

# SOUNDWORK

## *Synthetic Rainforest: Listening to the Bloedel Conservatory*

---

GEORGE RAHI

The soundwork file is openly available online on the UBC Library Open Journal Systems website: <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/201395>.

**S***ynthetic Rainforest* is a soundscape recording made within the Bloedel Conservatory, a tropical plant and bird sanctuary built in 1969 in Vancouver, on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples. The recording foregrounds the uncanny sonic character of this artificial ecology, offering multiple vantage points within the glass dome during the early morning hours as the sun rises and the birds begin to sing. Yet this “dawn chorus” is not a natural phenomenon: it is human-induced. The various tropical bird species awaken not in synchrony with the external rhythms of sunrise, but with the routine schedules of the staff who enter the dome to feed them. The recording thus expresses a displaced and mediated temporality: an impossible dawn chorus in which bird species from disparate geographies and ecosystems sing together under the dome’s enclosure.

This sonic event mirrors the architectural logic of the conservatory itself: a microcosm of globalization, enclosure, and simulation. The dome’s geodesic structure, modeled after Buckminster Fuller’s utopian designs, functions as both an ecological experiment and a symbolic apparatus. It extends the modernist aspiration to recreate and stabilize “nature” through technology, climate control, and design.<sup>1</sup> Within this environment, sound indexes the multiple layers of artificiality: the continuous hum of ventilation systems, the refracted calls of birds against curved glass, the faint sounds of misting machines. Listening within the dome reveals not only an aestheticized tropical ecology but also the

---

<sup>1</sup> James Graham and Caitlin Blanchfield, eds., *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary* (Lars Müller, 2016).

infrastructures that sustain it through a choreography of maintenance and mediation.

While gardens and conservatories are often imagined and sensed as spaces of contemplation, refuge, and harmonious coexistence with the more-than-human world, they are also sites that embody (and camouflage) histories of extraction, displacement, and control. The funding provided to establish the Bloedel Conservatory makes this contradiction explicit. Funded by a donation from the MacMillan Bloedel Lumber Company (one of British Columbia's largest forestry corporations and a major agent of old-growth deforestation), the conservatory materializes a paradoxical ecology: a sanctuary for exotic lifeforms made possible by the decimation of local forests and habitats. The tropical species cultivated within its climate-controlled environment recall not only Vancouver's settler colonial history but also its rebranding in the late twentieth century as a cosmopolitan city, oriented toward global flows of trade, culture, and capital.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the conservatory operates as what Peter Sloterdijk describes as a prototype of enclosure through which modern societies have experimented with the climatic, botanical, and cultural conditions of planetary life.<sup>3</sup> Within such architectures, "wildness" is rendered manageable and domesticated into a sensory experience that is accessible within urban boundaries. The soundscape invites us to hear these processes through acoustic signals – its mechanical breath, its asynchronous birdsong, its resonant enclosure – revealing the tensions between containment and vitality. To listen here is to attend to the infrastructures that sustain life under glass, and to sense the dissonance between global imaginaries of the tropical and the local histories of extraction that underpin them.

<sup>2</sup> David Ley, "A Regional Growth Ecology, a Great Wall of Capital and a Metropolitan Housing Market," *Urban Studies* 58, no. 2 (2021): 297–315, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098019895226>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology* (Semiotext(e), 2016).