

## MIT Soundwalk

Friday March 6<sup>th</sup> I embarked on a Soundwalk, visiting the places I go everyday on campus, but this time I was not focused on making it to class on time, or meandering my way through the crowd in the infinite. I took my time to listen to the sounds I had grown accustomed to. I started my journey at 428 Memorial Drive, crossed the infinite, visited Stata, then building 66 before I headed to Memorial Drive to walk by the Charles back to where I started.

A Soundwalk on MIT Campus



As I stepped outside into the cold Boston weather, I heard the crunching sound my shoes made when I stepped on the salt on the doorstep. Some of the salt stuck to my shoes and as I kept walking I listened to what salt and concrete being crushed with my weight sounded like. It is a granular sound that makes one feel like walking on a bed of nails that scratch the ground with every step. It is not a very pleasant sound and I realized it was distracting me from other sounds around me so I stomped my snow boots, making a low pitched thumping sound, and started listening to my surroundings. I heard peoples shuffled footsteps, which have very different sound quality depending on shoe type. A girl wearing boots with heels made a high-pitched clamping sound that echoed off the dorm's walls. Someone else was wearing sneakers and the plastic made a silent squeaking sound. The Tech Shuttle that passed by was especially noisy. As the driver hit the breaks to stop, there was a high-pitched screeching sound and as the shuttle came to a full stop, I heard the breaks releasing pressure, which sounded like steam escaping a boiler. It was as if the weathered down tech shuttle was moaning and sighing with every stop.

As I continued to walk by Kresge Lawn, I re-focused on my footsteps. Some of the snow had started to melt and it was inevitable to step into puddles of semi-melted snow. The sound of stepping into slush was different than stepping into a puddle of water. Stepping into a puddle of water made a sharper “bloop” sound and stepping into slush made a dampened, squish sound. I also stepped on a snow pile to see what sound it would make. I was expecting to hear a smooth “puff” sound, like one would expect to hear when walking on freshly fallen snow, but this snow had a cracking sound. Since it had been sitting there for weeks now and it had become an amalgam of ice and snow, changing the timbre drastically. As I entered Building 7, the aural perception of my surroundings changed completely. The high ceilings and the tiled floor created a nice acoustic. When I was outside, voices would quickly fade away but inside, the sound of people chattering was like a smooth humming sound that was hanging in the air.

I entered the narrow hallway of the infinite and noticed a change in the timbre of voices. I could hear conversations more clearly and the high-pitched quick “hello’s” people exchanged as they ran into each other. The heavy doors along the hallway would open and close, making clicking sounds as they latched and unlatched. As the infinite expanded into Lobby 10, the voices became a murmur once again that bounced off the walls. The next building I visited was STATA. This building has always been one of my favorite spots on campus. Every surface in Stata is either metal concrete or glass. The building itself has many alcoves and tilted surfaces that make the sound bounce around which makes for an interesting acoustical experience. The murmur of people was more chaotic and higher in amplitude compared to Lobby 7. The sharpest sound in the weirdly shaped geometric building was the clanging of chairs. Even with the slightest movement, the metal chairs sounded like they are screaming and the screeching echoed throughout the high building, reflecting off surfaces.

My next destination was the basement of Building 66. I am often in the basement on Building 66 because Course 10 has a study lounge there. The basements have an eerie silence, which is why I do not use the tunnels too frequently, but visiting the tunnels on my Soundwalk I noticed that they are quite the opposite of silent. There is a constant drone of machinery in the background. It is so monotonous that I had not registered it as a sound before. The humming of the generators sounded like low amplitude white noise. I also noticed that it was harder to tell where sounds were coming from in the basement.

As I headed back home I decided to walk by the river. I normally enjoy walking on the river especially because I am on the sailing team and I enjoy being close to water. Unfortunately the layer of ice hiding the river prevented me from hearing the soothing sound of the Charles. The river was almost like a white desert. The only sound, other than the cars, was the wind. Before starting my walk I had read Westerkemp’s Soundwalk and I thought it was interesting how he mentioned the different types of wind and how different objects react to the wind. As a sailor I am very familiar to the different sounds the wind makes on the water and how the sails sound as a gust of wind hits them, but I had not especially listened to wind

outside of sailing. The tall buildings that rise on the banks of the Charles created a wind tunnel and the strong winds would make high-pitched hissing sounds while a lighter gust of wind would make a sound resembling a howl. Listening to the wind made me think of an irregular oscillator. The wind would start off with a low pitch howl then every now and then the sound would escalate to a high pitched whistle, staying there for only a few seconds before falling back to a howl.

As my journey ended I reflected on how it had gone. I had never spent time to enhance my audio perception of my surroundings. It was a bit tiring and harder than I expected. It is very easy to be distracted by visual stimuli. The sounds I was expecting to hear were mostly footsteps and people talking. I heard a wider variety of sounds but also, I paid attention to the quality of the sounds I heard and how they could change depending on the environment I heard them. The most surprising part of my journey was noticing the different sounds and acoustical characteristics of being outside versus inside. By the end of the walk, I started thinking about how I could be constructing these sounds in Pure Data, which was not something I had put a lot of thought into. The experience was fun and made me appreciate the sounds around me.

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