An Aesthetics of Urbanism¹

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A B S T R A C T

The idea of ecology embraces more than the biological world; it extends to the cultural world as well, including the built environment. At the same time our understanding of environment has changed to include the human participants and not just their external surroundings. Furthermore, humans engage their environment perceptually and this introduces the aesthetic dimension. Shaping the urban landscape requires both an ecological and an aesthetic understanding, and an aesthetic ecological model based on artistic-aesthetic engagement offers a guiding vision for constructing and living in an urbanized environment.

KEY WORDS

aesthetic-ecological city, aesthetic ecology, aesthetic engagement, aesthetics, ecology, environment, environmental perception, urban ecology, urban landscape, urbanism

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摘要：生态学的观念已经溢出生物世界而进一步扩展包围了整个文化世界，包括各种人造环境。与此同时，我们对环境的理解已经发生了转变，涵盖了人类的参与而非仅仅局限于他们的外部环
Ecology and its significance

Our understanding of ecology has gone through several stages from its original biological meaning denoting the interdependency of all the biota and physical components that make up an environmental to its extension as a concept about the relation of humans to their physical and cultural environment. Many factors besides physical conditions affect this complex interrelationship, factors such as social, cultural, political, legal, and economic ones, and the study of human and cultural ecology has emerged to accommodate these. The special importance of expanding the ecological standpoint lies in recognizing that humans do not stand outside nature, contemplating, using, and exploiting it. Humans are seen here as an integral part of the natural world and, as such, fully encompassed in ecosystems, from particular, local ones ultimately to the planetary. This transformation has constituted a scientific revolution comparable in importance to the Copernican Revolution and similar to it, for an ecosystemic
approach removes humans from a favored place in the terrestrial world, just as the Copernican Revolution removed the sun from the center of the celestial universe.

Acceptance this idea – the understanding of environment as an all-inclusive context in which humans are wholly interdependent with natural forces and other organic and inorganic objects – is slow. The concept applies, moreover, not just to rural peoples and environments, the number of which continues to shrink rapidly; it applies equally to urban environments where most of the world’s population lives. For we face the reality of predominant urbanism and the emerging understanding of the urban region as an ecosystem with similar interdependencies of objects and organisms, from the most simple to the most complex.

The ecological model in biology thus has universal implications, for no organism can be understood apart from the system in which it functions. This principle applies to the dominant human organism as much as to any other. It proposes understanding humans as natural beings in continuity with the rest of nature, a conception that initially received powerful support from Darwinian evolution and to which ecological theory adds corroboration and sophistication. We humans, perhaps more than any other species, survive and prosper through our social organization and cultural practices. These are integral parts of the human ecosystem, and the rich field of cultural ecology explores how social and cultural conditions affect human well-being and influence survival.
Indeed, we are at a stage in cultural evolution when this ecological understanding finds itself in competition with pre-scientific, sometimes indeed neolithic world views, just as Copernican astronomical theory once did and Darwinian evolutionary theory still does in some benighted places. At its heart this is a conceptual revolution for, if we carry an ecological understanding through to the very idea of environment, we find that we, as humans, are not only fully enclosed within an environmental complex but are an inseparable part of it. We must, therefore, think of environment and of human life, in particular, in vastly different ways from before.3

Cultural ecology thus denotes an all-embracing environmental context in which each of its constituents, whether organic, inorganic, or social, is interdependent as well as interrelated with the others. And each factor, in pervasive reciprocity, contributes to an ongoing balance that promotes the well-being of the participating organisms. This ecological model goes far beyond the biologically unfounded paradigm of separate, individual organisms competing against one another for survival, a view that was never part of Darwinian evolutionary theory. By identifying these contrasting patterns – the individualistic and the ecological, their striking differences emerge clearly.4

Aesthetic ecology

The meaning of environment has thus changed dramatically. It can no longer be thought of as surroundings but more as a fluid medium, a kind of four-dimensional global fluid of varying
densities and forms in which humans swim along with everything else. In order to function in such an environment we are thrown on our own capacities, and these rely strongly on perception. Since the source and character of our capabilities lie in sense perception, the fluid medium of environment is a condition in which there are no sharp separations. It is important to recognize that, from the standpoint of sense perception, we experience environment continuously and in continuity. This is a condition Kant called “pure sensation,” wholly unformed and grasped in “pure intuition” and William James described it famously as “one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” As the same time as it lies at the origin of the aesthetic, the idea of sensory perception helps us grasp more fully the experience and meaning of environment.

Perception, however, is not simple sensation for, as I noted earlier, sensation is never pure. *Pure* sensation is more an idea than an experience, for in itself sensation is entirely a physiological event. Even then it is not entirely a direct sensory experience. Sensation is unavoidably colored by the perceptual process, a process that embodies gestalt qualities and cultural conditioning, and it is apprehended through the conceptual and emotional filters humans acquire through the socializing process. Sense perception, then, involves not only surface qualities but every dimension of our sensory, our sensuous awareness. When we experience environment in a manner that is fully aware of its perceptual richness and in which immediate, qualitative perception dominates, we are in an aesthetic realm. We can say, in fact, that environmental perception originates as aesthetic perception.
Not only is environmental perception fundamentally aesthetic but perception contributes significantly to our understanding of environment, underlining the fact that environment is undivided. The continuity of perception means that all the factors and features of environmental experience, including those that humans contribute, are bound together as a continuity. When we do not regard ourselves as standing outside of experience, objectifying and conceptualizing its objects, then we come to recognize the initially undivided character of all experience. This inclusiveness is another way of approaching a central feature of aesthetic appreciation that I have called, especially in the context of the appreciation of art and nature, "aesthetic engagement." Indeed, this same character of the experience of artistic and natural beauty is found in all environmental experience, and our encounter with the arts helps us grasp this key dimension of environment. In fact, what we learn from aesthetic appreciation can illuminate all environmental experience.

Relating aesthetic considerations to cultural ecology might seem fanciful, but the two are actually closely connected. Although the word 'aesthetic' is commonly used to refer to the value found in appreciating art, its fundamental, etymological meaning as perception by the senses enables us to consider all experience fundamentally aesthetic. And as the direct and immediate experience of any contextual order is perceptual, the perceptual experience of environmental contextuality can be understood as aesthetic. Further, aesthetic appreciation, like every activity understood from the standpoint of cultural ecology, is reciprocal. Appreciation is not only receptive; it is equally active, requiring the contribution of the appreciator of art or nature in discerning qualities, order, and structure and by adding the
resonance of meanings to that experience. In this respect, the appreciator, by an analogous activity, joins in the creative constitution of art and environment in bringing to fruition an experience of appreciation.

Understood in this way, aesthetic appreciation is as context-dependent as any other experience, perhaps more so, inasmuch as appreciative experience is intensely and continuously perceptual. Another way of stating its contextual character is to describe appreciative experience as perceptual engagement and, since as appreciative it is determinedly aesthetic, as aesthetic engagement. Engaging with an object of art or an environment, then, can be thought of as an ecological event, as a cultural ecological occurrence. Stating this conversely, going from the concept of an ecosystem, which is a cognitive idea, to its exemplification in aesthetic engagement reflects the ecological model of perceptual experience. In the one case we go from ecology to experience, and in the other from perceptual experience to aesthetic engagement, which is ecological in character. This reciprocity can be summarized by saying that the ecological concept of an all-inclusive, interdependent environmental system has an experiential analogue in aesthetic engagement.

This collaboration of sensory perception and sensory meanings in an aesthetic-artistic activity is, then, the expression of a cultural ecological process. We can think of aesthetic engagement, in fact, as an aesthetic ecology. It is the joining together in aesthetic appreciation of the viewer and the painting, of the listener and the music, of the dancer, the dance, and the
onlooker. It is the repatriation of the inhabitant with his or her environment. Aesthetic engagement is thus the perceptual experience of a cultural ecological process. Once we grasp that all experience in its primary, direct, and immediate form is perceptual, we begin to recognize the intimate place that the aesthetic has in human experience. It becomes a key to revealing and evaluating cultural experiences. How can we apply this key to the environments, the landscapes of everyday urban life?

**Understanding the urban landscape**

For most people an urban complex is coterminous with the human environment; indeed, it identifies the context of more than half the world’s population. In most developed countries, ninety per cent of the population lives in urban centers, and the proportion in second and third world countries is increasing rapidly. Like all key concepts, urbanism can be defined in different ways. How, then, to understand it? For my purposes here, I shall construe it most broadly as human organization on a large scale as part of an extended environmental complex largely shaped by human agency.

The urban landscape covers a wide range. At one extreme stands the megalopolis, an urbanized region that incorporates several large cities with their industrial and commercial appendages into a continuous band or spread of built landscape. At other points on the scale we can identify the industrial park, the commercial strip, the shopping mall, and the town. Urbanism does not apply to the village, whose small scale, low density, and open space exclude
the features commonly associated with the urban environment. These include a concentrated residential population, the satellite residential clusters housing a commuter population; large-scale industrial or other productive activities together with their effects on circulation patterns; support services in the form of utilities, hospitals, business and commercial services; and research, educational, and cultural centers.  

Now while urbanism constitutes the human environment for much of the world’s population, it is a condition that has come about, with a few notable exceptions, not by deliberate choice or design but from the demands of a rapidly increasing population, commerce, industrial production, central governance, defense, cultural interests in the form of museums, libraries, arts centers, educational and research institutions, and, of course, the emergence of nationalism and the thirst for political hegemony. To these we can add today the influence of global capitalism. We now see clearly how the exploitation and commodification of natural resources and the industrialization of the countryside have dispossessed masses of people, who are then driven to settle in or near metropolitan regions in order to scrape for survival.

Thus urban landscapes have developed and continue to expand, landscapes that offer amenities for the rich and, for the remainder of the population, a place in which to attempt to live and work, and to survive. The forms, characteristics, and ambience of this environment are rarely chosen but are shaped by geographical, political and economic forces. Instances of large-scale urban planning are rare: L’Enfant in Washington, D.C. in the late eighteenth century,
Haussmann in nineteenth-century metropolitan Paris, Costa in Brasília in the twentieth. Most large cities consist in a center nucleus with historic origins and character, surrounded by successive generations of residential and industrial development. These began as the work of people who migrated there from the countryside and then constructed dwellings, commercial, community, and municipal structures where space was available and land values cheaper, while independent entrepreneurs later defined whole neighborhoods and industrial sites. There was little or no coordination among any of these decisions. Urban forms, then, that are shaped by given, independent conditions -- geographical, climatic, political, economic, social -- are largely the result of chance and circumstance. We can call this the historical, aleatoric urban model and it should be distinguished from prevalent ideal images of the city.

“The house is a machine for living,” Le Corbusier announced. As does the house, so should the building and the city embody the values of order, harmony, uniformity and especially smooth, oiled functioning. This mechanical model is an ideal beloved of the culture that developed societies see themselves embodying. It envisions the quintessential virtues of an industrial order: efficiency, cleanliness, impersonality, uniformity, interchangeable modular units, expendability, and a social order of the sort that Charlie Chaplin caricatured in Modern Times which subjugates the human to the ethos of the machine. More recently, this industrialized social order was encased as a specimen of bourgeois culture in the opening tracking shot of Jean-Luc Godard’s Week-End, which displayed an endless line of automobiles slowly moving, bumper to bumper, as if on an assembly line, as they conveyed their passengers
steadily out into the countryside. It is an image of humans who, under the delusion of independence, are pressed into helpless uniformity.

Urbanism has now moved beyond these rather simplistic models to a more sophisticated stage as an ecosystem. This leaves behind the mechanical ideal of uniform, replaceable parts and adopts an organic vision. In sharp contrast to the mechanical, the biological ecosystemic model recognizes the urban region as a complex unity of many different but interdependent components, each preoccupied with its own purposes but at the same time contributing to and depending on a context that embraces them all.¹⁰

The ecosystem thus becomes an imaginative model of the urban environment. At the magnitude and complexity of mass industrial societies, the uncoordinated activities that characterize the aleatoric model produce disorder and inefficiency and easily lead to chaos and breakdown. The mechanical model is also inadequate, for it is at the root of the impersonality, anomie, and inhospitable character of industrialized urban regions. The biological concept of an ecosystem seems better able to compensate for the inadequacies of the earlier guiding principles. It can be more responsive to the workings and needs of human social life than the aleatoric model, more true to the human condition than the mechanical, and more resilient and responsive than both to the variety of human social forms and activities. Open-ended yet coherent, flexible yet efficient, independent yet balanced, the ecosystemic model appears to offer a truer vision for living in an urbanized environment.
How can we guide social activity by an ecological model? What sort of vision can lead us toward a more humanly successful social order? We need an incentive that is imaginative and enticing. Here, I think, is where the artistic-aesthetic mode of engaged experience can prove an invaluable guide, and the arts can be a guide in helping us identify and understand the perceptual dynamics of urban environments.

**The contribution of the arts**

Consider first what the arts do. The arts reveal aspects of our perceptual world, of our sensory environment. Each art sensitizes us to different perceptual modalities and the nuances of sensory qualities, and together the arts can educate us to the richness and depth of environmental experience. Painting, for example, can enhance our capacity for environmental perception, as well as making more apparent the visual qualities of color, shape, texture, light and shadow, mass, and composition. Painterly perception is not a matter of seeing the city as a painting but rather through the eyes of a painter and with the painter’s sensibility. This comes not only from visual qualities of art but from grasping how these qualities can be applied to environmental experience. Thus we can think of a zoning plan as composing areas and their relationships; building codes as influencing mass and shape; constraints on lot coverage as the arrangement of volume and space; and patterns of distribution, density and activity as texture.
The other arts offer their own distinctive contributions to perceptual awareness. Music translates into environmental perception as a soundscape: ambient sounds and their timbres, textures, and volumes as generated by the multifarious activities of urban life, such as traffic, commerce, and human action. Amplified sounds, canned music, engines, electronic sounds, and human voices all contribute to the soundscape of a place.

It is not difficult to apply the three-dimensional arts to environmental aesthetic ecology. Sculpture translates into the arrangement of masses and space in relation to the human body. A sculptural sensibility develops not only from walk-around sculptures but also from walk-in sculpture, which turns mass and volume into ambient qualities. Architecture can help us experience the urban landscape as a deliberately constructed environment, deploying mass, volume, and the movement of human bodies, not as a static array, but as intimate interrelationships in a dynamic experience of constant change.

Architectural dynamics lead easily to the distinctive dances that emerge from the human activities that go on in every environment. To grasp the city as a mobile environment involving the interplay of bodies and other objects in various patterns of movement is to see the urban dynamic as an endless, complex array moving from one transformation to another. Indeed, the forms of urban mobility display characteristics of various dance forms. Circulation patterns of cars, trucks, buses, and trams in relation to the movement of people are choreographed by planners and traffic engineers into a complex modern dance. The fact that these are not
random movements but reflect shifting patterns of interrelationships transforms the environmental dynamic into a formal ballet of social living. Since such movement is not erratic but coordinated or at least directed, we can perhaps grasp the interrelations of these patterns of movement as an elaborate tango. And when such movements respond to one another in active interplay, a dramatic element appears and the human landscape then becomes a kind of dance theater with staged movements and sequences. We can even extend the artistic metaphor and think of urban life as complex improvisational theater in which the dramas of human life constitute the plot lines. Humans are thus both the creative artists, the actors, and the participatory audience in an environmental drama.

In such ways, the arts as creative making and aesthetics as active perception combine to enlarge, illuminate, and enrich environmental experience. What can these modalities contribute to our experience and understanding of human life wherever it is lived? As I noted earlier, both the artistic and the aesthetic are inherent in environmental experience, the first in fashioning such experience and the second in bringing aspects of that dense perceptual experience into awareness. Humans, as part of the complex environmental dynamic, do not and can not stand back to contemplate the prospect. We must enter into it as artists through our activities and at the same time participate both actively and receptively in an appreciative mode. Thus do both the artistic and the aesthetic combine in our vital engagement with environment. What does this mean for living as part of our environment? What is its significance for creative aesthetic engagement?
An aesthetic urban ecology

Developing an aesthetic ecological model from a basis in artistic-aesthetic engagement has profound implications for building environments that promote rich and satisfying lives. If we are unaware of the presence of the aesthetic and its implications, we are likely to become helpless, alienated perceptual pawns in the hands of impersonal forces. Unless we move to deliberately incorporate the aesthetic in building human environments, we must abandon all hope for the survival of a civilization that is not just human but humane. Can we go beyond bare survival to fulfillment? How, then, can we envision an urban ecology guided by aesthetic values? This is our central question.

An aesthetic ecology is an experiential ecology. Instead of denoting interconnected and interdependent objects in a particular region, it takes a human perspective and turns to the experiential dimension of environment. Further, an aesthetic ecology encompasses humans as interdependent as well as interrelated. With aesthetic engagement as an ecological model for environment, events are translated into experiences that combine to form the living world we inhabit. Aesthetic engagement is an effective touchstone in building environments that promote experience that is satisfying and rich.
What can an aesthetic ecology offer in helping us understand our habitations and shape them so that they contribute to personal and social fulfillment? This is the practical question that follows from my theoretical analysis. So, in good pragmatic fashion, let us turn to its implications for practice and ask what an aesthetic ecology offers for understanding and directing the urban landscape.

By focusing on sensory perception and sensory meanings as integral to the human environment, aesthetic ecology becomes experiential; it is an ecology of experience. And because it is all-inclusive, it is an engaged ecology, one that exemplifies aesthetic engagement. We have, then, at the very least, an ecosystemic model in which aesthetic considerations are considered not just significant but critical. Perceptual experience becomes the central feature in the interrelations of the people, objects, and activities comprising an ecosystem. Thus an aesthetic urban ecology denotes an integrated region with distinctive perceptual features: sounds, smells, textures, movement, rhythm, color; the magnitude and distribution of volumes and masses in relation to the body; light, shadow and darkness, temperature.

Such an ecology of experience is not a fully controlled order, an aesthetic environment on a large scale within which our perceptual experiences are programmed in a complex system. Rather a perceptual ecology identifies an ecosystem, such as an urban landscape, whose aesthetic features are significant factors in environmental design, so that we can eliminate or reduce negative perceptual experience and encourage experience that enhances human life.
What negative perceptual conditions does ecosystemic perception lead us to try to guide and control? Many of these are obvious, such as reducing or eliminating air and water pollution, noise pollution, and noxious and offensive odors. To these we can add controlling extremes of heat and cold, strong winds, and excessive illumination, all of which are common conditions in large, barren, paved plazas and parking areas and amid the concrete structures and pavement of the urban core. To specify these even more, one need only mention characteristic offenders in the urban landscape: traffic noise and exhaust fumes, construction sounds and dirt, refuse, canned “music” in nearly every public and quasi-public place, vehicles hurtling from unexpected directions. These just begin the list.

Yet at the same time, sensory relief and aesthetic enhancement are possible. Some of these are localized and obvious, such as public buildings of architectural distinction and residential districts that reflect regional and cultural design features. Monuments at significant points in the urban texture capture attention and instruct as well as commemorate. Fountains are a distinctive urban aesthetic amenity that combines sculpture with the multi-sensory qualities of water in motion. These call attention to the aesthetic importance of public spaces.

Tiny “pocket” parks can function as oases of green, quiet, and clear air, places of safety and repose within the frenetic concrete jungle of commercial and industrial districts. Large urban parks provide an opportunity for creative and imaginative works of landscape architecture to provide experiences of cultivated nature. Public gardens are another urban amenity, and
sensitive landscaping in highway design and parking fields can do much to ameliorate mechanical, drab circumstances. When present, water can be used to enhance the urban soundscape, not only by the soothing sounds of fountains, but by taking advantage of unchannelled urban streams and rivers to introduce refreshing irregularity on the grid pattern of streets and to offer visual relief from concrete and asphalt. Where cities are built on a harbor or waterway, the shorefront can become a recreation area, providing open space and contrasting sounds and vistas, opportunities enhanced with walkways, benches, and picnicking and bathing areas. Industrial shorefront offers another opportunity for a unique experience of urban commercial activity as a process of generating and receiving the shipment of goods and materials and exhibiting the functional beauty of the industrial and commercial process.  

Commercial districts can incorporate pedestrian streets and walkways, with arcades offering vendors and shoppers protection from sun and rain, and covered or enclosed walkways and pedestrian bridges providing relief in regions of extreme climate or heavy traffic. And on a minimal level, anti-noise ordinances and anti-pollution requirements can help protect pedestrians from high, offensive, and harmful sensory input.

All these perceptual considerations have implications, not only for comfort, pleasure, and stimulation, but for health and safety as well. They can contribute to creating an urban landscape that is understood ecosystemically and that, instead of oppressing its inhabitants, engages them aesthetically in ways that enhance and enlarge their lives. An aesthetic ecology
that encourages aesthetic engagement offers a direction for constructing environments that promote rich and satisfying lives and that lead beyond mere survival toward human fulfillment. This direction has been marked by artist-designers who have demonstrated in practice the extraordinary capabilities of aesthetic ecological design. Patricia Johanson’s environmental designs, such as *Fair Park Lagoon* in Dallas, Texas and *Petaluma Wetlands Park and Water Recycling Facility* in Petaluma, California, are exemplary projects that promote functional ecological processes infused with a keen artistic sensibility. The designs of the Brazilian environmental designer Fernando Chacel, such as *Marapendi Municipal Ecological Park* and *The Ecological Walkway at Rio Office Park*, similarly fuse an aesthetic sensitivity to landscape with an ecological vision that Chacel calls “ecogenesis.”

An aesthetically positive urban ecosystem can enhance public spaces and recognize how each neighborhood – commercial, industrial, residential, or recreational – has an individual character and yet affects the others in shaping perceptual experience. In a humanly functional aesthetic ecosystem, the urban landscape is not an external environment but an inclusive one that integrates its inhabitants, who participate actively and contribute to its functioning. Taking aesthetic engagement as a normative goal can be a powerful guideline in humanizing the urban landscape.

**The aesthetic-ecological city**
Applying the aesthetic-ecosystemic model is revealing and offers a touchstone in efforts to humanize urban life. It is comprehensive and coherent. The complexity of its components adds to the ecological challenge, for an urban region typically includes an industrial domain producing basic materials and equipment, such as steel, oil, and machinery; another manufacturing consumer industrial products, perhaps including airplanes, automobiles, computers, elevators, air conditioners; and the production of consumer goods in the form of clothing, books and newspapers, prepared foods, furniture and the many other kinds of objects and services that fulfill the city dweller’s needs and desires and occupy his or her time and attention. The ecological model urges that these various domains be kept in balance and that they be of a proportion that no one of them dwarfs the capability of the others or overwhelms the urban dweller.

It is important to embrace under the rubric of the ecosystem social and cultural institutions and organizations: libraries, museums, schools and universities, houses of worship, research institutes, laboratories, and the like, the multiple institutions that constitute the social fabric. Critical among these institutions are the political and governmental ones: the bodies that constitute the city government, the legal system and the courts, the law enforcement agencies, and the social service agencies. It might seem strange to include these bodies in an ecological inventory. They are, however, of central importance. An ecological city must integrate political and cultural functions along with physical and biological ones.
A comprehensive urban ecosystem, then, when functioning as an integral whole, has no hard divisions between its physical structures, its social and political organizations, and the activities associated with them. For an urban ecosystem is comprised of more than physical components. It includes in equal importance the immaterial elements of social relations, behavior patterns, and customs and traditions. Indeed, these cannot be separated since architecture and mechanical technology are bound up with language and culture, forces that shape decision, choice, and behavior. Moreover, the ecological city is a dynamic whole. It is a seething process of altering, tearing down, building, adjusting, revising, and constructing, always trying to adapt to changed social, economic, and technological conditions.

As an entirety the ecological city embodies a distinctive aesthetic of multiple dimensions, in large part an aesthetic of function where its efficiency constitutes its beauty. Function, of course, introduces a utilitarian factor, long excluded from traditional aesthetic theory, but present, in fact, in numerous contexts other than the arts and the natural world to which the traditional account of aesthetic appreciation has been unduly restricted. I have long argued for a more inclusive account of appreciation as aesthetic engagement that includes smooth, efficient functioning appreciated for its intrinsic beauty. The inclusion of function as a mode of beauty is part of a growing recognition of the expanded scope of aesthetic appreciation that includes the objects, activities, and experiences of everyday life. 13
It is sometimes questioned whether ecological concerns and aesthetic interests are compatible. Different environments raise different considerations. Issues at stake in forest management or agricultural policy may have little bearing on urban policy. It is easy to see where these interests may conflict in the process of urbanization. To take one example, filling in wetlands for a housing development built to a prize-winning design is not uncommon. In fact, it is estimated that in the United States over fifty per-cent of the wetlands that existed in the 1780s were lost by the 1980s. In some countries such as Canada the percentage is even greater, in others it is less, but the issue is a global one. The loss of wetlands is a problem because wetlands are a crucial component in the propagation and maintenance of numerous species and are essential for maintaining biodiversity, and they also are a resource for many needs and activities of human populations. Some might argue that wetlands do not represent environmental beauty and that filling them in for agricultural or housing improves appearances. This seems to be a clear case of ecological and aesthetic incompatibility.

Several aspects of such a situation require clarification and ordering. One is the matter of ecosystemic scale. It is important to recognize that no significant local change has exclusively local effects. Draining a wetland affects more than the local ecosystem. Patterns of wetland reclamation have regional effects and contribute to global consequences in species diversity and climate. By our actions we humans make ourselves part of the ecosphere and actions may not have desirable consequences. Uses that are guided by considerations of sustainability and amelioration may meet human needs without causing permanent damage. Short-term goals must be balanced by long-term effects. Here an ecosystemic approach must
be spatio-temporal and include the effects over time as well as the immediate physical results of an action.

But how does this mesh with aesthetic interests? Factors of design are involved in creating perceptual interest in every project: visual design; spatial design; dramatic, temporal factors in the sequence of experience. The city encourages sensory engagement, and sensitivity to unplanned, gratuitous features and presences can be part of a comprehensive aesthetic presence. Also to be included are the multitude of fine perceptual details that are present in every environment, details of texture, plant and animal structures, light, color, and shape. Of course, all these include people's actions as participants in ecosystemic continuity and change. Moreover, it is essential to realize that an urban aesthetics must reflect the full range of aesthetic values, and that recognizing the aesthetic dimension of an urban ecosystem acknowledges nothing about the kind or multiplicity of its normative character. A wide variety of aesthetically negative characteristics may be present, ranging from perceptual intrusiveness and offensiveness to the repugnant, disgusting, repulsive, or loathsome. The urban environment offers probably the fullest range of aesthetic value, from the sublime to the sordid.

In the final analysis there is no incompatibility between the aesthetic and the ecological.

The relationship between the ecological and aesthetic dimensions of urban experience is a complex one. At the same time it is possible to show how these interests may be compatible. Central to understanding the values involved is recognizing the misleading and false
separations with which such issues as this are usually structured, separations that turn situations into problems. In the wetlands example these would be the developers and investors with their private needs and interests, on one side, and the social and ecological values present in a wetlands environment, on the other. This places the issue in the form of conflict. How would this be seen differently if we adopted the idea developed throughout this book that continuity, not division, marks the human world, both ontologically and experientially?

The challenge is to afford such full consideration to all the relevant factors in the complex context within which human direction and decision-making take place in order to discover their interrelations and interdependence. In place of hardening presumed incompatibilities into conflicts, we can strive to recognize areas of mutual support and enhancement that more truly reflect what is actually present in such situations. This possibility is difficult to grasp in a culture that is so thoroughly indoctrinated with an ideology of small private interests in perpetual opposition with wider, environmental ones in a turbulent sea of conflicting desires.

Aesthetic engagement can provide a valuable criterion for an urban aesthetic ecology, offering an experiential model and a guide for shaping and humanizing the urban landscape. It becomes a kind of appreciative, normative process that can be recognized and incorporated into environmental experience. And as we shall see later, aesthetic engagement provides a
basis for the aesthetic criticism of negative perception and a standard in developing positive experiences.  

Centering these considerations on the aesthetic-ecological city, understood in this way, adds yet another normative dimension, the ethical, for the ultimate criterion in assessing any human environment is how it contributes to the fulfillment of the people who are an inseparable part of it. Because ethical values are not a separate feature but suffuse the urban aesthetic ecosystem, they need to be integrated with the social and aesthetic values from which they are inseparable in living practice to achieve what Dufrenne called “aesthetic sociability.”  

If a disparity between ecology and ethics seems to appear, it is likely the result of seeing particular interests as separate and self-contained instead of as part of a common human spectrum of values. We introduce an ethical note here not as a casual addition but as a factor that broadens our vision by recognizing the presence of yet another dimension of experience. Its ramifications are vast and we shall pursue some of them in the chapters that follow.

ENDNOTES


Ecological and evolutionary thought in anthropology have long been entwined. See Julian Steward, *Evolution and Ecology* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977) for early statements. The history of evolutionary thought in anthropology and its critiques are well.
synthesized and summarized in the first chapter of Norman Yoffee’s *Myths of the Archaic State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

4 An ecological model does not commit one unqualifiedly to homeostasis. While homeostatic factors are at work attempting to maintain a healthy balance in the ecosystem, this is not an equilibrium, for environmental changes occur constantly and, for humans, social environmental changes as well as changes in the individuals are frequent and ongoing. There is no ultimate stable ideal order; adjustment to changes is constantly necessary. For a comprehensive discussion of urban aesthetics, see Nathalie Blanc, *Vers une Esthétique environnementale* (Paris: Éditions Quae, 2008).


7 Much of this account of perception draws on earlier discussions. See especially the Introduction and Chapter Two.
8 ‘Aesthetic engagement’ is central to my account of the experience of aesthetic appreciation, whether of the arts or of nature. I first developed it at length in Art and Engagement (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).


10 These three models, the aleatoric, the mechanical, and the ecosystemic, are generalizations of common practices and ideals and are not intended to designate specific cities. Particular
cities may exemplify some or all of the models at different times in their history and at different locations in the urban complex.

11 In *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson offer a comprehensive case for the aesthetic relevance of function, a quality especially applicable to the urban process.


14 These issues are clearly and comprehensively discussed in Paul H. Gobster, Joan I. Nassauer, Terry C. Daniel, Gary Fry in William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890) (Henry


16 Chapter Nine develops this idea at length.

17 Aesthetics as a basis for critical judgment is the theme of Part Three and is developed at length in Chapter Nine.