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The City as an Aesthetic Space

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Abstract

This paper uses the relational space paradigm to bridge some gaps between the field of aesthetics and
the field of urban studies. By introducing the concept of aesthetic space, I analyze a particular sort of
direct lived experience through which memories of the past, latent reality and the actualized perceived
present are conjured together, informing one another. Studying the aesthetic space can help urban
researchers better understand how the world becomes internalized or externalized by inhabitants, how
they develop a stronger concern for justice, or how novelty is borne from a constant dialogue between
the ethical and the aesthetic. Like many other social phenomena, aesthetic categories are emergent,
meaning that categories with different qualities appear at each different scale. In this sense, aesthetic
appreciation of the city as a whole cannot be solely understood as the sum of the aesthetic
appreciations of its separate parts. The production of a scale as a societal problem is analyzed through
the concept of style. A few examples are examined.

Keywords

urban aesthetics, aesthetic space, experience, scale, urbanity, style

Introduction

"It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations. It is we who set up the relationship
between this tree and a bit of sky. Thanks to us, that star which has been dead for millennia, that quarter moon, and that dark river are
associated in the unity of a landscape.” - Jean-Paul Sartre (1988)

"From my words you will have reached the conclusion that the real Berenice is a temporal succession
of different cities, alternately just and unjust. But what I wanted to warn you about is something else: All the future Berenices are already
present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable.” - Italo Calvino (2013)

When one considers the enormous amount of books and articles written on the subject of beauty and
the city, one discovers a certain gap between the two fields of inquiry. Even today, only a handful of
urban scientists are profoundly interested in the nature of the aesthetic experience, and an even smaller
number of scholars from the field of aesthetics consider the existential nature of our urban condition as being important. The difficulty in structuring a conversation between the fields of the urban sciences and aesthetic theory has a lot to do with the extreme richness of each one of these approaches, and even more to do with the fact that each discipline has evolved more or less independently. In this article, I will use a spatial approach to establish a bridge between the aesthetic theory and the urban theory.

The concept of the aesthetic has been the center of discussions for a very long time. What seems to be a particular matter of ongoing controversy is the idea of a distinctively aesthetic state of mind (Carroll 2001). The issue has been addressed by a variety of thinkers. Examples include Schopenhauer’s insistence on a pure will-less contemplation as a necessary condition for the appreciation of the beautiful and the sublime; Kant’s discussion on the disinterested character of aesthetic contemplation; or Schiller’s (2004, 102) understanding of the aesthetic state of mind as a disposition of the mind which contains in itself the whole of humanity (indeed, since it retains a certain character of freedom, “it takes no individual function of humanity exclusively under its protection, it is well disposed to every one of them without distinction”). In opposition to this, certain thinkers of both analytical and continental philosophy, like George Dickie, considered that a specifically aesthetic state of mind is an empty notion, i.e., a myth (Dickie 1964). For Dickie, the only thing that distinguishes the aesthetic domain from other human activities is the particular object of its attention, i.e., the work of art.

My position is that the aesthetic refers to a certain type of experience and to a certain type of space production, and not necessarily to a particular type of object. From the earliest stages of human history, a specific form of imaginative consciousness developed in which the aesthetic relations of man to reality were established and developed. This is why I argue that the aesthetic dimension runs through our entire society and is strongly and inseparably interconnected to the other dimensions of society that hold it together as a system.

If one is interested in writings on the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment, one discovers that the category of the city seems to be peculiarly absent from the most important philosophical investigations — in spite of the high priority assigned to aesthetic questions by European philosophers since the Enlightenment (Lampert 2001). Kant was involved in investigating the aesthetics of nature, for he hoped to find in them some universal principles behind our faculty of taste. Consequently, the city — as a pure artifact pregnant with historicity — was excluded from his writings. As for Hegel, in his great lectures on aesthetics, he turned his attention to art and replaced Kantian aesthetics with the philosophy of art. In doing so, Hegel profoundly influenced the Western philosophical study of aesthetics, which became focused, with some noteworthy exceptions, almost exclusively on the study of art.
As for urban studies, the subject of aesthetics seems present, but only in fragments (and usually equated with sensuous pleasures, which amputates the critical element from the aesthetic theory). In the 1128 pages of the “Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l'espace des sociétés” (Lévy 2013) and the 1052 pages of the “Dictionary of Human Geography” (Gregory et al. 2011), there is no separate entry for the notion of aesthetics. Of course, this does not mean that aesthetic considerations are completely absent from human geography. Kantian aesthetics played an important part in discussions of postmodern sensibilities and particular attention was paid to the aestheticization of politics in both modernist and postmodernist theories (Harvey 1992). Others tried to lay the groundwork for the geographical pragmatics of aesthetics based on theories of habitation (Hoyaux 2000), and yet others tried to study inhabitants as poets in a practical manner, with each inhabitant possessing a singular aesthetic capital (Matthey 2008).

In the last third of the 20th century, the relatively new discipline of environmental aesthetics emerged as a sub-field of philosophical aesthetics: its focus of inquiry being natural environments, human environments, and human-influenced environments. Today, it is a growing field of inquiry that has had some fruitful attempts in answering some of the fundamental issues surrounding the aesthetic appreciation of the world at large (for the overview see Carlson 2015, Saito 2015). I argue that the influence of urban space and space in general is still under-investigated since most studies have been taking the concept of space itself for granted: Most authors understand space as being a container within which matter is located, and accept this idea as a working hypothesis without worrying about its theoretical justifications and implications.

Yet space matters — not only because space and time are the two basic pillars that support all knowledge, including theoretical knowledge, but also because, as Cassier argues, it is a certain understanding of space and time that allows knowledge to gradually expand and move in new directions. “The more knowledge inquires into the structure of space and time, the more certainly it returns into itself;” (1969, 3). Since every intentional human experience is spatialized, this article investigates a particular spatial structure through which the aesthetic experience occurs. I will call this structure the aesthetic space. Studying the aesthetic space can help urban researchers better understand how the world becomes internalized or externalized by inhabitants, as imaginative urban actors. What needs to be better understood is how novelty is borne from a constant dialogue between the ethical and the aesthetic, and how the agency of urban actors is activated (or suppressed) by the aesthetic dimension.
The absolute space paradigm as a major epistemological obstacle

Space cannot be defined without being a space of something. To spatialize things means to establish relationships between them, which would allow action to take place. This action is called spatiality. Space, spatialization and spatiality are elements of the same process. This understanding of space is known as the relational space paradigm and was introduced by G. F. Leibniz already in the 17th century in his famous correspondence with Samuel Clarke, who acted as a spokesman for Isaac Newton. While rejecting the Newtonians’ understanding of space as an absolute entity quite independent of matter (a container), Leibniz proposed a view according to which space and time were assemblages of relations and possessed no substantial reality of their own:

“For my part, I have said several times that I hold space to be something merely relative, as time is, taking space to be an order of coexistences, as time is an order of successions” (Alexander 1998).

Space is an ideal set of relations, i.e. an order of coexistence for things that are simultaneous. This resolved the fundamental problem of how to unite the very natures of space with the nature of the space’s content. Together with time, space has its true objectivity in relations (and thus truth itself is to be searched in relations!), and it is important to note that relations refer not only to the actual but as well as to the virtual. Through space, material and ideal things exist as distinguished, ordered and placed in relation with other material and ideal things. This relational understanding allows a much larger implication of space: Indeed, it implies that space is real and can be known, which is an essential premise for any scientific criticism on spatial distribution and differentiation. In this sense, the relational paradigm provides us with a tool for critical thinking, which, as Karl Popper has argued, is the very essence of rationality.

Among the thinkers who put a strong emphasis on space, Martin Heidegger stands out with his idea of making humans ontologically-spatial beings (see Malpas 2012). He crystallized his ideas in the groundbreaking philosophical work “Being and Time”, published in 1927. The novelty of his approach was not only to give space a central role, but also to recognize space as the condition under which individuals can have a coherent experience of the word. Unlike Kant who defined space as an a priori element to all experience, Heidegger attributed space to individuals’ active ‘being’ and their practical involvement in the world. In other words, he introduces social space as the fundamental constitutive element of Being.

His objections to the traditional debates on space were related to their groundedness in the metaphysical dichotomy of subject and object. For him, humans exist spatially and this space of existence (which could be called the “lived” space, or “phenomenological” space) is founded on the
spatiality of Being-in-the-world (Ströker 1987, 13-170). Spatiality becomes essential to self-consciousness not only because the world is spatial but also because the subject is a spatial element of the world — the world as space itself is founded on the spatiality of Being. A direct consequence of this position is that it puts both the subject and object in an active position, rather than a passive one. On one hand, the subject is in a constitutive relation to the external world, which also becomes a component of Being. On the other hand, the standpoint of the observer plays a critical role in the constitution of space. This further implies that societies, as Henri Lefebvre (1991) demonstrated, do not just occupy pre-given static space, but rather that they actually produce space. Thus space is an active element in the constitution and functioning of a society.

**Aesthetic sensibility as a societal issue**

It is however difficult to study humans from the abstract concept of ‘Being’ and hyphenated formulations such as “being-with-others” for it transforms imaginative and projective human actors into desubjectivated agents. Instead I suggest taking the position of Norbert Elias (1994, 1991) whose figurational sociology (see Baur and Ernst 2011) pulls from the real actions and discourses of self-conscious actors, where each individual has an idea of what society should be like and what it should look like. Elias wanted to show that we as people can only understand ourselves if we study both the individual and the social as a “networked agency”, i.e., a complex network of social interdependencies (or figurations). Human beings exist only in interdependent relation with others (i.e., they exist through various spatial structures!) and it is through different social interdependencies that individuals define the self and the world, and orient their thoughts and actions. The individual and society are therefore incapable of being understood as separate phenomena.

In this sense, our feelings and aesthetic judgments, too, can only be understood as part of these spatialized interdependencies. In other words, aesthetic judgments do not only reflect individuals’ aesthetic sensibilities, but also the aesthetic sensibility of society itself. Aesthetic qualities are not to be taken as properties of the environment per se, nor as properties of the person reacting to the environment. Rather, aesthetic qualities should be considered as properties that emerge from the interaction between individuals and their environment, within a process of constituting themselves as self-reflective subjects.

Once I have presented arguments in favor of the relational paradigm, I will continue my discussion by introducing a particular spatial structure that arises when individuals engage in the aesthetic experience.
The production of aesthetic space

The production of space reflects not only the human capacity to connect and separate what is perceived, but also the capacity to surpass the conditions of everyday existence. Human beings do this by engaging in a particular imaginative play that allows them to see a single thing under the plurality of its aspects and, by doing so, they transform the meaning of the real. This capacity of humans to inhabit not just the actual world, but also possible other worlds, is a necessary condition for the emergence of aesthetics as a societal dimension.

To be able to critically approach the problem of aesthetic phenomena, I will draw upon the theory of the aesthetic attitude developed by Roger Scruton, supplemented by the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice-Merleau Ponty and Didi Huberman. What is common to these thinkers is the acknowledgment that humans exhibit, in their day-to-day engagement with the world, a kind of “double intentionality” (Scruton 2007, 247), or what philosophers of perception today call the “transparency of experience”. This means that while humans imaginatively experience the world, they bring to mind what is latent and invisible through what is present and perceived. By making use of their lived bodies, individuals are capable of engaging in a particular sort of imaginative play through which memories of the past, the latent reality and the actualized perceived present are conjured together, informing one another.

The order that allows this co-existence is precisely the aesthetic space. This space is topological in nature and essentially subjective, for elements that make up this space are essentially related in the ways the perceiver imagines them to be related. In the aesthetic space, the world becomes a true subjective representation.

The character of the aesthetic experience

A particularity of the aesthetic experience is precisely related to the fact that an individual is free, at least in part, to imaginatively engage with the object of aesthetic attention. Bell characterized it as an emotion that corresponds to a “release from the everyday life”; and Beardsley, in a similar way, characterized it as a “felt freedom from the concerns of ordinary living” (see Carroll 2002, 146). However, as Merleau-Ponty perpetually argued, the freedom of imaginative thought does not come when human beings turn away from the actual reality of the world, but rather when they turn towards it. It is precisely because individuals imaginatively focus on the here and now that they are able to partly detach from the actual world and bring the virtual to mind.

Seeing in an imaginative way (particularly when one is involved in deep aesthetic engagement) is presented to us as a story, as an imaginative walk — a promenade (Schaeffer 2015, 49). For Jean-
Marie Schaeffer, one of the major characteristics of the aesthetic experience is its “open” atten-
tional treatment, which is not restricted to any single particular task — it does not have any goal that would allow a target of attention to be defined before the perceptive exploration. As a consequence, the first symptom of an aesthetic experience is the phenomenon of “attentional saturation” (fr. saturation attentionnelle), which emerges when an indefinite number of characteristics become relevant (2015, 51-62).

Aesthetic attention often requires what John Keats called “negative capability,” that is, the ability to contemplate the world without any particular desire to reconcile its contradictory aspects, or fit it into rational systems (Keats 1899, 277). In this sense Didi Huberman reminds us that “we must accept never to know the totality and the closure” of imaginative spaces (2005, 18). The enemy of the aesthetics is not the unknown, but rather the indifference of the human subject. In front of the “so what” attitude, aesthetic space collapses.

**Inhabitants as co-producers of scientific knowledge**

In order to understand how the aesthetic dimension shapes individuals’ understanding of the world and strongly influences their agency, I conducted a study with residents of the Swiss city of Lausanne and its metropolitan region. Participants were asked to reflect upon their own aesthetic judgments and the judgments of others in ways that seldom occur in their everyday lives. I tried to make an appeal to the lived experience of each participant, their own logic and rationale, in a sense that these individuals became co-producers of scientific knowledge (Tursić 2017).

Every time I presented them with a photograph of an urban environment, they immediately started to examine the scene by searching for aesthetic objects or groups of objects that would allow them to produce a particular type of imaginative space in a way that “what is absent and imagined” was “conjured through what is present and believed” (Scruton 2007, 249). Indeed, when individuals observed an inhabited environment and claimed it to be beautiful, that environment became an analogon of virtual spatialities, allowing the observer to experience the invisible aspect of reality. In other words, they used the environment presented in the photograph as the medial support for envisioning a certain lifestyle, which itself appeared as an image, i.e., simultaneously quasi-present and imminently visible, precisely as Merleau-Ponty argued (1968, 215; see also Perri 2013). This brings us to the societal character of the aesthetic experience. David and Urs provided us with examples of such a situation:

Ah [the neighborhood] is pretty incredible. With old farms, old houses. (…) You can imagine that maybe there weren’t any farmers there, but rather a doctor of the time, or a notary, a lawyer. Well,
somebody that had a little more money than the local farmers. But it’s not a mansion. It’s a very pretty old house. - David, 65 (Translated from French by author).

It’s a beautiful village. I think that it’s the kind of architecture that suggests something positive because — maybe this doesn’t correspond to the current or even the historical relationships, I don’t know — but it somehow feels like a community, because the people really got close to each other in order to live together. - Urs, 42 (Translated from French by author, see Figure 1)

Figure 1: Lavaux Vineyard Terraces by Nicolas Guérin, 2007. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lavaux_côté_Vevey_1.JPG, licensed under GNU FDL.

Any aesthetic experience requires an active participation from the observer, because it is their imaginative attention that enables them to see a certain object in one way or another. However, the aesthetic object is not to be taken for granted — the liberty of imaginative thought is directly related to the perceptible world. In this sense Roger Scruton reminds us that “it is impossible to describe or understand a mental state in isolation from its object: It might be said that the object, or at least a certain conception of the object, is of the essence of a mental state” (1979, 73). Therefore, researchers need to search for the description of our mental states not only by observing what happens inwards (as in the classical phenomenological method, which consists of “bracketing”) but also what expresses itself outwards, where our actions, intentions and mental states are visible in various forms of material and ideal expressions.
Georges Didi-Huberman, a French philosopher and art historian, focuses primarily on objects of art, and has continually stressed the active role of aesthetic objects on the way in which we see those objects. In the work, which explores American minimalist sculpture of the sixties and seventies entitled “Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde” (1992), he speaks of “the unavoidable scission of seeing”, meaning that the act of seeing is not simply a one-way road. The objects that we as human beings look at turn back, looking at us. According to Didi-Huberman, this “paradox of vision” is something that we cannot fight — the act of seeing unfolds in the “space-between”.

In a similar way, O’Connor and Aardema (2005, 253) write that imagination emerges in the “possibilistic space” that “is always creatively constructed in between what is and what could be”. It is precisely in this foggy realm of *in-between* (Bullington 2013, 25), that beauty itself emerges as a subjective expansion of the virtuality of the aesthetic object. In this sense, a theory of the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment cannot stop short of giving a theory of its proper object, and consequently is intricately related to urban theory in a larger sense.

**The city as an aesthetic place**

It is worth repeating that the realm of art is by no means the only realm where aesthetics lives. Take for example the city of Venice, which has circulated in the bloodstream of world culture for many decades. Many visitors of Venice have experienced the following phenomenon: No matter where they move or which street they cross, they find themselves immersed in a unique space eliciting some of the strongest emotions. The whole city, including its churches, houses, gardens, streets and squares, its canals and surrounding islands become an exceptional *analogon*, i.e., an aesthetic place par excellence, which allows them to engage in an aesthetic experience. For a contemporary visitor who finds him/herself enjoying the city, Venice becomes “semi-transparent”, a fairy tale and a tourist trap at the same time, as described by Thomas Mann.

During their lifetime, humans create a network of aesthetic places. It is one of the many ways by which humans appropriate and imaginatively inhabit a three-dimensional topographical space of the material world. They do this by turning the material world into a topological and imaginative network composed of various aesthetic places. The character of this space (its formal structure) can be well grasped by relating it to the concepts of *synecdoche* and *asyndeton*, developed by J.F. Augoyard, a French philosopher and musicologist. Augoyard’s work on walking and urban ambiances highly influenced the writings of Michel de Certeau, particularly his famous essay ”Walking in the City”. He addresses the subject matter in the following lines:

“Synecehoch expresses a spatial element in order to make it play the role of a "more" (a totality) and take

its place (the bicycle or the piece of furniture in a store window stands for a whole street or

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neighborhood). Asyndeton, by elision, creates a “less”, opens gaps in the spatial continuum, and retains only selected parts of it that amount almost to relics. Synecdoche re-places totalities by fragments (a less in the place of a more); asyndeton disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something). Synecdoche makes more dense: it amplifies the detail and miniaturizes the whole. Asyndeton cuts out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility. A space treated in this way and shaped by practices is transformed into enlarged singularities and separate islands” (de Certeau 1984, 101-2).

To be able to produce aesthetic space, humans use both of the spatial techniques explained by de Certeau. Indeed, when we observe an object or an environment in the aesthetic mode, some elements rise from the scene and “excite” (Germ. erregt) us. In a certain way, they jump out at us, to the extent that they fill the entire image. These elements could correspond to pretty much anything: They could be something that reminds us of our childhood, a close friend’s house, or a girl in a street crowd. In this sense, a city is experienced (and therefore produced) in a way that the fragments replace the totality, while conjunctions between the fragments remain totally or partially omitted. These details, this “‘surplus’ in which we find ourselves reflected”, as Scruton writes, is at the core of aesthetic experience and a constant reminder that humans are not “creatures of the moment, consumed in the present activity”, but “rational beings, with a past, a present and a future” (1979, 35).

This latest observation must remind us that there is no marginal scientific object — things that might once have been dismissed as irrelevant can suddenly appear to be fundamental for understanding the way in which individuals make choices and act in society. And even more importantly, it raises the problem of the complex relationship of the fragments to the whole. This, in turn, raises the problem of scale, a topic that constantly reappears in scientific and operational discourse and challenges our knowledge of the inhabited world.

**More is different**

“If you take a house out of its context, I find it much less beautiful. It’s mostly the context. Overall, a village seems more beautiful than a single house.” - Thomas, 25 (translated from French, see Figure 1)

Scale matters because it brings forward the size-relations between different realities. However, switching over to one order of grandeur or another cannot be defined by any a priori criteria. If a researcher is dealing with complex questions such as the size of a city or the proximity of a particular urban space, a Cartesian reduction of the entire variety of realities to just the notions of extension and shape will not help much. One of the great failures of the Modern Movement lies precisely in the pervasive ignorance of scale by modernist architects and urban planners who treated the city as if it was a house, only bigger. They failed to recognize that when a threshold is transgressed, from a house
and a city, there is also a change in orders, from a private space to a societal space — which requires an entirely different approach when it comes to spatial planning and politics (see Lévy 2013).

The same systemic logic applies to aesthetic properties because a person’s relationship to parts of a whole differs from that person’s relationship to the whole. A collection of beautiful houses does not necessarily create a beautiful neighborhood. Fragments are not simply smaller than the whole: They are profoundly different. As Anthony Vidler pointed out, the fragment has a double meaning: “[a]s a reminder of the past once whole but now fractured and broken”; and “as an incomplete piece of a potentially complete whole” always pointing toward some “possible world” (as quoted in Jacobs 2002, 17). At the same time, changing scales might completely alter the meaning that is attributed to the fragments.

Different types of beauty emerge at each urban scale, at each level of complexity, for beauty does not come to existence as a result of a simple aggregation. When one claims that “the city of Venice is beautiful”, this judgment is qualitatively different from the judgment “this house is beautiful”, for the first judgement is formed upon a qualitatively different referential space. The beauty of a city is a classical example of the emerging property of a city, since the aesthetic appreciation of the city as a whole cannot be solely understood as the sum of the aesthetic appreciations of its separate parts.

The task of critical aesthetic theory is to precisely investigate (or demystify) the hidden relations that lie behind the emergence of aesthetic phenomena and to shed more light on the social processes that produce and sustain them. Studying aesthetic phenomena forces researchers to consider both ‘the forest and the trees’ and to bridge the gap between the holistic approach and the individualistic scientific approach.

The emergence of an aesthetic place: When is city?

Like urbanity, the beauty of the city is a result of the functioning city as an urban system; though it is also simultaneously an operator of its organization. The aesthetic dimension gives rise to a particular sort of power which is “inscribed in the minutiae of subjective experience” (Eagleton 1991, 20), allowing urban actors to use their aesthetic sensibility as an argument to influence society’s actions in the ethical realm or the legal realm. The aesthetic experience assumes an importance for its potential to activate the agency of urban actors, and fundamentally influences our actions towards the urban environment.

Indeed, in Venice, the aesthetic dimension has influenced both the revitalization of a deteriorated old city and the prevention of almost any new constructions due to the protection of Venice and its lagoon by the UNESCO World Heritage Organization. The consequences of this are twofold. On one hand,
the constitution of Venice as an aesthetic place par excellence made it a target for millions of visitors from all around the world. On the other hand, the city has become quite expensive and thus unreachable for many people. In this sense, beauty can bring urban spaces closer to people, while also bringing them farther from people. This is why one could say that aesthetic realm alters the character of separation between humans and their environments and influences both the distribution of justice and the politics of urban planning.

However, what is interesting here is how one of the greatest cities of the medieval world, characterized by diverse styles and rich historical stratification, has “organically fused into a coherent unit” that needs to be preserved, as is stated in the brief synthesis by UNESCO (whc.unesco.org/en/list/394). This shift from the disparate to the unified lies precisely in the realm of aesthetics, for what allows observers to perceive the fusion of Byzantine, Islamic and Latin Christian architectural forms as corresponding to the distinguished Venetian style involves a certain imaginative process that happens precisely at the aesthetic level. It is in the nature of the world that two separate objects or events cannot share all of their properties, but it is in the nature of human thought that objects or events are understood only through the similitudes that humans perceive, conceive or imagine they share.

Categories of unity and disunity are first and foremost aesthetic categories, as first recognized by Schopenhauer. Indeed, he argued that the effect of unity boils down to an effect of style (1957 [1883], appendix on architecture). Precisely how the relationships of unity are established is the problem of aesthetics. If categorization is the fundamental problem of ethics, then the emergence of style is the fundamental problem of aesthetics. Style has to be recognized as such, and this, as Andrew Benjamin writes, involves a relationship between “appearance, recognition and identification” (Benjamin 2006 x). Studying aesthetic phenomena forces researchers to ask not only: “What is city?”, but also: “When is city?”

The ethnologist Karla Werner (1991) suggested that the way in which inhabitants, as self-reflective modern subjects, make do with the various spaces of the city, helps them bring together different or even contradictory aspects of their own individuality. Just as each part of a city can represent a part of their fragmented individuality, the city as a whole seems to help them construct a certain coherence out of a highly fragmented reality. For this reason, I must agree with Davidson (2015, 661) who, in a response to Brenner and Schmid (2015), argues that the category of the city should remain “an anchor for critical urban studies”. If researchers abandon the city as an empirical and theoretical category, it could lead to a divorce between urban theory and the human experience. Aesthetic space provides individuals with the possibility of reconstituting (at least partially) the broken pieces of their modern urban existence and producing new meanings of the world they are a part of. Urban experience, as highly fragmented, is therefore highly aesthetic.
The production of style

The complex mechanism through which a shift in aesthetic sensibility happens and a new style emerges is perhaps best described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In their famous work “Thousand Plateaus” (1987), they argue that modern societies define themselves through processes of decoding and deterritorialization. Decoding means to conceive a certain cultural logic or societal practice and to reorder (translate) it in one manner or another. This new code is often accompanied by a strong sense of style, whose purpose is to protect the new meaning and to erase what other societies have coded and decoded. The decoding mechanism allows individuals to produce various aesthetic assemblages, where the relations between components are displaced and replaced according to how the subject imagines them in reference to their societal frame. Since (modern) urban reality is only apprehensible in fragments, this mechanism then serves to reconstitute a sort of new coherent totality with its inner logics, spatialities and temporalities.

Observing these mechanisms is a very difficult task. However, some events provide researchers with rare laboratory-like conditions to study these mechanisms because they manage to concentrate societal aspirations that span long periods of time and involve many different actors. National and universal exhibitions are among this kind of event and one of the most famous examples comes from Switzerland at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time, one could witness the rising aesthetic sensibility towards rural picturesqueness — which was being increasingly used in the construction of a new architectural and urban paradigm that rejected modernist architectural models. Just as Romanticism was a rejection of neoclassical ideals, the “rediscovery” of an old picturesque town at the end of 19th century was likewise a reaction to the effects of modernity. This ideology was formally articulated in 1896 during the National Exhibition in Geneva.
At the event, a village was built over a surface of 23,191 square meters and was to be inhabited by 353 villagers (see Figure 2). It contained a 40-meter tall mountain with an artificial waterfall, 56 houses, a church, three farms and 18 alpine chalets. This “1:1 model” of The Swiss village was used as the catalyzer for numerous symbolic elements, with the aim of presenting the nation as a coherent entity (Crettaz 1987). The houses and chalets all had their distinctive regional style, so the coherency the organizers were aiming to demonstrate was pure construction. Yet once recognized (i.e., encoded) as a unity, it provided an architectural archetype to be dispersed throughout the country (Salomon Cavin, 2005, 58). Today, a picturesque village placed in a natural background as well as a traditional pre-modern town still stand as aesthetic ideals, which strongly activate the agency of urban actors and influence the politics of spatial planning.

Style as a problem of identity and transformation

Style is always the function of uniformity (Konstantinović 1981, author’s translation). Each and every style is an unfurling of a certain outlook on the world, and thus an insistence on stylistic unity is always an insistence on a certain coherence regarding the way someone inhabits the world. At first sight, style subjugates an individual thing to some general law that also applies to other things. In other words, to stylize means to generalize. It means to isolate a particular spatial substance that
allows one to organize non-identical things into a finite order of similitude, to isolate a common denominator among a group of objects or events. A stylized rose, as Simmel (1991, 64) writes, is “supposed to represent the general character of a rose, the style of rose, not the individual character of a specific rose”. This means that the concept of style is a means of establishing aesthetic relationships between individual realities (see Ackerman 1962). In other words, when someone says that two houses are constructed in the same style, it implies that they possess some qualities that negate their individual nature and carry the note of generality. Style is thus a concept that allows the study of both processes of singularization and uniformization.

The problem of style is always connected with the problem of identity and transformation, so any preoccupation with style is automatically a preoccupation with time, that is, with societal change. A change in style always marks the passage of time, for style is always a sign of continuity, of stability. It eliminates inner contradictions and evokes consistency, neatness and security. The constitution of style is always a mark of a victory of being over becoming. The invention of historicity, as Benjamin understood it, was precisely an attempt to reestablish a continuity of the homogeneous social order (i.e., a continuity of the traditional communities) that was broken by modernity. Although it would be wrong to assume that arguments for continuity are somehow the denial of the modern, it is also true that to affirm modernity implies a certain affirmation of the discontinuity (Benjamin 2006, xiv).

What unites us with the nineteenth-century modern world, according to Berman, are “the contradictory forces and needs that inspire and torment us: Our desire to be rooted in a stable and coherent personal and social past, and our insatiable desire for growth — not merely for economic growth but for growth in experience, in pleasure, in knowledge, in sensibility — growth that destroys both the physical and social landscapes of our past, and our emotional links with those lost worlds.” (Berman 1988, 35). Modern individuals must therefore position themselves between the consistency of a controlled, reassuring environment, often epitomized in the ideal of historicity, and the uncertainty of novelty which is always seen as otherness, as something that opposes itself to stylization, or as a mere negation of an existing style.

The city as a coexistence of different styles

What appears to be the specificity of modernity is precisely the unprecedented liberation of coexisting ways of being. The heterogeneity of cities’ urban and architectural styles thus reflects the density and diversity of the urban space, as well as the intensity of urban interactions. More than any other spatial configuration, the city is a place of coexistence for a variety of ways in which everyday life is organized, practiced and expressed. This coexistence of different styles appears to be an indicator of the “degree of urbanity” (see Lévy 2013, 1994) of a certain urban reality. The point is that the
aesthetic appreciation of a city as a whole depends on a certain imaginative understanding of the urbanity of the given city.

Figure 3: Lausanne, Switzerland, 2015. Source: Mirza Tursić.

Style, which epitomizes the problem of sameness and difference, of fitness and unfitness, is an issue that kept cropping up in all of the interviews I conducted with Swiss inhabitants. Chantal, who lives in the peri urban zone of the Lausanne’s metropolitan area, addresses the subject matter in the following manner.

Lausanne, honestly, personally, I don’t think it’s a beautiful city. There’s such a mix of all kinds of architecture, not necessarily well-thought-out, as though they tried to get the cheapest deal possible or something. A cube gets built, poof! People get put in it and there you go. It’s just so motley, you have a house like that, and then you have another one that’s completely different. The aesthetic in Lausanne, at any rate the urban planning in Lausanne, I think it’s pretty catastrophic. There you go, that’s what I can say about Lausanne. I don’t think that Lausanne is a beautiful city. - Chantal, 65  (translated from French by author [see Figure 3])

David, on the other hand, was born in Lausanne, in the popular housing blocs. Having rather negative memories of his childhood, he never found much pleasure in inhabiting Lausanne, despite the fact that he founded a family and spent a big part of his career in the city. When asked to comment on a photograph of Lausanne taken from the Lemanic lake, he expressed his opinion in the following manner:
Oh, how terrible. That’s Lausanne right there. That behemoth that you can see from, I don’t know where. But there you go, a façade like that, it’s awful. (...) No, but because it’s a mix, there’s no unity, there’s nothing. That’s ugly. Ah no, I don’t know.

-What does it make you think of?
- It’s a pile of humans trying to survive in a city. - David, 65 (translated from French by author [see Figure 3])

At the same time, David does not consider himself as being anti-urban. Rather, he positions himself against both the modern heterogenous city and the urban sprawl. Like many others interviewees, he has a strong preference towards the pre-industrial environment whose appeal lies in the apparent unity of the unique and the general – a unity expressed in the apparent consensus regarding the question of style. This feeling of a “Paradise Lost” is in fact a reaction to the disintegration of the stylistic uniformity of pre-modern times, as Simmel argued (1991).

It is in this sense that is important for researchers to take into account the persistence of the suburban ideal, and the appeal of the picturesque ideal. The traditional picturesque town symbolizes lost ‘organicism’ while the suburban ideal is a chance for a unity regained. The question “In what style shall we build?” is another way of asking “In what society shall we live?” If researchers wish to explore the nature of change, one needs only ask people if they find cities ugly or beautiful. When it comes to the stylistic variety of the dense urban tissue, Amir, who was born and grew up in the city of Lausanne, expresses a different judgment than that of Chantal and David:

I love an assemblage like this. There are buildings, well, I occasionally spend time here, and then I went to high school here, so there are buildings that I like here. Especially in this row here, that one I adore, even if the colors are ugly, I like it... I don’t know, there’s something there. And yeah, there’s a movement there. (...) They strived to integrate them to what already existed there. (...) And then there’s the cobblestones, I like cobblestones. Actually, what I like is the urban atmosphere actually, that the houses are stuck to each other like that. That they aren’t the same height. They’re, they’re the same style, but they’re different. So we can conclude that they were built in different time periods, at different moments. And so there’s a certain history. Yes. - Amir, 25 (translated from French by author [see Figure 3])

The point is that an aesthetic dilemma reveals itself not just when one chooses between a pair of jeans or another, or between white or yellow wallpaper, but also when one chooses a lifestyle. Aesthetic judgements are primarily societal choices, even though they are choices that remain in the virtual domain. They are based on a certain idea of a society. However, the particularity of an aesthetic judgement, as stated previously in the article, is that it is made without particular regard for the actuality of the premises upon which these judgements are based. This is in contrast with practical involvement, for ethics always concerns the actual (whether it is the actual action or the actual intention).
One might say that aesthetic knowledge is a form of practical reasoning — only it is a particular type of reasoning that, according to Scruton, is “characterized by no specific desire to ‘find out’, no special preoccupation with facts, since while these may be a necessary precondition for its exercise, their knowledge is no part of its aim. (...) it retains the character of freedom which is one of the distinguishing marks of an imaginative act” (1979, 87). He then concludes that “changes in taste are continuous with, and indeed inseparable from, changes in one’s whole outlook on the world, and that taste is as much a part of one’s rational nature as are scientific judgments, social conventions and moral ideals” (1979, 106). With this in mind, critical theory must be able to provide some answers to the two following question: First, how do changes in taste occur? And second, what does imaginative freedom depend on?

**Conclusion: Aesthetic sensibility as an ethical problem**

My argument here is that the answer to both of these questions lies in the direct experience of human beings with the inhabited environment. Aesthetic judgement is evaluative, meaning that it is monitored and assessed by the judgments and behavior of others. By interacting with others, human beings learn how to imagine. Providing an aesthetic education consists precisely in the transmission of one’s own images to others. In this sense, the beauty of any part of an inhabited environment, as an emerging property, is, to a varying degree, flexible and open to constant change, and this further depends on people’s daily practices and their interactions (whether direct or mediated) with other members of society.

Because of their polytopic (Stock 2006) existence, an individual cannot be summarized as an organism, as a body. Individuals are always in a process of (re)constitution and full of inner contradictions, as the scientific works on cognitive dissonance have demonstrated (for an overview, see Fischer et al. 2008). An individual is never a coherent unity for they exist as a part of society that is based, to various degrees, on the principle of heterogeneity. An individual is different than their body, because an individual stretches out to include themselves into the various societal levels to which production (or destruction) they contribute. Thus, societies and spaces created by these societies are essential for people’s engagement in the imaginative experience.

People draw on their previous experiences, but, as evaluative and historical beings, they also draw on the experiences of others. Since everyday life is woven into a wide range of spaces, often in both the private and the public realms, people’s aesthetic sensitivities develop through the various interactions they create through them. Hence, a person’s style of spatiality appears crucial to the development of their aesthetic judgment. This final argument brings us back to the inevitable overlapping of ethics and aesthetics. If in aesthetics not everything is permitted, it is precisely because not everything is permitted in ethics. Since our existence as human beings involves both an alternating involvement
with, and detachment from, society, we escape in the realm of the aesthetic only to realize that even the world of our imagination is based on our actual lived experience, which we relentlessly try to overcome. Aesthetics continually gives rise to something new, something that can surprise us, and therefore, creates a new set of meanings within our existing area of societal representations.

Aesthetic categories confirm Henri Bergson’s (2010 [1946]) thesis that the possibility of something does not simply precede its existence. Rather, the virtual is an aspect of the real precisely because the real is never fully actualized. As part of a spatialized practical action, aesthetic phenomena appear as a constant reminder of the power of that which does not appear visibly and the power of the unknown. This is why individuals’ aesthetic sensibilities should be a matter of societal debate, contrary to the old Latin saying de gustibus non est disputandum. If aesthetic categories emerge from an imaginative play between the actual and the virtual, this play is too serious to be taken for granted.

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References

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**Endnotes**

1 This article uses, develops and updates a certain amount of content from the author’s doctoral dissertation entitled “Aesthetic Space: The Visible and the Invisible in Urban Agency”, which was presented on 16 May 2017 at the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL).

2 The virtual (lat. *virtus*) refers to a reality that exists only in a latent state (fr. *qui n’est qu’en puissance*) (Le Robert 2016).

3 In the aesthetic mode, we are presented with some imagined thing through some actual existing thing that our consciousness nihilates in order to produce the imagined relations. This existing actual thing is what Sartre calls the “analogon”. For consciousness to be able to imagine, Sartre writes, it must be able to stand back from the world by its own effort — it must be free. In this sense, the world carries in itself the possibility of its negation, at each moment and from each point of view (Sartre and Elkaïm-Sartre 2004, 184). The important question here is the following one: To which extent are we free from the materiality of the analogon? According to Merleau-Ponty, who was a close friend of Sartre’s but also one of his major critics, Sartre failed to adequately describe what is distinctive about imagination because he was more preoccupied with showing what the imagination is *not,* rather than what it really *is.* Merleau-Ponty continually argued that an image is not a mere negation of the materiality of its support (a fact that has long been underestimated, even in contemporary image theories).
first essay on painting entitled “Cezanne’s Doubt”, he argued that the freedom of imagination does not come when human beings turn away from the reality of the world, but rather when we turn towards it. Therefore freedom and individuality, even if it remains in the realm of imagination, can be won only in direct interaction with others and a deep involvement with the world, rather than in a disinterested detachment from it.

iv For the latest discussion in City on the wholeness of the London skyline, see Gassner (2017).

v This fact is well known to political actors who have used this knowledge for various political purposes. As one of the most striking examples, Susan Sontag (1975) provides an example of Nazi Germany, where the confusion between reality and fantasy, expressed in films like Leni Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will”, can be taken as emblematic of the illusory aesthetic spectacle which simmered at the heart of fascist politics. Such freewheeling aestheticism comes with the certain danger of aestheticizing the whole of reality, which in turn represents the true danger of totalitarian political systems.

vi At the time, the city, or more precisely the big city, had no importance in the construction of a national identity. From the aesthetic point of view, the city lacked the stylistic uniformity on which such an identity could be constructed.

vii François Walter (1994, 1985) affirmed that throughout the 1930s to the 1950s, the rural milieu affirmed itself as the principal protagonist in spatial planning — specifically, by protecting the land that urbanization endangered. “The notion that there was something ‘un-Swiss’ about a large city (…) became the dominant axiom of Helvetic planning” (Diener et al. 2006, 186).