SOUNDWALKS

This document includes soundwalks done by Andra McCartney and others from 1997 to 1998.

Introduction

Acoustic Ecology

Soundwalking and soundscape composition are both informed by an association with acoustic ecology, the study of sound environments. This association with the context of sounds makes soundscape composition quite different from the traditions of *musique concrète* and acousmatic music, other forms of electroacoustic music which use recorded sounds that are taken out of their context. An important way to begin learning more about sound environments is to listen more closely to sounds and their relationship to the larger sound world, becoming more aware of changes and imbalances in the acoustic environment. For instance, in the Queen Elizabeth Park soundscape, the recent absence of fountains near the parking lot has changed the soundscape in that area. The large crowds of people who come to see the sunsets at the park create a soundscape full of human voices, which (together with the air-conditioning sound) dominates the sound environment at the lookout.

The World Forum for Acoustic Ecology has a huge, well-organized and informative website with sound and text research archives, links to composers, acousticians, educators and other professionals in the field, and information about events, equipment, and publications.

> Recently, a number of regional organizations have sprung up around the world. In Canada, there is the Canadian Association for Sound Ecology, which encourages Canadian work in this area. I am on the board of CASE. If you would like more information, feel free to contact me: andra@alcor.concordia.ca

Composing

Go out and listen. Choose an acoustic environment which in your opinion sets a good base for your environmental compositions ... What kinds of rhythms does it contain, what kinds of pitches, how many continuous sounds, how many and what kinds of discrete sounds, etc. Which sounds can you produce that add to the quality of the environmental music? Create a dialogue and thereby lift the environmental sounds out of their context into the context of your composition, and in turn make your sounds a natural part of the music around you. Is it possible? (Hildegard Westerkamp, in "Soundwalking", *Sound Heritage* 3(4), 1974: 25).

Westerkamp's soundscape compositions begin when she records a sound environment. In the tradition of American experimental composers such as John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, and like other members of the World Soundscape Project such as R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax, Westerkamp hears the sound environment as a composition. She speaks of the sounds of a place as the language of that place, its active voice. A number of other sound artists and soundscape composers can be found at WFAE.

Soundwalks themselves are composed, in that the recordist always has a certain perspective, as Westerkamp points out in her article "The Soundscape on Radio" (**Radio Rethink: art, sound and transmission,** edited by Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander. Banff Centre for the Arts, 1994: 89). She highlights and juxtaposes certain sounds and sound relationships by the way that she moves the microphone within the space. Each person's soundwalk might reveal different aspects of the soundscape.

Beyond the soundwalk, a soundscape composer works with the sound environment through sound journals and in a studio. Sound journals record reactions to certain sounds and their relationships to the sociopolitical context of the place that was recorded. Sometimes the text from these sound journals becomes part of the composition, as in Westerkamp's **India Sound Journals**. Like Westerkamp, I work in a home studio with a Macintosh computer and a variety of digital audio software, including sound design, multitrack mixing, equalizing, and effects processors. Westerkamp's approach to studio composition - and mine as well - is to maintain a

connection with the sound environment by choosing to use fairly long sequences and studio techniques that highlight and trace the contours of sonic gestures rather than isolating sounds from their original context, and radically changing them to make them unrecognizable. I will be including an extensive discussion of studio soundscape work in my CD ROM on Westerkamp.

Listening

Hildegard Westerkamp says "A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are. We may be at home, we may be walking across a downtown street, through a park, along the beach; we may be sitting in a doctor's office..." ("Soundwalking", **Sound Heritage** 3(4), 1974: 18). In this same article, Westerkamp includes a poetic text that leads the listener through an initial soundwalk. I reproduce it here in full:

Start by listening to the sounds of your body while moving. They are closest to you and establish the first dialogue between you and the environment. If you can hear even the quietest of these sounds you are moving through an environment which is scaled on human proportions. In other words, with your voice or your footsteps for instance, you are "talking" to your environment which then in turn responds by giving your sounds a specific acoustic quality.

Try to move
Without making any sound.Is it possible?
Which is
the quietest sound of your body?

(If, however, the sounds you yourself produce are lost in the ambient noise of your surroundings you experience a soundscape which is out of balance. Human proportions have been disregarded here. Not only is your voice inaudible but your ear also is assaulted by a multitude of loud and chaotic noises.)

Lead your ears away from your own sounds and listen to the sounds nearby.

What do you hear? (Make a list)

What else do you hear?
Other people
Nature sounds
Mechanical sounds
Howmany
Continuoussoundscontinuoussoundscontinuoussoundscontinuoussoundscontinuoussounds

Can you detect
Interesting rhythms
Regular beats
The highest
The lowest pitch.

Do you hear any
I . n . t . e . r . m . i . t . t . e . n . t . o r . d . i . s . c . r . e . t . e . s . o . u . n . d . s
Rustles
Bangs
Swishes
Thuds

What are the sources of the different sounds?

What else do you hear?

Lead your ears away from these sounds and listen beyond .... into the distance

What is the quietest sound?
What else do you hear?
What else?

What else?

what else?

So far you have isolated sounds from each other and gotten to know them as individual entities. But each one of them is part of a bigger environmental composition. Therefore reassemble them all and listen to them as if you are listening to a piece of music played by many different instruments. Be critical and judge if you like what you hear.

Pick out the sounds you like the most and create the ideal soundscape in the context of your present surroundings. What would be its main characteristics? Is it just an idealistic dream or could it be made a reality in our modern society?(Westerkamp 1974: 19-20)

There are several places in this soundwalk where Westerkamp's intense listening is evident through the way that she guides the microphone. For instance, at the lookout, she guides the microphone closer to the vent as the airplane crosses overhead, constructing a dialogue between these two very different mechanical sounds. In the sunken garden, she moves the microphone to different points close to the waterfall, revealing percussive rhythms in the water that form interesting polyrhythms with the drumming. At the creek, she moves very close to the rocks and branches channeling the flow of water, making apparent the changing rhythms, pitches, and timbres that these structures produce.

Dialogue

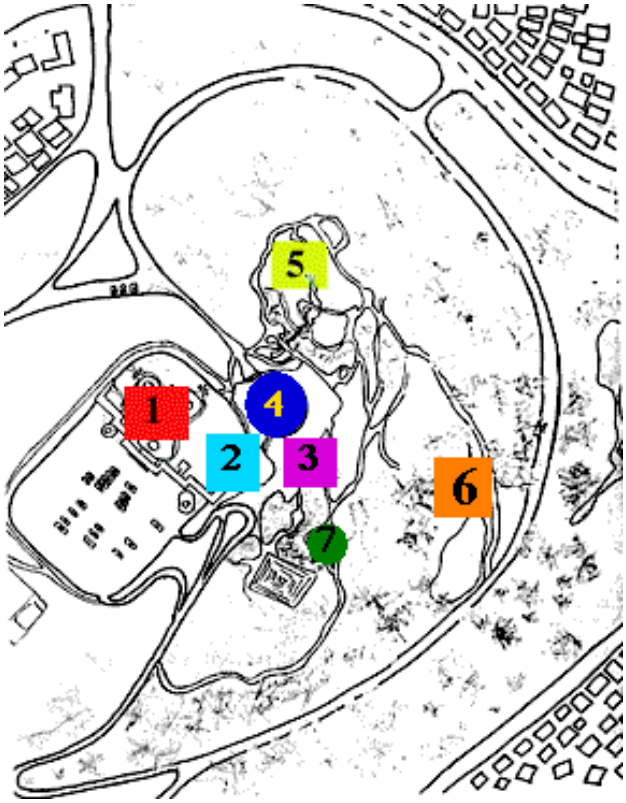
In her article on soundwalking (**Sound Heritage** 3(4), 1974: 18-27), Westerkamp suggests that one of its aims is dialogue with the environment. This is one of the extensions of active listening. For instance, listening attentively to bird or animal calls can lead to imitation of these calls, a strategy that composer Olivier Messiaen used in his music. As you can hear inside the Conservatory, when birds and people begin to imitate each other, the dialogue becomes quite intense. Listening attentively to the acoustics of a place can also lead to an understanding of which landscape formations and building structures produce echoes.

Soundwalking can also encourage dialogue with the people in a place. Some soundwalkers use unobtrusive microphones that resemble headphones. Hildi uses a large microphone which is obvious, and seems to encourage people to approach and ask what she is doing. For instance, when we were in the sunken garden, recording the sounds of a large plant, a passerby approached and began to talk to us. After we had recorded the sounds of the young people playing the Knife-Edge sculpture, they also asked what we were doing.

When a soundscape composer makes a piece, they are creating a representation of a particular place and its sounds. Some of Hildegard Westerkamp's compositions about places in Vancouver were broadcast as a radio show called "Soundwalking" on a community radio station, Vancouver Cooperative Radio, which gave her a chance to "talk back" to places reached by the station's transmitters. She discusses these shows in her article "The Soundscape on Radio" (**Radio Rethink**. Banff Centre for the Arts,1994: 87-94). Another interesting level of dialogue is the memories and associations that are inspired by listening to a certain soundscape. Do you have any comments on the soundscape excerpts (short as they are!) that you have heard here? If so, email me: andra@alcor.concordia.ca

Queen Elizabeth Park

This site documents a soundwalk done in August 1997 by Hildegard Westerkamp and Andra McCartney. Queen Elizabeth Park is a landmark of Vancouver, described in tourist brochures as "Vancouver's oasis", containing Vancouver's only tropical garden under the triodetic dome of the Bloedel Conservatory at the highest point of the park, which provides an excellent view of the city and surrounding mountains.



But what does it sound like?

1. Entrance
2. Knife-Edge
3. Lookout
4. Conservatory
5. Sunken Garden
6. Creek
7. Quarry

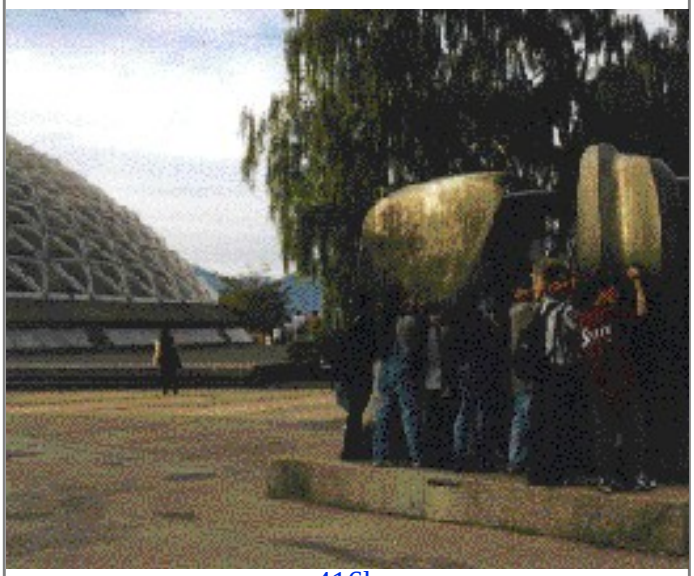
The map of Queen Elizabeth Park is by Hildegard Westerkamp. It was published in her article "Soundwalking" (**Sound Heritage** 3(4), 1974: 22), which includes a description of an earlier soundwalk in this location.

This site can be considered an initial sketch for the introduction to Andra McCartney's PhD dissertation, about Hildegard Westerkamp, which will be produced as a CD ROM.

1. Entrance

 416k	Hildegard Westerkamp has been performing soundwalks for many years. They are an integral part of her approach to soundscape composition. She always begins each soundwalk by identifying the place, date and time of recording, since she recognizes that places sound different from time to time, and of course the results of the soundwalk differ depending on who is doing the recording.
 416k	Westerkamp has done other soundwalks in this location. A description of such a soundwalk formed part of her article entitled "Soundwalking", published in **Sound Heritage** 3(4), 1974: 18-27. One change in the QE Park soundscape since that time is that the fountains in this entrance area are no longer functioning. The silent workings for one of the fountains is on the right-hand side of this photo, just above the steps. As you listen to the sounds, note the many human languages heard in this excerpt, something that we heard throughout the soundwalk in this park. Also, you can hear the distant sound of a train horn, creating a sense of acoustic space.

2. Knife



416k

In her soundwalking article (**Sound Heritage** 3(4), 1974: 18-27), Westerkamp says: "Close to the fountains you will find a metal sculpture ("Knife Edge" by Henry Moore). Explore it visually as well as acoustically. It consists of two pieces both of which have a different structure. Do they also differ in their sounds? What other relationships can you find between its form and its sounds?" We asked a group of young people passing by to play the sculpture. You can see them here in this photo. Listen to how the resonances change as Hildi circles the players.

3. Lookout

 1500k	As we walk from the Knife-Edge sculpture towards the Conservatory, we begin to hear an airplane passing overhead. The dominant sound of the lookout area outside of the Conservatory is that of the building's air vents, what R. Murray Schafer refers to as the "bad breath" of buildings. Listen to how the airplane sound decreases in pitch as the vent sound increases in amplitude, until - as we approach the vent more closely - the falling glissando of the airplane seems to melt into the vent's broad noise-band.
 384k	As we walk down towards the lookout area, away from the vent, its sound accompanies us, still fairly loud in relationship to other sounds, masking many of them. Finally, near the end of this excerpt, the sounds of passing footsteps emerge more clearly.
 672k	We return to the lookout just as the sun is setting. Notice how many voices there are in this area now. Human voices and the sound of the Conservatory air-conditioning vents fill this soundscape.

4. Conservatory

 544k	Hildi noticed that the waterwheel sounded different from her last visit. Doing several soundwalks in a place over time makes her more aware of acoustic changes: she made a similar note in the entrance area. Note how prominent the air-conditioning sounds in this excerpt. You can also hear parrots in the distance, as well as other birds.
 352k	Like the waterwheel, this bamboo bridge creates a sound not normally heard in northern countries. In this excerpt, I am walking across the bridge. Notice the dense interweaving of noise bands (the water is more prominent than the air-conditioning here) and more tonal sounds such as the birdsong. Mingled with the sounds of my feet on the bamboo, this complex of sounds creates a dense and timbrally interesting soundscape.
 864k	Our interaction with the parrots in the conservatory was hilarious, particularly with the one pictured here. As soon as we entered the conservatory, we could hear them calling "hello" occasionally, and whistling. Later, on hearing a child shriek, this parrot started shrieking in the way people do when their laughter overcomes them. This made us laugh, which encouraged the parrots to increase the volume and intensity of their vocalizations. Other people then became involved. It is too bad I can only include a short excerpt here. The only time that the parrots stopped was when Hildi came close with the microphone, although the camera did not seem to slow them down.

5. Sunken Garden

 728k	The dominant sound of the sunken garden is the waterfall, heard here with the sounds of Sunday drummers, who were seated in a wooded area overlooking the garden. Listen to how the drumming (by chance) increases in intensity as we approach the falls, and Hildi discovers percussive points in the waterfall that form a counterpoint to the drumming.
 551k	On this sunny Sunday evening, many people were enjoying the beautiful plants in the Sunken Garden. The high rock walls of the garden, combined with the masking effect of the waterfall, blocked out most traffic sounds. One exception is an emergency siren, heard here.
 299k	This large, rough-leafed plant grows to a huge size in Vancouver summers, and disappears each winter. This sound excerpt reveals both the texture and the size of the underside of the leaf (it took 13 seconds to stroke from stem to tip).

5. Creek

 512k	The waters of the creek sounded very different, depending on how they were flowing. Here the water falls over quite a large boulder. Notice how different this sound is from the following one.
 576k	Here, the water is moving more slowly and gurgling around some small branches and stones. It is less noisy and more melodious. You can also hear the air-conditioning from the Conservatory at the top of the hill. This sound seems louder in this part of the park. It continues as we proceed to the Quarry Garden.

6. Quarry

 788k	The main acoustic feature of the Quarry Garden is its echo. In this sound excerpt, we are walking on the path, towards and under the stone bridge that you see here. Notice also the increased volume of the air-conditioning sound.

River West Chicago

A Soundwalk from Artemisia to the River

Photos on this page were taken by Andrea Polli. She created a performance piece based on this soundwalk, called Shadow Walk.

The Artemisia Gallery is located at 700 N. Carpenter in Chicago's River West district, a confluence of transportation systems: freeway, railway, waterway.

Immediately to the south of the gallery are the I90 and I94 freeways, which are a dominant sonic presence in the area. Walking north two blocks leads across Milwaukee and past a church with a copper-roofed cupola (on the right of the photo, the gallery building is on the left). This church released a veritable torrent of bell peals as we walked towards it. Just past the church is a factory which seems mostly abandoned. The grounds of this factory are home to many birds, singing as we passed. A tiny residential pocket is next to this factory site. We stopped to listen to the Metra train pass on the nearby track. Here, some residents stopped their car to ask us what we were doing. We emerged from this neighbourhood onto Elston, a busier street that led eventually to the Chicago River. Approaching the bridge at Elston and Division, there is a large building on the far side of the road from the river, which reflects and intensifies sounds from the riggings of boats in a marina next to the river (the photo showing the marina and city skyline is taken from the bridge at Elston and Division). When I did a soundwalk along this same route two days before the workshop, the wind was tugging at these masts and riggings, producing beautiful rhythmic melodies. However, the day of the recording, the Windy City was calm. The metal ramps on the bridge played a different tune for each passing car.

SOUNDFILES

Metra train

birds

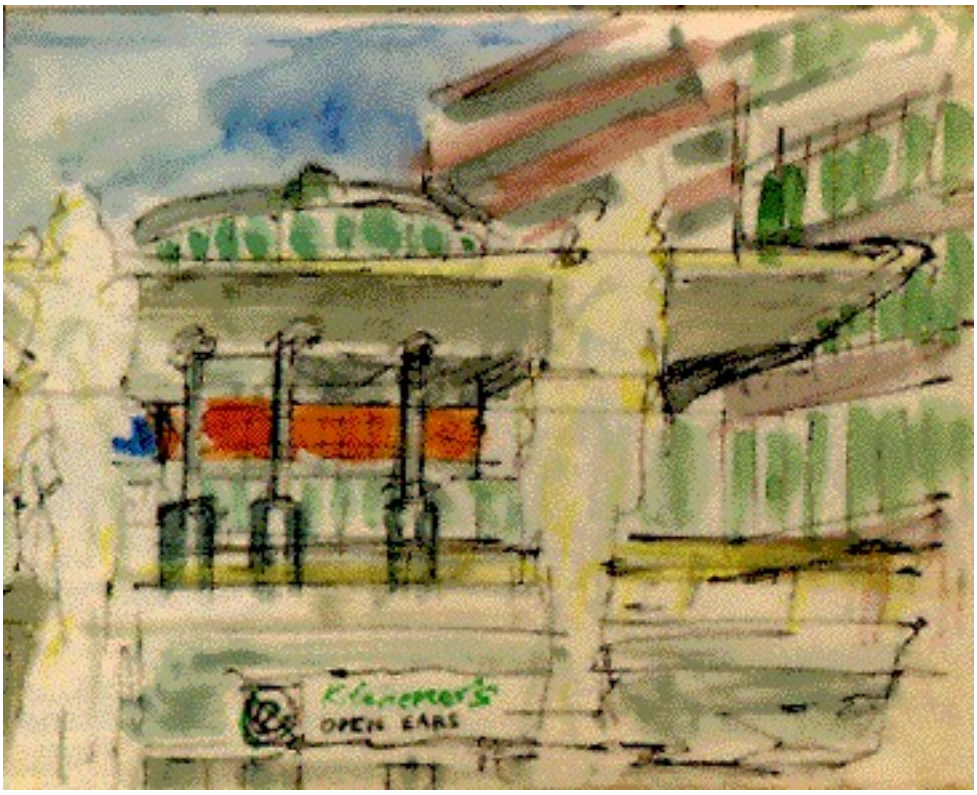
talking

freeway

churchbells

Kitchener Open Ears Soundwalks

On the Saturday, Sunday and Monday (May 16-18) of the 1998 Open Ears Festival, at 1 pm.



watercolour by P.S. Moore

SOUNDFILES

distant churchbells

under tree

emerging

Lutheran

rushing

clock

Kitchener Soundwalks: Downtown Route, May 16-18 1998

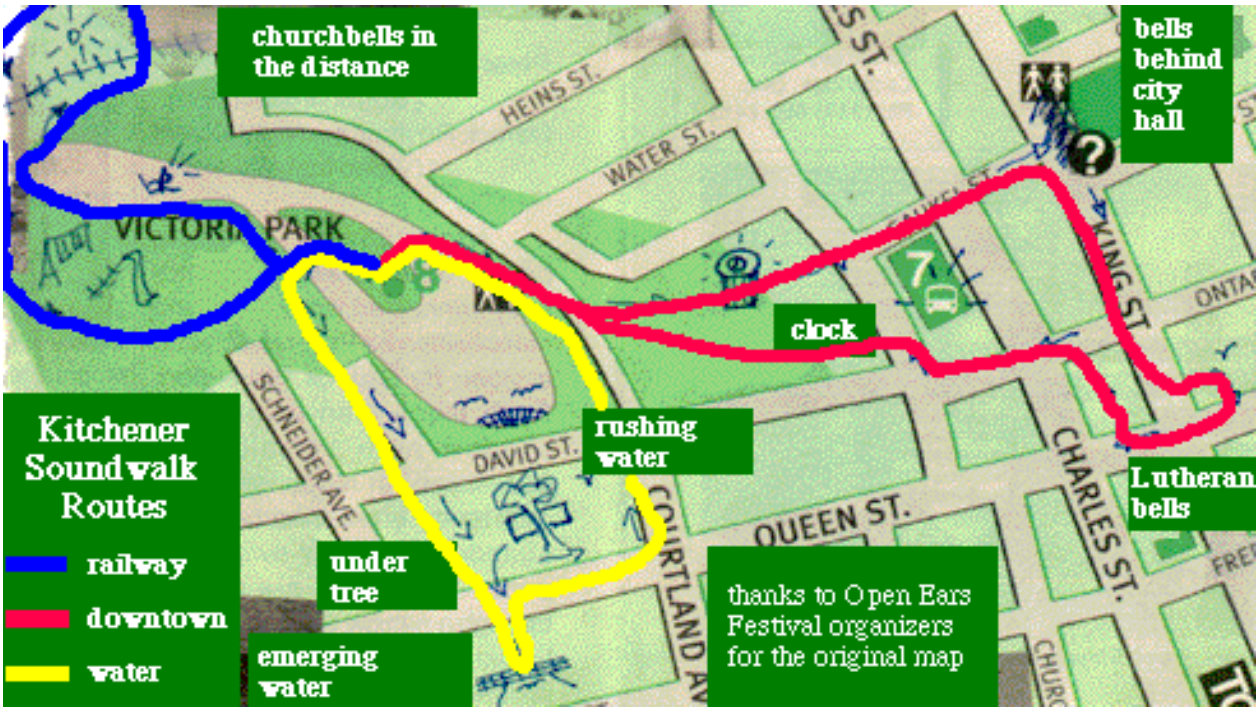
From the gazebo, we walk over a wooden pedestrian bridge where newly-hatched sparrows call for food, as their parents flutter in and out. We walk past the clock tower, seen here in a watercolour done by P. S. Moore during the Victoria Day electroacoustic concert. At the border of the park is the bus station, very active at this point in the middle of the day. It is two blocks from the bus station to Kitchener City Hall, which is fronted by several large fountains that mask much of the traffic noise, inviting us to stop for a moment. This is a popular meeting place, at this time of day frequented by people from downtown offices on lunchbreaks. Walking along King St. towards Queen St., we come to an empty lot. The brick walls on either side are populated by

many birds whose cries seem louder as we walk away from the traffic. A reverberant covered passageway leads to Queen St., where we turn back towards the park, crossing opposite the Lutheran church and through parking lots surrounded by building exhaust vents, back to the park.

Kitchener Railway Soundwalks May 16-18 1998

The railway route starts by crossing the same bridge as the water route, turning the opposite way, towards the Victoria Park pavillion, where we hear drummers taking part in the Festival's drumming workshop. We walk to the end of the lake, and cross a working railway line into a scrub brush area where many varieties of birds become audible. Just past this is an abandoned railway line, now used as a walking and biking trail. Cinders underfoot, occasional bicycle bells and wheels humming along. We cross a low gully at the far end, and as we rise at the other side begin to hear children in the playground at the park. We sit for a while at the picnic tables, then walk back towards the pavillion and gazebo.

The map below shows all three routes, and links from the map lead to sound files recorded at around 10 o'clock on the Sunday morning at various places.



Kitchener Water Concourse Soundwalk May 16-18 1998

A wooden footbridge leads off the far side of the gazebo island and we follow the sound of the dam, along the bank of the lake to where the water disappears underground. Victoria Park's lake is large and mostly quite still, an artificial lake constructed in the 1890s to form a recreational focus for the city. The dam is the only sound around the lake of fast-moving water, as it rushes into the concrete causeway below. Here we cross a side street and take the footpath towards Joseph Schneider House, a historic building. We are walking along the route of the original creekbed. Not far from Schneider house is an abandoned building foundation under a mature tree, where we sit for a moment. Here the soundscape varies greatly from time to time on my walks: sometimes the wind gently rustlng the leaves is clearly audible among cries of sparrows in a high branch of the tree. At other times, nearby weedeaters or lawnmowers mask these quieter sounds.

On the Sunday morning, the traffic on Queen St. is much quieter than on other days. From our pause at the foundation, the path leads to Queen St. Across the road, the water emerges from the concrete concourse below, which has smooth, high walls creating a resonance that we can hear as we lean over the fence. We cross back over the road, following busy Queen St. to the next corner, past a construction site dominated by a large crane, and back along the side of the lake to the gazebo.