

Shundana Yusuf
*Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture
on the Wireless, 1927–1945*

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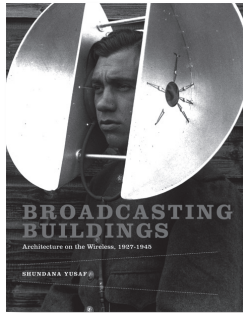
Mitchell Akiyama

Man looks at the creation of architecture with his eyes... One can only deal with aims which the eye can appreciate, and intentions which take into account architectural elements.

—Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*

In the mid 1990s, architect and critic Juhanni Pallasmaa published a slim polemic that indicted architecture for its blind obsession with vision. *The Eyes of the Skin* scathingly equated the West's occularcentrism (and its attendant qualities of detachment and domination) with a cold functionalism endemic to its architecture. Influenced by the work of scholar and Jesuit priest Walter Ong, Pallasmaa located architecture's hostility to non-visual ways of sensing in the Western tradition's transition from orality to textuality.¹ And, like Ong, he held hope that the ubiquity and influence of sonic media might help to return architecture and society to more communal and connected ways of being. While Pallasmaa was primarily focused on the haptic and the tactile, he helped to open architectural discourse to previously omitted or marginalized forms of sensory experience. *The Eyes of the Skin* only touched, as it were, on the importance of aurality in architecture, but in the years since its publication a handful of works—Emily Thompson's *The Soundscape of Modernity* and Berry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter's *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*—are notable examples²—have more deeply probed the relationships between sound and the built environment.

Shundana Yusuf's *Broadcasting*



Buildings, an assiduous history of the curious prevalence of architecturally oriented programming in early British radio broadcasting, is an important addition to this small but growing body of literature addressing sound and the built environment. In the period from 1927 (the birth of the BBC as a public radio broadcasting service) to 1945 (the year of its amalgamation into a single, national service), British broadcasters figured and constructed radio as a “wireless university” tasked with delivering a social and moral education to a nation that was still coming into its own as a liberal democracy. While architecture-related programming made up only a small portion of the BBC's output, broadcasts about the built environment offered both an important reflection of and a significant intervention into critical social issues of the day. In a sense, this pedagogical function of radio continued and expanded the paternalistic Victorian imperative to improve the public body politic through cultural education. An important part of this mandate was the creation of a unifying narrative about the nation's heritage, a history putatively encapsulated in Britain's architectural patrimony. Given radio's reputation for disembodied, transitory representation, a public pedagogy concerned with the solid, material weight of architecture might seem a counterintuitive venture, but Yusuf argues that BBC broadcasts infused the built environment with new forms of symbolic, auratic importance: “Radio changed the manner in which buildings exerted

force. If buildings had previously exerted power through the theatricality of their materials, they now asserted it through the theatricality of words” (81). In the age of mass media, architecture could no longer remain an esoteric sphere governed by elites whose primary criterion for excellence was, simply, beauty—a trait considered to be self-evident, at least to those with the authority to recognize it (39). What was significant about the BBC's broadcasts on architecture was that they trained the public to interpret the built environment with a critical eye. The methods for how one should indeed think about buildings were still determined by expert, patrician figures, but this is not to say that these terms were not publicly contested. For Yusuf, the key to this development lay in the power of speech, in early radio presenters' realization that to connect with audiences they would need to “formally employ casualness, artfully sound artless, and consciously take up spontaneity” (49).

There was no real consensus as to what sorts of aesthetic, political, or social positions the broadcaster should promote. The period Yusuf covers was tumultuous, and architecture became synecdochal of controversial political issues. One fascinating example she gives is the politicization of architectural preservation that threatened age-old notions of class and propriety. This was a time in which working class people were being encouraged to better themselves through education and exposure to the examples of taste and refinement set by the gentry, a time in which new policies effected a redistribution of wealth that left many aristocrats unable to keep or maintain their estates. One of the results was that this newly mobile population, encouraged to become tourists and take in the splendour of the British countryside, occasionally ended up committing such indignities as picnicking without permission, littering, and picking the flowers. Critics such as Charles Robert Ashbee, who had once

supported the redistribution program implemented by the New Liberals, now broadcast pleas for tourist codes of conduct and for the state to provide the means for former landowners to recover their properties and maintain them in a fashion that would preserve an architectural heritage that was being spoiled by populism (130–38).

Yusaf's patient historiography is admirably generous to her subjects; she shows an uncommon willingness to attend to individual—and occasionally conflicting—prerogatives without contorting them to fit an overarching narrative. If there is a shortcoming to Yusaf's thorough and thoughtful method, it is in her apparent assumption that the special power of radio derived from its specifically sonic properties. This is a thorny, somewhat contradictory position in that, while she describes the content of these broadcasts as being "socially constituted," she also leans heavily on Walter Ong's notion that radio ushered in an age of "secondary orality" (80–81). Ong, manifesting his debt to Marshall McLuhan, believed that the emergence and potential dominance of sonic media (which also included television) would catalyze a reversal of the social atomization engendered by print and effect a return to a more connected state of sociality. What is problematic about Yusaf's account is that she figures radio as issuing, even determining, a homogeneous reception of "wireless words," while arguing that the content of these words and the styles of presentation adopted by their speakers were highly constructed. This is not to say that radio and print are ontologically indistinguishable, but subsuming the message under the supposed immutable workings of the medium can abet the notion that the effects of listening, in all their forms, are somehow predictable. But, as Benedict Anderson famously noted, print does not necessarily or essentially fragment a population. Indeed, the printed word played an important role in

fostering the imagined communities that constituted the modern nation state.³ This is why the emergence of scholarship that deconstructs our assumptions about media along sensory lines is so important. When Yusaf writes, for example, "I explore how the unifying and harmonizing sense of hearing meddles with the clarifying and distinguishing sense of sight" (18), she perpetuates a problematic truism about the essential differences between the senses. Jonathan Sterne contests this cliché, one he calls the audio-visual litany, arguing that it problematically sets sensing and phenomenology outside of history.⁴ While Yusaf shows herself to be a deft historian of institutions and cultural production, it is important to remember that the senses too, have a history. ¶

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1. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (London, 2012), 40–41.
2. Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Barry and Linda-Ruth Salter Blesser, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).
3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 2006).
4. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC, 2003), 14.

Charmaine A. Nelson
***Slavery, Geography and Empire
 in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes
 of Montreal and Jamaica***

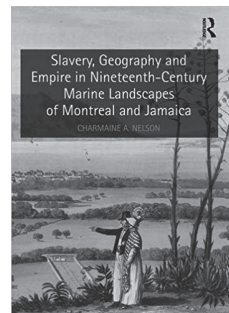
London and New York: Routledge, 2016
 416 pp. 16 colour plates, 26 b/w illus.
 \$149.95 cloth ISBN 9781409468912

Renée Ater

Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica is a deeply researched

and complex book. As a comparative study of two island settlements that were part of the British Empire, Charmaine Nelson's work draws links between Canadian slavery and tropical plantation slavery of the Caribbean through a focus on nineteenth-century marine landscapes produced in oil paintings, watercolours, engravings, lithographs, and aquatints. One of her principal framing questions asks what these landscapes of Jamaica and Montreal can tell us about empire, geography, and the economy of slave labour. She writes, "What does the colonial appropriation, use, and exploitation of land and its material transformation and representation as landscape have to teach us about the process of imperialism?" (2).

Nelson argues for the displacement of the metropole-colony dichotomy that has dominated the field of slavery studies. Instead, she posits a new model based on the idea of colony-to-colony interconnections and pathways within the British Empire. Employing a postcolonial feminist reading, she intertwines art history, geography, and slavery studies in support of this colony-to-colony model and to propose "a second Middle Passage between the shores of the Caribbean and Canada" (7). Nelson reads geography as playing a central role in empire building and colonization. Her interpretation of Jamaican and Canadian (Montreal) landscape imagery is rooted in what



she terms "the racialization of the land" (8), which, she argues is rooted in how "a geographical location