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Arch 549 Architectural Programming
Project 3
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Music is essential to the culture of a people. However, it is difficult for amateur musicians to practice and perform privately in an urban, high-density area characterized by condominiums and apartments. Without spaces to rehearse and casually perform, the average skill of amateur musicians will fall. This also threatens the appreciation of music, as well as the communal cohesion that music offers. Therefore, my 2008-2009 terminal studio project aims to provide rehearsal, recording and performance space for amateur and professional musicians in an urban infill site. Specifically, I have been investigating the site on the north side of the west landing of the Fremont Bridge in Portland.

Part of the research has concerned how this project could repair the acoustics of this site. The site is challenged by I-405, the Willamette River corridor, and industry along the river. A great deal of time was therefore spent researching such phenomena as sea organs, natural wind-catching devices, water resonators and other such devices. I will be integrating several pieces of sound-generating equipment into the common spaces and public spaces of this project. But all this did beg the question that became the focus of this particular research for the Arch 549 class: to what extent are musicians affected by, or inspired by, nonmusical sounds in their art?

This question concerns the mental impressions and inspirations of actual musicians. It was determined that

the best way to learn the intentions of artists was to conduct interviews and to review artist statements. What follows is a summary of the results of these interviews, and the directions these have taken my thinking about the project.

First, several interviewees stated that the question had it backwards. They do not typically think of nonmusical sounds when composing or performing music. Rather, they think of composed music while listening to nonmusical sounds. For example, suppose the architect supplied a system of spaced metal panels along which water could travel downward, eliciting different tones on its journey. Many musicians, upon hearing the resulting tones, would impose an order on the tones from within their own perception. That is, they would infer or project a rhythmic arrangement on the tones. Music, is after all, "the science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity[.]" ("Music," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/music>)

It is interesting to note, therefore, that many musicians project an intentionality onto random things that are happening in the world - like a drip of water - based on how those things are ordered among themselves.

Second, one interviewee in particular performs music as an amateur violinist and as a professional music therapist. As a professional music therapist, this person noted she is much more likely to look to nonmusical sounds as inspiration. (Michelle. Personal interview. 4 December 2008). She is also more likely to directly incorporate nonmusical sounds into her professional work. Based on further discussion with this participant, we were able to

identify a few factors that contribute to this. First, the instruments used in therapeutic music healing are typically acoustic instruments that incorporate natural phenomena to produce their sounds. This may include metal bowls filled with water and manipulated to produce tones based on their water levels, as well as different types of instruments that manipulate air within themselves, such as flutes and pipes of different diameters, lengths and timbers. Because the resulting tones are similar to other tones typically heard in nature, such as drips, whooshes and whistles, it is easier to translate nonmusical sounds in the art and vice versa. This was an important insight to the project as it helped to offer further programmatic developments, specifically, the consideration of including private areas for sound therapy in addition to the architectural sound therapy potentials of nonmusical but planned sounds in public spaces in the building.

Another factor about the music used in sound therapy that makes it an interesting topic for this discussion is the cadence or pacing of music typically used in the field. In nature, many of the tones we hear are more like white noises, or swells and decrescendos, than they are crisp and sustained discrete tones. Many examples of distinct beats can be found in nature, but typically these do not occur over extended periods of time without variation in the tempo of the sounds. However, swells and decrescendos are common and easily transferable across different media. The interviewee noted that the arrangement and composition of swells and decrescendos are integral to the work of a professional sound therapist and may result in their being more attuned to nonmusical sounds than musicians per se.

Third, the vast majority of regular musicians that were surveyed for this research stated that they do not consider nonmusical sounds to be a significant source of inspiration to their music. Frankly, I found this to be surprising, but it was important to hear testimony from the target users to whom I would ultimately be marketing the project. In continued discussions with interview participants, a few key factors were identified as to why this might be the case. First, several interviewees noted that the nature of their instrument is such that to their ear, the relationship between the sounds produced by the instrument and nonmusical sounds in the world is tenuous at best. For example, one participant plays a five-string electric mandolin. He stated that the tuning of this instrument, as well as its fretting and electric amplification, place it squarely into the cultural creation that is modern music. (McKee, Christian. Personal Interview. 7 December 2008). This instrument does not bear much resemblance to rustic, acoustic and perhaps more natural traditional mandolins. Because of the nature of this instrument, this musician found it difficult to say that he is directly inspired by nonmusical processes in his art. Another factor, begun to be identified in the discussion above, is the social dynamic of music performance. It is one thing for a sound healer to ding a bowl in their therapy studio for the benefit of a patient. It is quite another to have a lineup of a half-dozen or more individuals all endeavoring to make music together as one coherent unit. These individuals will need to communicate with each other in all phases of their work, from composition through performance. In order to do so, they must establish a language. Over time, this language

becomes increasingly self-referential, and it becomes a thing unto itself. So for example, four musicians may get together and agree to play a blues number, and that has a whole system of time signatures, typical chord progressions and acceptable scales. There is no need to reinvent the wheel in the modern blues session, and specifically no need to determine from what nonmusical or natural place these agreed-upon formulations ever emerged.

Fourth, this research identified a gap between "musicians" and "artists". Again, there can certainly be found many exceptions to the below distinctions, but they represent a first attempt at distilling some of the results of the survey. A lot of musicians play a certain type of music, and play it a certain way with a certain group of people. These musicians are more likely to participate in an established language that does not require reinvention or original sourcing to nonmusical sounds.

Artists, on the other hand, are at once both pressing for outrageous individuality and more expressly concerned with communicating new truths in a new way to both initiated and uninitiated audiences. These individuals are more likely to need to invent a new language in order to achieve their ends. As such, these individuals are more likely to appeal to nonmusical sources for inspiration. They are also likely to demonstrate an interest in nonmusical sources because they may hold truths or provide examples of things that the artists want to demonstrate in a musical way. For example, famed composer Tan Dun is sponsoring a current YouTube competition in which he envisions individuals playing a classical piece on atypical instruments, including found objects. Tan Dun has stated that his latest composition was inspired by walking around the

streets of New York and hearing the sounds of mechanics.

("Youtube seeks classical musicians,"

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/7759171.stm>)

Whatever ultimately becomes of the spaces that emerge in the final terminal project, no small part of the task will be making an environment that is enjoyable and beneficial for both musicians and artists to do their work. In that way, I will be able to capture the best of the dynamic between those who literally see through lenses of music, and those who find inspiration in nonmusical sounds for conceptual ends.