

Melbourne's Urban Electroacoustic Soundscape Systems

a discussion and strategy paper

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1. Executive Summary

In 1991 a large-scale electroacoustic soundscape system was installed on the Southgate Arts and Leisure Precinct in central Melbourne. This system became the first of four to be installed in close proximity over the next 15 years. A fifth system was installed for a single art work in 2006. Despite this estimated private and public investment of over \$1M in sound art these installations represent, there remains a significant amount of development for their cultural presence to be advanced.

The sites under investigation fall into two categories. The first can be described as *art work specific* where a single work appears on the site as in Birrang Mar (*Proximities*) and ACMI (*Soundscapes for Australian Centre for the Moving Image*). The second category includes sites where different soundscape designs could be curated as in Southgate, Signal and Federation Square North Atrium. For the purposes of this study and report, urban soundscapes were limited to multi-channel electroacoustic systems, installed for the purposes of delivering spatial sound designs or art works. For the purposes of focussing the study's aims and to keep the study within budget constraints, sites such as the Federation Bells were beyond the scope of available resources. This fact was often lost on asset and cultural managers but was critical to ensure the project was comparing 'like-with-like'. Future studies may compare the electroacoustic with acoustic installations.

This report sought to investigate the undocumented history and current physical state of the systems, original motivations for their installation, issues around the establishment of the systems, artists' experiences in creating works for the systems, and the reasons why particular systems fell into disrepair. From these and related topics, a series of recommendations have been made to inform strategic developments toward ensuring that a practice of urban soundscape design might evolve around the globally unique opportunity afforded to Melbourne through the presences of the remaining infrastructure. Additional research included literature and international project searches, site visits, the creation of a soundscape reader and development of an experimental software platform for sound designs on large scale soundscape systems.

The report was generated through a series of interviews with artists, sound designers, asset managers, cultural and marketing managers and technical experts. Given the scale and complexity of this public art infrastructure, there were often conflicting attitudes, and sensitive and difficult recollections for participants to communicate. We wish to thank all those who agreed to participate in the interview report for their generosity in sharing a range of experiences and opinions and in a spirit of genuine willingness to seek ways of reinvigorating this practice in Melbourne.

Six recommendations were generated from the research process (refer page 26) with the intention they inform further strategy development. They include recommendations to establish a new experimental soundscape system, conduct an audit of existing systems, establishment of a professional advisory panel, work with selected communities of practice with a stake in urban soundscape design, addressing the creation of new works, and development of processes to evaluate the experience of key players in urban soundscape design.

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