

Check it out: Ralph Gardner's "Sounding Their Way Around the City"

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Abstract

Last month Ralph Gardner, from The Wall Street Journal, reviewed Elastic City's listening tour of DUMBO. (If you're interested in Elastic City's listening tour or other sensory tours of NYC, click [here](#).)

Keywords

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Last month Ralph Gardner, from The Wall Street Journal, [reviewed](#) Elastic City's listening tour of DUMBO. (If you're interested in Elastic City's listening tour or other sensory tours of NYC, click [here](#). Next time I swing by NYC I'd love to check this out.) In his piece he details how the tour guide, an acoustic engineer, takes them around the area between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges and invites them to take in the sounds the area has to offer. Here's the trick, though: the listening walk must be in silence. Gardner did not seem too impressed by the tour, by the tone of his article. However, I think Gardner's frustration stems from the fact that he kept on looking for a particular kind of sound, instead of simply listening to his urban surroundings.

What was Gardner looking for? I'm not sure. But he was looking for something other than "noise": "The evening began with Daniel Neumann, our guide (he's an acoustical engineer), taking the handful of us who signed up into an alley and inviting us to close our eyes and listen. Unfortunately, an industrial air-conditioner chose that moment to kick in, drowning out all other sounds....But it was so noisy I couldn't make out what he was saying." Farther down the article he complains about one of the most iconic New York sounds, the sound of the subway:

From the alleyway we proceeded to walk underneath the Manhattan Bridge. I'd never taken a good look at the bridge before, and I was struck by how elegant it is, how much it reminded me of the ironwork on the Eiffel Tower, built in the same era. But I remembered I wasn't supposed to be looking. I was supposed to be listening. The problem was that there wasn't much to listen to except the deafening clatter of the subway running overhead, back and forth across the bridge between Manhattan and Brooklyn. We passed a guy practicing the saxophone; I assume the reason he chose that location was because it was already so noisy he knew nobody would complain.

From the looks of it, what bothered Gardner was that he couldn't focus on the acoustic landscape of DUMBO because of the noise. I don't believe that cities only produce and harbor noise (as in harsh sounds or artificial sounds) because listeners can find the sounds of nature and the sound of silence down alleyways, backyards, or parks, day or night. However, the sounds Gardner complains about are artificial sounds, industrial sounds (air conditioner, subway) that you would find in a city. Later in the article he mentions "the sweet trill of birdsong." Even though he is making a joke here about how it's hard to focus on such sounds when you're walking around NYC with your eyes closed, his choice of words—and of sound—is interesting to say the least.

Gardner tried to tune in, and I appreciate it. But he consciously tuned out the very sounds he was supposed to tune in to. There's a very fine line here: sounds/noise, urban sounds/natural sounds (I am assuming that's what he was looking for, from his comment about the birds' songs). And can we ever "just" listen? There's always some sort of discernment going on when we listen; we are always in the process of tuning out when we tune in. These are issues people within sound studies contend with. They are not solely issues that Gardner's piece poses. We are not sure of how the tour guide influenced Gardner's listening, and if he coaxed the folks on the tour to listen to certain sounds (Gardner mentions one moment where the tour guide asked them to listen to the sound farthest away). In the end, Gardner's article is a snapshot of listening vs hearing, and how selective we can be when it comes to listening even when we are not trying.

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