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Sounding off on Sound

A shopping center abroad is making noise in the world of acoustics

By Christopher Curtland



When designing a space, you're sure to account for sight and touch (likewise, when selecting products, we constantly consider how a material looks and feels). And our friends in hospitality take care of taste and smell—whether it's chefs concocting tapas to enliven your palate or hotels wafting floral aromas to invite guests to relax. But has one of the senses gone unheard?

Acoustics are easy to overlook. "In many contexts, sound is used without thought," said Martin Hallberg, creative director of Radja Sound Design Agency, which designs acoustic strategies for commercial spaces. "Instead, we should use sound as the magnificent tool it actually is and make demands on how we want both our environment and products to sound."

The firm recently evoked unique auditory designs at the Emporia shopping center in Malmö, Sweden, and won a Red Dot Communication Design Award for its efforts. Take a look at what the team did (and head online for a listen!) to make sure your acoustic strategies are sound.

CASE STUDY

Emporia contains six plazas that are different in appearance, and their acoustics reflect those differences. Four of the smaller spaces are distinguished by color—the red is a playful square, inspired by a tuba, percussion, and whimsical orchestra; the indigo is accompanied by a cello, while conjuring an icy winter and night sky; the pink is a microcosm of the cosmos that combines glowing organisms and bursts of fire with electronic tones; and the amber simulates the feeling of stepping onto holy ground as vocal soloists and choruses play in the background.

If this sounds unorthodox, that's because it is. The two large expanses are equally eccentric. The Ocean Plaza covers four stories and uses different speakers at each level to create an auditory journey—the lowest plays underwater bubbles, and you move up through splashing, waves, and breezes. The Floral Plaza then plays a nature ambience of birds calling and insects buzzing.

But although the spaces and soundscapes are unusual, that doesn't mean they're nonsensical. The staggering sensory experiences are designed to keep users interested in the space. "The idea with the plazas was to let people come for a moment of pause and a bit of tranquility, and to create a setting that would encourage them to stay and linger," explained Hallberg. "It was important to have quite a lot of variety so that the sounds wouldn't be repetitive."

When introducing sound into a building, consider the type of environment you're creating and how it will make people feel, added Hallberg. "To aim for complete silence is not always the right way to create a calm and safe place. Some people can rather experience silence as cold and exposing," he said. "With Emporia, the aim was to create a warm, open, and playful environment that encourages visitors to feel free."

SPACE DICTATES SOUND

If you're looking to jazz up your next project with auditory design, reflect on the various touch points in your buildings. These include lobbies, corridors, dining areas, and lounge spaces. Think about how long people will stay in those specific spots and what kind of mood you want them to experience.

"Retail environments use sound along with lighting, temperature, and smells to create an image and entice buyers," explained Greg Coudriet, principal with the Sextant Group, an audio visual consulting firm. "However, there is sometimes backlash because consumers don't like feeling that they're somehow being subliminally manipulated. Sound should be natural, fitting, and unobtrusive."

Beware that the answer isn't always background music. "Most sound environments that are successful have minimized musical content," said Matthew Azevedo, acoustical engineer at consulting firm Acentech. "The repetition of music can start to grate on you."

For the Emporia project, Radja worked with as many audio producers and engineers as instrumentalists to ensure that the auditory decorations were complex, yet simple, and not repetitive, said Hallberg.

Randomized background sounds are often the key. "Rushing water and chirping birds are more comfortable for humans than patterns, tones, and fans whirring," suggested Ethan Salter, principal at consultant group Charles M. Salter Associates. "It goes back to our hunter-gatherer ancestry. People need change in their environment."

WHAT TO DO AS A DESIGNER

So what's your job as an interior designer? You've envisioned a space that feels amazing, so evaluate how you can further enhance both the building and the brand behind it. "When creating a place that looks spectacular, why not make sure it sounds spectacular as well?" said Hallberg.

Don't turn a blind eye to the elephant in the room—or a deaf ear to his stomp. One of the biggest problems with acoustics is that interior designers ignore them, said Azevedo. "They install a bunch of speakers, plug in a streaming device, and forget about it," he explained. "Interior designers should give the same consideration to the soundscape as they do the carpet and furniture. Use the other senses to build experiences."

Simply accounting for acoustics is your first step. Sound is a design element, and your space already communicates sound in some way, whether you choose to work consciously with it or not—so take control of your sound environment to make sure your space is perceived how you want it to be. Doing so will make your destination stronger and more trustworthy.

"If you want to differentiate yourself, sound is it. Emporia is a great example of getting out of the gallery space and into a real, living space," Azevedo said. "You're essentially composing a symphony that will run for 24 hours a day. Make it engaging and fulfilling, and have a plan for refreshing it from time to time."

But don't let that symphony analogy overwhelm you.

"As acoustical engineers, we're not always trying to design a concert hall or recording studio," said Salter. "Acoustics doesn't always mean quiet. Set the criteria for your environment."