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By ANDY BATTAGLIA



Snøhetta

The 'To a Great City' exhibit, shown in a rendering, will be installed in five locations including Governors Island, above.

Few settings would fail to be improved by the introduction of floating translucent orbs and music made by means of metaphysical tintinnabulation. Better still if those settings were scouted by architects on assignment to find New York's secret outposts of peace and calm.

Such is the scenario at the five sites selected for "To a Great City," an ambitious sound-installation project that pairs design work by the Norwegian architecture firm Snøhetta with music by the composer Arvo Pärt. The project, which will run for the next two weekends beginning Thursday, is part of "stillspotting nyc," a multidisciplinary series organized by the Guggenheim Museum.



The premise is simple: to consider the nature of silence and noise in a city where insights into either can be elusive. The presentation is more complex—but not too

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Snøhetta

A rendering of the installation in the Woolworth Building.

complex for balloons. Too often, said David van der Leer, the Guggenheim's assistant curator of architecture and urban studies who conceived "stillspotting nyc," exhibits on cities fixate on big numbers and data maps that need to be interpreted. "If you want to get people to think," he said, "you can also explore more poetic ways of doing so."

Part of the poetry of "To a Great City" will derive from clusters of weather balloons arranged in and around Lower Manhattan, creating a sense of space fit for stillness and contemplation. The minimalist design suits the other source of poetry: music written by Mr. Pärt, the classical composer whose alternately eerie and transcendent work addresses spiritual queries with questions and answers syncretized as one.

"There's something very personal and self-aware about his music that we liked," said

Vanessa Kassabian, the director of design at Snøhetta. "We thought about different kinds of spaces where you can be surprised when the city turns away and transforms into another kind of environment."

As part of a core team of three, Ms. Kassabian helped marshal a search that led to both airy and concrete urban settings, some of them well-trafficked, others more remote. One of the installations will be in an empty, unused floor of 7 World Trade Center. Another will be fitted within the verdant Labyrinth for Contemplation in Battery Park. A third will take over the grand lobby of the Woolworth Building. The remaining two will be above ground and below in gunpowder storage space at Fort Jay on Governors Island, where the city skyline can be seen to soar. (Ticket-holders for "To a Great City" will pick up their passes in Battery Park and be supplied with directions to sites they can visit at any point throughout the day.)



Snøhetta

A rendering shows one of the sound-accompanied installations planned for Fort Jay, on Governors Island.

"I was looking for good architects who understand space and music but also have an interesting relationship to New York," Mr. van der Leer said of choosing Snøhetta, which set up an office in the city after winning the commission for the National September 11 Memorial and Museum. Snøhetta's idea to use floating balloons embodied his idea for the project: "They create space but also ignore space. In a way, that's also what music does."

Indeed, music by Mr. Pärt has a habit of insinuating itself into empty places and exercising different states of mind. Work of

his from the past few decades—including a movement from "Tabula Rasa," an orchestral piece from 1977, and "Hymn to a Great City," a more recent piece for two pianos that lent the event its name—will be played on speakers arranged at each site or, in two cases, through headphones. "In spaces with headphones, you can be alone together [with other participants]," Ms. Kassabian said.

Collaboration with Mr. Pärt, who lives in Estonia and travels infrequently at 76, was undertaken by written correspondence and phone conversations. The composer is famous for his concept of "tintinnabuli"—a compositional practice involving single-chord inversions and inspired by bells—as well as his controlled quietude.

"I remember a discussion about the consequences of using a single tone in music," said Craig Dykers, a senior partner and director of Snøhetta in New York. "With two tones you measure the space between, but a single tone cannot really create space. There are portions of his music where a single tone becomes very apparent. In architecture, they say space doesn't exist unless you have mass to frame it. We were intrigued to try to define space without creating a framework or a border."

But architects' talk of space only gets to part of the intended effect. "What we're trying to get

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at in this project," explained Mr. van der Leer, "is not only to deal with actual issues with noise and sound, but to try to find a quiet moment every once in a while. We should celebrate stillness a little bit more."

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