

The Mystery of the Whistling Building



In the fall of 2012, the government of New York City started getting strange complaints from people who lived on a small part of Staten Island. People who lived in the South Beach neighborhood said that, when it was windy, they could hear a noise that sounded something like whistling. No one knew where the sound was coming from. The noise had never been around before, but it had started suddenly and was often very loud. When the wind was blowing hard at night, the whistling was especially loud. Those times, some people even had trouble sleeping.

People described the spooky noise in many different ways. One person told a local newspaper that it sounded like “100,000 people with unlimited air in their lungs blowing through Coke bottles.” Others said it was more like the sound a UFO in a movie makes when it lands. The noise was not always the same. It would get louder and softer depending on the wind. Sometimes it would sound higher, and sometimes it would sound lower. Every so often, more than one note would play at the same time. To many people, it sounded like a giant musical instrument. The sound could be heard more than a mile away.

It turns out that the whistling was caused by a building. That building was the Ocean Breeze Athletic Center, an indoor running track. It was in the middle of construction when the noise first started. The construction workers had just finished building the giant metal frame for the building. Because the building was next to the water, it got a lot of wind that blew in from the ocean. Some of this wind blew through parts of the building called “acoustic baffles.” Funnily enough, these acoustic baffles were made to lower the noise coming from inside the building. However, when wind blew through the acoustic baffles, they made a whistling sound. This was the noise the locals were hearing.

The athletic center was not the first building in New York City to make a whistling noise. In the late 1980s, a skyscraper in the city also made whistling noises. Whistling happens when a stream of air moves through a small hole. The kind of whistling sound that is made depends on the size and shape of the hole. The whistling skyscraper had parts on the exterior (the outer part of the building) with small holes. The wind could pass through those exterior holes. This was how the whistling noise was created.

When people in the New York City government figured out that the athletic center was causing the annoying noise, they quickly apologized to the people of South Beach, Staten Island. They had not known that the building would make a whistling sound. They promised that the problem would be quickly fixed when the building was finished and the acoustic baffles were out of the wind. They thought that the roof would be finished in November and the exterior would be finished in December.

Unfortunately for the people who had heard the noise, the building was not finished on schedule. A few weeks later, the huge storm Hurricane Sandy hit New York City. Much of Staten Island was flooded. Construction workers that had been building other buildings before the storm were sent to help with the cleanup. The site of the Ocean Breeze Athletic Center was also flooded during the storm. Both of these things pushed back the construction of the athletic center by many months. And the people of South Beach had to put up with the noise for all that time.

One afternoon in December of 2012, a reporter went out to see the building and listen to the noise. He brought with him a musical composer. A composer is a person who writes music. This composer made modern music. Modern music often uses many different types of sounds, not just the instruments of a normal orchestra. The composer brought a large machine with him to record the whistling noise. He set it up 100 yards from the building. The wind was blowing, and the building was whistling loudly. For a long time, the reporter and the musical composer listened to the building. Finally, the composer reached over and turned off the recording machine.

“That was beautiful,” he said. “The building was like a giant organ.”

As the reporter and the composer were walking back to their car, they saw a special hospital near the whistling building. This hospital was a place where people with mental illness could get treatment. The two of them got curious. What would the people with mental illness think of the noise? They walked over to the hospital to find out. They walked in and asked the person at the front desk what the people in the hospital thought of the whistling.

“Some of them hate it, but some of them love it,” she said. “There’s one man who’s been here six months. He was ill-tempered, angry with everyone, until that whistling started. Now he’s pleasant as can be. I don’t know what that is. It soothes him, I suppose.”

As of August 2014, construction of the athletic center was almost finished. The building stopped whistling. However, the sound it made had been saved on several recordings. And the musical composer was thinking of turning the whistling into a new song.