

## An Alternative to the Intentional-Historical Definition of Art

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AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

A B S T R A C T

The idea of environment as an all-inclusive context in which humans are wholly interdependent with natural forces and other organic and inorganic objects applies equally to urban environments. Introducing an aesthetic dimension into an ecological model is both illuminating and important, for the ecological concept of an all-inclusive, interdependent environmental system has its experiential analogue in aesthetic engagement.

Aesthetic engagement may be exemplified by the perceptual character of the various arts, and it can be the basis for creating an aesthetic ecology. It is a value that can be deliberately incorporated into the design of environmental experience, and it can serve as a guide in re-shaping and humanizing the urban landscape.

### KEY TERMS

aesthetic engagement, environment, cultural ecology, ecosystem, urbanization

#### 1. Ecology and its significance

Our understanding of ecology has gone through several stages, from its original biological meaning denoting the interdependency of biota in a particular environmental setting, to its extension as a concept about the relation of humans to their cultural environment. For many factors besides physical conditions affect this complex interrelationship, factors such as social, cultural, political, legal, and economic ones, and the study of human and cultural ecology has emerged to accommodate these. The special importance of an extended ecological standpoint lies in recognizing that humans do not stand outside nature, contemplating, using, and exploiting it. Humans are seen here as an integral part of the natural world and, as such, fully encompassed in an ecosystem, from a particular, local one ultimately to the planetary. This transformation has constituted a scientific revolution comparable in importance to the Copernican and similar to it, for an ecosystemic approach assigns humans no favored place in the terrestrial world, just as heliocentrism did in the celestial universe.

It has been difficult for this idea to gain acceptance: that environment is an all-inclusive context in which humans are wholly interdependent with natural forces and other organic and inorganic objects. It applies, moreover, not just to people living in rural environments, the number of whom continues to shrink rapidly; it applies equally to urban environments where most of the world's population lives.<sup>[1]</sup> This leads us, then, to the idea of an urban ecology, of the urban region as an ecosystem with the same kinds of interdependencies of objects and organisms, from the most simple to the most complex.

We are at a stage in cultural evolution when this ecological understanding finds itself in competition with pre-scientific, sometimes indeed neolithic world views, just as Copernican astronomical theory did and the Darwinian evolutionary theory still does in some benighted places. This is, indeed, at its heart a conceptual revolution, for if we carry an ecological understanding through to the very idea of environment, we find that we, as humans, are not only fully enclosed within an environmental complex but are an inseparable part of it. We must, therefore, think of environment, and of human life in particular, in vastly different ways from before.

Adopting an ecological model in biology implies universal scope, for no organism can be seen as independent of the system in which it functions. This applies to the dominant human organism as much as to any other. It brings forward the understanding of humans as natural beings in continuity with the rest of nature, a conception that received powerful support from Darwinian evolution and that gains corroboration and sophistication from ecological theory. It is but a short step along the route of human ecology to extend this model from biology to society and culture. We humans, perhaps more than any other species, survive and prosper through our social organization and cultural practices, which are integral parts of the human ecosystem, and the rich field of cultural ecology explores how social and cultural conditions affect human well-being and influence survival.

Cultural ecology thus denotes an all-embracing environmental context in which each of its elements, whether organic, inorganic, or social is interdependent as well as interrelated with the others, and which, by a pervasive reciprocity, contributes to an ongoing balance that promotes the well-being of the participating organisms.<sup>[2]</sup> This goes far beyond the individualistic and biologically unfounded paradigm of separate organisms competing with one another for survival. By identifying these contrasting patterns the individualistic and the ecological their striking differences emerge clearly and the models can be seen as occupying opposite conceptual poles.

## 2. Aesthetic ecology

The meaning of environment has thus changed dramatically. It can no longer be thought of as surroundings but more as a fluid medium, a kind of four-dimensional global fluid of varying densities and forms in which humans swim along with everything else. In order to function in such an environment we are thrown on our own capacities, and these capabilities rely strongly on perception. It is important to recognize that, from the standpoint of sense perception, we experience environment continuously and in continuity. Since the source and character of this experience lie in sense perception, it is a condition in which there are no sharp separations.

This condition is what Kant called "pure sensation," wholly unformed and grasped in "pure intuition,"<sup>[3]</sup> and William James described as "one great blooming, buzzing confusion."<sup>[4]</sup> It is where we can begin to detect the origin of the aesthetic, and the idea of aesthetic perception help us grasp more fully the experience of environment. For the aesthetic is distinguished by its thoroughgoing perceptual character, by the primacy of perception.<sup>[5]</sup>

Perception, however, is not pure sensation, for sensation is never pure. Pure sensation is more a concept than an experience, and as experience it seems to be a physiological event. Even then it is not exclusively a direct sensory

experience. Sensation is unavoidably colored by the perceptual process, a process that embodies gestalt qualities and habitual experience as well as sensation, and it is apprehended through the conceptual and emotional filters acquired inevitably in the socializing process. Perception, then, is not only surface but is every dimension of our sensory, our sensuous consciousness. When we experience environment in a manner that is fully aware of its perceptual richness and in which immediate, qualitative perception dominates, we are in an aesthetic realm. We can say, in fact, that environmental perception is originally aesthetic.

Not only is environmental perception fundamentally aesthetic but perception contributes significantly to our understanding of environment, especially the fact that environment is not fragmented. This means that all the factors and features of environmental experience, including those that humans contribute, are bound together in a continuity. If we do not stand outside of experience, objectifying and conceptualizing it, then we are able to recognize the initially undivided character of all experience. This is another way of approaching a central feature of aesthetic appreciation that I call, especially in the context of the appreciation of art and nature, 'aesthetic engagement.' Indeed, this same character of normative experience of artistic and natural beauty is found in all environmental experience, and our encounter with the arts can help us grasp a critical dimension of environment. What we learn from aesthetic appreciation can illuminate all environmental experience.

Relating cultural ecology to aesthetic considerations might seem fanciful, but the two are actually closely connected. 'Aesthetic' commonly refers to the value found in appreciating art, but in its fundamental, etymological meaning as perception by the senses, we can consider all experience fundamentally aesthetic. And as the direct and immediate experience of any contextual order is perceptual, the perceptual experience of environmental contextuality can be understood as aesthetic. Further, aesthetic appreciation, like every activity understood from the standpoint of cultural ecology, is reciprocal. Appreciation, moreover, is not only receptive; it is equally active, requiring an equal contribution from the appreciator of art or nature in discerning qualities, order, and structure and by adding meanings to that experience. In this respect, the appreciator, by an analogous activity, joins with the artist in bringing to fruition an experience of appreciation.

Understood in this way, aesthetic appreciation is as context-dependent as any other experience, perhaps more so, inasmuch as appreciative experience is intensely and continuously perceptual. Another way of stating this is to describe appreciative experience as perceptual engagement and, since it is determinedly aesthetic, as aesthetic engagement. Engaging aesthetically with an object of art, then, is an instance of ecology, of cultural ecology. Stating this conversely, going from the concept of an ecosystem, which is a cognitive idea, to its exemplification in aesthetic engagement, reflects the ecological model of perceptual experience. In the one case we go from ecology to experience, and in the other from perceptual experience to aesthetic engagement. We can summarize this by saying that *the ecological concept of an all-inclusive, interdependent environmental system has its experiential analogue in aesthetic engagement.*

This collaboration of sensory perception and sensory meanings in the aesthetic-artistic process is, then, an aspect

and an expression of the cultural ecological process. We can think of aesthetic engagement, in fact, as an aesthetic ecology. It is joining together in aesthetic appreciation the viewer and the painting; the listener and the music; the dancer, the dance, and the audience; and it is the repatriation of the inhabitant to his or her environment. Aesthetic engagement is thus the expression in perceptual experience of the cultural ecological process. Once we grasp that all experience in its primary, direct and immediate form is predominately perceptual, we begin to recognize the intimate yet central place that the aesthetic has in human experience. It becomes a key to revealing and evaluating cultural experiences. How can we apply this key to the environments, the landscapes, of everyday life?

### 3. The aesthetic in the urban landscape

For most people, urbanism is synonymous with the *human* environment, indeed with the *human* condition. In many developed countries, ninety per cent of the population lives in urban centers, and the proportion in second and third world countries is increasing rapidly. Like all key concepts, urbanism can be defined in different ways. How, then, to understand it? We need an enlightening and guiding model. For my purposes here, I shall construe it in the broadest possible way as urbanization: human organization on a large scale in an extended physical and cultural setting, appropriated, shaped, and constructed by human agency.

The urban landscape has a wide range. At one extreme stands the megalopolis, an urbanized region that incorporates several large cities into a continuous band or extent of built landscape. At the other end of the scale we find the commercial strip, the shopping mall, the industrial park, and the town. Urbanism is wholesale environmental reconstruction. It does not apply to the village, whose small scale, low density, and open space exclude features commonly associated with the urban environment. These include a concentrated population, industrial or productive activity together with its effects on circulation patterns, the means of providing support services in the form of utilities, hospitals, business and commercial services, research and educational centers, and the like.

Now while urbanism constitutes the human environment for most of the world's population, it is a condition that has come about, with rare exceptions, not by deliberate choice but by the demands of expanding trade, industrial production, a rapidly increasing population, cultural interests in the form of museums, libraries, arts centers, and a wide variety of educational institutions, and, of course, nationalism, militarism, and the thirst for political hegemony. To these we can add today the influence of global capitalism. We see before us today how the exploitation and commodification of natural resources and the industrialization of the countryside have dispossessed masses of people of their land and their means of sustenance, and are then driven to settle in or near metropolitan regions in shanty towns and favelas in order to scrape for survival.

We find, then, that an urban landscape has developed that offers amenities for the rich and, for the rest, a place in which to try to live and work. The forms, characteristics, and qualities of this environment are rarely chosen but are shaped by geographical, political and economic forces. Instances of large-scale urban planning exist but they are rare: Haussmann in nineteenth century Paris, L'Enfant in Washington, D.C., Nambour in Brasilia. Most large cities

consist in a center nucleus with historic origins and character, surrounded by generations of neighborhoods. These were the work of individuals who migrated there from the countryside and then constructed dwellings where land values were cheaper and space available, while independent entrepreneurs added whole neighborhoods. There was little or no coordination among these decisions. Urban forms, then, not chosen but shaped by independent conditions -- geographical, climatic, political, economic -- are largely the results of uncoordinated actions, of chance. We can call this the *historical, aleatoric urban model*.

"The house is a machine for living," Le Corbusier announced famously. As does the house, so should the building and the city embody the values of order, harmony, uniformity, and especially smooth, oiled functioning. This *mechanical model* is beloved of the culture that developed societies see themselves as embodying. It has the quintessential virtues of an industrial order -- efficiency, cleanliness, impersonality, uniformity, modular and interchangeable units, expendability, and a social order in which the human is subjugated to the machine, a society that Charlie Chaplin caricatured in *Modern Times*. More recently, this industrialized social order was encased as a specimen of bourgeois culture in the opening tracking shot of Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Week-End*, which displays an endless line of automobiles moving slowly, bumper to bumper as if on an assembly line, as they convey their passengers steadily out into the countryside. It is an image of humans who, under the delusion of independence, are pressed into helpless uniformity.

Urbanization has now moved beyond these rather simplistic models to a more sophisticated ecosystematic pattern. This leaves behind the mechanical ideal of uniform, replaceable parts and adopts a more vital, organic vision. Quite the opposite of the mechanical model, the *biological ecosystemic* one recognizes the urban region as a complex unity of many different but interrelated parts, each preoccupied with its own purposes but at the same time contributing to and depending on a context that embraces them all.

The ecosystem has thus become an imaginative model of the urban environment. At the magnitude and complexity of mass industrial societies, uncoordinated activities produce disorder and inefficiency and eventually lead to breakdown and chaos. The mechanical model is also inappropriate, for it is at the root of the fragmentation, the impersonality, the anomie, and the inhumaneness of industrialized urban regions. The biological model appears to be able to overcome the inadequacies of the earlier guiding principles. It seems more responsive to the workings and needs of human social life than the aleatoric model, more true to the human condition than the mechanical, and more resilient and responsive than both to the variety of human social forms and activities. Open-ended yet coherent, flexible yet efficient, independent yet balanced, the ecosystemic model appears to offer a humane vision of living in an urbanized environment.

How can we guide social activity by an ecological model? What sort of vision can lead us toward a more humanly successful social order? We need an incentive that is imaginative and enticing. Here, I think, is where the artistic-aesthetic mode of engaged experience can be a valuable guide.

4. The contribution of the arts

Consider first what the arts can contribute. Each art reveals aspects of our perceptual world, of our sensory environment. Each art sensitizes us to different perceptual modalities and the nuances of sensory qualities as well as to structure and meanings, and these arts can contribute to the richness and depth of environmental experience. Painting, for example, by making more apparent the visual qualities of color, shape, texture, light, shadow, and composition, can assist our environmental perception. This is not a matter of seeing the city as a painting but rather through the eyes of a painter and with a painter's sensibility. And it arises not from visual qualities alone but from how they can be transferred to environmental experience. Thus we can think of a zoning plan as a composition of districts and their relationships, building codes as guiding size and shape, constraints on lot coverage as the arrangement of masses and their relationships, and patterns of distribution, density and activity as texture. In environmental terms music translates into the soundscape: environmental sounds, ambient sounds, and the timbres, textures and volumes of sounds generated by the multifarious activities of life traffic, commerce, construction, sounds that also are thoroughly historical. Amplified sounds, canned music, human voices all contribute to the auditory sensory atmosphere of a place.

It is not difficult to apply the three-dimensional arts to environmental ecology. Sculpture becomes the arrangement of masses and space in relation to the human body. A sculptural sensibility develops not only from the presence of sculptural mass to the body but also from walk-around sculpture and walk-in sculpture that turn mass and volume into ambient qualities. Architecture can help us experience the urban landscape as a deliberately constructed environment, deploying mass, volume, and the movement of human bodies, not as a static array, but in intimate interrelationships in a dynamic experience of constant change. Architectural dynamics lead easily to the distinctive patterns that emerge from the activities that take place in every environment. To grasp the city as a mobile environment involving the interplay of bodies and other objects in various patterns of movement is to see the urban dynamic as an endless, complex process moving from one transformation to another. Circulation patterns of cars, trucks, buses, and trams in relation to the movement of people are choreographed by planners and traffic engineers into a complex modern dance. The fact that these are not random but involve shifting patterns of interrelationship transforms the environmental dynamic into the dance of life. Moreover, since such movement is not erratic but coordinated or at least directed, we can grasp the interrelations of these patterns of movement as an elaborate human ballet. When such movements respond to one another in active interplay, an element of drama appears. The human landscape then becomes a kind of theater with dramatic movement and sequences. We can even think of urban life as complex improvisational theater in which the dramas of human life constitute the plot lines overarching multiple sub-plots. Humans are thus both the creative artists, the actors, and the participatory audience in the environmental drama.

In such ways, the arts as creative making and aesthetics as active perception combine to enlarge and enrich environmental experience. What can these artistic modalities contribute to our experience and understanding of human life wherever it is lived? As I noted earlier, both the artistic and the aesthetic are inherent in environmental experience, the first in fashioning such experience and the second in



bringing into awareness aspects of that dense perceptual experience. Humans, as part of the complex environmental dynamic, do not and can not stand back to contemplate the prospect. We must enter in as artists through our activities, and at the same time participate both actively and receptively in an appreciative mode. Thus do both the artistic and the aesthetic combine in our vital engagement with environment. What does this mean for living as a part of our environment. What is its significance for creative aesthetic engagement?

Learning from artistic-aesthetic engagement, *an aesthetic ecological model* has profound implications for building environments that promote rich and satisfying lives. If we are unaware of the presence of the aesthetic and its implications, we are likely to become helpless, alienated pawns in the hands of impersonal forces. Unless we move to deliberately incorporate the aesthetic in building human environments, we must abandon all hope for the survival of a civilization that is not just human but humane. Can we go beyond bare survival to fulfillment? What, then, is an aesthetic ecology? This is our central question.

## 5. The aesthetic in environment

An aesthetic ecology is an experiential ecology. Instead of denoting interconnected and interdependent objects in a particular region, it takes a human perspective and refers to the experiential dimension of environment. Moreover, an aesthetic ecology encompasses humans as interdependent as well as interrelated. With aesthetic engagement as an ecological model for environment, events are translated into experiences that combine to form the living world we inhabit. Aesthetic engagement is an effective touchstone in building environments that promote experience that is satisfying and rich.

What can an aesthetic ecology offer in helping us understand our habitations and shape them so that they provide generous support in achieving fulfillment? This is the practical question that follows my theoretical analysis so, in good pragmatic fashion, I want to turn to its implications for practice. In particular, what does an aesthetic ecology offer for understanding and directing the urban landscape?

By focusing on sensory perception and sensory meanings as integral to the human environment, aesthetic ecology becomes experiential, an ecology of experience. And because it is all-inclusive, it is an engaged ecology, one that exemplifies aesthetic engagement. We have, then, at the very least, an ecosystemic model in which aesthetic considerations are considered not just significant but critical. Perceptual experience becomes a central feature in the interrelations of people, objects, and activities of an ecosystem. Thus an aesthetic ecology denotes an integrated region with distinctive perceptual features: sounds, smells, textures, movement, rhythm, color; the magnitude of volumes and masses in relation to the active body; light, shadow and darkness, temperature. I am not talking about a fully controlled ecosystem, a large scale environment as part of which our perceptual experiences are fully programmed. Rather than this, I am depicting an ecosystem, such as an urban landscape, whose aesthetic features are significant factors in environmental design so that negative perceptual experience can be reduced or eliminated and experience that is enhancing be encouraged.

What other implications does aesthetic engagement have for the urban ecosystem? To be more specific, what negative perceptual conditions does it lead us to control and guide?

Many of these are obvious, such as air and water pollution, noise pollution, and noxious and offensive odors. To these we can add extremes of heat and cold, strong winds, and excessive illumination, all of which are common conditions in large, barren, paved plazas and parking areas and amid the concrete structures and pavement of the urban core. To specify these even more, one need only list characteristic offenders in the urban landscape: traffic noise and exhaust fumes, construction sounds and dust, canned "music" in nearly every public and quasi-public place, vehicles hurtling at us from unexpected directions. These just begin the list.

Yet at the same time, sensory relief and enhancements are available: tiny "pocket" parks that are oases of green, relative quiet, and clear air, places of safety and repose within the concrete jungle of commercial and industrial districts; soothing sounds that come from fountains, channels of running water, and waves along the shore front, experience encouraged by benches, picnicking and bathing areas; commercial districts that incorporate pedestrian streets and walkways, as many already have; arcades that offer vendors and shoppers protection from sun and rain; covered or enclosed walkways and pedestrian bridges in regions of extreme climate or heavy traffic. And on the most minimal level, the relief from high or offensive sensory input that anti-noise ordinances and anti-pollution requirements can help create.

All these perceptual considerations have implications not only for comfort and pleasure but for health and safety. They contribute to an urban landscape that is understood as an ecosystem and that, instead of oppressing its inhabitants, engages them aesthetically in life-enhancing ways. A mildly aesthetic ecology, one that encourages aesthetic engagement, offers the direction for building environments that promote rich and satisfying lives, and that lead beyond mere survival to fulfillment.

An aesthetically positive urban ecosystem will recognize how each district—commercial, industrial, residential, recreational—has an individual character and yet affects the others and, what is more significant still, shapes perceptual experience. In a humanly functional aesthetic ecosystem, the urban landscape is not an external environment but an inclusive one that integrates its inhabitants who participate actively and contribute to its functioning. Including aesthetic engagement as a normative consideration would be a major step in humanizing the urban landscape.

Aesthetic engagement may be exemplified by the perceptual character of the various arts, and it can be the basis for creating an aesthetic ecology. It provides the grounds for an aesthetic criticism of negative perception and the goal in developing positive ones. Aesthetic engagement is thus a value that can be deliberately incorporated into the design of environmental experience, and it can serve as a guide in re-shaping and humanizing the urban landscape.

#### ENDNOTES

[1] It is estimated that by 2010 more than 50% of the world's population will be living in urban rather than rural environments, leading to social deprivation and "new instability risks," and the further growth of shanty towns.

[2] An ecological model does not commit one to homeostasis unqualifiedly. While homeostatic factors are at work attempting to maintain a healthy balance in the ecosystem,



this is not an equilibrium, for environmental changes occur constantly and, for humans, social environmental changes, as well as changes in the individuals, are frequent and ongoing. There is no ultimate ideal order; adjustment is constantly necessary.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), First Part, 1 (A 20-21, B 34-35).

[4] William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), p. 462.

[5] This allusion to Maurice Merleau-Ponty is deliberate. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception," in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Northwestern University Press, 1964).