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Shifting Sensibilities: Architecture and the Aesthetics of the City

Introduction

In recent discussions on contemporary architecture, two strands of thinking have become increasingly central. On one hand, the urgency of demands for sustainability and, on the other hand, the fast pace of technological development which is affecting the sphere of architecture with growing intensity. Neither of the ideologies behind these phenomena is exactly new but they have become increasingly relevant for how architecture is defined and understood in the contemporary philosophical and theoretical discussions. This will inevitably have an effect also on how architectural aesthetics is understood, through questions such as what is the role of beauty in architecture, and how is aesthetic value in architecture related to other values such as ethical, ecological or more instrumental values linked to efficiency and economics, for example.

The discussion regarding values in architecture is not new, of course, on the contrary. From very early on, architecture has been defined in the Western tradition through combining the different interpretations of what is beautiful and useful. Architecture has also been understood as one of the artforms with varying degree of emphasis on its aesthetic and creative dimension. But to what extent do the new demands for architecture affect its role in the wider aesthetic context of the city? And what are the further repercussions for aesthetics of architecture and city that stem from the philosophical interest in the specific aesthetic features of human environments in general? The emphasis in this article is on recent discussions from all represented fields, as the aim is to bridge these discussions in new, meaningful ways.

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This article presents some of the contemporary ideas developed within the aesthetics of architecture and the aesthetics of the city. The aim is to show a continuation from the aesthetic interest in the architectural form to the aesthetic interest which has the urban form in its focus. This is done through the notion of the human environment, which has been notably present in the philosophical study of environmental aesthetics since the 1990s. The article is by no means a conclusive representation of the complex relationship between the aesthetics of architecture and the aesthetics of the city but instead, it is an attempt to further the discussion by bringing up some interesting and vital developments in both areas. The underlying intention is to bring forth the study of urban aesthetics by making clearer how it is positioned in relation to an aesthetic interest in architecture and human environments at large.

1. Aesthetic interest in architecture

According to some of the most influential canons in Western philosophical and aesthetic thinking from Vitruvius through Kant, architecture has been described as a form of human activity that combines beauty with utility (Kruft 1994; Guyer 2011). This paradigmatic definition of architecture through its combining the interlaced values of beauty, functionality, and ability to express aesthetic ideas dominates still the aesthetic discussions related to architecture, although with slightly changing nuances. It is interesting to speculate, whether and how the defining conditions of the human civilization in the 21st century, such as globalization, rapid technological development, and the growing awareness of the planetary boundaries for human activity, are affecting this paradigm. One option is that the entire question needs to be posed anew and a new type of definition for architecture will be found more in conjunction with the broader notions of the human environment or the city.

Turning attention from the general idea of architecture as a unified, definable phenomenon to individual works of architecture is one way of approaching the aesthetic value manifested by the general art of building. Aesthetic attention can address features of a building such as its shape, size, texture, and colour. Aesthetics is also defined by factors determining the proportions of the building, features such as balance, unity, movement, emphasis, contrast, symmetry. Overall management of space determines the aesthetics of a building but details such as patterns, ornaments, and decoration draw aesthetic attention relatively easily. How different spatial and visual features are aligned with each other is important in the scope of an individual architectural object. More broadly, culture and

context are present in all of the aforementioned features and how they become perceived and interpreted. Some determining aesthetic factors of a building have traditionally been considered static such as shape, size, and the overall proportions, but most of the features change with time. Philosophical study of architectural aesthetics has not been very agile in taking into consideration how the elements of time, temporality, and transformation manifest in architecture. One way to complement this area of interest is through interdisciplinary approaches to empirical case studies (Lähdesmäki 2018).

Aesthetic approach to architecture often starts with the broad question to “what is architecture?”, the same question having raised interest in a broad range of aesthetic traditions relatively recently (e.g. Ballantyne 2002; Winters 2007). It is thus relevant to ask whether it makes sense to discuss *aesthetics* of architecture in particular or if the wider notion of *philosophy* of architecture is better suited to cover also the aesthetic questions explicit and implicit in architecture. In a similar way, “aesthetics of art” might not make fully sense, since art is so thoroughly conceivable as an aesthetic practice even taking into account the contemporary conceptual and relational turns. Also, aesthetic matters in architecture in particular are rarely only aesthetic as they are practically always tied together with other values, such as ethical, social, environmental, and so forth (Fisher 2016). If architecture is to be studied as an artform, an art-like practice, or even as something parallel to different forms of art, questions such as “can buildings quote?” (Capdevila-Werning 2011), “how do buildings mean?” (Whyte 2006) will also be of interest. Denotation, meaning, and expressivity are arguably one side of the aesthetic repertoire of architecture but aesthetic attention to architecture seems to require a broader perspective than what is offered by likening architecture to an artform.

As pragmatist approaches show, the question of the (aesthetic) nature of architecture can be approached also through the various manifestations of it. Stating, that architecture is permeated by aesthetic interests to a greater degree than other engineering practices, for example, does not mean that aesthetics would be the main concern of *all* architecture. On the contrary, the cases of aesthetically insensitive architecture are omnipresent in contemporary societies, in the form of commercial, industrial or multi-purpose utility buildings, at the very least. Within architecture and recent architectural discourse, aesthetics is treated as the “uneasy dimension” of architecture, this resulting in critical discussion having become “marginalized or almost non-existent” (Rönn & Toft 2019, 4). This type of characterization and worry is symptomatic of the tense rela-

tion between how philosophical aesthetics is understood in architectural research and the extent to which the practical prerequisites of contemporary architecture are seen to determine also its aesthetic qualities. The uneasiness of aesthetics risks thus building up into a blind spot of the entire field, according to this worry presented by architectural researchers.

The aesthetic dimension of architecture tends still very often to be understood as synonymous only with the surface of buildings: how they are perceived *visually*. This creates tension between the exterior versus interior spaces of a piece of architecture and there is a risk of treating the building as a piece sculpture rather than as a spatially more diverse artefact. A way of looking at buildings is focused on evaluating built spaces from the outside, occasionally meandering to the inside of the buildings to admire how the exterior formations are visible from the other side or how they are linked to the decor. However, aesthetic experience does not require a certain attitude or readiness to evaluate and appreciate a piece of architecture: buildings and other architectural objects are intertwined in a much more varied ways with our everyday lives and individual lines of experiences.

Aesthetic sensibility in architectural theory is often linked to mastering a version of the phenomenological method for interpreting the human experience, for example in giving a detailed account of what is experienced when one perceives or enters a building. The phenomenological approach to the aesthetics of architecture has been found relatively easy to adopt by architects due to its “practical character” towards comprehending architecture (Shirazi 2012, 11). Although there are various ways to define phenomenology in architecture, each seems to acknowledge its power to reveal the underlying common qualities that mark the core of the architectural phenomenon (Seamon 2000). It is at best complemented by a deeper look also into the socio-cultural sphere of meaning-making since architectural objects are not experienced in a vacuum and are instead probably even to a greater extent linked to the broader networks of power, representation, and social justice than many other aesthetically significant areas of human life.

The visual orientation seems to be still dominating partly due to the nature of the architectural process: it is difficult to assess plans with other senses than vision. However, there exist well-argued theoretical contributions against *ocularcentrism* both from the side of architects (e.g. Pallasmaa 2012) as well as philosophers (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 2012). (Re)claiming the “physical, sensual and embodied essence” (Pallasmaa 2012, 35) of architecture is one attempt to reflect the multisensory aesthetic di-

mension of architectural objects. Emphasis on the body is also something that enables the aesthetic evaluation of inside as well as outside spaces and also links experiencing an architectural object to its wider context: its immediate surroundings as well as the environment more broadly. As the experiencing body is not static, it is moving in the space and bodily aware of its surroundings through perception and engagement (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Vignemont 2011).

We do not face architecture in a vacuum, but our values (and the values of the future generations assessing the built legacy) is affected by social and economic conditions as well as an array of aesthetic preferences that change with time. Fashion- or trend-based understanding of architectural aesthetics acknowledges the role of changing values made visible in architectural styles. One big debate relating to this is whether modernism is an architectural style in itself or whether its principles are guided by more generally prevalent functional ideas. Architecture is also defined by its social practices. To a great extent and despite its largely public role, it is a closed practice, in which design and execution require higher-level education and understanding of the explicit and implicit norms. The aesthetic consequences of this are not in the reach of this article, but nonetheless an interesting area of future study on aesthetic choice, taste, and preferences in architectural design.

2. Aesthetics of human environments

The unavoidability of architecture in contemporary societies has led to it gaining prominence in the aesthetic discussions. It is almost impossible to imagine a developed human community without an architecture of some type. It is easier to imagine a human community existing without most parts of common infrastructure such as roads, bridges, or sewer systems than without buildings of some type. It is possible to imagine human communities (as there exist also such) which lack most or even all contemporary urban technologies (power supplies, GPS, or public transportation network). Even though the forms that human habitation has taken are more varied, our contemporary understanding of it relies strongly on it consisting of buildings of some architectural type.

In philosophical and applied study of environmental aesthetics, the interest in natural environments defined by an underlying notion of wilderness dominated the discussions for the most part until the latter part of the 1990s. The transition from the natural environment to the urban environment has not been a straightforward one in academic aesthet-

ics. Rural, cultural, agricultural and industrial environments have gained increasing interest; however, it has come often through an implicit comparison to the more natural environments as the ultimate environmental and aesthetic ideal. In the literature from the early 2000s, landscape, art, and architecture were often bundled together as socio-culturally conditioned phenomena that differ from natural environments as objects of aesthetic appreciation (Carlson 2000). The notion of the *human environment* seemed to bring balance into this by presenting environments affected by humans as aesthetically relevant in their own terms.

By “human environment”, it is possible to refer to different typologies of landscapes. Urban and periurban environments, as well as countryside all have their distinct level of characteristic features with combine the human-made and the natural. Periurban refers to areas which are adjacent to cities or urban areas, but which nonetheless are not yet fully urbanized. Importantly, also rural areas are to a great extent human environment since their cultivated landscapes have been formed by human agricultural or industrial activities. These un-urban landscapes, however, have been perceived as significantly more natural than urban landscapes until very recently. It is only now, that the increased knowledge about unsustainable farming methods or increased criticism towards livestock farming has become more mainstream, that rural and agricultural landscapes are revealed to the eye as more “unnatural”, even in the negative sense. The same goes for forests, of which it is surprisingly difficult to perceptually determine whether they are cultivated or left in a natural state unless one is a forestry professional of some level.

The concept of the human environment is thus apt to show how the lines are increasingly blurred between natural and human-influenced environments. It is however questionable in the light of current environmental research, whether there are any more places on Earth that have not been “affected by human agency” (Berleant & Carlson 2007). Indeed, the human traces are found already beyond the planet Earth as well, whether in the form of human footprints in the Moon or the alarmingly increasing amount of space debris in Earth orbit. The concept of a human environment seems thus so expanded that it almost becomes irrelevant. However, instead of strict division and human-made, it is more useful to think of the human influence on the environment through a scale model. Cities, towns and dwelling places, in general, are most firmly affected by human agency and practices whereas a varying degree of natural elements are present in environments beyond large human settlements.

The degree of “humanness” is not, however, the only interesting aspect of determining what are the particular human environments interesting from an aesthetic perspective. Putting focus on the concept of the everyday has brought important insight into which human environments and elements in them are more central to aesthetic discussions and how they are experienced (Saito 2007). For it is the context of the everyday which is the most central yet underexamined framework for either aesthetics of the human environment. In their everyday functions, architectural constructions create “stability, reliability, and structure in our environment” (Haapala 2017, 171). This concerns those types of buildings that are clearly a part of one’s everyday environment. In the contemporary urban environment, there are also increasingly present different types of temporary forms of architecture even though they are a clear minority.

Conceptually, human environments make visible human-originating elements as antithetical to natural ones. However, in reality, human environments seem, quite on the contrary, to blend and merge human aesthetic influences with the gradually more natural phenomena. In what relation are thus the human elements to the allegedly more natural ones more precisely? This distinction seems somewhat easier to make in urban environments, although the easiness is also deceptive since many elements perceived natural are also products of human influence. For example, elements of natural greenery in urban environments are mostly planned and cared for by human agents, even though they take shape to a certain extent based on other factors such as abiotic elements (e.g. the weather conditions) or other, non-human species (e.g. pollinators or non-native species).

An interesting point to consider is how differently aesthetic attention is directed and focused in different type of environments. Stimulation of the senses might differ depending on whether one is faced by the wilderness of the arctic region or a bustling urban hub. Architecture as a form and result of human intentional activity is a central part of different types of human environments. Naturally, architecture in rural areas is designed partially for different purposes than in the more urbanized context. Similarly, buildings have different functional and sensorial properties when comparing periurban, suburban and urban areas. In this regard, human social relations and activity define the further nature of different types of human environments. Distance or proximity to others (humans or other species) as such and the quality of the relations, for example, might prove to be a more central factor in determining the aesthetic relations to the surroundings than what has been thought so far (Lehtinen 2015).

With this in mind, cities are also much more than simply “human environments”. They might be predominantly defined by human-originating features, but their interaction with the unintended, non-human, and unpredictable phenomena is still not understood to the extent it should. The increasing knowledge of interlinked planetary and urban sustainabilities is one example of new perspectives that require a re-evaluation of aesthetics of the city as well.

3. Aesthetics of the city

When zooming out from individual buildings or the blocks and neighborhoods that those buildings create, we take a wider stance on how a city is perceived and appreciated. But what makes a city a city, how to define the urbanity of the urban environment? Most commonly, the city is defined by sufficient level of economic and social activity. Cities represent efficient use of space and are considered to be logistically the most efficient way to provide means of living for large quantities of people. Instead of a place, the city should be perceived as a system (Jacobs & Malpas 2019). When taken further, this process emphasizing, systemic understanding of a city will have a great effect on how the presence of the aesthetic is perceived, and its relevance for defining the urban lifeform is understood.

A city can be perceived first and foremost as a logistically and efficiently organized functional place. This definition emphasizes mainly the role of economic and social activity. However, a city is also a place more or less full of potential for different types of experiences that go beyond the principles of efficiency. Any city also makes visible the ideologies of different generations of people through its architecture and the ways of living it makes possible. (Berleant 1992; Besson 2017) Besides offering economic opportunities, cities have become successful by growing population because they offer social and cultural meaning to the life of individuals. Cities are places of collaboration, of bringing explicitly shared meaning to the everyday life of an individual. Cities also depend on human collaboration, they cannot survive let alone thrive without the joint efforts of people, who do not even share the same ideals necessarily. The aesthetic dimension is found in all these functions of a city in various ways, and this is what causes confusion when trying to define what urban aesthetics addresses more specifically.

In the case of entire urban environments, it seems to make more sense to discuss *aesthetics* of the city instead of a wider notion of philosophy of the city, since city as a concept is conceived first and foremost through

their social meaning and values. What type of aesthetic form these social and societal meanings get, is a more specific question, which has been of a more detailed interest only occasionally. How this urban aesthetics or aesthetics of the city is defined then, is a further question which has to take into consideration advances in both philosophy/aesthetics of architecture and aesthetics of human environments.

Similarly, as architecture in general or in its individual representations, cities have been likened to artworks or the concept of art in different ways. The city can be approached as an artwork in itself, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or a “total work of art” of human activity (Sepänmaa 2007). The idea is admittedly fascinating, even though metaphorical reflection on the serendipitous results of human activity does not take us necessarily very far in thinking about the uniquely aesthetic qualities of different types of formations of human communities. The idea of the city as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is more symptomatic of the extent of the illusion of power and control over the order of the city. A much more nuanced metaphorical elaboration is the idea of “the art of the city”, which stays sensitive to urban beauty rooted in the fluctuating difference between routine and creativity (Milani 2017). Also, as in the case of architecture, urban aesthetics is still commonly considered to cover predominantly the *visual* side and study of the urban environment. However, the emphasis on more multisensory account of urban aesthetics is present in contemporary philosophical approaches (e.g. Sepänmaa 2003; Shusterman 2019) as well as in approaches stemming from fields such as sociology and urban studies (e.g. Frers & Meier 2008).

Reflective attention to the building styles or architectural details is another direction pointed out for urban aesthetics. It is possible to rate or rank cities according to the ratio of authenticity in relation to building era or the prevalence of certain building styles. These types of rankings are often made by art historians, architects, or professionals in other similar history- or design-oriented fields. “The most beautiful cities in the world” rankings are as popular as the justification of their choices are various. These lists often focus on the perspective of travelers and seem to be mainly aimed at increasing tourist attention. Against these most common thoughts, a comprehensive approach to urban aesthetics does not refer only to the outer appearance of the city, the arrangement of its elements, or to urban art as a particular phenomenon but covers instead more broadly diverse areas of urban life (Lehtinen 2020).

Cities inarguably consist of intentional architecture, although not all elements of the built environment are products of human decision-making processes (von Bonsdorff 2005). Besides the totality of these planned

and unplanned built elements, also plenty of other things make the physical structure of the city: streets, trees, bridges, hidden infrastructure, people, animals and so on. What is the relationship of these elements and how does their interplay determine the aesthetic potentiality of a city? Another deceptively simple question to urban aesthetics is, what does urban *life* comprise of and should it be a matter of interest for aesthetics as much as the setting in which it takes place? Or does it make even sense to separate them? Without resorting to more detailed concepts such as “social aesthetics” (Berleant 2005), human activity clearly is a defining factor for how cities exist for the human perception and experience even in the changing everyday conditions. This is made even more clear by the exceptional conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused cities globally to temporarily empty from most human presence in public spaces. Even though the images of empty city streets are fascinating as such, it is clear that they represent only one dimension

One persistent worry related to the sensory level of experiencing urban life regards the decline of sensory practices as a threat to aesthetic sensibility. With the increase of the number of stimuli, attention gets dispersed and scattered. According to this perspective to the urban aesthetic experience, the particularity of objects and people in the city are muddled into a mass of unrecognizable features (Simmel 1950). Currently, the increase of new urban technologies in ubiquitous, everyday use (e.g. GPS-based mobile apps) is often seen as a factor that leads to even more of this type of sensory numbness. However, it is also possible to interpret the use of these types of technologies so that they enable new types of aesthetic attention in the urban environment. As an example of this, one can start paying attention to architectural details when attention does not have to be directed only towards the legible features of the environment for wayfinding purposes (Vihanninjoki & Lehtinen 2019). In any case, even in the hustle and bustle of a city, the sensorial intricacies and details of architecture are not altogether lost. The scenic, almost panoramic stance towards the city is so compelling precisely because it is accompanied simultaneously by an array of much more detailed observations. The flow and exchangeability of objects of attention create rhythm to the aesthetic side of experiencing the city.

4. Aesthetic evolution of the human lifeform

Determining, whether there could exist a sort of “optimal human habitat” is an interesting and challenging quest in itself (Besson 2017). Even if one would argue, that there really is no one type of habitat that would

be optimal as such, it is clear that the idea of such a habitat has been a driving force behind many phenomena in the development of human habitation. In fact, there seem to be various different types of optimal habitats: what is optimal for humans as biological organisms, for example, might be different from what is optimal for interpersonal relations or for the continuation of the human culture. Acknowledging thus the difficulty of pinpointing optimal living conditions for the human species opens the opportunity for making wiser choices within the inevitable limits of compromises.

This said, there seem to exist some parameters which link both aesthetic quality and the quality of living. Urban density has been considered to be one such parameter, space as a contested resource affecting how both architecture and cities will be built in the future (Harries 2016). Once again with the issue of density, the ratio of human-built or -determined elements and natural, less planned elements is important. In urban environments of the future, it is likely that these elements will merge to a greater extent, creating hybrid environments consisting of instances of “micro-nature” (such as grass-roofed or -walled urban furniture or community-managed foraging spots) and technologically mediated opportunities for using the shared spaces efficiently and in creative ways (e.g. apps for finding alternative transportation routes with focus on scenic beauty or environmental history).

The functionality and usability of built spaces will be and has already been redefined by the contemporary scientific knowledge regarding sustainability. Climate change will change the use of outdoor spaces in large parts of the cities globally, whether due to extreme heat or increasing rainfall. Aesthetic qualities and evaluation of human habitats is increasingly dependent on different forms of technologies. GPS-based wayfinding, urban lighting, urban mobility and further applications of technological innovations structures in the urban sphere will have a defining effect on the overall look and feel of a city. Besides these scenarios which until very recently have seemed futuristic in most parts of the cities globally, more nuanced changes will take place within the domains of architecture and urban planning which have a defining effect on discussions on urban aesthetics. Architecture which works with existing buildings, with the layers and remnants of the past times, is becoming increasingly important for our understanding of the practice. Existing buildings pose other types of aesthetic problems to be solved architecturally than entirely newbuilt structures. This pragmatic approach to contemporary conditions calls for architecture which also takes buildings apart instead of limiting itself to making them (Stoner 2012). The dynamic and continuously evolving

nature of most cities needs to be merged with the traditions that are written into the urban landscape when defining the fate of their buildings (Donohoe 2019).

Let's return briefly to the question of why aesthetics should be of interest in discussions on architecture or the city. This seems to be an especially relevant question in the times of urgent environmental crises and sustainability deficiency on global levels. Architecture or the practice of building has been slow to transform to the circular economy, for example. With these grave challenges in mind, it might seem secondary or even superficial to discuss ideas such as beauty or the sublime. However, it is clear that the topic of the experienced quality in urban environments is as important as ever also with sustainability in mind.

The future of the human civilization will be directed by how cities are designed, developed, and re-designed and what further forms they take. What has not been in the scope of the discussion of this article, are the social and moral features of architecture and urban environments, to the great extent they also affect the aesthetic features. It is around these factors, that future work needs to be done in order to fully understand the complexity of the human aesthetic sensibilities and the extent to which contemporary and future cities take them into consideration.

5. Conclusions

This article has traced how the aesthetics of the city is linked to the aesthetics of architecture through the notion of the human environment. Instead of attempting to define aesthetics of architecture as such anew, the focus here has been on understanding how the aesthetic approach to individual works of architecture develops when attention is directed to the complex context of the city. How this, in turn, transforms into an overall notion of urban aesthetics, is also preliminarily sketched. The initial hypothesis has been, that "human environment" is an important mediating concept when pursuing an integral aesthetic understanding of the city which is not derived solely from the aesthetics of architecture.

The built environment is an important factor in defining the aesthetics of the city. However, it is only one factor, the influence of which to the overall aesthetics differs case by case. This ratio of human versus more natural elements in a city is not fixed either, which in the contemporary times of overdesign or overplanning of cities makes urban aesthetics an especially important topic for broader discussion. If urban aesthetics is to

be developed into a more defined area of interest, its relation to the aesthetics of architecture and human environments will need further clarification. This article has been an attempt to initiate this discussion in a contemporary framework by presenting what similarities and differences these overlapping areas of philosophical and practical interest have.

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Shifting Sensibilities: Architecture and the Aesthetics of the City

Aesthetic interest in architecture is a well-documented and discussed area of specialization in architectural philosophy. However, how it is related to the broader and so far, less-defined area of the aesthetics of the city is not equally clear. This article traces how aesthetics of the city is formulated based on architectural aesthetics but also through the notion of the human environment. The intention is to show, how aesthetic attention to architecture, building details, and analysis of the experience of architectural stylistic phenomena translates into a heightened awareness of the aesthetic dimensions of the urban lifeform. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the urban environment is interpreted based on information gained through the senses and we analyze and assess the city in the process continuously. This article presents some of the contemporary ideas developed within the aesthetics of architecture and the aesthetics of the city. The aim is to show a continuation from the aesthetic interest in the architectural form to the aesthetic interest which has the urban form in its focus. This is done through the notion of the human environment, which has been notably present in the philosophical study of environmental aesthetics. The article attempts to contribute to a growing body of literature defining urban aesthetics as a separate field of philosophical and applied environmental aesthetics.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, Architecture, City, Urban aesthetics, Human environment