

Reaching a sound climax in T.O. hubbub

Aural pleasure not yet a passion for cityscape planners

By LESLEY McALLISTER

On this sunny last day of April, I'm scooting along Queen to the Peace Garden, where I'll join up with composer and "soundscape architect" Richard Windeyer and other attuned urbanites for the first-ever Soundwalk.

Beside me, a transport grinds to a halt with an ear-splitting hiss of air brakes. Yikes!, I think, is this going

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to be fun?! Will I survive an hour-long trek through the urban sound jungle?

A lot has been said about the relationship between decibel levels and stress levels, but what about the *quality* of our sonic environment? Enticingly dubbed "a whirlwind excursion through the wild sounds of downtown," Soundwalk puts a new twist on this year's International Noise Awareness Day.

Aural skills

Working with designers, artists and educators, Windeyer formed the Canadian Association for Sound Ecology (CASE). Its mission — to encourage listening, sharpen aural skills and deepen our understanding of sounds. A relatively new field, acoustic ecology could soon be crucial to our well-being, as megacities around the world continue to grow.

Windeyer hands out tips. Listen



Squeak, screech, clang and roar, the city communicates in hyper-language.

with your eyes shut when possible. Listen for buildings that "hummm." Would you have to shout to be heard? We're asked to pick out little "gems" of pleasing sound from the disagreeable noises. The Old City Hall bell tolls and our small, comfortably shod group sets off.

Ears wagging, we troop down Bay to the sounds of our city — traffic, traffic and more traffic! We're not wandering at random. Windeyer has spent a few months planning for today. He's got a route in mind and some surprises in store.

We push through squeaky revolving doors into the Bay. The shoe department's broadloomed expanse forms a beige oasis of quiet. Sit down? Try on some Hush Puppies? Definitely a "sound of commerce."

But we don't stop to shop. Today the aisles are our sidewalk, easier on the feet than concrete and a break from the chaos outside. And soon I begin to pick out snatches of conversation, quiet music, the click of heels on the-tiled floor.

Out on Richmond, we dodge bike couriers and the staticky blare of

walkie-talkies — do I hear faint water sounds? — and arrive at an urban mecca, the Cloud Gardens Conservatory, with its two-storey-high falls. Climbing the wood terrace, the roar gets louder and louder until I'm eight years old again watching Niagara pour down on me from the deck of the Maid of the Mist.

Good noise

In the quest for another "good noise" experience, we jog up a lane into the courtyard of First Financial Place, where an acoustically astute

architect has planted glass panels that are not only pleasing to look at but also act as sound buffers. But what aurally challenged designer dropped the building's air vent into the middle of this retreat? It gives off an irritating hum that even the cafe's sound system can't mask.

Why do we never hear classical music in public places?, a fellow walker laments. Is it taste? Or lack of enough bass to block out the city's hidden mechanics?

Stepping off a squeaky escalator, I experience my "sound climax" — in, of all places, the subway. There's the screech-rattle-screach of trains, turnstiles clanging — kachomp! kachomp! kachomp! — announcements amplified to 200 decibels. And rising out of all this, my gem — the ping of tiny tokens hitting the bottom of the fare box. Ahhh!

Back at the square, we talk about the special moments. For one participant, it was the surprise of singling out a conversation in the middle of the Eaton Centre. And we voice our concerns, too.

Why are there so few quiet spots in the city? What about using more sound-absorbent building materials? Why isn't water, with its soothing capacity, utilized more often by designers?

Across the dry fountain, a clanging streetcar tells me my ride's here. Thanks to Windeyer, I count myself converted, a novice noise activist. But until the message gets to the right people and things quiet down, it's time to tune out, plug in my own sound and try to survive another summer in the city. ●