

CHAPTER 1

Another Look at the City. Emphasizing Temporality in Urban Aesthetics

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Abstract: Cities are usually formed over long periods of time. The subjective experience of time on the scale of a human individual comes together with the longer lifespan of human made constructions in contemporary cities. Intergenerational aesthetic values are negotiated together with short-term trends and both have an influence on how cities become perceived, experienced, and used. Changes in the material conditions define the aesthetic qualities of urban environments. Building, demolition, and acts of care and maintenance are needed to keep the material system of the city functioning. The forms of urban structures draw direct aesthetic attention as they are being designed and redesigned in these processes. Buildings and architecture as such have for long carried meanings beyond the mere function of giving shelter. Building materials, for example, prove to be a central source of new meanings as they are currently being re-evaluated from the perspective of ecological and sustainability values. This article outlines how philosophical urban aesthetics can take into account the explicit aspects of aesthetic value change in cities. The article shows how the idea of aesthetic sustainability could be introduced into urban aesthetics in a way that will increase our understanding of how aesthetics and sustainability are and could further be interlinked in contemporary and future urban environments.

Keywords: Urban Aesthetics, Intergenerational Aesthetics, Everyday Aesthetics, Urban Everyday, Aesthetic Sustainability

1 Introduction

This article stems from a need to advance some central tenets of contemporary philosophical urban aesthetics. The advancement concerns taking better into consideration the increasingly relevant temporal change in the case of cities as well as in aesthetic values themselves. If the ‘first look’ at the city from the perspective of

philosophical aesthetics has focused on the sensory and spatial stimuli that the city has to offer (e.g. Berleant and Carlson 2007; Milani 2017), the second, updated look focuses on how cities are perceived and evaluated always in flux, their aesthetic qualities unfolding in temporal as much as spatial terms (e. g. Haapala 2005; Lehtinen 2020b; Lobo 2020). The temporal emphasis in aesthetics has been articulated already in recent developments in new areas such as everyday aesthetics, which deals by definition with the everyday as a temporally determined part of human life. The everyday is, however, a rather relational and subjective concept compared to the time cycles that dictate how a city looks and feels. Another important direction for developing aesthetics with temporality in mind is the current transdisciplinary emphasis on ecological thinking and sustainability transformations. The implication of transformations point towards processual changes as a result of both intentional and unintentional human activity and these processes in themselves would benefit from understanding the explicit and implicit roles of aesthetics in them.

This article discusses two possible directions for advancing explicitly temporal thinking in urban aesthetics, namely those of intergenerational thinking on one hand and sustainability approach on the other hand. The intention is to describe in which ways these broad disciplinary border-crossing conceptual frameworks are influencing also how aesthetic values are understood now and towards the future. One of the aims of this contribution is to make visible how urban aesthetic values do not exist in a vacuum, but are instead strongly linked to other contemporary discussions and areas of value deliberation. In the very final part of the article, the aim of increasing the use of wood as building material in the urban environment is presented briefly as a case example of a contemporary transdisciplinary urban project, which exemplifies in an impactful way how the temporal scope of aesthetic values gets interpreted in practice.

2 From Spatial to Temporal Perspective in Urban Aesthetics

The appearances of human settlements of all types change and evolve with time. This change concerns the whole spectrum of human habitation from the more dispersed and rural to compact and fully urbanized communities. Contemporary cities globally are no exception in this regard: they are not stable entities but, instead, constantly at the focus of a continuous process of building, demolishing, and repairing.

The long- and short-term urban development processes are managed by authorities and some type of legal procedures in most civilizations globally. However, the experiential repercussions of the city as a process are very complex and go often beyond the intended effects. The changes in how features of a city become experienced are thus difficult to plan in advance. Even with careful planning and predicting, seemingly independent decisions accumulate into an overall aesthetic character of a place: a process in which overall aesthetic deliberation plays little role in the end. Besides this jigsaw puzzle of aesthetic elements in construing an urban place, all kinds of traces of previous generations of humans and non-humans alike are visible and expressively present in the urban landscape. The amount of cohesion and the ratio between the intended and unintended elements in cities is of course not stable, but varies according to the type of city, community, and governance model.

The philosophical subspecialty of urban aesthetics has been developed to study the aesthetic qualities and values of cities with a more focused effort since the 1990's (von Bonsdorff 2002; Berleant and Carlson 2007; Lehtinen 2020b). The field has been marked by focus on the built and human environment in opposition to more natural environments, but this dichotomy-based approach is currently severely questioned by the posthuman paradigm as well as transdisciplinary approaches such as sustainability science and studies. In its current form, urban aesthetics is influenced also by philosophy of the city (Philosophy of the City Research Group; Meagher & al. 2019) and a selection of theoretical approaches in contemporary philosophy and aesthetics of architecture and urban planning.

As emerging focus areas in urban aesthetics, the following ones are recognised here: 1) *global cities*: challenging the Eurocentric notions of the aesthetic ideals of cities, 2) *aesthetic temporality*: explicating the aesthetic impacts of the processual nature of urban transformations, and 3) *technological change*: recognizing and assessing the aesthetics of fast technological development in cities. Interestingly, all these areas of future research put emphasis on temporally developing conceptualizations of urban aesthetics as well as experiences which unfold only with time.

Cities are not static entities but follow a type of dynamic logic of change. They are continuously re-evaluated and altered to cater the changing needs of the community. Part of this change is intentional and coordinated, but unintentional change is equally taking place. Intentional change consists of both complex and collaborative practices of urban planning, design, and development as well as of the repeating acts of

care and maintenance. What is common for both types of human collective activities is the more or less implicit attention to the temporal nature of the built structures of the city. This attention is aimed either at creating longevity or enabling change towards communally beneficial end goals. However, the temporality of city environments is not entirely intentionally driven either. The unintentional changes can be abrupt as in the cases of natural or human originating catastrophes such as extreme weather phenomena or acts of terrorism. The unintentional changes come also in the form of more gradual degradation as in the case of animal or plant species taking over less maintained places. The ratio of the intentional and unintentional elements varies from a city to another and the distinction is not always possible to make in the first place. Even in the case of clearly definable examples such as invasive plant species changing entire urban landscapes, one reason is rarely enough to explain the complex array of changes taking place.

While the dynamics of change of contemporary urban habitats globally are studied in detail in directions as diverse as urban ecology and urban planning, for example, the aesthetic implications of urban change have not been traditionally at the centre of attention. This is partly due to the marginal status of aesthetic theory as an area of contemporary knowledge competency in comparison to other areas in urban studies. Partly, it is because cities are being observed in scientific discourse prevalently as places determined by economic and social forces, instead of putting focused efforts on analysing the prerequisites of pleasant and liveable living environments for human and nonhuman species alike. Although subjective variations in the broad spectrum of aesthetic preferences make them statistically challenging to chart, these preferences nonetheless have a significant effect on the general trends that lead into thriving economies somewhere or shrinking cities elsewhere.

It is not insignificant that urban aesthetics can also be presented as a specific subfield of the broader area of environmental aesthetics, gaining more prominence as the phenomenon of urbanization has not shown signs of slowing down. Instead, and despite recent pandemic flight from the cities, urbanization is proving to be one of the foremost characteristics of the 21st century, challenging traditional ways of thinking to find new angles to what types of environments are pleasant or desirable to live in. Environmentalist thinking in relation to cities is developing into a truly significant way of reconceptualizing the use and development of urban space. Nature-based solutions in materials and

processes are an example of how sustainability is a driver for future-oriented planning solutions. The simultaneous development of new and emerging technologies, on the other hand, is also in its own way concerned with urban futures. In relation to the broader environmental focus in aesthetics, ecological sustainability frames itself as a principle that redefines the production of goods as well as in their consumption. Translated into contemporary aesthetic thinking, especially in the context of the aesthetics of the everyday, environmental sustainability articulates itself even more broadly, ranging from the practices of production and consumption to everyday aesthetically-induced preferences and seemingly spontaneous decision-making processes (Lehtinen 2021). Importantly, both the environmentalist and the technological innovation emphasizing ‘smart city’ orientations are visible in contemporary philosophical and practical urban aesthetic thinking, but it is becoming increasingly central to see how they can be bridged in thinking about sustainable urban futures. Urban aesthetics as a philosophical field is well applicable to bridge these two often unnecessarily opposed paradigms of thinking about the urban lifeform. At the very least, with the magnifying lens of urban aesthetics the city is studied first and foremost through its perceptual and experiential qualities. The look and feel of a city are thus always a *mélange* of human and non-human elements alike: any projected false dichotomies of ‘natural nature’ and the human-originating technological engagement evaporate in close contact with the perceptual sphere of the city itself. In fact, the city is formed perceptually as a constellation of places, cityscapes, objects, living creatures, trajectories, and interactions of various kinds. One does not necessarily pay that much attention to the details of the city amidst the everyday life and to an extent, one becomes even oblivious to their familiarity (Haapala 2005). This everyday familiarity does not, however, entail that the city would need to stay unchanged.

Everyday aesthetics demarcates another significant paradigm shift in the urban aesthetic approach. So far, the main focus of everyday aesthetics has been on defining the very everydayness of the everyday itself. The everyday is an intuitively easy concept to grasp, yet it is like slippery soap to the one trying to give a precise definition of it. When discussing the everyday, the point of reference is always to some extent “*my everyday now*”, a heavily subjective and contextual, ultimately experiential concept (Naukkarinen 2013). Besides broadening the everyday aesthetic categories (Leddy 2012) this combination of unavoidability and slipperiness is also the most exciting turn in everyday

aesthetics when trying to define the temporality of the everyday urban lifeworld. With added emphasis on the everyday, the temporality of daily aesthetic phenomena becomes prevalent. How the rhythms, routines, and recurring events make time experienced in the Bergsonian sense, as duration, is at the core of understanding the inevitable changes occurring within the scope of any given city.

3 Intergenerational Aesthetic Choices: Wood as Building Material

Intergenerational aesthetics is a recent formulation in philosophical and applied aesthetics, which describes and analyses the temporal aspects of aesthetic value change (Emily Brady has brought up this concept in her talk in Edinburgh in 2016; Lehtinen 2020a; Capdevila-Werning and Lehtinen 2021). Concerning environmental issues at large, aesthetic values are not necessarily universally set spatial or temporal rules but, instead, they change according to the currently prevailing other values and meanings attached to the objects of appreciation. This differs substantially from the persistent ideas that aesthetically positive values in urban environments follow from the universally valid pleasant formal features, such as harmony or the golden ratio. In everyday and ecological aesthetics this change has been acknowledged to an interesting extent already (Saito 2007; Brady 2014) but the broader discussion regarding the more radical intergenerational aspects of aesthetic values is yet to take place.

Intergenerational thinking is briefly mentioned here as a first step towards discussing the intergenerational roles of aesthetic values. It is left for future studies to explicate the relationship of intergenerational and aesthetic values more closely. Considering how aesthetic values are traditionally understood, as being based on or expressed in highly subjective experiences, fitting them in the intergenerational scheme might seem problematic. This example is to show that there is reason to discuss values in the temporally determined framework, and not only through formal aesthetic features, qualities, or the notion of taste.

In contemporary cities globally, intergenerational aesthetics concerns directly the multiple layers and the interplay of traces of human activity. The decisions of past generations will determine the field of action and decision-making for the generations to come. Traces of previous generations have affected the layout of the city and also its main character, what is conceived as possible within it. Most of these traces are intentional but the ensuing aesthetic combinations are often

unintentional. Whereas in agricultural landscapes, in which, if untended, nature will take over fields and cultivated forests fairly quickly, the traces of human life in cities are more deeply carved into the environment. These effects do not concern only the visible parts of the city but the invisible parts as well: human traces are to be found in the ground, in the air, and the inevitable flow of water. Radiation and airborne particle pollution are examples of long-term effects on the porous surface of the urban habitat and, eventually, the human bodies themselves.

Intergenerational thinking in philosophy, in environmental or social philosophy in particular, has focused especially on the obligations to future generations (Groves 2014). These obligations and the temporal distance make the relationship between generations significantly different than relations between contemporaries. There is imbalance in reciprocity and, more closely, in what forms moral and aesthetic values take. Some values are clearly more long-lasting, and others more prone to change. From the contemporary perspective, ecological values are affecting aesthetic values and it is possible to trace these changes. Some examples are the aesthetic acceptance of wind turbines (Saito 2007) or how aesthetic value is detached from the artistic intention and moved towards ecological aesthetics in the case of landmark architecture (Capdevila-Werning and Lehtinen 2021).

Emergence of ethics of care in intergenerational ethics is one recent development that has significance for the urban environment. This strand of thinking has brought together origins as diverse as Heidegger and feminist care ethics (Groves 2014). Focus on care and maintenance in philosophy and urban thinking has been gaining increasingly interest as thinkers in diverse directions such as Yuriko Saito in aesthetics (2020), Steven Vogel in environmental and infrastructure ethics (2019), Mark Thomas Young in philosophy of engineering (2020), Shannon Mattern in anthropology (2018), and myself in urban aesthetics (Lehtinen 2020c) have contributed to the discussion of this topic. Care implies futurity and the adjoining sustainability paradigm requires thinking forward even to an uncomfortable degree: this translates into an exacerbated need to face the uncertainty related to future times (Groves 2014). In aesthetics, the longevity of the aesthetic choices of our era as such is a source of uncertainty but sustainability concerns cause even deeper trepidation. We might and should ask more often: “Are these changes/choices necessary?” and “Do we know enough of the harmful effects to the environment?”

The cyclical nature of aesthetic trends and continuous maintenance do not go well with the central premises of Western philosophical thinking: striving towards universal and enduring values. In aesthetics, the 20th century in particular was marked by both an attempt to find universal aesthetic value in pure formalistic ethos and a remarkable opening towards aesthetic relativism with the ensuing stylistic plurality. This dichotomy is not even a deep contradiction as it manages to explain a plethora of aesthetically interesting yet temporally short-lived styles. In architecture and urban planning, the push and pull of classical versus contextual beauty has been especially clear. From the universality of function-determined purity of functionalism to the playful referential aesthetics of postmodernism, the need to take a position either in favour or against any prevalent ‘ism’ has been an important signifier of having developed a socially conscious and securely defined form of taste. What is thus the place of aesthetics in the normative thought of sustainability transformations in general and urban sustainability in particular?

Intergenerational aesthetics is a new articulation to explicate temporal change in aesthetic values and aesthetic obligations towards future generations (Capdevila-Werning and Lehtinen 2021). In practice, this means consciousness of the long-term effects of contemporary aesthetic choices and that current aesthetic preferences should not dictate the outcome irreversibly for the generations to come. The increasing requirements for ecological sustainability are changing the temporal logic of the urban everyday. To contextualize this, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) no 11 focuses on “Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (UN 2020). This includes issues and focus areas such as urban nature, air quality, urban transportation, infrastructure, energy, health & wellbeing, social equity, and economic viability. The multifaceted issues are grouped under one goal and thus the interrelated nature of urban sustainability goals is acknowledged. This is something to keep in mind, although for the sake of brevity and scope, the focus in this paper is especially on how to increase and support the sustainability of the built environment and, even more, how aesthetic thinking can contribute to this. The intergenerational perspective on urban aesthetics does not imply cultivating an individualist ethics of obligations towards the future generations but the focus is on recognizing the overlapping networks of responsibilities. What is at stake is aligning the aesthetic and ethical values so that the aesthetic scope of the future generations is not limited unnecessarily. Thus, the strict obligation-based ethos of

intergenerational theories is replaced by an emphasis on resilience and changing nature of human aesthetic values.

An interesting example of this phenomenon is the new wooden building paradigm, which is gaining prominence especially in Northern Europe and the Nordics more specifically, after a long hiatus. The increase in interest in the possibilities of high-rise wood buildings is due to growing scientific evidence about the carbon-sinking effects of wood material (Amiri et al. 2020). Wood as a building material is one of the oldest in human use, but became increasingly shunned in the 20th century dense metropolitan areas. It was not only considered a fire-hazard but also a sign of lesser means compared to more durable and expensive brick buildings. However, now the appreciation of the material is gaining new traction fast. Looking at the carbon footprint only, wood as building material would be a far better choice compared to concrete in most urban environments. Carbon footprint does not of course determine the overall sustainability of any material (there are territorial and climate differences and other local materials can be more sustainable locally, for example), but the difference is so clear that a serious reconsideration of the value of wood as a building material is needed.

The ongoing increase in the use of wood as building material is studied from the sustainability perspective, addressing ecological, environmental, and economical facets. This necessitates also the reassessment of its aesthetic values and potentialities as part of the social and cultural sustainability. If wood is not accepted due to how it looks, it is difficult to reach the level of use that reaching the set sustainability goals would require. As an organic material, it shows signs of aging and use and these signs, such as patina and change in colour, show as a change in the appearance of buildings (e.g., Saito 2007; Kalakoski 2016). With the natural weathering process of unfinished wood, the roughening of the surface keeps on developing for years and the outcome can be difficult to predict. Another central aesthetic consideration relates to the style that is associated with wooden buildings: the material itself is open to new types of building techniques but the nostalgic associations might limit how it is expected to be used.

The acclimatisation of architecture to accept these types of unstable changes requires thinking about the future of the building more as a dynamic process than as a stable state to be preserved in the intended original form. In fact, any sort of idealised original form in most cases is not even an option, since buildings consist of overlapping structures and objects added through time and they always need some type of upkeep

and maintenance that alters them at the same time as keeping them in condition. Restoration and preservation practices have long taken the aging process into consideration, in making decisions about either maintaining something in pristine conditions or even emphasizing the signs of aging as an aesthetically significant part of the restored building.

4 Conclusion

This article has focused on presenting some ideas for further research by showing why there is a need to articulate urban environmental aesthetics to take more explicitly into consideration the perspective of temporality. Emphasis has been given to how the increasingly valuable inter- and transdisciplinary sustainability framework can be of use in this process and re-evaluation of the field of urban aesthetics. Sustainability concerns extend the discussion over values, as well as others, over a longer time span. The perspective of future human and non-human generations and their preferences are to be taken more systematically into account when planning aesthetically significant features of urban environments. The globally recognized challenges such as anthropogenic climate change and broader sustainability deficiency concerns directly the lived quality of most urban environments globally. Even though the theoretical and scientific discussions are considered to address most directly the sustainability goals of the society, it should be taken into consideration that some sustainability issues become experientially explicit in the repeating and habitual interactions with everyday urban places.

As a solution to bridge some gaps between sustainable solutions and governing aesthetic preferences, this article has offered an informed understanding of the sustainability transformation solutions, especially relating to the aesthetic changes of building materials. This implies that the overall role of aesthetics in a shift towards more circular modes of production and consumption is more central than what is currently understood. The increase in the use of wood as building material has been presented as a case example. Recognized as carbon sinks, a steep increase in the preferences for wooden urban tall buildings is offered as a solution to some urban sustainability transformations. This requires taking a more positive stance towards the wear and tear that the organic material will inevitably show. Aesthetic qualities of wooden buildings require thus a reassessment in terms of their intergenerational aesthetic qualities. This is strongly linked to the more subtle tones of everyday

aesthetic experiences, as they sensitize and condition to evaluate and assess aesthetically the sustainable building materials in practice.

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