

# What do **you** want to hear?

A good sound environment cannot be measured only in decibels. Just like with everything else around us, it's a matter of the overall perception and the total experience. In the acoustic landscape, the subjective sound quality is therefore as important as the objective sound level.

Photo | Futureimagebank.se

"This is what acoustic design is all about," says Björn Hellström, Acoustic Designer at ÅF-Ingemansson. "And just like with visual design, acoustic design can be both emotive and functional. The aim may be to create a pleasant, attractive sound profile or to provide information or guidance."

Acoustic design has thus far been most common in the commercial context. Take the car industry for example: the sound made when the driver's door opens or shuts is not left to chance, nor is the exhaust note – at least, not if the manufacturer wants to place the car in the premium segment.

Or take retail trade as another example: it's been a long time since the department store was a neutral sound environment that aimed to suit everyone. Specify what sort of customers you want and what you want them to buy, and you'll get specially tailored music designed to persuade them to open their wallets. Or the other way round – you can use music to shut out those you don't really want in your shop. After all, if you're a pensioner you most certainly won't enter a trendy boutique when the loud, harsh music that greets you at the door tells you clearly that this is one shop that doesn't cater for your age group!

"The people who've made the most progress in this area are probably electronic games designers," says Björn Hellström. In a computer game, noise and sound effects are at least as important to the overall experience as the graphics are.

## Offensive or defensive

This perception is gradually gaining traction among city planners and architects.

"Acoustic design is an offensive way of dealing with sound," explains Björn Hellström. "Instead of combating noise only with defensive methods such as noise-damping fencing, the aim is to harness positive sounds and to create an acoustic panorama that reflects the rest of the environment."

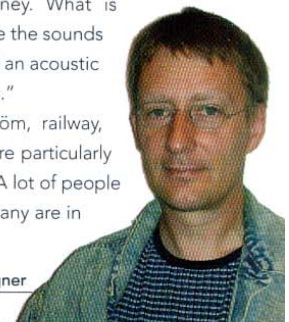
The way we perceive sound depends entirely on the context and our relation to the noise source. We are disturbed by things that do not belong, things whose origins we cannot quite place and against which we cannot protect ourselves.

## Identity and guidance

"Sound also forges a clear identity with the environment – total silence isn't necessarily the best at all times," continues Björn Hellström. "A town square with lots of outdoor cafés but without any sound coming from them is totally wrong, as is a railway station in a city centre without any background noise from people, trains and public announcements. The sound is needed to attract, to confirm that we are in the correct environment and to reinforce the experience, for example the sense of expectation ahead of a journey. What is important is to be able to ignore the sounds we do not want to hear – to find an acoustic oasis or a quiet counterbalance."

According to Björn Hellström, railway, commuter and metro stations are particularly interesting from this viewpoint. A lot of people pass through these hubs and many are in

Björn Hellström, Acoustic Designer



“people who've made the most progress are probably electronic games designers”

- Don Martin starts contributing to "Mad Magazine" and "crazy humour" becomes an established concept
- "Cop Hater", Ed McBain's first detective novel, is published

- A.A. Milne, creator of Winnie The Pooh, dies
- Floyd Patterson takes his first World Heavyweight Championship title. He goes on to become the first boxer ever to regain a lost title

- Author and dramatist Bertolt Brecht dies
- Toni Sailer of Austria takes the gold medal in all three alpine events at the Cortina Olympics

