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## ROUND TABLE 11

### URBAN AESTHETICS IN MOTION

**Abstract** | Aesthetic considerations play a major role in all fields of urban planning, though most often, the nature and role of aesthetic values are not explicitly stated. Most parties – planners, architects, urban residents – take the aesthetic for granted, often relying on a set of tacit preconceptions. Moreover, there seems to be an operative consensus about what is generally regarded as an aesthetically satisfactory environment, and one may easily assume that there is no need to go into deeper analyses. In particular, the role of movement in constituting the aesthetic quality of human environments has been widely neglected both in urban planning and in the experience of urban dwellers.

However, aesthetic considerations are vital for the living quality and well-being of humans, not only in that everybody prefers an aesthetically pleasing environment, but also in that these preferences, and aesthetic experience broadly, have far reaching implications on social, health, and ecological issues. In this paper we explore the complexities urban aesthetics from various points of view.

**Index terms** | Environmental Aesthetics; Everyday Aesthetics; Legibility; Mobility; Urban Aesthetics; Urban Experience; Urban Complexity

### VARIETIES OF THE AESTHETIC IN URBAN CONTEXTS

One of the central aims of this paper is to analyze the most salient meanings of the “aesthetic” and to develop conceptual tools for an improved understanding of the relevance and role of aesthetic values in the everyday lives of urban citizens as well as in planning processes, especially in relation to mobility possibilities. Contrary to standard engineering perspectives, we argue that human mobility should not be considered only under the assumption that the major or even the sole aim for planners is to minimize travel time. We emphasize the human perspective and the experiential character of cities.

There is a controversy and a confusion at the very heart of the discipline of Aesthetics – is there something that can be called “the aesthetic,” and if so, how to define it? There are a number of classic approaches and solutions to this issue, referring, for example, to the notions of taste, aesthetic attitude, aesthetic experience, aesthetic qualities and aesthetic concepts. The scope of the “aesthetic culture” is vast encompassing just about all possible artefacts, natural objects and scenes, as well as urban environments. We will give a broad outline of the scope of the aesthetic. Urban settings give a possibility to experience the whole variety of the aesthetic. In parks, for example, there are aspects that raise immediate sensory pleasures, whereas architectural constructs require historical and theoretical knowledge, sometimes even intellectual pondering until the aesthetic is captured. Both “surface aesthetic” and “deep aesthetic” are involved. An

everyday leisurely walk in an urban environment provides aesthetic pleasure of its own kind – aesthetic of the everyday, is yet another modification of the aesthetic. All these three varieties of the aesthetic have a role in the urban experience.

Besides the notion of the “aesthetic,” “imagination” has been widely used as an explanatory concept in Aesthetics. It goes without saying that the concept of the aesthetic should have a prominent role in every aesthetician’s toolbox, but also imagination has clearly a role in the arts, perhaps even more broadly in all aesthetic phenomena. The aesthetic and imagination are, indeed, closely connected. When something – whether fictional or real – is imagined, it quite often, although not necessarily, gains the status of being an object of aesthetic consideration – an aesthetic object. There is broad enough a notion of imagination which is useful also when trying to understand the varieties of the aesthetic. Edward Casey’s phenomenological analysis is helpful here.

According to Casey, there is a certain kind of attitude we can adopt to things and states of affairs, regardless of whether they are real or not: imagination is a human capacity to entertain something in our minds. The stance is to posit whatever is the object as a pure possibility, “as *sheer supposition*: a supposing that is free from either overt or covert connection with what is actual.”<sup>1</sup> This stance can be extended to purely abstract and non-representational matters: we can entertain in imagination also visual forms and sound patterns. By this extension the notion of the aesthetic has also gained content. Urban environments and moving in them, offer a great variety of possibilities for this kind of entertaining. Although this kind of “sheer supposition” is most easily conceived when talking about the surface aesthetic, it is crucial also in cases in which the objects of our perception are conceptually defined. Entertaining the formal patterns of a Gothic or Neoclassical architecture requires historic knowledge of what is relevant in these styles. Entertaining forms and patterns is not, however, restricted to artefacts – very often the most powerful imaginings occur in nature. Walking in a wintery forest and seeing pines and spruces heavy with snow forming many kinds of forms and shades of green, white and grey. Or we can entertain the different shades of green of an urban park in the spring.

The faculty of imagination helps us to understand the nature of the aesthetic. However, there is, at least, one variety of the aesthetic that requires a different analysis – the notion of the everyday aesthetic which probably is the most common when talking about urban environments and movement. In everyday aesthetics, we are dealing with phenomena that are, most often, in the background. They do not raise in the level conscious entertainment. Rather, they form the solid bedrock of our conscious activities by simply being there, by giving constancy and reliability to our everyday activities.

If we accept the relevance of everyday aesthetics – as we think we should – the consequence is that it is just as futile to try to capture the varieties of the aesthetic under of single definition as it is to try to define all the arts by referring to a formal feature or to the contents of works of art. But this is not a loss to philosophical aesthetics, rather the opposite: we are dealing with a fascinatingly complex phenomenon.

## LEGIBILITY AS AN AESTHETIC ATTRIBUTE IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

For a pedestrian, the legibility of an urban environment is a functional attribute of central significance. It is impossible for one to move and find one's way in the city, if one cannot "read" – i.e. perceive and interpret – the surroundings correctly. Besides this, the question of legibility has notable aesthetic relevance, though the relationship between legibility and aesthetic quality is multifaceted and ambivalent. On the one hand, easily comprehensible urban environment may be satisfying in its rationality, but also monotonous and dull; on the other, complicated and complex cities may be chaotic and frustrating, but also fascinating in their originality.

In order to fully understand the aesthetic relevance of legibility-related issues in urban environments, a conceptual clarification is needed, as the notion "legibility" is used ambiguously, and it may refer to multiple interrelated yet distinct phenomena. First of all, it is usually not acknowledged well enough that legibility is necessarily legibility *for someone*: there always is *an experiencer*, whose relationship to the particular environment and experiential background in more general have a central role in assessing whether an environment is legible or not. Despite the apparent significance of personal experiential history, the questions of legibility are not a matter of mere idiosyncrasy. Hence, instead of assessing the legibility from the perspective of a single person, it is reasonable to make use of reference groups, manifesting different *types* of relationships to the particular urban surroundings.

In practice, however, even though various user groups are often identified, and the differences in their relation to the urban surroundings are acknowledged to a certain degree, the potential variation concerning the notion legibility *itself* is not properly addressed. "Legible environment" is thus supposed to mean by and large the same for the members of the different user groups, even though their environmental experiences are likely to comprise a very heterogeneous and diverse entirety – not merely with regard to *content* of the experience, but also representing different *modes* of experience.

For example, in their analysis of legibility, King and de Jong categorize the users of an environment into three distinct groups: locals, regulars and visitors.<sup>ii</sup> According to them, locals "are very familiar with how to get around and rely mostly on landmarks", whereas regulars "are quite familiar with their route, [and thus] do not necessarily need maps, signs, or local information". For the visitors, the local environment and its idiosyncrasies seem more or less "foreign".

Such a fundamental categorization is surely helpful to some extent, but it does not shed light on the *dynamism* inherent in our environmental relationship, and it remains unclear what happens *experientially* when we become acquainted with an environment. To be more specific: *how* does the regulars' experience change in the course of time so that they do not have to (anymore) rely on maps and signs, and *why* locals can move around on the basis of mere landmarks?

It seems that we have here two distinct *modes* of knowing one's environment: one based on propositional or declarative representations and mental images, and another based on procedural skills and habitual practices. These modes correspond effectively to knowledge *about* (navigating) a route, and knowledge of *how* to navigate the route.<sup>iii</sup> Legibility, in turn, is usually addressed merely in light of the former, emphasizing the abstract structural and visual dimensions of the urban surroundings and thus privileging the perspective of a *stranger*. What legibility means in a *familiar* environment – whose

characteristics are “registered in one's muscles and bones” as Yi-Fu Tuan<sup>iv</sup> puts it – remains then largely unanswered.

Such a distortion has serious and detrimental implications for understanding the relationship between legibility and aesthetic issues. For example, in an analysis founded on a traditional Lynchian<sup>v</sup> notion of legibility understood as “imageability”, Nigel Taylor ends up defending aesthetic quality of an environment at the expense of legibility,<sup>vi</sup> whereas judged from a more holistic point of view, the overly sharp separation between legibility and aesthetic quality is ill-advised *from the very beginning*.

For ecologically-oriented environmental psychology, legibility forms one of the four main spatio-structural features behind the environmental preferences (i.e. the aesthetic appreciation of an environment),<sup>vii</sup> implying that we tend to *prefer* surroundings that are knowable – in the *both* senses of knowing. How, exactly, the legibility-related preferences may manifest themselves in a variety of either familiar or strange<sup>viii</sup> urban environments *experientially* is, however, a topic for further examination that falls under the scope of philosophical aesthetics.

## AESTHETIC APPROACH TO EXPERIENCING URBAN COMPLEXITY

Urban lifeform in itself is undoubtedly one of the main characterising features of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Urban environments have thus also become central territory for different types of contemporary debates and controversies. These controversies range from the ecological to the social, from the technological to the political but most of them have some types of direct or indirect aesthetic consequences that affect the everyday life of people living in cities. Following the paths these controversies open more closely will elucidate what are the unique approaches that philosophical aesthetics can provide to studying contemporary cities and understanding the conditions they provide for human life.

Urban aesthetics is still often defined as the study of urban forms of art. This narrow definition stems from the tradition of aesthetics focusing solely on philosophy of art. Instead, aesthetics offers a wider opportunity to understand the human experience in and of the urban environment. Urban aesthetics points towards understanding how the urban lifeworld takes place, how it is shaped and how it shapes us. It is thus of interest, what form and shape things, planned and unplanned, in the urban sphere take, and how they become perceived and acknowledged. Recent advances in urban aesthetics have had focus on the meaning of place, mobility related aesthetic experiences, and the role of familiarity and strangeness in urban everyday life. Also qualities such as fluency and usability or notions such as atmosphere and the tourist gaze exemplify some of the central concepts that comprise the study of urban aesthetics.

If conceptualizing the lived quality of urban environments is stated to be the aim of urban aesthetics, some of the traditional accounts regarding what a city could or should look and feel like are in dire need of an update. Emphasis on moderate amount of aesthetic diversity, harmony, or traditional notions of beauty, for example, might not be fit to describe the aesthetic ideals of cities that aspire to high-level sustainability, efficiency, and livability. Cities have proven to be “emergent, far from equilibrium, requiring enormous energies to maintain themselves, displaying patterns of inequality spawned through agglomeration and intense competition for space, and saturated flow systems that use capacity in what appear to be barely sustainable but paradoxically resilient networks”<sup>ix</sup>. In contemporary megalopolises

of both Northern and Southern hemisphere aspects such as chaos, conflict or complexity are present also on the level of the urban experience and by no means necessarily in an inherently negative way.

Focusing on the form and characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cities, it is obvious that the forms that urban life is taking all over the planet is challenging the traditional aesthetic norms attached to city life. The inadequacy of traditional aesthetic notions in describing urban experiences is also symptomatic of a more general shift in describing the contemporary experience: also within the sphere of art new types of qualities such as interesting, cool, or cute has to some extent replaced more traditional aesthetic qualities<sup>x</sup>. Without taking this into consideration, there is a strong risk of universalising a certain form of the city as the ideal and not paying enough attention to the new aesthetics of cities. An example of this is the notion of “messy urbanism”, an umbrella term for “understanding the ‘other’ cities of Asia”<sup>xi</sup>. Another example is related to how the bottom-up urban development strategies in cases such as Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, for example, are feeding mainstream aesthetics.

The fast changing, postindustrial, and self-organizing megalopolis as a paradigmatically complex system might be to some extent understood through the notion of *the sublime*. This is exemplified, for example, in how perceptually acquired information about the limits of the city is not necessary for our understanding of the city, since we *know* that the city continues beyond our perceptual capabilities. This knowledge and the very borderlessness of the megalopolis itself are a source of pleasure that colours the aesthetic engagement with the city. Collective experience, immersion, *scale* that surpasses the human perceptive capacities, and *modes of organization* that surpass the individual human cognitive capacities are in the focus of this approach to urban aesthetics. In contemporary and rapidly changing megalopolises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the functioning mechanisms of enormous systems becomes visible in glimpses to the experiencers defined as *users* of the city, no longer categorizable merely as either tourists or inhabitants.

## BIOGRAPHIES

Arto Haapala received his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London. He has been Professor of Aesthetics at the Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, University of Helsinki since 1995. He has been a visiting Professor at Temple University, Philadelphia, Lancaster University, UK, University of Murcia, Spain, and University of Málaga, Spain. He has done research in different problems in aesthetics, particularly in ontology and interpretation, as well as in environmental aesthetics and Martin Heidegger's philosophy. His most recent interests are in the aesthetics of the everyday environment. His publications include *What Is a Work of Literature?* (1988), *The End of Art and Beyond* (ed. with Jerrold Levinson and Veikko Rantala, 1997), *Interpretation and Its Boundaries* (ed. with Ossi Naukkarinen, 1999), *Aesthetic Experience and the Ethical Dimension: Essays on Moral Problems in Aesthetics* (ed. with Oiva Kuisma, 2003), and *Ympäristö, estetiikka ja hyvinvointi* (Environment, Aesthetics, and Well-Being, ed. with Kalle Puolakka and Tarja Rannisto 2015). In 2010 he founded a journal entitled *Aesthetic Pathways* together with Gerald Cipriani; in 2014 the journal was relaunched under the title *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*.

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Vesa Vihanninjoki's (MA in Aesthetics, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Helsinki) research deals with the questions of urban environment and urban planning from the viewpoint of humanistic environmental studies and environmental aesthetics. His PhD thesis aims at providing improved conditions and a more solid basis for achieving culturally and also aesthetically sustainable urban environment. Vihanninjoki is part of the Urban Aesthetics in Motion research group (UrAMo, University of Helsinki and Aalto University consortium project, <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/urban-aesthetics>). Anteceding his doctoral studies, Vihanninjoki worked as a researcher at the Environmental Policy Centre at the Finnish Environment Institute SYKE.

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