Chapter 11

Ideas for an Ecological Aesthetics

Introduction

Considering environment aesthetically is a comparatively recent development. The focus on the aesthetic dimension of environment began in the 1970s and gained increasing prominence. Appearing sporadically at first, interest in environmental aesthetics developed during subsequent decades in the U.K., Canada, and the U.S., and more insistently and intensively in Finland. Beginning in the 1990s, the aesthetics of environment gained wide attention in China. Environmental aesthetics can now be considered an established domain of inquiry that is international in scope and that draws on and influences several disciplines. It appears most prominently in philosophical aesthetics, environmental psychology, and landscape design, and it is a recognized focus in the visual arts, literature, and the environmental sciences.

As interest in environmental aesthetics became a global phenomenon, it cut across philosophical styles as well as cultural traditions. There is much to gain by continuing this momentum. Yet while we all face similar environmental problems, ways of thinking about environment vary. Different cultural traditions, different philosophical cultures, different conditions of life influence the way we understand experience, environment, aesthetics, and ecology, and their place in life experience. There are obvious reasons for this variation. At the same time, environmental issues are no longer only regional but involve changes whose effects spread without limit atmospherically as well as geographically. There are compelling
reasons, therefore, to consider whether there is any commonality on which these differences can converge.

Common problems invite coordinated solutions. It would greatly assist cooperative action on environmental issues if we shared a similar understanding of the ideas that are central to this situation. Encouraging as the global interest in environment may be, it is nonetheless the case that research on the aesthetics of environment displays significant differences in the meaning of its central ideas. Recognizing such differences would help communication and cooperation. More important, perhaps, it would enrich our understanding of the variety of dimensions and experiences of environment, a precondition of intelligent and effective action on environmental issues. Fundamental here are the inconsistencies and confusions in what is meant by the central ideas. By clarifying their meanings we may not only come to a common understanding and engage in collaborative action. Our understanding may itself be enlarged and enriched.

In such a spirit I should like to offer some reflections on how we might begin to bring together the sometimes disjointed thinking on the underlying issues. This chapter also hopes to promote our understanding of the cultural differences that impede the response on a global scale to common issues concerning environment and its aesthetic dimensions. By providing a better grasp of these differences, this discussion may help with those issues.

**Words about environment**

The idea of environment as an all-inclusive context is central to an ecological understanding. In such a conception, humans are wholly interdependent with natural forces and other organic and inorganic objects and applies equally to urban environments as to so-called natural ones. Further, 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 parallel in experience in aesthetic engagement.

It is clear that terminology is critical in these matters. Unless we can agree on what we mean by ‘environment,’ ‘ecology,’ and ‘aesthetics’ when we try to coordinate widespread responses to environmental questions, our actions will be less effective and may even work at cross-purposes. A major complication here is the influence of cultural patterns of aesthetic sensibility in understanding environmental experience. It raises the question of whether and how to reconcile vastly different conceptual understandings and perceptual experiences in ways that will promote our aesthetic experience of environment and the effectiveness of our collaboration in dealing with environmental issues.

We should begin, then, with a clear understanding of the basic concepts involved. Yet this is not easy for our concepts are so embedded in historical uses and cultural matrices that ideas that seem intuitively simple and unambiguous may well embody confusion and even contradiction. As interest in environmental aesthetics has grown beyond the attention of a few widely-scattered scholars to enter into national and international discussion, problems with clarity and difficulties in communication have become increasingly troublesome.

Furthermore, no concept in philosophy is self-evident, simple, or self-contained. Every basic idea is unavoidably caught in a network of theoretical assumptions and implications. Any apparent obviousness belies these hidden debts and allegiances. There are no simples in philosophy; culture and theory oblige us to begin with complexity. This is clearly the case with the four basic ideas that inform our discussion: environment, aesthetics, ecology, and experience. Let me consider them, first, in turn and then in relation to one another.
1. environment

It might seem undeniable to take environment as the foundational idea of this inquiry. Surely it is the overall focus of our concern. It is a commonplace these days to speak of an environmental crisis, and this is not only a manner of speaking. People across the globe are increasingly distressed by erratic and unseemly weather events: disrupted seasonal changes, extreme temperature fluctuation, freak wind storms, record floods, and tidal waves, not to mention the violent disruptions caused by hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes. Added to these so-called natural disasters are those caused by human action and error. I am inclined to think, however, that rather than beginning with an understanding of environment, the discussion should actually terminate in an enlarged sense of environment. That is, identifying environmental issues as basic, such as erratic weather and climate change, is a consequence of people’s attitudes and practices and not because of any conceptual order. As a leading idea, environment invites a larger, more inclusive understanding than climatological changes and crises.

2. aesthetics

And yet the very breadth of environmental concerns makes a clear focus difficult. Environment embraces many regions and perspectives: preservation, conservation, resource protection, land use and planning, public policy, recreation, and the enjoyment of nature, to name some of the most obvious. All are relevant and all are important, but our concern here is with a clearer understanding of environment and its issues.

Perhaps it would serve better to take an aesthetic interest in environment as fundamental. In some ways it is fundamental because our sensory engagement with environment precedes and underlies every other interest, and sensory perception lies at the
heart of the meaning of aesthetics. It is also central in aesthetic experience, and the sensible experience of environment lies at the heart of every environmental interest and use.

Moreover, since our concern here is with environmental aesthetics, aesthetics should be our point of departure. Whether we take aesthetics here in a narrow sense to mean environmental beauty, or consider it broadly as sensible experience in general, that is, as the range of sensory perception, aesthetics is necessarily a point at which environmental concerns intersect human experience and activity. We might even claim that the aesthetic, as the fundamental understanding of direct perceptual experience, is not only our starting point but also our ultimate goal.

Yet while we easily speak of the aesthetic, it is an idea that is not always clearly understood. A major step in grasping the idea of the aesthetic lies in associating it with sense experience, for the literal meaning of the Greek term ‘aisthēsis’ is “perception by the senses,” and the perfection of sensory awareness is what Baumgarten had in mind when he chose this term in 1750 to name the discipline of aesthetics.

Much of course has been written as a palimpsest on that word, but I should like to return close to its basic, original meaning by refining aesthetics as “the theory of sensibility.” ‘Sensibility’ develops the perceptual core of the discipline of aesthetics by discerning three aspects. First and most basic in aesthetic experience is perceptual acuteness. While this is biological in origin, differences in the sensitivity of our sense organs, in training, and in the intensity of attention all influence perceptual acuteness. A related facet of sensibility is the capacity for perceptual discrimination. This varies depending on how our sensory awareness is developed: education, knowledge, and practice are strong influences. Sensibility has yet a third feature and that is emotional sensitivity to perceptual experience and, while
responsiveness varies among people, it is affected by life experience and by background in the arts, as well as by biochemical conditions.

Aesthetics introduces the experience of sensory perception, and aesthetic engagement identifies the experience of intense perceptual involvement, even intimacy, that characterizes the sensible experience of connectedness and participation on occasions of acute perception. It is epitomized by the intense perceptual involvement elicited by the various arts at their most effective, but it may also occur in the transcendent experience of natural beauty and of the sublime. Aesthetic engagement can thus be understood as the experiential analogue of ecology. Both are holistic and contextual, whether grasped from the outside or the inside; both are all-inclusive; both place the human factor in active juxtaposition with the other elements and conditions. Aesthetic engagement 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.

3. ecology

These two ideas, environment and aesthetics, are clearly basic constituents at the heart of an inquiry into environment. But there is yet a third: ecology. This may seem like a late addition to the discussion for, as I noted earlier, ecology has only more recently assumed an important place in our understanding of environment. Indeed, as a region of scientific theory and investigation, ecology emerged only in the late nineteenth century. And while it began as a biological theory about the interdependence of organisms in particular environments considered as ecosystems, its basic concept has spread throughout the social as well as natural sciences.
Ecology may seem to be derivative, a way of thinking about environment that has only secondary interest here. Until recently, ecological concerns have not had a notable place in the work of Western environmental aestheticians. Indeed, ecology figures most prominently in discussions of environmental aesthetics by Chinese researchers. Is this merely a cultural difference or does it entail a theoretical divergence?

Reviewing the underpinning of an aesthetics of environment, I have come to think that ecology can make a significant, indeed a determinative contribution. By starting with an ecological orientation, we gain an illuminating perspective on this inquiry, for it transfigures our understanding of both environment and aesthetics. In fact, ecological aesthetics can serve as the leading idea here, an idea whose meaning decides all that follows. Let me explain how that is.

An ecological perspective considers environment as a system of interacting, interdependent participating factors. Environment in general, then, must be thought of as a complex composed of interacting, interdependent constituents. Because of this interdependence, an ecosystem is not the sum of independent parts or organisms. Rather it is an unstable complex in precarious balance striving to sustain its coherence. I use the word ‘complex’ rather than ‘whole’ because the coherence of an ecosystem is the outcome of a dynamic process involving a multitude of organisms, objects, factors, and conditions. It may achieve balance but that is as a complex, never a unity. We can think of an ecosystem then as a context rather than a thing or an object.¹

An ecological perspective transforms the concept of environment. It leads us to discard the common understanding of environment as surroundings and re-envision it as an all-inclusive, coherent complex embracing humans, when present, together with other living organisms and the physical conditions with which they live, including geographical features and climate. Because ecology envisions these as interconnected, it is necessary to think of the constituents of environment as all-inclusive and continuous. In this sense environment is holistic: nothing outside, nothing apart.²

Humans, then, must be understood as participating parts of their context, understood and experienced from within. From the human standpoint environment becomes experience and, thinking ecologically, environment must be understood as contextual experience. Aesthetics fastens on the sensible aspects of that experience, and so environment, considered aesthetically, is perceptual. Thus the language of environmental aesthetics brings us to the idea of experience; our understanding of experience is fundamental in everything we say about environment.

4. experience

The idea of experience has held a central place in the history of philosophic thought, beginning with the pre-Socratics and extending to the very present. Generally considered synecdochically as sense experience, its transitoriness and ephemerality have troubled philosophers in their search for coherence, regularity, and stability. Thus a bias developed

² Val Plumwood, in Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), develops the implications of ecological thinking for philosophic rationality and ethics. The same cultural and natural embeddedness that affects our understanding of environmental aesthetics influences profoundly our understanding of environmental justice.
against change in favor of permanence. Change was denigrated as unstable and thus unworthy and destructive of human good in comparison with the ideal of absolute permanence of things regarded *sub specie aeternitatis*. Experience has a history that runs the length of philosophic time yet, oddly enough, the history of experience remains to be written. In the present discussion, understanding experience is basic to understanding environment.

Starting with experience may seem a strange way to pursue a discussion of environment. I realize, of course, that environment is usually thought of in a scientific or quasi-scientific, objective sense as *the* environment, a definable subject-matter, something to be studied by various branches of physical science, such as physical geography, climatology, and ecology. These identify environment objectively, as an object. But it is an object that becomes more personal when we ponder the effects of global warming, since all living creatures, humans included, are affected by climate change and its consequences. These influence the habitability of various regions of the earth’s surface, they affect agriculture and food production, and they force us to cope with the effects of changing temperature gradients and new and more extreme weather patterns. It is convenient when considering global climate changes to externalize environment, to speak of *the* environment as if environment were something apart from ourselves but about which we are concerned.

This, I think, offers only a partial and misleading understanding. It is partial because it fragments environment by circumscribing and objectifying environmental experience, abstracting it into separate parts, and treating problems as isolated events requiring specific, local solutions. It is misleading because, by regarding these abstractions as if they were real and objective, it takes a derivative understanding as if it were the basic one. One of the lessons of ecology is that, in relation to human needs and human uses, there is no
environment out there apart from and distinct from us.\textsuperscript{3} This leads us to recognize that the fundamental significance of the idea of environment is its human meaning, more pointedly, its meaning in experience. And environment is not experienced objectively but is always connected with us, where we are. We are part of our environment. By beginning with experience, then, we begin with ourselves, with the human world of which we are an integral part. And when we come to speak of environment, then, it only falsifies things to think that we can objectify it and consider environment independent of human place, participation, and use.

I have tried to offer an orderly progression of the leading ideas of environmental aesthetics. Oddly enough, what have emerged are actually two orders. I began with environment, turned next to aesthetics, followed it with ecology, and concluded by interpreting all within the matrix of experience. This is a logical order, with environment as the broadest concept to which we then give an aesthetic cast, and arrive at a special sense of environmental aesthetics as ecological.

**The logical order of environmental aesthetics**

environment  

aesthetics  

environmental aesthetics  

ecological aesthetics  

experience

There is another order, however; one that is truer to experience. Indeed, when we cast our ideas in the language of experience, the order becomes inverted, for starting with

experience, all experience is actually contextual and so can be understood ecologically. And as experience is primarily perceptual, it is always aesthetic. Finally, taken most inclusively, we come to understand the idea of environment as ecological aesthetics. Thus the aesthetics of environment is ecological.

**The experiential order of environmental aesthetics**

experience

ecology

aesthetics as sensibility (perception) \(^4\)

environment experienced as ecological and aesthetic

I opt for the language of experience. Here we begin with a commitment to the largest perceptual context, one that the concept of ecology reflects most adequately. This, as we have seen, is not the biological setting alone or just the physical conditions of environment. Since our reference is to experience, the human perceiver is central, and the condition that binds together all aspects of the context is perceptual experience. Such experience is by definition aesthetic, and the aesthetic thus becomes the primary mode of experience. For these reasons, then, environmental aesthetics can be thought of as ecological aesthetics, and ecological aesthetics as part of cultural ecology.

\(^4\) I have come to consider aesthetics most broadly and inclusively as the theory of sensibility. Sensibility has three facets: perceptual acuteness, perceptual discrimination, and emotional sensitivity. Aesthetics includes the aesthetics of art in general and of the individual arts, and has expanded to include, among other things, the aesthetics of nature, environmental aesthetics, and everyday aesthetics.
The experiential “order” of environmental aesthetics (2):

experience ➔ ecology ➔ aesthetics as sensibility (perception) ➔ environment
experienced as ecological and aesthetic

Thus we are led to the largest perceptual context, one that the concept of ecology reflects most adequately. Ecology here, as we have seen, is not the biological setting alone or just the physical conditions of environment. Since our reference is to experience, the human perceiver is central, and the condition that binds together all aspects of the context is perceptual experience. Such perceptual experience is by definition aesthetic; the aesthetic thus becomes the primary mode of experience. For these reasons, then, environmental aesthetics can be thought of as ecological aesthetics, and ecological aesthetics as part of cultural ecology.

Some implications

cultural sensibility

There is obviously much more that needs to be brought into consideration, for enlarging the concept of ecology to embrace culture leads to the importance of including those cultural factors that affect aesthetic sensibility. Among these is sensory awareness, which varies greatly among different societies, such as the Buddhist awareness of breath, and the related Chinese notion of qi (chi) or ki in Japanese, literally air or breath, usually translated as energy flow. Another mode of aesthetic sensibility is found in the Japanese concept of ma, which identifies the interpenetration of space and time in the awareness of an interval, either as a distance or a pause. Still another, powerful mode of sensibility that is found both in

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5. Arata Isozaki, M.A., Space-Time in Japan (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1979). Isozaki explains, “[S]pace was perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it, that is, space was recognized only in its relation to time-flow.” p.12. Here, space is understood as “the natural distance between two or more things existing in a continuity,” or “the
Aboriginal and native American cultures is a sensitivity to the land in its very formations, the soil as the repository of human history.

An even more fundamental difference in perception that may have its origin in a cultural ontology functioning as sensibility is the understanding prevalent in Euro-American societies of a separation between humans and nature, between self and other, and the related tendency to perceive the world apart from oneself as external and objective. This contrasts sharply with the awareness that prevails in Asian societies as well as indigenous cultures of humans embedded in natural things, processes, and events. In Chinese culture, for example, the interpenetration of humans and nature so characteristic of Taoist thinking and of humans and society in Confucian philosophy contrasts dramatically with the pervasive Western oppositions of man and nature, individual and society, subjectivity and objectivity. Cultural sensibility is thus an integral part of cultural ecology, of the human environment. It may be that ecological aesthetics is the most inclusive and comprehensive concept for dealing with environmental aesthetics.

*urban ecology*

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 as it does to so-called natural ones. It is important to liberate our ecological thinking from a biological model. Important and suggestive as this model is, its graphic forcefulness should be extended to other conditions. Especially since human life is

natural pause or interval between two or more phenomena occurring continuously.” Quoted from Iwanami, *Dictionary of Ancient Terms*. 


increasingly carried on in urban environments, environmental experience takes on new and extended perceptual dimensions.

Envisioning urban environmental aesthetics ecologically means recognizing its contextual character in perception. Here is one area in which empirical research can make a large contribution. How, for example, are the sensory modalities combined in new ways in such circumstances as heavy traffic, where sight and sound may be fused differently for pedestrians, drivers, and passengers; or in crowds that affect spatial perception, mobility and its relation to mass, and haptic awareness. Indeed, the perceptual ecology of the city gives prominence to mass and motion, to a heightened sense of masses that are stationary while others may be moving and at different speeds. Here is a rich area for perceptual exploration by phenomenologically inspired behavioral sciences.

*aesthetic engagement*

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, but it can also become the basis for creating an aesthetic ecology. Once the aesthetic significance of perceptual engagement is recognized, it can be incorporated deliberately into the design of environmental experience. Here it can serve as a guide in re-shaping and humanizing the urban landscape, in building an urban landscape in relation to people, to a human scale, to people’s activities, and to their perceptual comfort and wellbeing.

*ecology in experience*
Environmental aesthetics translates ecology into experience; it is the human meaning of ecology. This is another way of saying that ecology is a concept, the idea of an environment understood as a complex of interdependent objects and factors. The scope of such an environment is defined by the activity and intensity of such interdependence. As its force begins to fade and other factors and forces become prominent, a different ecosystem begins to emerge. Such boundaries are rarely sharp but distinctions are nonetheless possible as, for example, between an urban ecosystem and a suburban one, or between the city and the countryside. Mountains and valleys are distinguishable even though their precise boundaries cannot be plotted.

The aesthetic experience of environment is thus the perceptual counterpart of ecology. Environmental aesthetics embodies the ecological meaning of environment. It has profound implications for environmental understanding and design and thus for ecological aesthetics.

Ecology requires constant reference to aesthetic experience as a guide and a criterion in environmental design. The work of many environmental artists is important in pointing up the experiential aspect of environments, that is the awareness that environments do not consist of objects but of experiential relationships. Pioneer work is being done in integrating an aesthetic dimension in ecologically-oriented environmental design, and such work has great significance for both environmental and ecological aesthetics.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Such work is widely scattered and is international in scope. Three environmental designers whose work combines ecological and aesthetic concerns are the American Patricia Johanson, the Brazilian Fernando Chacel, and the Chinese Yu Kongjian.
Ecology and culture

The interplay of humans within the natural world is experienced and understood in sharply different ways in Western and Eastern cultures. An observation such as this would seem to force us into broad and overpowering generalities, and this is invariably misleading when joined with a commitment to the diversity and particularity of experience. Still, recognizing the dangers should not prevent us from recognizing common patterns, despite differences that exist among the many writers and movements that reflect them. And these patterns are revealing.

A full historical analysis would undoubtedly display a richly varied tapestry describing the human world. And a nuanced commentary would reflect their intermingling and divergent strands. But at the same time and for our purposes here, it is important that this variety and complexity not obscure the broad patterns that emerge. It is these that stand as a potent illustration of the cultural influences on experience. Stated boldly, the dominant patterns display the Western sense of separation of humans from the natural world, and the prevalent understanding in the East of the harmonious integration of nature and humans, are both of ancient origins.

The Western understanding is embodied in early texts that have had a powerful influence. The two most influential intellectual sources are works written down at approximately the same time, i.e. the fourth century B.C.E., and largely middle Eastern in origin. One justifies taking possession of the natural world for human purposes; the other denigrates sensory experience. The first is the Hebrew Bible, which establishes a justification
for humans appropriating the creatures, objects, and resources of nature for their own interests and uses. The other is Platonic philosophy that ascribes to natural objects a lowly status in the order of things and posits a higher reality that is the refuge of truth and reality itself, an understanding found throughout Plato’s dialogues and most famously in *The Republic*. Whitehead’s comment that Western civilization is a footnote to Plato testifies to its effect.

These influences have combined to shape the Western view of the natural environment. “Environment” is an idea we have devised to identify our material matrix and is commonly defined as “surroundings” in Western languages, giving linguistic credibility to a way of thinking endemic in Western culture. It reflects a tradition that we can trace to the religious beliefs and practices of ancient Greek Orphism that separated the physical world from what is distinctively human. It was an understanding appeared in various forms during the Golden Age of classic Greek philosophy and continued in religious and philosophical formulations to emerge in the Enlightenment in Descartes’ dualistic objectification of the physical world as the full rational reconstruction of human experience.

This historico-cultural development of Western civilization led to understanding the world as an objective condition separate from and independent of humans, and it turned

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8. Plato, *The Republic* V, 475-480; VI-VII.

9. E.g., the German Umwelt; the French environs.

10. The Orphic ideas have been traced to the fourth century B.C.E. but are likely even older. Relevant here is its mythology in which Zeus designates his illegitimate child Dionysus as his heir. His wife, Hera, incites the Titans to murder and eat Dionysus, but Zeus, when he learns of this, incinerates the Titans with a thunderbolt. Mankind is born from the ashes, which contain the bodies of the Titans and Dionysus, resulting in humans having a divine soul (Dionysus) and a body (the Titans) to which the soul is in bondage.
environment into an object for humans to control and manipulate. Thus we speak easily about the relation of person and environment, as if there were two distinct things that can be causally connected. Such a conception fits easily with the growth of early modern science and the technological revolution it generated. This was a development that quickly altered the human environment and led, among much else, to the environment-transforming practices that have reached a crisis level in our time.

In their rapid industrialization, Eastern countries, such as China, Japan, and India, have compressed Western development into a few short generations, resulting in many of the same environmental problems that the West is confronting. At the same time, the cultural historical influences in Eastern cultures provide the basis for a very different conception of environment that is struggling to assert itself against short-term economic and political interests. Common to the many different strains of Daoism is an understanding grounded in the view of living in harmony with nature. Eastern culture here offers a remarkable parallel with recent Western ecological thought, for it is a way of thinking that we can describe as ecological in character. Of course the first is a religio-cultural understanding and the other a scientific one. But what is relevant here is not their differing sources but their similar understanding. While originating as a biological theory, ecology offers a compelling theoretical framework that has not only shown its value in the social sciences but that has special relevance for the environmental sciences and for environmental philosophy.

What ecology offers is an understanding of environment as an integral whole. Environment thus does not consist of a relation between humans and their environment as distinct and separate entities. Environment rather includes the human as an interdependent and engaged constituent. One of the most important lessons we can draw from ecology is that
there is no environment apart from and distinct from us humans.\textsuperscript{11} Humans and environment need to be understood as interdependent constituents of a complex whole that has identifiable contributing factors but not separate parts. This is a way of thinking about the world, and it may help explain the attraction of ecological aesthetics for Chinese environmental aestheticians.\textsuperscript{12}

It is interesting to consider whether this cultural matrix is simply an alternative worldview. That would imply a cultural relativism in which the differences are essentially arbitrary. However, there are more or less accurate ways of representing environment, and we can claim that an ecological model better reflects our present knowledge of environment, whether understood in a physicalistic, scientific sense, in an experiential one, or philosophically. This does not imply an “objective,” absolute truth but rather a less assumptive understanding that shares the compelling, evidentiary claims of science. The conception of environment as ecological affirms its meaning as a human meaning, its meaning as experienced. As experienced, environment does not stand apart but is always related to humans, to the human world of interest, activity, and use. That is the human meaning of ecology.

On the subject of experience we encounter a great body of thought. From the physical and social sciences to the literary arts and philosophy, one can consider human experience the most inclusive subject of inquiry. This discussion of environmental aesthetics


offers but an endnote to that research. Perhaps, rather than an endnote, it is more of a
searchlight that may be directed over the range of scientific and scholarly commentary, since it
centers on understanding that experience on which all other inquiry rests.

At the risk of affirming the obvious, it will be useful to call attention to some
characteristics of experience that are easily overlooked. The categories into which we pour the
molten intangibilities of experience are so engrained in habitual thinking that we are likely to
assume them as ontological rather than customary: categories such as emotions, sensations,
thoughts, memories, ideas, feelings, imagination, consciousness, cognition, perception, and
more. The challenge is how to make the ephemeral tangible, and these categories have long
served as convenient receptacles. But like the proverbial emperor's new clothes, though we
persist in thinking we see those categories as something (i.e., as ontological), there is nothing
there. Moreover, taken alone, whatever meaning content such categories have is informed
and constrained by the habits of so-called “common sense,” heavily clouded by the multitude
of influences that give them conceptual shape and content. Think of the many meanings
given to “perception” and of the severely limited vocabulary with which we identify emotions,
as well as the metaphors with which we attempt to grasp consciousness, from James's
“stream” to Locke’s atomistic theory of substance and his corpuscular theory of mind.

Thus there are multiple “overlays” through which we discern and interpret experience.
One obvious overlay is cultural, expressed through our natal language, traditional practices,
prevailing beliefs and systems of belief, all infused with regional geographical and
climatological conditions as their context of reference. To this cultural overlay must be added
an historical one. Our understanding is subtly and not so subtly influenced by our historical
circumstances: the notable events and conditions of the time, in addition to their influence on
the cultural climate. We can identify still other overlays of differing scope, such as professional, avocational, social, and educational, along with the more transitory influences of taste, style, fads, and fashionable ideologies. All of these, moreover, are themselves categories through which we isolate and identify dimensions and perspectives of experience. These observations on the multiple matrices of experience are not intended to obfuscate our attempts at illuminating it. Rather they begin to make more explicit the multi-dimensional landscape of experience and lead us to recognize the conditions under which we attempt to grasp the human world.

What, one might ask, do these general comments have to do with the aesthetics of environment and how we think and talk about it? In one respect, merely to ask the question is to answer it, for environment is a fundamental category of experience through which we organize our understanding and identify the issues. It is important, however, to make these observations more definite by identifying basic cultural differences in understanding environment, recognizing all the while that large trends mask many variations. These differences, deeply historical and cultural, characterize differing relations of nature and humans that are fundamental in Western and Eastern thought.

Whether a resolution of this divergence is possible is a difficult question. The answer will not lie in a choice between simple alternatives but requires determinations that are circumstantial and may be complex. Satisfactory resolutions must be decided in relation to the specific context and to the particular points of balance between the options that are available. These will vary with scientific, poetic, and political environments and will reflect the order of values chosen, itself a cultural determination. Is it possible to attain equipoise between the technological capabilities of Western cultures and the cosmic proportionality of the Eastern?
The answer to this rests with whether the social and political development of human civilization has attained the capacity for such a resolution.

**Conclusion**

This rich array of ideas that does not allow for simple summary. I have tried to reshape the issues so that the relationships between conceptual understanding (ecological aesthetics) and perceptual experience (environmental aesthetics) become clearer. I continue to think that the former must be seen in the light of the latter. When we recognize that ideas originate in perception and should be translated back into experience, we can then proceed to reshape our world in ways that better meet our interests and fulfill our needs. The possibilities are there, often hidden in a miasma of false constructions and misty assumptions. Perhaps the chapters that follow will help draw them out and suggest in specific ways possible directions for a better environmental future.