Produce a wide variety of sounds and - among others - try to find a low-pitched rumble, a high-pitched clang, and a swish. You may even like to join together a series of sounds and create a composition (called "Knife Edge ?") Put your ear against the surface and listen to the inside.

4) When you walk into the conservatory, you are entering an artificially created, tropical environment. Take your time and experience it with all your senses. Does it look and smell and feel tropical? Does it sound tropical? What kinds of birds do you hear? Can you strike up a conversation with some of them? Can you hear the sound of the air-conditioning system?

When you walk across the bamboo-bridge explore it as if it was a sound sculpture. It creates a unique sound which is not generally heard in northern countries. Once you have passed the bamboo bridge listen for the sound of a small waterwheel. In the early days, when the conservatory first opened, it was always running and created a most interesting water soundscape in its vicinity. It is not always audible now and seems to have been neglected as a sound source.

5) Continue your walk to the Sunken Garden, a section of the park which is acoustically of special interest. Can you hear the sounds of the city disappear while you walk down into the garden? Observe its formations and explore how much these influence its acoustics.

The dominant sound of this garden is the sound of a waterfall. Can you hear the varying "voices" as the water falls onto different surfaces and rushes into the pond below?

While you continue, listen to the sound of your footsteps changing every time you hit a different surface. In the centre of the garden is a stone bridge, which-by its convex form-creates an acoustically interesting space between the water and the bridge. Listen to your footsteps while you walk across, and experiment with the sounds of your voice, your hands, etc. underneath the bridge, if you can get there. (A similar, bigger bridge is in Stanley Park. The same experiments done there will have very different and even more exciting acoustic results.)

6) The main acoustic feature of the Quarry Gardens is its echo. Discover it and find out where and how it is produced. Which of your sounds produce the clearest echo? Play with all possibilities of producing an echo and enjoying the acoustic interplay between you and your environment.

7) Let us end the soundwalk at the creek. Sit down and let the sounds of the flowing water soothe you. The water winds its way through channels and gaps between rocks and murmurs in new voices, which you have not heard yet. And if you were to listen to more water, there would be more new voices, an endless variety of them.

And finally: Is this park as attractive acoustically as it is visually?

When attentive listening becomes a daily practice, requesting sound quality becomes a natural activity. This may be reflected in simple actions like not playing the radio all day long, using a hand lawnmower instead of a power mower, buying quiet machinery, requesting to turn off disturbing sounds wherever possible, helping to preserve quiet areas in our cities, and staying aware of our own acoustic actions and of our collective responsibility for the sonic environment.

In this context it is appropriate to mention another type of soundwalk which does not only include attentive listening but also active physical participation in the music of our environment. There are many opportunities for this kind of activity in the soundscape, which children often demonstrate to us quite naturally. But to many of us adults, the idea of creating our own sounds, of composing or orchestrating our environmental music may seem silly and contrived. But surprisingly, going on a participatory soundwalk can create unexpectedly interesting dialogues between our surroundings and ourselves. It is worth a try.

Previously there was mention of tribal societies being in continuous dialogue with nature. For them it is a matter of survival to be able to understand and even imitate the sounds of nature. Any sound encountered during a hunt, such as a cracking stick, would carry very specific acoustic meanings to an indigenous hunter and would give clues about animals and their whereabouts.

In the same way we all need to stay in touch with our surroundings, as every sound carries very specific meanings, no matter where we live. Even though, as urban beings, we can no longer fully integrate our lifestyles with the cycles of nature, it is vital that we retain conscious contact with our environment. Cities are full of acoustic clues which-on many levels-are

important for our survival: we must listen to our cities as the indigenous people listen to their forests.

In order to get the most out of a participatory soundwalk it is best done in a place where we can hear ourselves and the more delicate sounds around us. A participatory soundwalk can either have the practical purpose of orientation in the environment or of having a dialogue with the surroundings; or it can have a purely aesthetic purpose of creating a soundwalk composition.

Orientation

The following is an account of how ship captains used to determine their position in relation to the shoreline:

"They used to get their position by echo whistling. They'd give a short whistle and estimate the distance from the shoreline by the returning echo. If the echo came back from both sides at the same time they'd know that they were in the middle of the channel." (Gordon Odlum, reminiscence, Vancouver, 1973)

Another example tells us of how Inuit used to orient themselves in their white northern world:

"I recall travelling in fog along a dangerous coastline. Visibility was zero, yet we neither delayed nor detoured. My companions listened to the surf and to the cries of birds nesting on promontories; they smelled the shore and surf; felt the wind and spray on their faces and 'read', through their buttocks, the wave patterns created by the inter-play of wind and swell. Loss of sight was not a serious handicap. When they used their eyes, it was often with an acuity that amazed me. But they weren't 'lost' without them." (Edmund Carpenter, "Eskimo Realities," New York, 1973, p, 36)

Since this type of orientation through our senses is not a natural part of our daily life anymore, let us do it in the form of a soundwalk.

Choose a pitch-black night or thick fog and set yourself a goal you want to reach. Your eyes are of little help. Your ears are your main tools for finding your way around. With your voice or any other sound you produce you will be able to tell where you stand in relation to your environment. Take a friend.

Or go for an orientation walk in the city, any city, asking people for directions. Besides not getting lost that way, you will also get to know a little of the character of a city by listening to the way people answer. Listen to the sounds and melodies in their voices, listen for accents. Ask all kinds of different people, young and old, men and women, children etc.

Dialogue

If you are a bird lover you may want to make contact with a bird and respond to its calls. How and how well can you do this? Do you feel that this contact is actually possible? Try it in the city and in the country.

If you are a hunter you may catch your prey easier by imitating the animal's call. The Inuit still do it in this fashion. "A hunter's imitation of a seal is sometimes good enough to fool the hunted seal. Some men can parody anything: bear, iceberg, yes, even wind." (ibid. p. 27) Go out and try to imitate all sorts of sounds.

Finding echoes has always fascinated people. Not only certain landscape formations produce them but also certain building structures. Find all the echoes in your environment and examine where they bounce off. Which ones are most interesting and why?

Soundwalk Composition

This kind of soundwalk is basically similar to the above ones, except that its main purpose is aesthetic rather than practical.

Go out and listen. Choose an acoustic environment which in your opinion sets a good base for your environmental compositions. In the same way in which architects acquaint themselves with the landscape into which they want to integrate the shape of a house, so we must get to know the main characteristics of the soundscape into which we want to immerse our own sounds. What kinds of rhythms does it contain, what kinds of pitches, how many continuous sounds, how many and what kinds of discrete sounds, etc. Which sounds can you produce that add to the quality of the environmental music? Create a dialogue and thereby lift the environmental sounds out of their context into the context of your composition, and in turn make your sounds a natural part of the music around you. Is it possible?

Many soundwalks like this will eventually bring us closer to the ultimate goal of aural awareness on a wider scale. We begin to see that certain landscapes or environmental conditions provoke certain acoustics. In this following account we are told how ship captains:

". . . could also recognize different shorelines by different echoes--a rocky cliff, for example, would give a clear distinctive echo, whereas a sandy beach would give a more prolonged echo. They could even pick up an echo from logs."(Gordon Odlum, reminiscence, Vancouver, 1973)

Another example shows how the inhabitants of a particular landscape adapted their system of communication very sensibly to the acoustic characteristics of their environment. The shepherds of the Austrian and the Swiss Alps used to communicate with each other through very melodious singing. It must have been sheer enthusiasm for the echoes produced in the mountains, that eventually developed the singing into the art of yodelling. In the plains of East Prussia, however, the men tending their logging rafts would never have thought of yodelling. Instead they called each other on one long high-pitched tone, which carried particularly well across the vast, flat country.

The closer we observe our environmental formations and conditions, the more acoustic possibilities we may discover in them. And once we have learned to differentiate sound qualities

we will have become more discriminating and will no longer accept bad acoustic situations. This kind of acoustic consciousness can be applied on all our soundwalks, in fact, even in our everyday life. We can observe the shapes of the environment and determine by ourselves how they influence the acoustics. Thus let us go on a soundwalk in which the structure of our environment plays a major role. The main theme we will listen to on this walk will be the wind and the ever-changing voices it produces.

The Sound of Wind

We hear about these voices in old myths, in novels, in poetry, in fairytales and in horror stories, and we can listen to them in today's films and radio plays.

Whenever wind touches an object it creates a sound-a sound which is unique for this specific acoustic event. Emily Carr perceived these subtleties very well, as we can read in her writings:

"The trees take the wind so differently. Some snatch at it as if glad of the opportunity to be noisy. Some squeak and groan, and some bow meekly with low murmurs. And there are tall, obstinate ones who scarcely give even a sulky budge." (Emily Carr, Hundreds and Thousands: The Journal of Emily Carr, Toronto, 1966, p. 128)

And so did Thomas Hardy:

"To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of a breeze the fir trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; and beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality." (Thomas Hardy, Under the Greenwood Tree,1920, p. 3)

Wind whistling through electric wires. Wind rustling through grass. Wind trapped between buildings. Wind howling, mourning, rustling, wailing, whining, screaming. . . . And as we hear these voices they may be mocking us, they may sound frightening, or they may energize us, each time depending on the situation we hear them in.

Go out and listen to as many sounds created by wind as possible. Listen for low-pitched and high-pitched ones, for those which continually change their pitch and also their loudness. What kinds of structures produce what kinds of sounds when touched by wind? What effects do the various kinds of sounds have on you?

If it is fascinating to listen to the acoustic interplay between wind and object it becomes even more exciting to listen to that between wind and other sounds. What happens to an existing sound when it is caught, thrown about and carried away by the wind?

Concentrate on one outstanding continuous sound (church bells, a motorboat, outdoor music etc.) and listen to the acoustic games the wind plays with it.

In the twentieth century we have developed extremely fast-moving vehicles and, as a by-product, have created a new type of wind. As we speed along a freeway we encounter a voice of the wind which has never been heard before.

Listen to this voice and compare it to all those voices of the wind you have heard so far. Is there a significant difference between them?

People have always listened to wind and have been fascinated by it. Because they know what kinds of sounds it can create they have invented and designed objects--like wind-chimes and wind-harps for example-- that make the most beautiful music when they are touched by the wind.

Build an object with which the wind can play the most exciting acoustical games. Listen to the music it can make and observe other people's reaction to it. You may possibly have improved the quality of your acoustic environment.

Let us continue to listen to the little cracking sticks, which, in disguise of car horns, radios, air-conditioners, and tire screeches influence our daily life and subtly affect our hopes for survival in this urban jungle. Perhaps soundwalking can be a step towards enhancing our chances of survival . . .

Or can simply be fun.