



Dozens of speakers take visitors' ears for a walk.

Sound garden

An absorbing auditory journey awaits at San Francisco's Audium.

Strolling through San Francisco's Cathedral Hill neighborhood, it would be easy to miss **Audium**. The wooden building, sandwiched between a dry cleaner and a coin laundry, isn't new or glamorous. But step inside and you'll feel like Alice in Wonderland, as everything grows curiously and curiously.

Audium, a "sound-space continuum," houses a planetarium-like room, filled with circles of chairs arrayed beneath a high ceiling. But you won't see any constellations here. In fact, you won't see anything: This is a show for the ears.

The sensory experience begins in the lobby, as sounds of gurgling water, tinkling bells, and squealing wheels resonate throughout the space. With a flicker, one angled wall becomes a movie screen: Forests, waves, and streetscapes dance across it, refracting like images in a kaleidoscope. Then, everyone files into the main room, the lights fade, and the real show begins.

In darkness, raindrops, drumbeats, and footsteps echo from the walls and floor. A train whistle rises to a cre-

scendo; a bass line wanders across the ceiling. Time disappears as sounds wash over, under, and around you. Then, after what could be a minute or an hour, trilling birds signal the reverie's end. The lights come up, and everyone sits silent, returning to reality.

As Stan Shaff, the composer behind Audium, tells it, this sci-fi soundscape—where recorded sounds play from 176 speakers—sprang from a simple idea: "What if a composer could write for the walls, ceiling, and floor?"

Back in 1960, Shaff and fellow musician Doug McEachern decided to find out, wiring speakers around Shaff's home and playing recordings through them. These experiments led the pair to open the original Audium in 1967, and Shaff's been performing at its intricate soundboard ever since.

This year, as Audium turns 50, the composer and his son are presenting their newest work, *Audium 10*, and planning to invite others into the space.

"We'd love to have musicians come play a live performance," Shaff says.

—megan mcCrea



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