**MOVING FROM LANDSCAPES
TO CITYSCAPES AND BACK:
THEORETICAL AND APPLIED APPROACHES
TO HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS**

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MOVING FROM LANDSCAPES TO CITYSCAPES AND BACK: THEORETICAL AND APPLIED APPROACHES TO HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS

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An Intergenerational Approach to Urban Futures: Introducing the Concept of Aesthetic Sustainability

Introduction

The experienced quality of urban environments has not traditionally been at the forefront of understanding how cities evolve through time. Within the humanistic tradition, the temporal dimension of cities has been dealt with through tracing urban or architectural histories or interpreting science--fiction scenarios, for example. However, attempts at understanding the relation between currently existing components of cities and planning based on them, towards the future, has not captured the experience of the temporal layers of cities to a satisfying degree. Contemporary urban environments comprise both lasting and fairly stable elements as well as those that change continuously: change is an inevitable part of urban life. Different aspects of city life evolve with a different tempo: urban nature has its cycles, inhabitants their rhythms, and building materials and styles different lifespans, for example. Recognizing them becomes an especially important issue when future imaginaries are projected onto existing urban structures and when decisions about the details of urban futures are made.

This paper aims at bringing environmental and urban aesthetics into the discussion about the possible directions of urban futures. The focus is on introducing the notion of *aesthetic sustainability* as a tool to better understand

how urban futures unfold experientially and how aesthetic values of urban environments develop with time. This concept has some background in the field of design theory, more specifically in sustainable usage and product design[1], but it has not so far been used in order to study large scale living environments. The concept can prove to be a valuable supporting tool in urban sustainability transformations based on how it captures the experiential side of the physical and temporal dimensions of cities.

Framework

Interest in the aesthetics of urban environments has been growing in importance since the 1960s, at the same time as the environmental turn in philosophical aesthetics and an overall humanistic turn in urban studies were taking place.[2] Environmental aesthetics is focused on studying the human-environmental relationship, especially how the environment appears to and is thus perceived and conceived of by human beings. Urban aesthetics deals with applying these approaches to urban environments, but from the start it has been clear that urban environments are not strictly antithetical to nature, even though this opposition has been somewhat strengthened by the division between the aesthetics of natural and urban environments. Besides the theoretical level, urban aesthetics can be understood to consist of practices, policies, and tacit knowledge about urban environments. Urban aesthetics has been increasingly developed since the 1990s to form a central framework for assessing how the urban lifeworld is processed in human experience.

Aesthetic experiences, as subjective and difficult to define as they might seem, nonetheless give us plenty of non-verbalized information that is of value when designing future environments. Understanding our relation to environment through the notion of aesthetic engagement, as has been presented most notably by Arnold Berleant, has brought emphasis of multisensory experiences and engagement to the forefront of environmental aesthetics.[3]

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1 K.H. Harper, *Aesthetic Sustainability: Product Design and Sustainable Usage*, Routledge, London – New York 2017.

2 *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, ed. by A. Berleant, A. Carlson, Broadview Press, Peterborough 2007; J. Portugali, *Complexity, Cognition and the City*, Springer, Berlin 2011.

3 A. Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: the Transformation of the Human World*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2010.

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This is especially important when considering built environments, since it is in this context that human beings are actively engaging not only in planning and building but, most importantly, in using and inhabiting the environments. Moving from environmental aesthetics to a more specific area of urban aesthetics requires some new, sharper definitions to be made: the aesthetico-ethical concern of environmental aesthetics needs to be directed to the study of the entire urban lifeform.

There can be distinguished a so-called *macro perspective* of urban aesthetics, that concerns the look of a city, its specific architectural features, and the overall image that is typical to it. Cities such as Paris, New York, or Rio de Janeiro are defined by their world-renowned monuments but also by their overall look, which is determined by the style of their buildings, the configuration of their infrastructure, and other forms that lived life has taken in them. Processes that affect how these types of cities are built most likely unfold over a relatively long period of time. On the other hand, fully intentional cities can have a strong overall look, which is more determined by a centralized vision. Besides these types of cities, there exist many other types, and it seems fair to say that cities have (or they often strive to acquire) some notable features that reach some level of recognizability in order to build or strengthen an aesthetic identity. It is possible to study these types of phenomena through identifying a macro-perspective in the study of urban aesthetics.

Another level of urban aesthetics, termed the *micro perspective* here, is also recognizable, and it concerns the more detailed experiential quality of urban life. This basal undertone of everyday life is born mostly out of familiarity, individually changing and shared factors, and how they condition everyday engagement with the environment. Urban environments also provide their inhabitants with less intangible benefits. In the field of environmental aesthetics, it is commonly thought that positive aesthetic values embedded in the urban environment contribute to the well-being of a city's inhabitants. Various interpretations and definitions of well-being or human flourishing have been of interest lately within different branches of philosophy. However, in the context of sustainability, well-being is still understood quite narrowly and mainly in economic terms.[4]

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4 T. Helne, T. Hirvilammi, *Wellbeing and Sustainability: a Relational Approach*, "Sustainable Development," vol. 23, 2015, no. 3, p. 167–175.

What is aesthetic sustainability?

Aesthetic sustainability as a concept comprises two parts: "sustainability" referring at first glance to the ability of a system to maintain balance, on a temporal scale thus referring to some type of overarching longevity and durability. The first part of the concept, "aesthetic," sets the boundary for what type of sustainability is of interest. The aesthetic is defined in this context to concern the sphere of perception and evaluative judgment therein. The concept has been used occasionally within the past 10 years, but with only partially plausible definitions as a result.[5]

Danish design theorist Kristine H. Harper defines aesthetic sustainability in *Aesthetic Sustainability: Product Design and Sustainable Usage* from the perspective of product design. Aesthetic sustainability is equated to durability to a great extent: for Harper, the definition of aesthetic sustainability is linked to how *time* is worked into an object.[6] In the case of cities, aesthetic sustainability can also describe how time is worked into the system in an experientially sustainable way. Harper pronounces explicitly that those objects that appear to be ageless in their design manage to raise interest, attention, and an inclination to take care of them. Those objects that make us care for them have thus also proved to be aesthetically sustainable: we have grown fond of them. Repairing, mending, or modifying are active forms of caretaking. Objects and artefacts carry emotional value that is aligned with their sensory properties. There seems to be something immediately easy to grasp in the idea of aesthetic sustainability. However, there are some notable differences when applying the concept to urban environments: how are cities to be considered aesthetic in a sustainable sense?

Short-term and long-term trends in architecture are easily condemned as being antithetical to aesthetic sustainability. With a change in taste, trend-based approach is feared to lead to buildings being deemed old-fashioned and outdated. However, it is also a well-attested fact that many of these trends gain new admiration with the passing of time. For example, lately, the concrete buildings of the latter part of the 20th century have gained increased

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5   N.S. Lowe, *Aesthetic Sustainability: the Fourth Bottom Line Orienting Sustainable Building and Development*, Empire Advertising and Design, Houston 2010; Harper, *Aesthetic Sustainability*.

6   Ibidem.

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attention and a solid fan base under the name of "brutalist architecture." This type of phenomenon makes even the traditional notion of the "test of time" tricky, since there are fluctuations in what is generally considered aesthetically appealing or even acceptable. Cultural differences and taking local cultures into account are considered important aspects of cultural sustainability, which is in some cases (though, importantly, not always) parallel with aesthetic sustainability.

Traditional aesthetic concepts related to nature include beauty, harmony, order, and balance.[7] It seems that these traditional concepts are not necessarily fit to describe urban aesthetic experiences: a new path is needed to take into account complexity both in the environment as well as in the experience itself. Aesthetic sustainability as a concept is better equipped to take into consideration the variety of tastes and uses of anyone involved with an environment. Aesthetic diversity becomes thus one central value, even when resulting in chaos or complexity on a level that has previously been considered unappealing.[8] Change in aesthetic values can take place when the ecological sustainability of certain "messy" urban development solutions is understood.[9] As a result, the prevailing taste of an epoch is nudged towards preferring something that was previously uninteresting or even unappealing.

Intergenerational perspective
How cities evolve with time is crucial for understanding how to steer their development towards the future. If we are to bring into focus the human experiential sphere and preferences, this temporality has to be unfolded also on the level of aesthetic judgment and preferences: "Just as the rest of environmental discussion takes note that actions, objects and organisms exist in large, even global networks, so should aesthetics."[10] Besides geographical networks, our focus should include temporal relations: the aesthetic factors that unfold with

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7   A. Carlson, *Appreciation and the Natural Environment*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism," vol. 37, 1979, no. 3, p. 267–275.
8   P. von Bonsdorff, *Urban Richness and the Art of Building*, in: *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, p. 66–78.
9   M. Chalana, J. Hou, *Messy Urbanism: Understanding the "Other" Cities of Asia*, Hongkong University Press, Hongkong 2016.
10 O. Naukkarinen, *Aesthetic Footprint*, "Aesthetic Pathways," vol. 2, 2011, no. 1, p. 89–111.

time. Aesthetic sustainability as a concept makes visible the temporal endurance of that which is considered to be aesthetically significant.

The theme of responsibility towards future generations is growing in importance in environmental philosophy and environmental ethics more specifically.[11] This is due to the nature of the wicked problems and the environmental crisis the world is facing on an unprecedented scale. The ideas about intergenerational ethics presented here are based on Christopher Groves's recent writings, especially in *Care, Uncertainty and Intergenerational Ethics*.[12] Groves proposes developing intergenerational ethics with more focus on the notion of "care". It becomes an especially important theme when dealing increasingly with uncertainties and responsibilities that cannot be avoided when thinking about the possible future. Groves promotes an idea of futurity that goes against the general ethos of seeing the future mainly as a field of uncertainties that have to be tackled by various management efforts that often prove to be extremely difficult or even futile. "Taming" the future in this sense is never possible. On the other hand, Groves also resists the idea of understanding the future deterministically: we still retain possibilities to affect what will happen. He offers an interpretation of our relation to the future that better takes into account the shared imaginaries that define to a large extent what is normal, desirable, possible, or even knowable at a certain moment in time. This type of view makes clearer the currently underlying assumptions and "implicit ordering of relations between present and future".[13]

Through the notion of *intergenerationality* we can approach the longer timespans of some aesthetic values. The theme of responsibility towards future generations is at least implicitly already present in all urban planning however little it gets articulated in each stage of the decision-making process. Approaching the sustainability of built environments with an emphasis on aesthetics, experience, and futurity explicates a side of the human relation with the humanmade material world that is usually obscured by practices,

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11 J. Nolt, *Future Generations in Environmental Ethics*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, ed. by S.M. Gardiner, A. Thompson, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016.

12 C.C. Groves, *Care, Uncertainty and Intergenerational Ethics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2014.

13 Ibidem.

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concerns, and policies for *the most immediate future*. For Harper, the process by which "designers can work *time* into an object" deals with temporality mainly as a design issue, which is solvable if only acknowledged and skillfully mastered.[14] The temporal scale of urban environments is particularly interesting, since the relation between the old and the new elements in a city is more complex: the ratio between already existing and new structures is not fixed but instead brings forward important questions about how and when change is effectuated and what the experiential repercussions of this change are.

Fostering aesthetic sustainability in urban transformations
Yuriko Saito lists "care" and "sensitive attitude" as constituents of the sustainable design strategy that she calls "green aesthetics." Saito states that this type of approach to aesthetics that is guided by environmental values is applicable to artefacts as well as to nature or natural environments.[15] This idea of design links ecological and environmental care and attunement as its core values directly to not only passively appreciating but cultivating and developing aesthetic preferences. As an example, the conscious relation of a designer to the materials in use covers knowledge about their origin, usability, and maintainability. Investing in knowledge about the processes that are used in acquiring building materials, for example, can embody this type of caring and sensitive attitude in the context of the built environment. Green aesthetics also translates into the experience of the user: it is not merely a design concept. Through the notion of green aesthetics, Saito opens up the possibility of "nudging" (borrowing a concept from behavioral economics)[16] people's aesthetic preferences towards more ecologically sustainable design solutions: we start finding something aesthetically pleasing gradually, when we know that it is ethically produced, for example. This presents one route to how trends and tastes change.

What is valued personally is more likely to be protected and cared for. The notion of care moves towards the subjective realm, to those instances of

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14   Harper, *Aesthetic Sustainability*.
15   Y. Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2007.
16   R. Thaler, C. Sunstein, *Nudge – Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2008.

value that can be traced to the simplest everyday activities and encounters. Care denotes a feeling of affection. Groves speculates that the human sense of care grows from the deep experiences of attachment in early and vital developmental phases in the life of a human being.[17] Cities form a large part of our more or less – involuntarily inherited legacy, which previous generations have built according to their predictions about the future. Similarly, our generations are bound to leave traces of our existence in the form of cities. Caring for places is one way to approach how futures become tangible from the perspective of the present.

The futures of cities are always imagined first. These imaginings are based on current knowledge and understanding of possibilities and limitations. Prevailing aesthetic values are one central ingredient: we are more likely to project into the future what we deem valuable at this very moment. The intergenerational perspective adheres to the fact that there is an unavoidable power asymmetry between generations: there is no real reciprocity simply because of how time works. The people of the future will not know of the intentions and the logic behind the thinking done today, except from deducing something from the traces. However, they will live with the remnants of previous generations' activity. Intergenerational ethics expresses an interest in understanding the future generations' perspective, even though it admits the fundamental impossibility of this task. Even so, any attempt to better acknowledge this spatiotemporal separation between generations sheds light onto how estimations about future preferences take place.

Renovation, refurbishment, and modification of already existing buildings is the core activity of sustainable development in most existing cities. The annual building renewal rate, even in fast-developing places such as Singapore, is no more than 3%. Taking into consideration all of the activity that is necessary to develop and maintain built environments makes the care--based approach more complex. Continuously ongoing maintenance work, for example, requires making decisions that have aesthetic consequences. These small decisions are often perceived as insignificant, but they accumulate and lead to unexpected changes within the experiential sphere. This kind of ongoing aesthetic deliberation should be better acknowledged because

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17 Groves, *Care, Uncertainty and Intergenerational Ethics.*

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of the cumulative nature of its results. The amalgamation of consequences from different layers of changes makes the aesthetic sphere of the built environment difficult to control. But this is also what can potentially lead to aesthetically positive, dense and diverse environments.

Conclusions

This paper outlines how aesthetic sustainability could be defined in the context of urban environments. The concept makes explicit many less discussed values in the use and evaluation of urban environments. Focusing on the concept of aesthetic sustainability reveals a blind spot in understanding how human experience is linked to values and preferences in how to manage and take care of an urban environment. Aesthetic preferences become visible in architectural trends but increasingly also in how everyday urban practices are understood to unfold in future everyday environments.

Aesthetic sustainability has been introduced here as a concept to be used in urban aesthetics. It could be further developed into a tool of assessment that could support the overall agenda of more general sustainability criteria but by focusing on the experience of urban environments. Aesthetic values are often a blind spot when considering how decisions about the future are made: the notion of aesthetic sustainability offers an alternative way of contemplating the repercussions of the choices made today.