The Potential for Architectural Sound

The opportunity for completing any design space lies in the creating of ambient sound which matches the other elements of the design.

Long understood has been the important role of lighting and design. Much less understood is the impact of acoustics and sound to the environment. Most of this “design” focus is placed on control and hiding hardware. The “kind” of sound is a secondary concern. The net result is the aural equivalent of exposed old fashioned florescent tubes. This creates irritation in the space and is not an enhancement, nor a continuation of the design intent.

It’s a complex puzzle. The acoustics of the space and the range of purposes and design specifics must be addressed with care and understanding. Often, the acoustics and aesthetic limit the options available to the sound designer. Bringing all parties together early in the project with a complete design goal can help.

There are acoustic materials of a huge aesthetic range available. Incorporated in the design, the space need not look “engineered” while delivering the ambient intent of the architect and interior design.

Far more focus is needed on the hardware, and finally content used in the final execution of the project. One must look far beyond “keypads and plastic elevator speakers.” Or worse, the growing number of “invisible” speakers.

It’s quite possible to create real magic with the right acoustic sensibilities. Everyone appreciates the “feeling” experienced when walking somewhere and hearing a real piano, Christmas carolers, or gently running water from somewhere nearby. It’s a basic biological reaction that works similarly to smell. The scent of baking bread, brownies or anything associated with positive memory is hard wired in all of us. Thus, realistic, warm, rich music and sound instantaneously effects us the same way.

Some things to look for when choosing your acoustic partner as an architect or designer:
Do they understand your goals for the space? Can they demonstrate the kind of sound you are looking for?
Can they simply explain their processes?
How do they achieve differing sound characteristics for differing requirements?
What tools are they using?
Do they plan to use disposable technologies and products? (A surprising number of “professional installers” use products intended as profit centers with “destroy onsite” instead of manufacturers warranties. This “straight to landfill if it breaks” policy is a red flag.) Components should come from specialists who are known to advance the art, not “simply business builders.”
Are they placing emphasis on source, content, connectivity and thorough execution?
Do they “minimize” hardware and cable differences and dismiss nuance as being unimportant?
Will they work with you on playlists for the final deployment?
Make sure their goals match your own.

The right partner will understand the importance of every detail and work with you to deliver an excellent result.

Be weary of anyone too eager to agree with every request or requirement. There are limits what is possible and those need to be addressed at the onset. There is no substitute for a synergistically deployed free standing system and the rules which apply to optimizing installed, or hybrid designs is the same. The limitations of space and budget routinely force secondary options. Those compromises must be selected carefully or the result will just be “background noise.”

