

Soundwalking

Bridging Disciplines and Cultures?

By Hildegard Westerkamp

Reflections on Two Soundwalks Conducted at
...acoustic ecology...
an international symposium
Melbourne, Australia, March 2003

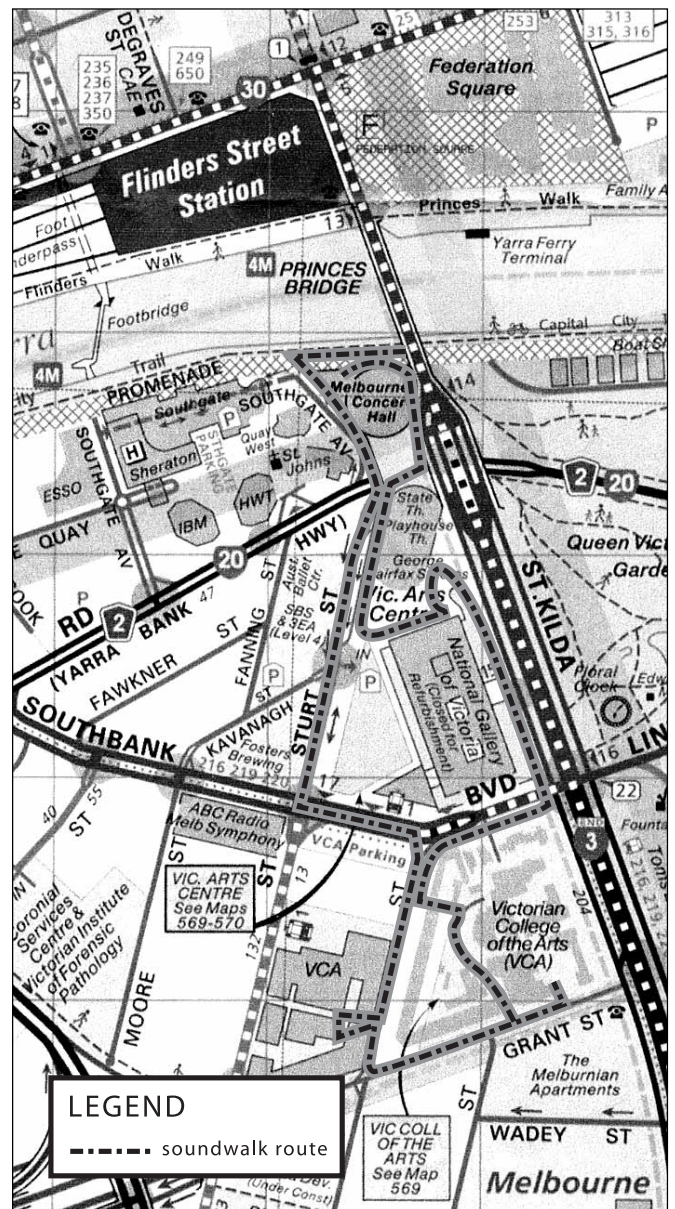
A soundwalk opened this symposium, not a keynote address. Listening, not talking. Around 60-65 participants walked between the Victoria College of the Arts (VCA) where the symposium was held, and the bridge leading across the Yarra River to Melbourne's downtown core—not a quiet environment and yet full of contrasts and stimulating details (see map 1). One participant commented:

I lived in the area where we walked. I thought I knew it well. During the soundwalk, I heard new sounds, new layers of sounds. Some sounds were aggressive, others reassuring. Some sounds masked others... I had no idea how much I had closed my ears.

In this way, the city where we had all gathered for the symposium had a chance to introduce itself to all of us first. The environment 'spoke', we listened and remained silent during the one-hour duration of the walk. Our presentations, our words, during the following days, occurred inevitably out of an experienced, listened-to context of this place, no matter whether we had come from far away or whether we lived in Melbourne itself. I believe that this had a significant influence in setting what I perceived to be a generously open-minded 'tone' for the symposium as a whole.

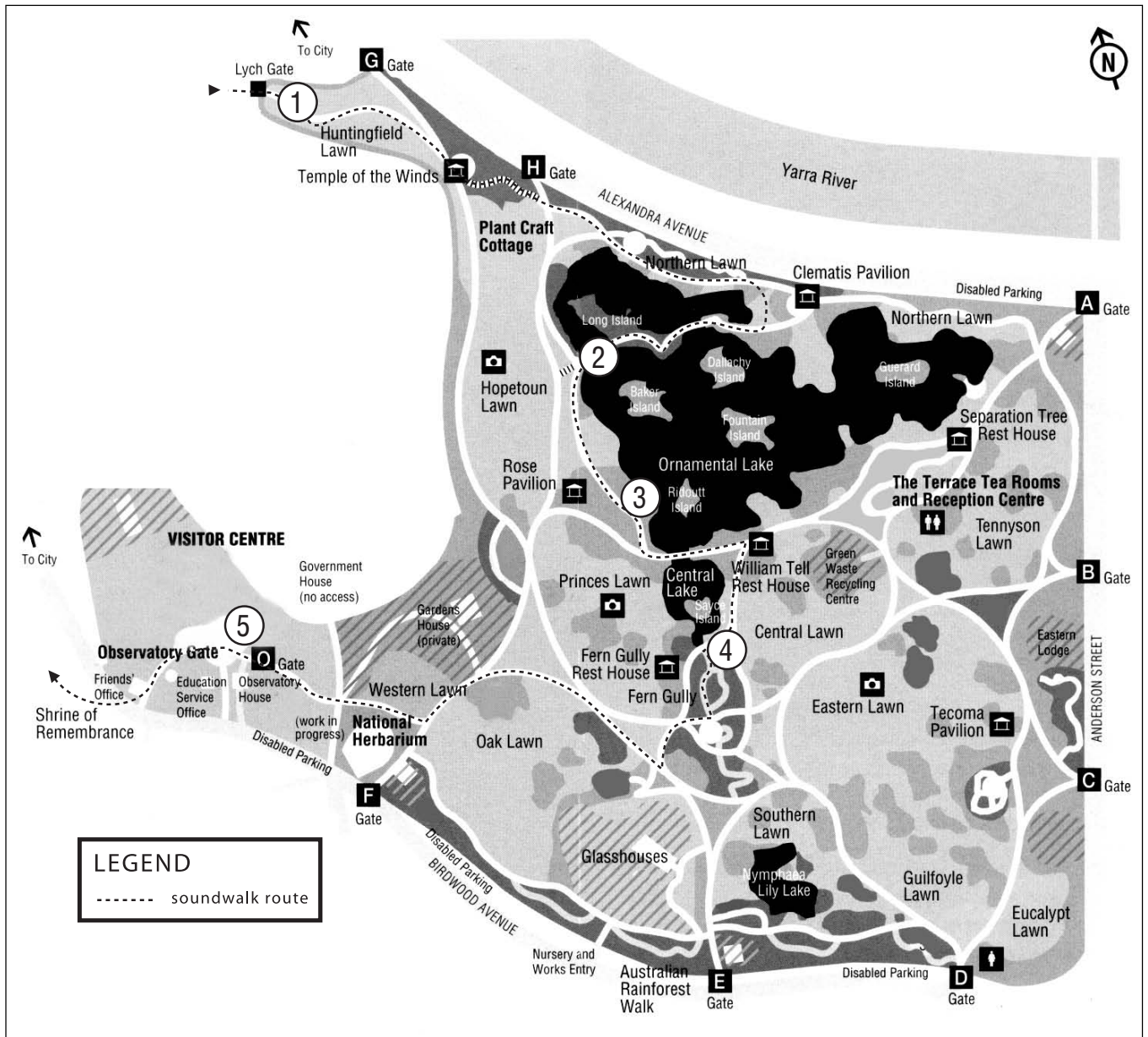
The Melbourne Symposium was a unique event, which brought together—under the umbrella of the field of acoustic ecology—a wide range of professionals who study the sound environment through a variety of disciplines. As someone who has been involved in the field since the mid-seventies in various capacities I wanted to provide a conceptual and practical bridge in this context between disciplines through the idea and practise of soundwalks—soundwalking as a bridge between listener and environment, between cultural differences, professional specialisations, etc. all of which tend to determine how our listening perception works at any given time, in any given space. Soundwalking itself as the action of *building* the bridge, of a pathway from the perceptual practice of listening to scientific, social, cultural inquiry and research.

In order for the discipline of acoustic ecology to grow and mature, this approach of including perception into the study and exploration of the sound environment is essential. Much scientific research has been conducted into sound, acoustics and noise since the 70s, but very little of it actually has helped to improve the quality of the world soundscape as a whole.



Map 1: Urban Soundwalk near the VCA

Recognizing this, one university research project in Canada—not connected to the WFAE or the soundscape studies tradition—actually acknowledges and articulates this as its highlight in the following way: “the key novel feature being that our interdisciplinary research reinstates the listener into the listening environment.” [*Acoustic Ecology Project*, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada <http://www.cs.ubc.ca/~kvdoel/acel/>] Since soundscape studies, as originally conceived



Map 2: Soundwalk route through the Royal Botanical Gardens, Melbourne, Australia.

by the World Soundscape Project in the 70s at Simon Fraser University, is expressly based on the listener as source of information and research, it is heartening to see that other researchers and disciplines in the fields of sound, acoustics and noise are now also recognizing the importance of this.

In Melbourne two walks were conducted in a simple, basic way—to first find out *what is*, not only for those of us who were visitors, but also for those who have lived in Melbourne for many years and have a basic familiarity with it. A relatively large group of people was taken on two pre-explored walks for approximately one hour. The only ‘instruction’ that was given to participants was to refrain from talking, or rather, to understand this as a rare opportunity to be in a group and not feel compelled to talk. Like every soundwalk in my experience, these two soundwalks also facilitated immediate communication—after the walk and based on the experience itself—between the various disciplines represented in the walkers. The mere fact of making space for a *time of listening* gives immediate attention to the sound environment as-it-is. It tends to inspire ideas in the walkers/listeners, a desire to communicate these ideas and frequently to develop ways for further study.

The ultimate question becomes, who the listener is. If the town planner’s ears are taken on a soundwalk, something quite different may be perceived as when the biologist’s, audiologist’s, parent’s or composer’s ears (to name just a few) are taken on a soundwalk. A soundwalk is a meeting between listener and sounds: the experience occurs and the information emerges. And the listener always brings certain ‘materials’ into the process that will shape the experience—the ears, the listener’s expertise, specialty, perspective, training, as well as personal background, such as gender, age, cultural background, professional choices etc.

Traffic and Flying Foxes

The first soundwalk (see Map 1), opening the symposium, simply provided participants with an opportunity to open themselves to the environment and their own ways of listening. There was no official group discussion afterwards, but plenty of comments and ideas emerged afterwards as part of the general communication throughout the symposium. The second soundwalk (see Map 2) occurred within the context of my presentation *Soundwalking—Soundscape—Composition—Listening*

and took participants through the Royal Botanical Gardens. It was concluded with a group discussion under one of those large sprawling trees in the park near the VCA.

As we start this second soundwalk through the park across from the VCA towards the Royal Botanical Gardens, we hear traffic moving on the street surface, streetcar wheels screeching on the tracks, and the foreground sound of wind in trees. The traffic from the street recedes as we walk further and the general city throb-as-background becomes more pronounced, a broad-band hum, a sound wall enclosing us and preventing us from hearing more distant sounds. The wall stays with us throughout the whole walk with small variations in intensity. Leaves are moved by the wind along the pathway in front of us producing small percussive, rustling sounds. Airplanes, a jet above, later a helicopter—the wind throws their sounds around altering their frequency spectrum and volume in the process.

We hear a clear signal, sounding very much like an electronic 'ping', repeating itself at semi-regular intervals. A few days earlier, while exploring this soundwalk's route, I had heard it for the first time. I thought that a group of teenagers that happened to play a game on the grass when the sound occurred, had a device making this 'electronic' signal. I later realised that it was a call from a bird and learned that I had heard the Bell Bird! Its call travels far and can penetrate through much noise. It is so clear that one can easily locate each bird's position. If several birds are calling, communicating with each other, they give the listener a wonderfully clear sense of space, articulated even more clearly through the slightly different pitch that each bird seems to have—all pitches, though, seemed to hover within a half-tone of each other.

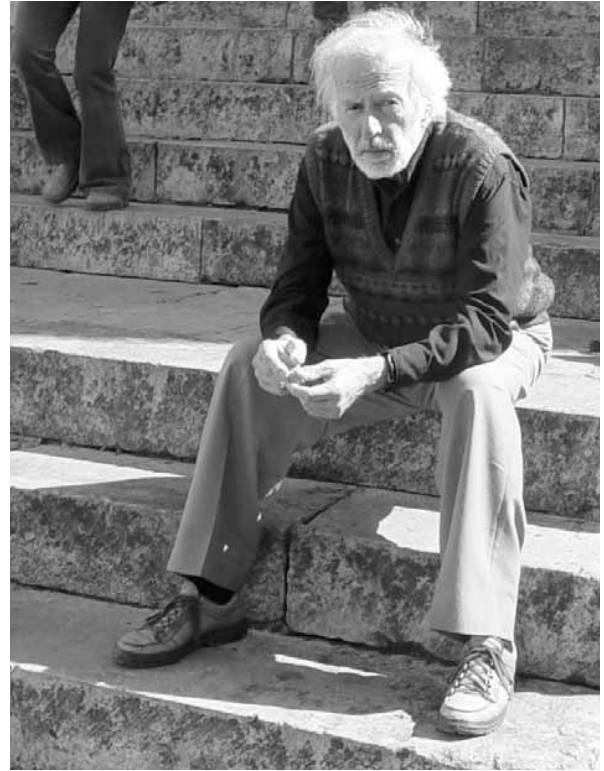
When we enter the Botanical Gardens [1] we are informed that,

the permanent presence of the flying fox colony in the Royal Botanical Gardens is threatening Fern Gully and significant tree specimen. Noise flags and other non-intrusive activities are being used at dawn and dusk to encourage flying foxes to move to a new roost. (from pamphlet)

But at this point we cannot hear the flying foxes, a type of bat. We mostly hear the very noisy streets on both sides of the river, bordering the Gardens. Walking towards the lakes, [2] there is much distant bird song, high twitter, plus the bell birds' pings. Wind is rustling in various foliage; traffic is a bit more distant here mingling with the wind in interesting ways. Crickets are singing in a dryer area just off the main path. Under high trees, near the lake [3] what sounded like distant bird twitter, turns out to be the flying foxes. Yes, black bats are hanging like large fruit off the top tree branches. The closer we come, the noisier and screechier they sound, dominating the whole soundscape, in fact, masking the more distant traffic hum now.

Fern Gully [4] is where most of the flying foxes 'hang out'. It is as if we are moving right inside the sound of the flying foxes—it is actually frightening, too much of one thing—making audible the menace that is threatening to destroy parts of the Garden's vegetation. Their screeches are dominating the soundscape, masking the sounds of other species, masking even the other sound that had dominated the first part of the soundwalk, traffic. The flying foxes' racket does not entirely leave us until it gets submerged by the approaching traffic sounds as we leave the Botanical Gardens [5].

Hildegard Westerkamp is a composer, who lectures and writes on topics of listening, environmental sound, and acoustic ecology. She conducts soundscape workshops and presents her compositions internationally.



— 70 years —

Best Wishes to Murray Schafer

With much fondness do I think back to July 18, 1973—my first or second day of work with the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University—when we were sitting in a little office in the Communications Department, eating a birthday cake, celebrating Murray Schafer's 40th. I remember thinking, 'I like this atmosphere, I am feeling right in this place, with this group of people, their ways of listening and thinking and speaking, with their sense of humour.'

Thirty years later, I still feel 'right' among a now much larger community of listening people, all of whom are concerned not only for the quality of the world's soundscape but also for the quality of listening in general. I know that I speak for many of them when I thank you, Murray, for what you have given us all. Through your listening, writings and thinking, we have found a special relationship to the world, have found our own ears, have learnt to trust them, and have found inspiration and energy to keep working together, listening together, towards some sort of ecologically healthy soundscape.

So, dear Murray, here is a heartfelt thank you from all of us soundscape friends and colleagues, with warm wishes for many more healthy, enlightened and inspired years. We hope to see you at all our events!

Hildegard Westerkamp