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Aesthetic Engagement in the City

Nathalie Blanc

Translated from French by Miriam Rosen

This article aims at showing how environmental aesthetics relates to the common environment, the ordinary environment that we discuss, share, and live in. Aesthetics has primarily been understood in relation to art and art history, but it has now been emancipated from this framework of interpretation. In the wake of John Dewey, aesthetics has become the problem of experience as ordinary sensitivity. One can even think that it is a question of adequately defining the world of sensitivity that rests on the faculty of perception: both the capacity to perceive and the concept of the perceptual commons that follows from this. The forms that are perceived could then very well be understood as those we have in common and that we discuss in questions of policy (formal commons).

Arnold Berleant, in his essay "The Aesthetic Politics of Environment," explains:

Such a vision brings us to the need for recognizing and shaping environment. It may be that the perceptual commons identifies the establishing conditions of the human environment, that is, of the human world, and that in shaping environment we are enhancing and making coherent all its participating constituents.[\[1\]](#)

In the remarks that follow I would like to show just how much aesthetic engagement, involving active participation in the appreciative process, sometimes by overt physical action but always by creative perceptual involvement,[\[2\]](#) concerns urban lives and also, in spite of the eminently artificial nature of the urban environment, how much it draws on the depth of the perceptual experience involved. Indeed, if there is knowledge in our city-dwellers' gaze, it is not this erudition that gives the aesthetic experiences their depth and liveliness, but the human capacity to project ourselves into these environments, to feel connected to them ecologically.

1. Aesthetic engagement in urban space

Today's worldwide urbanization has profoundly transformed humans' relations with their natural and built environments. The latter is often considered as an entirely artificial setting, but the presence of ecological dynamics shows that it remains a living environment for many species. Experiencing the city, in fact, attests to a natural dimension that contributes to a renewed appreciation of the urban life setting. The numerous mobilizations in favor of nature in the city are accompanied by an appropriation of the urban environment that has been encouraged by the awareness of overall ecological issues. The fact that urbanites are expressing a desire to reconnect with nature in the city is in keeping with the elimination of the subject-object dichotomy. But before going any further, I would like to make several remarks about the debates around aesthetic engagement, environmental aesthetics, and eco-aesthetics.

First of all, it is important to stress the practical experience of the urban environment and the relationships that make it a framework for experiencing the city. This practice

constitutes the heart of a vital process that we can term *environmentalization*, that is to say, the creation of environments proper to the human being. The sensory materiality of the city contributes to this. Consequently, the representation of the environment is the result of a process involving keen aesthetic engagement. The individuals and communities sharing such aesthetic engagement do not dissociate the urban experience (as something appreciative, creative, central, and representational) from the production of the urban environment. Giving the urban setting its full meaning, this aesthetic engagement brings into play a learning experience, narratives, visions, landscapes, and panoramas.

Second, this experience of the city has recently taken a new turn that might be termed aesthetic and environmental. City-dwellers have gradually become aware not only of the importance of nature in the urban setting but also of the environmental issues arising from the damages caused by human activities, locally and globally. This growing awareness, through mobilizations, has gradually produced a change in the shaping of the city and has contributed to the creation of a new urban aesthetic (especially visible in eco-neighborhoods and other such experiments). In short, the aesthetic experience of the city is not limited to what has been constructed but includes living environments as well.

Third, the idea of aesthetic engagement involves an active experience so that the aesthetic experience of environment increases the value of the environment and provides an opportunity to talk about it and about oneself at the same time. By simultaneously enhancing the self and the environment or a particular aspect of it, aesthetic engagement constitutes a recognition of oneself in the environment.[\[3\]](#)

Fourth, the perceptual habits governing our daily lives blot out part of the spectacular, monumental nature of the built city in favor of a singular syncopated experience that tends to be associated with urban rhythms. To cite one example, a contemporary analysis of aesthetic engagement inevitably refers to an experiential framework caught between the extremes of mobility and immobility. This gives the city and its different urban spaces an uncertain appearance, like a kind of hesitation waltz between the extreme fixity of the spaces as setting and the great fluidity of the processes – a phenomenon that is tied at once to contemporary capitalism and a desire to make urban spaces physically safe. Such a reading takes into account phenomena of mobility (roads and motorways, flows of data and persons, etc.), regardless of the speed, as well as relations between the built and the natural, and the tangible and the intangible. The particular aesthetic that emerges foregrounds the inhumanity of the situations encountered (from the high-speed motorways of urban networks to the traffic jams of the city taken as machine). All the same, the spread of mobility networks comes up against local and/or environmental resistances that take inspiration from novel forms of action to defend precious or endangered environments and species.

At the micro level, the city proclaims itself the site of friendly movement, such as *flâneurs*, improvised byways, and shortcuts. Various sources of legitimacy are invoked: pollution, the need to slow down, new perceptions of the urban landscape, all sorts of leitmotifs in remarks about the need for a “friendlier” aesthetic perception of the city, as well. In less than twenty years, we have gone from the hegemony of the automobile, in Western cities at least, to the renaissance of so-called friendly transport and the re-emergence of figures until now lost in modernity: the pedestrian, the cyclist, even the farmer.

This trend opposes two forms of disengagement. The first is tied to the professionalization and highly technical process of urban planning, which has altered the sensory features of the city and prohibited many customs and practices (sleeping on the grass, savoring the odor of springtime, watching the stars, feeding the birds, etc.). The second form of disengagement comes from the privatization and commodification of the “public” space, where a significant portion of the road network is reserved for automobiles, advertising, and various means of blocking and closing off the space.

Here it must also be emphasized that the aesthetic experience, whether individual or collective, reflects forms of engagement in the environment that lead to understanding it in such a way as to resist normative injunctions concerning our ordinary behaviors. In this sense, turning the environment upside down means doing the same to ourselves. City-dwellers and their environment are closely interdependent on a conceptual level, which might be qualified as cultural ecology, and they perceive the depth of this interdependence. Thus, the beauty of neglected urban neighborhoods claimed by certain residents raises questions of ethics, individual dignity, and environmental justice.

The issue here is to elaborate an alternative way of understanding environmental processes. This alternative path rejects the social constructionism that endows societies and individuals with a kind of pure power to shape the environment. It also rejects a kind of naturalism or realism that would grant scientific objectification a higher power for revealing reality. This alternative path draws on research dealing with agency and intra-action. To begin by explaining these terms, we can say that the on-going relations human beings maintain with their environments lead them to jointly construct and elaborate a shared world as a frame of reference.^[4] Aesthetic engagement is a powerful means of shaping environments. Consequently, it is no longer possible to understand a given event without including the observational setup and even the ways in which the observation, the environment, and the actors are constructed. A few examples will allow us to illustrate the way aesthetic engagement accompanies thinking about the city.

2. The cockroach in the city: a shady animal

The first example deals with a truly urban creature, the cockroach. Interdisciplinary research on the population dynamics of this species in three French cities: Paris, Lyons, and Rennes, have demonstrated the usefulness of aesthetics to characterize the behaviors it sets off. The cockroach (or *Blatta*, to use its scientific name) is specifically urban because, like other increasingly numerous animals, it profits from the ecological conditions provided by the modern city (constant, year-round heat in buildings, moisture, abundant hiding places, and the presence of food). In this sense, we are studying the ecology and ethology of this species of insect by situating it in a context that has not often been studied, that of the representations and practices it engenders.

This pioneering study, in both its form and content, has led to appreciating the significance of the aesthetics of the cockroach and the practices that characterize our reactions to it. In addition to bringing out its formal qualities and the way it is perceived (a dark insect with many feet, highly mobile, taking refuge in dirty places, fleeing human beings and light), the aesthetic experience of this creature includes a large place for the imagination. The same imagination is brought to bear on the aesthetics of the neighborhood and the people living there. This kind of insect contributes to a debate that makes its presence an element full of

meaning, as an indication, for example, of the stigmatization of disadvantaged neighborhoods in which they proliferate.

A woman who used to live in the countryside thus conveys the shame she feels through this account of her life in an urban housing block:

People weren't used to seeing us in this kind of environment. That's how you discover who your friends are. It's the same for the building. People say, "Do you see where you're living, how it smells, what the people are like, their color?" For me, it was clear, I warned the people who were coming here: "There are cockroaches, if that bothers you, you leave, and if it doesn't bother you, you stay."

Her way of dealing with the cockroaches stems from a broader struggle to adjust to a place that represents the "slum belt" and the behavior of some of the residents (reciprocal intolerance, irresponsibility, etc.). She is trying to improve her living conditions.

People imagine that the animal is dark and associate it with building technology: the plumbing, the interstices between buildings, all kinds of crevices constitute its "home." This is where it settles, takes refuge when someone chases it, lies low in preparation for invading the nooks and crannies of private space. In other words, it is a shady animal taking up residence in the recesses of the everyday.

By extension, this animal of the shadows represents the foreigner, the other, who, in these housing blocks in the south of Rennes, a French city in Brittany with some 292,000 inhabitants, may be seen as a problem. As one of the women queried explains: "One year, we came back from vacation and the walls were crawling. That must have come from somewhere. People say it's because of the Arabs. Where it comes from and how it got there, but I don't really know...." Two reasons are advanced: first, the insect is dark and likes the night, and second, it likes heat: "I've never studied the cockroach's behavior. I've just noticed that we didn't see any in the daytime and that it comes out in the evening.

Once I was in Tunisia and went into a store and there were [cockroaches]. It seems that there are a lot of them in warm countries." These two features of the animal serve to associate it with the foreigner who, in France, comes from the South and has an olive-colored skin. In *Man and The Natural World*, Keith Thomas offers a striking example of this.^[5] The author analyzes the exclusion affecting animals and parts of humanity between the 16th and 19th centuries. He cites a letter written in 1879 by "an animal-lover whose house has been overrun by black beetles: "I hate making war even upon black beetles," it runs, "they have as much right to live as black Zulus. But what can one do in either case?"

The metaphorical dimension of the approach to the cockroach also demonstrates the power of aesthetic engagement. The metaphorical universe, a bridge suspended over reality, brings out the latter's illusory depth. The judgment that confers greater importance on one metaphor or another, to the point that some of them, like the sunset, seem perfectly obvious, recognizes the universality of the aesthetic experience. The metaphor creates a link with reality, offers the possibility of increasing the value of certain places: when we attribute one term to another, we are not simply enhancing the description of the first but giving it a

value. The metaphor increases the value of an imaginative, poetic way of grasping the real; it manifests an awareness of relationships uniting us with the environment.

By way of example, the etymology of the word *cockroach* in French – *cafard* – is a marvellous tracer of the metaphorical construction of relationships between human beings and things. The two terms used to designate this insect in French, the scientific name *Blatta* and the common name *cafard*, bring out the fact that both refer to its nocturnal habits.^[6] Indeed, *cafard* (1589) is probably borrowed from the Arabic *kāfir*, "unbeliever." The pejorative suffix *-ard* replaced the original ending and the word was adopted with the religious sense of "poser" or "hypocrite" employed polemically in the sixteenth century, especially during France's religious wars between Catholics and Protestants. It seems that the everyday meaning of *Blatta* (*blatte* in French), attested from 1542, is a metaphorical use of "religious hypocrite" now applied to a dark-colored animal hiding from the light. This meaning was initially regional (Normandy, Berry) but spread into French as a whole by the nineteenth century. The term *blatte*, from the Latin *blatta*, which covers various insects "fleeing the light" (Pliny), follows the same lines. Through the intermediary of scientific Latin, the naturalists of the second half of the eighteenth century established *Blatta* as a genus of cockroaches. The animal's night-time habits thus play a large role in the representations and practices surrounding it, as demonstrated by many literary texts (where the cockroach swarms, threatens, should be exterminated, renders uncomfortable, etc.).

3. Natural spaces in the city: sensory experience and scientific knowledge

Second, studies attempting to characterize people's relationships to nearby patches of nature, and more specifically, to the greenways in the greater Paris area, have shown that sensory, aesthetic engagement permits the richness of nature to be characterized other than by the use of scientific terms that usually attest to particular knowledge. Thus, if neither the ecological dimension of biodiversity nor the spatial dimension of the continuity is clearly perceived, do we still have to conclude that there is no link between the attachment mentioned above and the existing biodiversity? Several questions from the survey addressed the users' sensory perceptions in these spaces. On the basis of the findings, these perceptions bring out an ecological dimension that, even if it is not consciously defined, is reflected nonetheless in the interest these spaces generate. The presence of animals, for example, is important: no fewer than 88% of the sample state that they see animals. Even if we remove replies concerning pets such as cats and dogs, there are still 65% of the replies mentioning birds, more than 30% citing different kinds of mammals, 5% mentioning fish and nearly 3% talking about insects. On the average, users thus declare that they have seen between two and three animals and cite a total of nearly eighty species.

Vegetal diversity is also perceived. With regard to trees, 70% of those surveyed indicated that they have distinguished several species, with half of them able to cite at least two. The percentages are slightly lower for grasses (52% of users identified several kinds), with a total of nearly eighty herbaceous plant species named by those surveyed. This attention paid to animal and vegetable species is also part of the attractiveness of these spaces, and even more interestingly, of the well-being they may generate. Forty-two per cent of the respondents declared that they heard pleasant sounds and 39% that they smelled pleasant odors. This feeling is directly tied to biodiversity: the pleasant sounds primarily come from animals (72%), and secondarily from vegetation or water (13%), while the odors depend

above all on plants (69%). Sounds and odors related to biodiversity thus contribute directly in the well-being felt in these greenways, as well as the sites' "aesthetic quality" that is cited among the terms best describing these spaces, just after "calm" and "verdure." We thus observe a profound difference between the knowledge of biodiversity (practically non-existent) and its perception that constitutes a large part of the attraction felt for these spaces. The role of these sensory perceptions as "gateways" to a greater awareness of biodiversity ultimately brings out the importance of the places, considered both from the standpoint of their biological diversity and from that of their aesthetic qualities as landscapes.

4. The experience of illness: rediscovering the senses

Third, aesthetic engagement helps to treat the symptoms of today's illnesses. In terms of the link with nature, this does not just involve a spiritual reconnection but everything affecting city-dwellers, directly and physically.

Here, the University Hospital in the north-eastern French city of Nancy offers an extremely interesting case in its "therapeutic garden" created by the hospital in 2008 for patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Conceived within the logic of horticultural therapy, the "Art, Memory and Life Garden," as it is called, brings together elements stimulating the cognitive mechanisms of Alzheimer's patients. To that end, it is divided into four sections evoking the classical elements: air, earth, water, and fire.^[7] The idea is to mobilize all the senses: sight, through the colors and landscapes; hearing, through the sounds of the fountains and sound sculptures; touch, through the plants; smell, through the scents and fragrances of the flower beds. Memory, language, and emotion are solicited by the cycle of the seasons and exchanges with the support staff. Strolling in the garden also provides a spatial and temporal frame of reference. Because it is outdoors and accessible to visitors, it is a place of openness and thus of mediation.

5. The senses and science

A final example concerning atmospheric pollution demonstrates how the capacity of aesthetic engagement for enhancing the value of everyday experience is such that the scientific knowledge that might be associated with it is sometimes not even mentioned. The study in question was based on nearly sixty semi-structured interviews concerning ordinary residents' practices and representations with regard to air pollution in the eastern French city of Strasbourg. Half of the sample was composed of individuals suffering from asthma or allergies to grass pollen, following the principle of the "case-control" study widely used in epidemiology. Two interviews with heads of the local Association for the Monitoring and Study of Atmospheric Pollution (ASPA, the organization that officially monitors air quality in the Alsace Region), as well as a study of ASPA articles in the press, complemented the survey. These elements were then compared with measures of air quality indoors and outdoors carried out by physicians and chemists. The findings of this study may be summarized in three main points:

- 1- The individuals queried paid little attention to information about air pollution. They relied on sense information (odor, sight, noise) to construct their understanding of the phenomenon.

2- The standard, objective scientific information disseminated about air quality by the ASPA was quite remote from the residents' empirical, sensory knowledge of air pollution. This was reinforced by an attachment to a concrete social context with which they identified. The opposition between these two spheres of knowledge about the physico-chemical phenomena is striking.

3- For the city-dwellers, the practical form of involvement against pollution is a way of linking it symbolically to other environmental phenomena. Some of those surveyed believed, for example, that the vegetation protected them from pollution.

Such reasoning was based less on scientific knowledge than on the feeling that greenery purifies and that the "garden" it suggests – Paradise in many religious cultures – could shelter them from the pollution they considered to be a product of unnatural human activities. We can thus see that the cultures of nature, relying on an engaged aesthetic perception of the environment, play a fundamental role in understanding that environment and, consequently, on the practices people follow.

6. Conclusion

If it is essential to take aesthetic engagement into account in urban development, it is just as necessary to remain critically vigilant about the methods and objectives of this integration. Indeed, today's decision-makers and developers do take aesthetic experience into consideration; but it nonetheless contributes essentially to an aestheticization of the environment that favors a spectacular vision of the city. But is it not possible to think of the city as an experience of discontinuity and syncopation? The light used to create striking night-time images of places that become impossible to miss, the greenery or the mix of city and nature all contribute to turning the city into a spectacle. The objective is to create hypnotic images of the urban space, to capture the tourist's eye, to produce instantaneity and silence, "ghostliness," or images that, coming back to haunt us, obliterate the reconstituted fluidity of the different experiences.

The city also becomes a mirror, a place reflecting a singular condition, a looking-glass. Urban policies, notably in France, tend to multiply sensory experiences to create a backdrop. (The "Paris-Plages" artificial beach is an example of this). Thus, the setting is increasingly understood as an attempt to improve urban well-being. The importance assumed by quality of life is symptomatic of this situation. Public authorities, but also representatives of civil society, are expressing a new demand for well-being that is deemed essential to the urban life of cities. It thus marks the transition from an urban *aesthetic* (space as setting) to an urban *aesthesis* or sense perception (urban environment as atmosphere), from a space of decors to a space of well-being. Urban strategies thus reflect this shift toward an ecological urbanism in the sense of a multitude of possible experiences. Certain places in the city would be able to produce emotions or new aesthetic experiences. It should be noted, however, that representatives of civil society, such as community garden movements, consider this environmental approach as a change of lifestyle. Nonetheless, these various changes tend to enlarge the place for the sensory and the living in systems in order to increase the value of the urban environment.

Do our bodies now contribute to the environmental fashioning of urban space?[\[8\]](#) The "sensorial" standards thus being created are now integrated into environmental policies,

town-planning, and "landscaping" practices where artists participate as well. In a broad sense, the development of these ecological events plays a *de facto* role in producing public space. This involves, first of all, ejecting inhabitants deemed undesirable, whether these are living species, such as pigeons, or the homeless, who are prevented from staying in the protected urban space. Second, the multiplication of sensory experiences in that space and the creation of a living environment that meets city-dwellers' demands for leisure activities underscore the theses of aesthetic capitalism: [9] capital is invested and produced in the commodification of the urban environment. The production of a green environment is part of the branding of the product "ecology" that is appropriated by capitalists and urban policy-makers to inject dynamism into a society keen on consuming new experiences. For the cities' political leaders and technical experts, the artist often appears to be the means of rehabilitating damaged or ailing environments in the "green" imagination of an ecology-oriented society. Navigating between local development and political manipulation, the artist offers the potential of a new reading or experience of the sites. The urban space, formerly dedicated to specific urban functions (services, production, etc.), becomes the very locus of experimentation and the creation of new events. Animals, vegetation, air, and climate are all part of this rereading of the city.

Endnotes

[1] Arnold Berleant, "The Aesthetic Politics of Environment," in *Aesthetics beyond the Arts, New and Recent Essays* (Ashgate, 2012, p. 187).

[2] Aesthetics is returned to its etymological origins by stressing the primacy of sense perception, sensible experience, and perception itself was reconfigured to recognize the mutual participation of all sensory modalities, including kinesthetic sensibility.

[3] A. Honneth, *La réification. Petit traité de théorie critique*. (Paris: NRF essais, Gallimard, 2007).

[4] K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics And the Entanglement of Matter And Meaning* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007). See also A. Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[5] Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*, (London: Penguin, PP History PB, 1991)

[6] Translator's note: The English 'cockroach' is also a borrowed word, apparently taken from the Spanish name for the same insect, *cucaracha*, and anglicized into *cock + roach*.

[7] Horticultural therapy entails a comprehensive practical rehabilitation of the individual through gardening activities adapted to different kinds of handicaps (physical, sensory, mental, or multiple). It may serve as a preventive practice or as a form of therapeutic education.

[8] G. Canguilhem, *Le normal et le pathologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966).

[9] O. Assouly, *Le capitalisme esthétique. Essai sur l'industrialisation du goût* (Paris: Cerf humanités, 2008).