

What's in a Soundwalk?

by Hildegard Westerkamp



The following document was written by Vancouver-based sound artist, environmentalist, and educator, Hildegard Westerkamp. It was used in advance of a soundwalk that Hildegard led in Mexico City in 2009, at the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology conference.



A soundwalk can settle our nervous system. It can create inner calm, which in turn may open up possibilities for unexpected atmospheres of listening throughout the next few days here.

One type of soundwalk is a silent group walk, led along a pre-planned route in order to experience a location's ambiance and underlying rhythms. All too often the sounds of the environment pass by unnoticed



because of our uncanny ability to shut them out. But environmental sound can also be understood as a type of language where each sound and soundscape has its own meanings and expressions. Each environmental sound is like a spoken word: it has something to say to us if we care to listen.

A soundwalk enables its participants to listen actively, to open ears and consciousness to the complex orchestration that the environment is offering to us at all times for our consideration. It is a musical, sonic adventure that reveals the banal to be extraordinary.

The walk will be about one hour long and there will be an opportunity for discussion and exchange when we get back. One important instruction is that we walk in silence and agree not to speak. It is a rare opportunity to be in a group and not speak with anyone. The main idea is that we open our ears to all sounds. But I also want to invite you to include your own inner sounds and voices, the mental chatter, in your listening. Paying attention to both outer and inner sound worlds can inform us about how we relate to the environment, how we listen, what kind of listeners we are and how we let the soundscape affect us.

We will be a conspicuous group, an unusual social entity. People will notice our large silence. If someone asks what we are doing, just answer that we are on a soundwalk and walk on. Equally, if you meet any friends and do not want to pass them in silence, tell them about the walk and explain more later.

Once we arrive at our destination, we'll have the opportunity to debrief by sharing with one another what we experienced. Each of us will encounter this walk in a different way; we'll bring with us our own inner-dialogue and our own way of experiencing the spaces around us. Sharing our experiences with others will not only draw our attention to features of the environment we may have otherwise missed, but also, it will show us some of the many ways of interpreting a shared urban experience.



These instructions apply equally to us as we prepare for the Urban Imaginaries soundwalk as they did for Hildegard's group in Mexico City. Our destination will be Arlington5, where we'll debrief after the walk. For more on soundwalking, Hildegard has written a short essay titled "Soundwalking as Ecological Practice" (2006) which is [freely accessible on her website](#).