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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 29-31: The Aesthetics of Space and Sound

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director

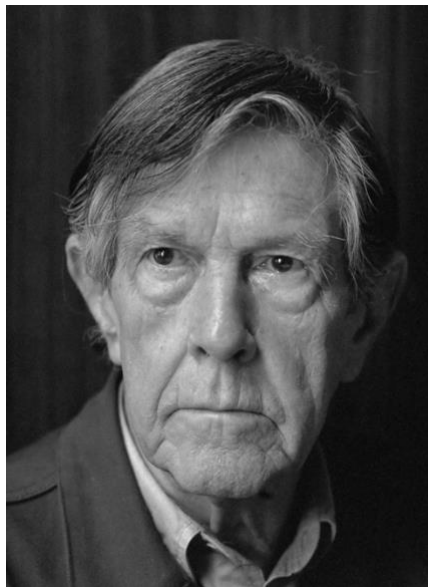


Jan–March 2021

Issue 29–31: *The Aesthetics of Space and Sound*

PART I. The Sound and the Fury?

The avant-garde composer John Cage (1912–1992) once said “my favorite piece of music is the one we hear all the time if we are quiet.” Sometimes when I walk around the reconstructed spaces of Bridwell full of dust and dirt and through construction areas that look like warzones strewn with wood debris, piles of stone, and sheetrock crumbles, I think of John Cage (right, courtesy *Nationaal Archief, Den Haag*). The maverick musician was known for many absurd and unpredictable compositions—from sticking utensils and screws into tempered high-carbon steel wires before playing his metallically percussive “prepared piano” to sitting for *4 minutes and 33 seconds* in silence in front of an audience, while looking at a piano score, only to realize that the so-called “music” was the sound of the audience’s peculiar reaction. I relate to Cage when I walk around Bridwell because he demolished the concept of music by challenging our assumptions about how music is defined, how it is constructed, who makes it, and where it is made—indeed, we might even say that he forced us to question what the “it” is of music. If any sound or *lack* of sound is music, then all of Bridwell is effectively an instrument. And all the noise, sound, and articulations of the aural space are incessant performances of Cageian sonatas, suites, and symphonies. Of course, I doubt when said *jackhammer* obliterates another foot of three-quarter-century-old concrete, the headaches of my staff will not be ameliorated by me declaring: *listen to that music!* Hell no! My visions of Cage in the library are more an imaginary evocation than any given reality and the only time Bridwell is quiet



these days is when everyone leaves for the evening. But I still like to consider someone sweeping the floor or slamming a door as a Horowitz, Pavarotti, or Callas of structural noise.

In 1958, the French theoretician and philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) published one of the most influential books on contemporary art and architecture called *La Poétique de l'Espace* (The Poetics of Space). Its central idea concerns the relationships between human beings and their particular surroundings. I first came across this

work on the bookstore shelves of the Dallas Museum of Art when I moved here and was immediately taken by his approaches to thinking about space, place, sound, and environments. Reflecting on both natural spaces and sound and the more artificial ones within our library building has made me realize that the experiences of our surroundings are multifaceted, expansive, and infinite, as much as they are magnificent elements of the physical and sounding blocks that construct who we are as people.

The changes *within* Bridwell are in many ways quite drastic, but they are changes that evoke a pride in the space and greater physical structure itself. The most striking transformation of Bridwell is the opening of the library’s entry hall, where contractors removed a good portion of the mezzanine to allow for a lofty ceiling trimmed out with the original crown molding in plaster, and now in wood. At the center is a custom designed circulation desk with a curved black marble counter and hardwood drawers crafted to fit the curvature of the structure. All of this is accented with a sophisticated new lighting system that runs under



the contour of the new counter's rim. It looks like an Edwardian version of *The Starship Enterprise*.

Since coming to Bridwell in 2018, I have been in constant conversations with colleagues about such details of design, space, angles, molding, countertops, furniture, colors, lighting, shade, and a spectrum of aesthetic nuances that I had not fully comprehended. These considerations also play into the reimagining of the library itself as a space for art, exhibits, performance, and general engagements. As we get closer to opening the library, it is increasingly important to me that we provide as dynamic, hospitable, inspiring, and usable experience as possible. It is not simply to present a *pretty library* for patrons, but to be cognizant of the wide range of human senses, needs, and desires that will invite all of us to experience an optimal space in which to thrive. Thus, aesthetics is just as important as functionality and utility, but so too are furniture design rationales, lighting rubrics, and no-food policies. The holistic approach is key, because a beautiful library that smells like a corned-beef sandwich *is not pretty*.

In his monumental book *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (1974) the environmental geographer Yi-Fu Tuan called attention to how the meanings of spaces are understood and constructed through lived experience. Topophilia is effectively the “love of place,” something that is enhanced by the value that people create for somewhere specific, distinct, and meaningful. We are tied to the earth, because we are terrestrial beings, but there is something more to this than simply being land-trotting sentimentalists. There is meaning in most things we experience, so it is no surprise then that a *love of place* is tied to the emotions, experiences, and memories we all have, like Tuan suggests—whether a childhood home, a favorite beach, a beautiful park, or a beloved library. This is in contrast to *topophobia*—or fear of a place. This can be the association one has with a bad event, a trauma, something that can trigger an unforgiving memory. And then there is even that middle-ground: the place that is both familiar and new—a topo-ambiguity, perhaps like Bridwell: we have known

the building and space, and have our particular feelings and memories about it, but they are slightly changed depending on how long we've known the space, how long we've been in it or *away from* it (such as during a renovation), and whether it is in fact the same space we remember. Even for those who have come and gone in the space, the transition of staff, faculty, researchers, or patrons creates a new environment and encounter.

We often mix the words “place” and “space” in English, though they are generally distinguished as “that which has a fixed location (place)” and “that which does not (space),” respectively. They are both related to how we understand the physical terrains or structures of which we are describing and throughout history, cultures and languages have treated the terms with both specificity and ambiguity.

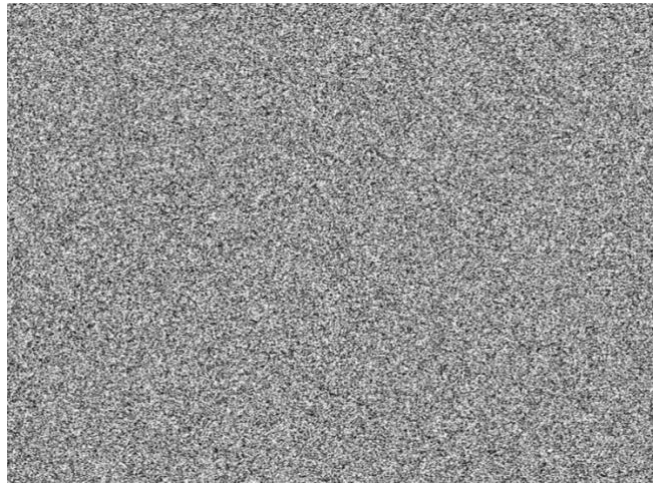
In the ancient world, for example, there were words like *chóros* and *topos* in Greek, which relate similar ideas, but with slight nuance: *chóros* (“space”) has the connotations of external territories, those being beyond the *polis* or city; whereas *topos* simply meant “place.” Interestingly, *chóros* (“space”) at first sight seems to be related to the words *chorós* (“dance”—note the accent) and *chorodía* (“chorus, choir”), for example, which have similar sounding roots, but they are etymologically and orthographically different. While *chorus*, *choir*, and *dance* (including *choreographies*) are actually related in antiquity and the Greek dramatic tradition, *chóros* as “space” is again alone despite its wishful homophonic alliance. But in our present circumstances, I wonder if they ought to be more intentionally related and connected? Space, after all, in the modern world has become more modular and adaptive in architecture and the public square than it had once been.

This idea of *modular* or multivalent space is at the core of my considerations for Bridwell. Of course, foremost we are a library, but what we do in libraries nowadays is not what was always done, nor is it what the future demands of us as we need to become more flexible and malleable. Both the *space* and *place* of Bridwell, then, must allow for the dynamics of aesthetics and sound, as well as the



rudiments of the building’s structural supports—its heating, cooling, water, sewers, fire suppression, and security. And in all of these considerations, how we operate around this dynamic of aesthetics and sound is centrally important to how we will operate moving forward.

A few months ago, I had a conversation with Dr. Christopher Anderson about the word *noise* as it relates to the history of the organ—he was teaching a course on the subject—and I discovered that *noise* is etymologically related to the word *nausea*, which is to say that even if we talk about “holy noise,” there is a lot to unpack from that connection. *Noise* by itself has some roots then in the human feeling of sickness, which is not only important to us in how we understand the contemporary post-Cageian definitions of music, but also what *sound* and *noise* mean in



particular, discreet spaces—like a library. Indeed, the whole trope of the “shooshing librarian”—of which *I am not!*—has its bearing in the idea of preserving some semblance of “right sound.” That may be Cage’s “favorite piece of music—quiet,” or it may be the ordering of *sound in space*, such that we are not creating uncomfortable sound—or, noise. In the last two decades, especially, university and public libraries have fought with the changing needs and behaviors of patrons in libraries around the ability to be more “lax” and “more humane,” such that people can drink, eat, talk, or make any *sounds* or *noise* they want in libraries. This issue is about balance and trying to find the happy medium between some antique tradition of a library and the behaviors of humans in the present. There is no easy solution. (NB—the image above is one of many results when one searches for “noise” in Google. You can almost *feel* the sound!)

Music, like any other term, has succumbed to the tyranny of the postmodern, in that we are left to *describe* or *recognize* something when we see or hear

it, but are withheld from actually ever defining things, because any definition will be inadequate—the idea of *definitions* at all seem to contradict the postmodern ideal. As for *music*, dictionaries have changed their definitions over the last hundred years. Since coming to SMU, I have had innumerable productive conversations with Dr. Marcell Steuernagel about music and its functions, especially the idea that music can and should be created not only for the listener’s enjoyment, in its traditional sense, but also discomfort to convey pain and struggle and evoke meaningful discourse

around human suffering. Therefore, the *noise- nausea- sickness* connections fit into Cage’s own lexicon of describing music; admittedly, my experience with Witold Roman Lutoslawski’s expansive ‘cello concerto demonstrates this condition: a couple years ago the Meadows orchestra performed

the concerto, which begins with a lengthy, while seemingly thin introduction by the soloist. As I sat in the front row, when the heavy brass suddenly *screamed* its incorrigible bars, my body felt sick by the cacophonous *noise*. Yet, holistically, I thoroughly enjoyed the work—it was a physical and acoustical paradox that I’d never before experienced.

Sound is never fully neutral, though. And *most* sound is political—perhaps not the sounds of squirrels, sparrows, or feral cats. But then again, sounds of *nature* may in fact be political by the fact that the domains of wild fauna and *animalium* are effectively constructed by the restrictions we people put on their habitats. So maybe *all* sound *is* political? The concepts of *sound*, *noise*, and *music*, then are all complex and intertwined into a soup of ambiguity, with which we struggle to mediate and understand not only in our library spaces, but everywhere we exist in the world.



PART II. Chapels, Films, and Operas

The concerns of space, aesthetics, and sound have implications for how Bridwell will negotiate its own future. Three recent experiences have provided considerations of the library, such that we may question outright the role of space in relation to not just the people who will enter and use the building, but to the greater Perkins, SMU, and Dallas communities. These experiences concern the ideas of chapels, films, and opera; specifically, the Rothko Chapel in Houston’s Montrose neighborhood; the films of Akira Kurosawa; and the operatic legacy of Richard Wagner. Each of these forms, which are in themselves *aesthetic genres* and forms of *art*, reflect the potential of not simply Bridwell as a structure or distinct *place* on the university campus, but as an excursive space where the human being encounters the totality of spiritual, religious, aesthetic, and tonal performance—like the sacral spaces of a chapel, the contrasts of color and motion in cinematography, and the cultivated *mythos* and the negotiated realities of a Wagnerian opera.

Performance in many ways is the primary connective tissue here. Dr. Steuernagel, who wrote his dissertation on church musical performance, has introduced me to greater nuances around performance and pushed me to think more critically and expansively about the term and its function not just in churches, but society writ large. In his scholarship, he questions the very foundations of what *performance* means and how there are various natures to participation, reception, and the passive-active quality that exists in church spaces and liturgical settings. We may take this consideration and situate it in the library, as a place *and* space of performances—not simply the transactional quotidian work, but the acts of prayer, liturgy, worship, music, art, aesthetics, and so forth.



The functions of our days constantly play out in the universe of human action itself, such that performance is inherently tied to *place* and *space*. It forces us then to understand and recognize our constructed surroundings as sacral environments for both reflection and work, whether meditated or utilitarian. It also requires us to reassess what we call these places and spaces and *how* we use them.

Is Bridwell *a chapel*, then, or could it be? What would that mean? Beyond the fact that I have discussed the possibility of hosting *liturgical* and otherwise chapel-related activities, like the Advent service, in Bridwell’s space, the idea of a library *as chapel* is fundamentally conceivable, though perhaps more practically inconvenient. The origin of *the chapel* is described by *Britannica* as an “intimate place of worship,” believed to have been first used to describe “the shrine in which the kings of France preserved the cape (*cappella*) of St. Martin of Tours (ca. 316-397—seen at left as portrayed by El Greco), by tradition, this garment had been torn into two pieces by St. Martin so that he might share it with a ragged beggar; later Martin had a vision of Christ wearing the half cape; by extension, any sanctuary housing relics was called a chapel....” A chapel, then, as intimate place of worship, as a space where sacred or valued objects are preserved, does not sound that different from a theological library.

In the many theological institutions where I’ve worked, there has been a range of chapel constructions. I often found the chapel experiences in places like Union Theological Seminary in New York to be extraordinarily fluid, dynamic, and untraditional—where the chapel had been stripped of its pews and the gothic architectural enclosure doubled simultaneously as a chapel and art space that was intentionally performative—the person entering that space was both performer and audience (*or*, “*videance*”—“those who collectively see, not just hear”—if I



could invent such a word!). So why not a library as a chapel, a place that holds sacred its space, even as a model of spiritual, cultural, and anthropological liminality and change?

This brings us to Rothko's chapel in Houston. Upon a recent visit there, I was not sure what to expect. But I was thoroughly engaged and provoked by it. The inspirational measures taken by John and Dominique de M n il (right) to commission, build, and promote Rothko's chapel as a premiere "interfaith space" is understandable in the context of the more mid-century (it was finished in 1971) understanding and approach to "let's all get along UN peace keeping ecumenism." This method risks devolving into a bland pabulum or flavorless unitarianism that seeks to push political progressivism in the tuxedo or evening gown of ritual. Rothko is different though. When I first entered the chapel, it was hard to see anything, because there are no lights to speak of. Photography is forbidden inside. It is, after all, supposed to be a "sacred space." But this only seems to reinforce its connection to (and no-photography policies for) the adjacent modern art museum also imagined and built by the de M n ils. This intentionality of space is part of the quandary, because it makes you question the role of a chapel in how it is being appropriated: is it for show or is it truly for interfaith meditative practice? Is this the height of mid-century contemporary art-cum-religion? I should say that I think anyone can imagine or create what they want: I'm not against that. My advocacy here is for a more open and creative space for anyone to develop what they wish. The question though is about intentionality, about the blurry lines of constructed spaces, the vagaries of art, and the visceral reactions to intentions that make a place what it is or isn't.



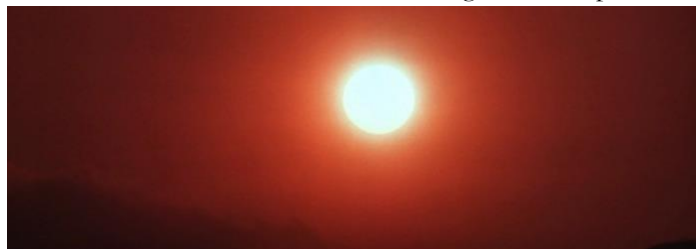
The Rothko chapel is treated as a museum and art space. Only a dozen or so people can enter every half hour. The space is an enshrined, near lightless box, with narrow slats in the ceiling allowing in only modest glimmers of sunlight. Four wood benches facing each other (or facing the walls) let visitors gaze at nine or so oversized paintings of what first appeared to be the interiors of a cave—dark monotonal canvases. This is interesting, because my colleague Jon Speck noted this was one of Rothko's intentions. But I really didn't know what I was looking at. As I sat there though, something miraculous happened. My eyes acclimated to the light's dimness and the paintings came—somewhat—alive in colors of muted browns, dark purples, and deep grey-blues. I was astonished by this transformation, but I was equally ill-at-ease with the

space—not by the colors themselves, but by the feeling of a space that felt so isolating, closed off, and *un-contemplative*. Initially, I'd felt more spiritual in barns, basements, and over baby-changing tables, than in the de M n il-Rothko's intellectual-artistic thought experiment.

Curiously, the entry and anteroom had a long wood bench with nine or so religious texts from around the world—including the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Book of Mormon*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Khordeh Avesta*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Book of the Hopi*, *Acharanga Bhashyam*, *Prayers and Meditations of the Bab 'u'll h*, the *Torah*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Holy Qur'an*—and yet there was no *New Testament*. Was this too hierarchical, too much a Christian hegemonic legacy? Ironic that this early interfaith chapel, *called in fact 'a chapel'* from an historically Christian space in France, was appropriated into something non-Christian, non-sectarian (which is fine, of course), but that that particular element was missing from its own textual representation.



The Rothko experience is complex—it reflected the wholeness of anticipation, encounter, and realization, while also questioning the assumptions and intentionality about space, art, and spirituality. In reflection, it still is very much an art museum that is called a chapel, but the potential for a transformation process by visitors is remarkable and brilliant. It's not necessarily a place that I would want to spend hours—it's more what I'd imagine a place where people are waiting to be waterboarded are held. But if you can reorient your mind to Rothko and his art, then it may change you in another way, and the experience can be fulfilling—and not torture, after all. (Yi-Fu Tuan might likely call this a “landscape of fear.”) The half dozen docents in monochromatic outfits and handful of visitors is part of the experience and alters the relationship you as a visitor will have. Maybe Rothko is the art version of my Lutoslawski experience—it just takes time before we are able to understand something, see some-thing for what it is, because all things change, just as we do. That's part of the process of becoming something new and appreciating those things we misjudged in the past. Sadly, even something that is meant to be artistically provocative, while also communal and uniting, suffered vandalism in 2018 when someone splashed white paint across the grounds and reflecting pool. Considering this disturbing episode makes the visit even more powerful.



Indeed, such magnificent dark canvases might be contrasted more deftly in brighter spaces, but clearly that was not the point. The gradualness of change and of adapting to this peculiar discomfort was the point. The evolution of the eyes, the body, the self in an uncertain place was the point. The whole existential act of us in the world, our discomforts, our fears, our false and confused

assumptions coming into the realization of a new place and new reality—that was the point.

My second recent experience was seeing an exceptional movie by Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998), often considered the father of modern cinema. His 1975 film *Dersu Uzala* is an unexpected classic, based on a memoir about a Russian imperial surveyor, who recounts his surprising friendship with an indigenous hunter in easternmost Russian Ussuri a decade before the Russian revolution. Though I believe the book is remarkable, the film by Kurosawa is breathtaking (the real *Dersu Uzala* in 1906 at left; below, the bold and rich 70mm film of Kurosawa in a still from the film). When I watched it, I was struck by the utter expansiveness of the film, the quality of the cinematography by Asakuzu Nakai (1901–1988), and how that captured the layering of color in contrast to how the characters made their way through natural spaces. Furthermore, the detail of

sounds within those spaces—of crunching snow, moving branches, flowing water, and howling winds (all of the film was made

outdoors in eastern Russia) provided a distinct juxtaposition between the rawness of natural space and the intimacy of the human beings within those spaces interacting with one another. Aside from these aesthetics, the story of the film itself is one of the greatest presentations of friendship and tragedies of human endurance in conflict with modernity that I have ever seen. This film and Kurosawa's artistry confirm that we may look at any of our circumstances infinitely and reimagine our environments and relationships in ways that will demonstrably enhance their value and meaning to us. It may seem overtly peculiar that a forty-five-year-old Russian-language film by a Japanese director has made me rethink our library, but that merely attests to the staying power, artistry,



and influence that such creative genius has across genres, time, and language. Bridwell is not a Kurosawa film. But we can learn from the cinematic expressiveness of a film done well—all of the elements required to portray a holistic, vibrant, and entrancing vision of a library that has a multifaceted history that is aesthetic and harmonious in its own presentation to the world.

The last of my recent encounters that has made me think more about Bridwell as an evolving space is a book about Richard Wagner. In Alex Ross's new work *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* (2020), graciously lent to me by Chris Anderson, we find a richly ornate portrait of a woven history of Richard Wagner's legacy. More precisely, the afterlife of Wagner in all that he did seems to have been tinged or outright *dyled* indelibly with the vulgar and horrific associations with anti-Semitism and Nazism, for example. Ross describes many things in the 600+ page tome but does not waste time getting to the relationship between Nietzsche and Wagner. In fact, perhaps one of the most characteristic and relevant statements of the book comes from the old paralytic Nietzsche himself: "Wagner *sums up* modernity." What underlies this statement, and the book itself, is that there is much more retrievable from the Wagnerian legacy than its associations to Aryan hatreds and tyrannical dictators and murderers, even though these play into that "charm." Wagner's modernity, like he as a person or his unwieldy legacy, means that there is so much packed into these histories, that there is no one real accurate portrayal or assessment of him or what he represents broadly speaking down to this day. We can say the same thing about life in general, about religion, about Christianity, about higher education, about theological education, and about our own libraries. This is not to say that Bridwell or Perkins or SMU Libraries or SMU itself *sums up modernity*—in Nietzsche's words. Far from it. Rather, places like Bridwell are complex entities viewed with distinguishing characteristics which are often associated with this or that or another thing or person—the great concern about Bridwell has long been "it thinks it's a museum *and* a theological library, but it can't be both!" Yet, like Rothko's chapel, *who cares* if it's more of an art gallery

installation and treated as such than an interfaith chapel? Our experiences will always inform us differently of our surroundings and of the spaces and places we know well or don't know at all—just like Bachelard and Tuan and others have told us. And the sounds and aesthetics that Cage declared to be music and the performative notions of daily or special events will continue to allow us our own chapels, no matter what anyone says. A Kurosawa film or a Wagnerian opera are aesthetic and tonal creations, but they both also convey their myths and attachments and we either enjoy them or dislike them. I don't know if there's a neutral middle ground on this.

In the end we return to Cage and his ideas about music. In 1967 he "wrote" a piece called *Musicircus*, which was meant to be created and produced anew each time by those who partook in it. It was a "musical circus," an unconstructed assemblage of people in a discreet space making music through their living sounds and action. I took my kids to a "production" at the Bard College summer festival *Spiegelteint* a few summers ago. The cacophonies of sounds—a pianist playing Chopin, a string quartet playing Haydn, a jazz ensemble jamming, a solo singer crooning blues, a bunch of kids running around, someone on a trampoline, my family talking, and someone eating popcorn—were a joyful gathering of humans in a space of celebration and livelihood during that eventide: *sound, noise, music, art, life*. At the end of the day, our gathering together as community in spaces meant to be lived in is what mattered most. My observations and considerations about aesthetics and sound are important to me in making our library an extraordinary place, but the return of our communities, our friends, and families into shared spaces is truly the greatest gift we can hope for.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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