

Charlott Greub

Charlott Greub is an associate professor of architecture at the North Dakota State University. She received her Master of Architecture, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Germany in 1992, with Laurids Ortner and Elia Zenghelis (OMA) and her Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Germany in 1986 with Tony Cragg and Erwin Heerich. She is an artist and registered architect in the European Union with 10 years of international professional experience, specialized in Urban Design and feasibility studies in metropolitan areas, a trans-disciplinary approach that addresses environmental, social and cultural factors within the city.

Formless Intersection – The concept of silence in music and architecture exemplified by John Cage’s 4’33” and the Resor House project by Mies van der Rohe

The intersections between art, architecture and music have been a long-running theme in the history of western civilization. This nexus reaches deep into antiquity and continues until contemporary times. Indeed, the linkages between music and architecture have long been the object of architectural research.¹ Notable examples of these transdisciplinary connections can be found in the theoretical works of Vitruvius; Alberti; Schelling; Schoenberg; Xenakis; and Cage. The overlap between art, architecture and music also finds expression in the works of architects like Mies van der Rohe or Daniel Libeskind as well as composers like Iannis Xenakis and John Cage.

As cultural-production platforms, music and architecture have been essentially connected to ideas of unity, harmony, and structure. Nevertheless, a series of radical twentieth-century compositional experiments have questioned the fundamental assumptions behind these ideas. These experiments have challenged these ideas through creative explorations into the concept of ‘silence’ in music and architecture. In discussing the concept of silence as a process of translating from one discipline (music) to another (architecture), we could enlist the facilitation of John Cage’s 4’33’, 1952, (In Proportional Notation)" ink on paper and Mies van der Rohe’s Resor House (1937-41) project drawings.

The disciplines of architecture and music both conventionally communicate their ideas through notational systems made up of temporal and spatial symbols. These symbols are extensions of their authors’ ideas or instructions, generally manifested through drawing or score, which are visual modes of defining arrangements of activity waiting to be interpreted by the performer or builder.

John Cage saw harmony as an outdated and abstract ordering principle which served to regulate the otherwise continuous

field of sound, and he sought in his own work to substitute for harmony different structures, based solely on the lengths of time. For this reason, Cage’s structure for a musical piece/performance was intended to function without regulating the existing sound-space within and around it.

It is not surprising that this first reference of Cage related to the concept of ‘silence’ in music, art and architecture appeared in 1952 for that year marks the composition of Cage’s most known work, 4’33”: the manifesto presentation of his definition of ‘silence’ as the presence of ambient and unintentional noise rather than the complete absence of sound.

This presentation will discuss one key exemplary piece of modernism in music (John Cage’s 4’33”) and another in architecture (Mies van der Rohe’s Resor House) to show how the concept of silence could be integrated not just in music but also in architecture through the deployment of its structural equivalent. There is a similarity between the structural nexus between music and sound as a compositional material on the one hand and between architecture and glass as a building material.

In addition, this presentation comparatively explores the spatial intersection that could be experienced through sound material in 4’33’ on the one hand and the mutual spatial intersection that occurs between the Resor House and its enveloping Grand Teton Mountains environment. This presentation also suggests that the relationship between architectural design work or experimental music and its compositional material or environment could be construed as an interconnected spatial relationship or interpenetration (intersection). In this case, the compositional material or environment, whether the ‘silence’ and sound surroundings or glass material or landscape, comes to be seen and experienced as integral parts of the building

¹ Capanna, Alexandra, “*Music and Architecture: A Cross between Inspiration and Method*”, Nexus Network Journal 11(2009)257-272.

design or the musical composition. This offers a perspective that posits that the relationship between architectural design work or experimental music and its environment could be construed as an interconnected spatial relationship or intersection in which the environment (landscape/ sound surroundings) comes to be seen as an integral part of the building design and/or the musical composition.



Fig. 1 Mies van der Rohe, Resor House project drawings, Jackson Hole, WY, 1937-1941

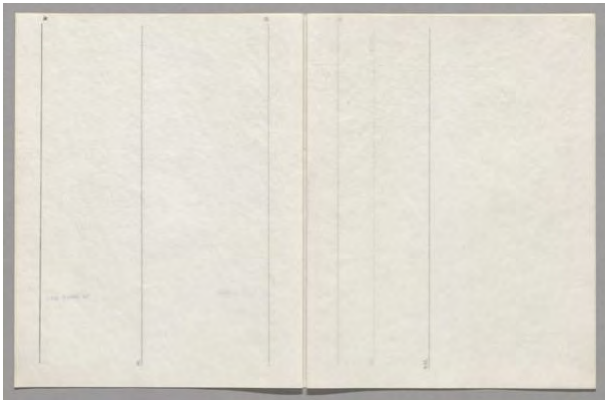


Fig. 2 John Cage, 4'33", 1951, (In Proportional Notation)" ink on paper