

# The Mystery of the Whistling Building



In the fall of 2012, the government of New York City began receiving unusual complaints from the residents of a small strip of land in the borough of Staten Island. People who lived around a section of Father Capodanno Boulevard, in the South Beach neighborhood, claimed that, when the wind was up, they could hear a noise that sounded something like whistling. Where the sound came from was a big mystery. The noise had never been around before, but it had suddenly appeared and was often very loud. When the wind was blowing

especially hard at night, some residents even had difficulty sleeping.

Residents had many descriptions for the noise, which was decidedly eerie. One resident told a local paper, *The Staten Island Advance*, 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 makes in a movie when it lands. The noise was not consistent. It would get louder and softer depending on the wind. Sometimes, it would change pitch. Every so often, more than one note would play at the same time. To many residents, it sounded like a giant musical instrument. The sound could be heard more than a mile away.

The whistling, it turns out, was caused by a building. The Ocean Breeze Athletic Center, an indoor running track, was in the middle of construction when the noise first started. The construction crew had just finished assembling the giant metal skeleton that would form the building’s frame. Because the building was next to the water, it got a lot of wind that blew off of the Atlantic Ocean. Some of this wind blew through parts of the building called “acoustic baffles”—devices designed, ironically, to reduce sound produced inside the center. However, when the baffles were exposed to wind, they made a whistling sound. This was the noise the locals were hearing.

The athletic center was not the first building in New York to make a whistling noise. In the late 1980s, another building in the Midtown neighborhood of Manhattan also produced whistling noises. Whistling happens when a stream of air moves through a small hole. The kind of whistling sound produced depends on the size and shape of the hole. The skyscrapers in Midtown had architectural features on their exteriors which contained small holes that wind could pass through. This was how the noise was produced.

When they figured out what was wrong, the New York City government, which was responsible for building the athletic center, quickly apologized to the residents of South Beach, Staten Island, for the annoying noise. They had not expected that the building would produce a whistling sound, and promised the problem would be quickly fixed when the building was completed and the acoustic baffles were protected from the wind.

“We sincerely regret any annoyance the wind noise may be causing for residents of the area,” the city told residents in a written statement. “We expect to complete the roof by mid-November and the exterior shell by early December.”

However, this estimate was, unfortunately for the people who had heard the noise, not correct. A few weeks later, Hurricane Sandy hit New York City. Much of Staten Island was flooded. Construction crews that had been building other buildings before the storm were dispatched to help with the cleanup. The site of the arena was also briefly flooded during the storm. Both of these factors delayed construction of the arena by several months, leaving the poor residents of South Beach to put up with the noise for all that time.

One afternoon in December of 2012, a reporter went out to see the arena and listen to the noise. He brought with him a musical composer. The composer made modern music—music that often uses many different types of sounds, not just the instruments of a traditional orchestra. He brought a large recording device with him, which he set 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 device.

“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 noticed that a psychiatric hospital—a place where people with mental disorders can get treatment—was located just a few blocks from the building. The two of them got curious and walked over to the hospital. What would the people with mental disorders think of the noise? They walked into the building and asked the receptionist what the patients 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 at 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 nearing completion. The building stopped whistling. However, the sound it made had been preserved on several recordings. The musical composer was thinking of turning the whistling into a new song.