

Message sent from **R. Murray Schafer**, Indian River, Ontario, to
'Sounder Spaces' Conference, London Zoo, Regent's Park, 14 March 2007

The initiative taken by the Lord Mayor of London and his administration in the Sounder City strategy is a welcome signal to everyone concerned with acoustic ecology and the improvement of the urban soundscape. Let us hope that the opportunity being extended to Londoners to improve the acoustic environment of one of the world's greatest cities will have a significant impact on other cities as well.

We have no definite proof that the modern city is noisier than the city of the Industrial Revolution or of the Middle Ages, but we do know that dissatisfaction with urban noise is growing in all cities around the world, especially since we now have the technology to reduce and repair most of the noises of modern life.

When I began to use the word soundscape in the 1960's, I intended it to be a neutral word inclusive of all the sounds of the environment. Rather than to rage against noise, I thought it would be better to analyse what was happening, what we were losing as well as gaining - for no two days are the same and the soundscape of yesterday will never be repeated exactly.

The 1960's were a noisy decade. The introduction of commercial jets greatly enlarged the noise profile around airports. There was a great deal of construction noise as cities were expanded and rebuilt after the War. Car manufacturers gave a new throb to the engines of "muscle cars" and rock music boosted amplification to intensities never before experienced. Audiologists were beginning to talk about universal deafness. It was all very depressing and negative.

The word soundscape was intended to be inclusive of all sounds, natural, human and technological. Only by studying all sounds, I argued, could we find a point of reference for soundscape design, a new discipline, related to industrial design as it had emerged among the artists and architects of the Bauhaus and elsewhere a few decades earlier.

There were bad and unhealthy soundscapes but there were also good and beautiful soundscapes. What could we learn from the past or from other countries? Ecology was a new word in the 60s. We began to speak of acoustic ecology: the relationship between living sounds and their environment. We began to ask questions that had not been asked before. Were there soundmarks worth preserving just as landmarks were? Should there be museums for disappearing sounds? Could future soundscapes be designed as buildings or communities were designed? What could be learned from other cultures? The study of the soundscape became partly aesthetic, partly social and partly technological. We recorded soundscapes, we interviewed people about the sounds of their environment and we made recommendations to civic or national authorities (occasionally with success).

Soundscape research was spreading to other countries and eventually resulted in the foundation of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, which holds meetings every one or two years at which time ideas are exchanged and projects are discussed.

Can the soundscape of the world be improved? Of course it can. To think of the soundscape as a huge "musical" composition in which we are simultaneously listeners, performers and composers opens the door to an aesthetic perception of the responsibilities of the soundscape planner. Where are the sounds of the birds, the fountains, the children playing and the old people conversing in your soundscape? Where are the sounds that excite us, that amuse us, that tease us? Where are the sounds that awaken us in the morning and guide us to sleep at night? And where are the old familiar sounds that tell us we are at home?

May the fresh perspective of London's Sounder City strategy not only improve the soundscape environments of the great city of London, but serve as an influential model for other cities and administrations in other parts of the world.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R. Murray Schaffer', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

R. MURRAY SCHAFER