

21 October, 2010

### Stockholm - soundscape leader?

I'm in lovely sunny Stockholm today, just for one day, to record an appearance on Skavlan, the top Swedish/Norwegian chat show, which came about because of my second TED talk on sound and health. This is a very exciting opportunity to raise the consciousness of sound of three million people so I hope I get the message across! I type this blog in my dressing room minutes before going on... I am happy to report that Fredrik Skavlan is absolutely charming and he and his lovely team have put me very much at ease.

While here I visited the Museum of Architecture, where (almost lost among the huge visual exhibits) there is a small exhibition by Björn Hellström on aural architecture. It's in two parts. The first shows a model of the proposed massive redevelopment of the Slussen area, and with a simple before and after sound installation demonstrates how bad it will sound if nobody pays attention to the noise levels and installs acoustic treatments. Hellström's point is that aural architecture falls between the cracks: no town planner, architect, designer, engineer or councillor is tasked with thinking about it, so they all miss it and the result is the usual - accidental and unpleasant, just the exhaust gas of the urban machine. He argues for a new breed of 'acoustic architect' - though I prefer the term aural architect coined by Barry Blesser in his fabulous book *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* - one person who is completely focused on the question: how will this building sound?

The second part is more fun and equally thought-provoking. It's a single darkened room with a multi-channel sound installation on 10 lovely Genelec loudspeakers, which simulate the soundscape in Mariatorget, a square with busy roads at both ends in which there is a permanent sound and light installation. As usual, the sound feels much more intrusive when you can't see what's making it - much like what happens when I play clients their retail soundscapes on headphones. Our eyes acts as a kind of automatic compressor, preparing us for sounds a fraction in advance. Without the visual cues, the traffic noise in the installation is dominating, and leaving the room creates a visceral effect of peace. Whilst inside the installation, habituation occurs and the more delicate sounds of the art installation - chimes and light leaf sounds - emerge. The question Hellström's asking in this piece is: what happens when we see things we can't hear, and hear things we can't see? Does it matter? This resonates greatly with the schizophonia concept from

Murray Schafer that I discussed in my TED talk and that seems to have rattled quite a few cages on the forums. It's an important question for modern living in my opinion, and one that needs to be researched.

Next visit to Stockholm I hope to swing by the University, which is home to the Soundscape Support to Health project, started by Birgitte Berglund in 1999. This is the oldest and probably the most influential scientific soundscape project in the world; Professor advises the WHO on the health effects of soundscapes, and the group, led by Östen Axelsson, is working on an ISO definition of soundscape quality. Stockholm University has just hosted a global conference on Designing Soundscape for Sustainable Urban Development, so this is the current hotspot for urban soundscape thinking. Exciting stuff, and with clarity I think will come feedback on what (and how) to improve. There is hope for our poor urban ears!

**Julian Treasure**