

ARCHITEXTS 4

(MARGINS OF MUSIC – SLIGHT REPRISE)

Buildings and Sound

A Copenhagen Square has been wired for sound sculpting. Sound artists carve aural environments for people to inhabit, move in and traverse. Awareness of the constant soundscape around us deepens whilst opening architecture to the dimension of acoustic ecology.

Salome Vogelín discovers the Sound Gallery and talks with John Wynne, curator of a recent sound-sculpting festival

In November 1996 I went to Copenhagen for the big Electric Under Current Exhibition that featured an international array of video artists and formed part of 'Copenhagen Cultural Capital of Europe'. Another less visible part of this event was the Sound/Gallery project created by Michael Madsen in collaboration with technician and co-ordinator Steen Johannessen in the central Town Hall Square. A complete stranger to Denmark, I found my way to the square but had some difficulty locating the studio, which is hidden behind the high-tech toilets beneath the tourist information centre. In a little room under the square there is a 4-track digital sound studio operated with the ProTools sound editing programme. With the help of an additional programme called 'Max', this system is able to transmit and move sounds through a grid of 25 speakers buried under the pavement of the square covering an area of 900 square meters. The setup constitutes a permanent sound diffusion system that enables guest artists to change the acoustic appearance of the Town Hall Square.

I was very impressed by the originality of the concept and felt that it was certainly a unique approach to art in a public space. Conceived and prepared between 1994-95, the Sound/Gallery attempts to redefine

continuously what is possible, stretching technological as well as artistic boundaries. Initial technical problems and distrust on the part of the sponsoring bodies and the authorities had to be overcome before a full scale test in 1996 exceeded all expectations. The successful launch of the Gallery opened the system to a wide range of experimentation by artists from Denmark and soon also from abroad.

Artists, composers and musicians invited to the Gallery add an invisible layer of sound, creating a sculpture of acoustic material that alters the square's reception by the ear. The public of Copenhagen, moving over the square, aware and unaware of this 'hidden noise' becomes the audience of a new acoustic environment. The experience of this aesthetic transformation influences and changes the perception of this familiar area.

I feel that the acoustic relief of a space plays an important, if sometimes neglected, part in the identification and orientation of this space. Sound can be understood to work as a fourth dimension of an environment, emphasising and redefining its architectural characteristics. In the open area of the Sound/Gallery the sound artist becomes the temporary architect of the square, renovating its aural design. He/she transforms the space invisibly, opening up the possibility of a re-evaluation through sound, acknowledging the potential of acoustic expression in shaping our experience of a place.

Although Copenhagen struck me as a much quieter place than London, the sonic profile of the space of the Town Hall Square is nevertheless dominated by the drone of the traffic that circles relentlessly around it. The low frequency engine hum and the occasional high pitched squeak of brakes form the basis from which the sound artist reworks the acoustic appearance. Key sounds, such as the bells of the Town Hall, the sirens of an ambulance or police vehicle pierce through the new design and merge with it, creating a different, hybrid profile.

Many adjoining streets empty into the Town Hall Square bringing with them a flow of people criss-crossing the space. Just as a 'real' sculpture might re-map the invisible paths people routinely take over the square, the virtual sculpture created by the diffusion



system influences their movements. New paths are found, acknowledging the temporary acoustic presence. Some people seem to be intimidated and avoid the sounding area, whereas others show more curiosity, investigating the square's acoustic topography.

A square is invariably a meeting place; a social cornerstone reflecting the community's peculiarities. Sound describes the square and its functions within a specific society. At the same time it has the power to change its characteristics. Although the Town Hall Square of Copenhagen is not adorned with any remarkable public memorial or other visible focal point I nevertheless felt that people were meeting here, forming their own points of focus and memory. The work commissioned by the Sound/Gallery effectively re-frames the square. The artist takes the actual acoustic presence and thereby the sonic expression of the community and changes its framework. How profound the implications of a sound piece are on the communal realities of Copenhagen depends on the artist's as well as the audience's aural memory and perception: the process of change is not solely determined by the artist but very much invites and stimulates the participation of the audience.

The plans of the Sound/Gallery organisers to create a mobile version of the Gallery promotes the idea that

any space can be redefined through a change in its acoustic components. This notion opens up a vast realm of possibilities by which space can be explored and manipulated. I see such a mobile version expanding the artistic possibilities of acoustic expression, thereby promoting acoustic awareness and public interaction. By transgressing the spatial limitations of a static system the Gallery will aim at making the concept available to artists working within the acoustic realm world wide. Hopefully this should encourage an even more active exchange of ideas between Danish and other sound artists.

Last summer, seven UK-based artists under the curatorship of sound artist and composer John Wynne presented the show 'Out of Nowhere' at the Sound/Gallery in Copenhagen. The group of artists and composers addressed the square with pieces specifically designed for the grid of speakers in the diffusion system. I spoke to John about his contribution to the Sound/Gallery, and about his work in sound art in general.

Salome: The name Sound/Gallery suggests a closed space, white walls and soon even an entrance fee. How does the Danish Sound/Gallery evaluate or respond to these preconceptions?

John: It's interesting because it is obviously not any of those things; there are no walls and the idea was always to use a public space with open access. It seems to me that what they are trying to do by appropriating the cultural baggage of the word 'gallery' is to bring about a recognition of sound as an autonomous art form. It is operated as a gallery in that they invite artists to work in the studio and the public space but in practice the presentation is much more open-ended than what is usually thought of as a gallery.

Salome: What do you see as the limits of this sonic gallery in terms of technology, space, site etc., and how can they be overcome?

John: The funding for the gallery is quite good by British standards but there are aspects of the setup which could use upgrading, such as the studio monitoring – at the moment it's nearly impossible to tell what anything will sound like until you actually hear it on the square itself, which means that you spend a lot of time running up to the square, communicating with the studio via walkie-talkie.

The technology is such that it does force you to work in certain ways: for those of us accustomed to stuffy sound studios and the struggle to make computers do what you want, rather than what they want, this was not a problem, but for someone like Paul Burwell, whose work is usually live and improvisational, there were some unwelcome restrictions. But in the end his piece was an interesting example of high-tech meets