Interview with Professor Berleant

**Topic: From Environmental Aesthetics to Urban Aesthetics**

Participants:
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Cheng (C): Dear Professor Berleant, thanks a lot for interviewing me in your home. When you visited Shandong University in 1993, I didn’t imagine that there was a discipline called environmental aesthetics at all. Almost 13 years later, I realized that your book titled The Aesthetics of Environment had been published in 1992, the year before you visited Shandong University. I was so regretful!

Berleant (B): You are warmly welcome. When I visited Shandong University I spoke about American aesthetics and I seem to remember also giving a paper called "Deconstructing Disneyworld." I think of that paper as actually being in environmental aesthetics, especially in employing its critical capabilities.

C: As you may understand, until now, people in China are still not very familiar with environmental aesthetics. So would you give me a brief introduction to it and explain the difference between environmental aesthetics and landscape aesthetics?

B: As a newly emerged subdiscipline of aesthetics, the scope of environmental aesthetics is even more difficult to circumscribe than that of art. Environmental aesthetics encompasses some divergent ideas, and its various meanings reflect the disciplinary interests and goals of different investigators. Environmental psychologists, urban and regional planners, and other behavioral scientists commonly associate environmental aesthetics with the visual beauty of landscapes. They attempt to measure it quantitatively through studies of preferential selection and behavior with the goal of formulating guidelines for design decisions and for governmental environmental policies. Aesthetics here is usually taken as what is visually pleasing.

Others, including philosophers and some social scientists, consider the quantitative bias of such empirical research to be restricted and even flawed by being conceptually naive, perceptually undiscriminating, and heavily assumptive. Some choose a qualitative orientation and identify environmental aesthetics with the beauty of objects or scenes as apprehended by a skilled viewer. Those who adopt a phenomenological approach emphasize the activity of perception, the formative contribution of the perceiver in aesthetic experience of environment, and the fundamental reciprocity of perceiver and environment. In its largest sense, environmental aesthetics denotes the appreciative engagement of humans as part of a total environmental complex, where
the intrinsic experience of sensory qualities and immediate meanings predominates. The experience of environment as an inclusive perceptual system includes such factors as space, mass, volume, time, movement, color, light, smell, sound, tactility, kinesthesia, pattern, order, and meaning. Environmental experience here is not exclusively visual but actively involves all the sensory modalities synaesthetically, engaging the participant in intense awareness. Moreover, a normative dimension suffuses the perceptual range, and this underlies positive or negative value judgments of an environment. Environmental aesthetics thus becomes the study of environmental experience in the immediate and intrinsic value of its perceptual and cognitive dimensions.

Landscape aesthetics concerns larger domains, often defined visually, as we have seen, yet not necessarily so, as we begin to understand the aesthetic inhabitation of a landscape. On one end of the spectrum it may include landscape architecture, from foundation planting and landscaping to the design of gardens and parks as perceptual wholes. On the other end of its range, it may reach to the perceptual horizon, even extending to a geographic region perceived cumulatively as a whole because of similar or complementary landforms and vegetation or by unifying human activity. Landscape aesthetics, understood most generally, may be thought of as synonymous with the aesthetics of environment or with the aesthetics of nature.

C: I get it. Your environmental aesthetics is called "an aesthetics of engagement." Your approach to environmental aesthetics considers the human person as an active contributor in a context that includes and is continuous with the participant. A person is the perceptual center, both as an individual and as a member of a socio-cultural group, of his or her life-world whose horizons are shaped by geographical and cultural factors. What led you to research environmental aesthetics? What’s more important, the key word in your aesthetic thought, I mean, in "the aesthetics of engagement" is ‘engagement’. I read two different Chinese translations of it but I could not understand it clearly. Would you please explain it in the context of Western aesthetics?

B: Your questions about my idea of engagement have led me to explore my use of the term and this was informative to me! The term 'engagement' appears early in my writings. The earliest occurrence I could find is in a paper, "The Experience and Criticism of Art," published in the Sarah Lawrence Journal in 1967 that became the final chapter of my book, The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1970). 'Engagement' appears a number of times in chapters 4 and 6. In that book I wrote in several places about 'appreciative engagement.' I suppose one could say that the idea of aesthetic engagement was the motivating force behind the concept of the aesthetic field, which I developed in that book and which provided the underlying theoretical framework for all the writing that followed. I am not certain about when I began using the term 'aesthetic engagement.' The expression certainly appears frequently in my book, Art and Engagement (1991). It is the central theme of that book and I develop it at length theoretically and in relation
to a number of different arts. At the time I began writing about engagement as an alternative to disinterestedness, I do not remember the term being used by others. Since then it seems to appear everywhere, both in aesthetic contexts and in others. I introduced the expression 'aesthetic engagement' in order to specify more explicitly the kind of experience I have tried to describe and the characteristic context in which it occurs.

Aesthetic engagement is inescapable in environmental situations. Environmental experience is one of the clearest and most accessible examples of experience best described by the expression 'aesthetic engagement.' Among the arts, such experience is most characteristic and obvious in appreciating film and fiction and, perhaps to a lesser apparent extent, dance. But in experiencing environment aesthetic, engagement is widely accessible and it occurs outside of an artistic context, which leads to the necessity of expanding the aesthetic to include the wide range of environmental situations. Thus its theoretical implications are enormous.

C: With your careful explanation I can understand that environmental aesthetics is emerging as a discipline in its own right, with distinctive concepts, issues, and theories. You have joined environment with the arts in a contextual account that leads to a reconsideration of traditional aesthetic theory on the basis of environmental experience. The key phrase here is ‘environmental experience,’ and I think we must pay more attention to its active qualities. You know, environment involves perceptual categories that are wider and more numerous than those usually recognized in the arts. No single sense dominates the situation; rather, all the modes of sensibility are involved. Sight, touch, hearing, smell, and its correlate, taste, are all active in environmental experience. So, with multiple-sensory activities and experiences, ‘aesthetics’ as an independent discipline has really become a science of ‘the aesthetic’.

B: Yes, much environmental experience requires considerable active participation, such as strolling through a garden, hiking along a mountain trail, paddling a canoe down a flowing stream, or driving through a scenic countryside. Even when an environment does not demand physical engagement, part of its appeal lies in the magnetic forces that seem to emanate from it. One can feel the invitation of an entryway or the pull of a serpentine garden path. Even when standing still, the embrace of a sunset can draw one into an intimate relation. Such experiences make it difficult to accept the usual account of appreciation as disinterested contemplation, and this has led to theoretical accounts, such as pragmatic and phenomenological ones, that emphasize the active qualities of environmental experience.

My effort has been to recast traditional aesthetics in a way that absorbs its insights within a larger scope that replaces disinterestedness with engagement, separation with continuity, and the constriction of aesthetic value with its pervasiveness. My intent is rather to return art and the aesthetic to the integral place it has occupied in most human cultures throughout most of human history, while preserving the acute awareness of aesthetic value that this so-called modern aesthetics of disinterestedness has had such a hand in developing. My intent in revising aesthetic theory was in
response to appreciative experience that the tradition will not allow. An aesthetics of engagement is more permissive, encompassing both the art canon and its vanguard.

C: In my opinion, no matter how we understand and define environment, basically, it is a conception related to space and place. So, I am very interested in a technical term which is strange to Chinese scholars: Topophilia. I even take it as the theoretical theme of environmental aesthetics. Topophilia is described in Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language as literally “love of place”. It is a term used to describe the strong sense of place or identity among certain peoples. It combines the Greek word topo- or top-, meaning place, with the ending -philia, meaning love of/for. Yi-fu Tuan, a Chinese-American geographer, became a full professor at the University of Minnesota in 1968, where he began his focus on systematic humanistic geography. Tuan claims that topophilia "can be defined widely so as to include all emotional connections between physical environment and human beings." (Tuan, Yi-fu. Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall. 1974.) We may say that all experience is experience of place. What is your response?

B: 'Topophilia' is a felicitous term that has achieved widespread use. It calls attention to the emotional aspect of place experience. At the same time, it does not take account of place experience that is negative, as much place experience is in our industrialized world. Your second point about all experience being place experience is well taken. Experience, contrary to how it is often described, is not subjective, not internal, not private. Rather it involves human participation in some setting or other. It is possible, then, to think of all experience as experience of place, although the term 'place' has a geographical connotation and may be misleading. Working in my study is environmental experience in which I engage in thinking, reading and writing. The setting has much to do with that experience, with its quality, its form, and its success or failure. Yet it would be odd to call the experience of my study as a place experience.

C: Thanks for your explanation. From here on I want to talk about urban aesthetics, which I think has a very close and intrinsic connection with environmental aesthetics. Historically, from the viewpoint of urban aesthetics, the City Beautiful Movement should get some attention firstly. As we know, the City Beautiful Movement was a progressive reform movement in North American architecture and urban planning that flourished in the 1890s and 1900s with the intent of using beautification and monumental grandeur in cities to counteract the perceived moral decay of poverty-stricken urban environments. The movement did not seek beauty for its own sake, but rather as a social control device for creating moral and civic virtue among urban populations. Advocates of the movement believed that such beautification could thus provide a harmonious social order that would improve the lives of the inner-city poor. What is more, as you mentioned in your letters to me, the American city designer Kevin Lynch’s outstanding work, The Image of the City (1960), can be
interpreted from the perspective of urban aesthetics to dig out the theoretical significance of his idea of city image, which may be summarized as the aesthetic dimension of urban design and regional planning.

Theoretically speaking, environments can be divided into natural environments and built environments. The most important and complex built environments are urban environments, which are all kinds of cities and metropolitan regions. Correspondingly, what we call environmental aesthetics in general should include natural environmental aesthetics (or the aesthetics of nature) and urban aesthetics. Unfortunately, compared with many works about the former, works about urban aesthetics are fewer and less comprehensive. What is more important is that cross-cultural research on urban aesthetics has not entered sufficiently into our academic horizon. You know, China is on its fast way to urbanization. Now, I am rethinking urban aesthetics from the perspective of environmental aesthetics and I hope to get your ideas on urban aesthetics.

B: What you are talking about sounds interesting and reasonable. Urban aesthetics focuses on a special landscape, the built environment, shaped almost entirely by human direction for human purposes. We do not, however, have to oppose the city aesthetically to the countryside or to wilderness, a common tendency. The city is rather a particular environment, made from materials obtained or derived from the natural world and embodying the same perceptual elements as other environments, but designed and controlled by human agency. Moreover, although the city is a distinctively human environment, it is nevertheless an integral part of the geography of its region, from which it usually has no distinct boundaries and with which it has a reciprocal relation.

Urban aesthetics deals with the same perceptual factors that are part of all environmental experience. And as the preeminent cultural environment, the city's social and historical dimensions are inseparable from its sensory ones. Aesthetic value here, then, is more than a matter of urban beauty; it encompasses the perceptual experience of meanings, traditions, familiarity, and contrast, as well. Further, urban aesthetics must also include a consideration of negative aesthetic values: the obstruction of perceptual interest by noise pollution, air pollution, strident signage, utility lines, littered streets, dull, trite, or oppressive building designs, and the destruction of traditional neighborhoods. Indeed, an aesthetic critique should be a key factor in evaluating a city's character and its success. To incorporate aesthetic considerations into urban planning is to place the city in the service of the values and goals that we associate with the full meaning of civilization.

C: Yes, exactly. City and civilization have the same root, city meant civilized place in ancient times. But, with the rapid modern trend of urbanization, big cities almost mean social diseases all over the world. Urban aesthetics should criticize this kind of cultural phenomenon. Thanks to your recommendation, I was invited to take part in the International Colloquium “Environment, aesthetic engagement and public sphere: the stakes in landscape”, May, 9, 10 and 11, 2007, Paris. My colloquium is entitled
Urban Image and Urban Aesthetics, in which, I take Kevin Lynch’s idea of city image as my starting point and focus on urban aesthetics mainly implied or reflected by the aesthetic character of traditional Chinese cities and the design philosophy behind them. My basic points are: 1) Urban image is the object of urban aesthetics, which can respond to the two fundamental questions of “what and how to aesthetically appreciate” proposed by Allen Carlson in his aesthetics of natural environment. 2) With the idea of “cross-cultural aesthetics” in mind, I try to introduce the principle of traditional Chinese city design, which is “to imitate the images that cleave to Heaven and the forms manifested on Earth” (Xiang-Tian Fa-Di). Through the analysis of its metaphysical significance and two personal experiences of disorientation, I try to show that it is impossible to appreciate environments aesthetically without metaphysical insight, and urban aesthetics viewed with metaphysical insight can be viewed as the philosophical reflection of the crisis of modern urbanization. Compared with many works about natural environmental aesthetics (or the aesthetics of nature), works about urban aesthetics are fewer and less comprehensive. Why? What is more, I know you have published some papers researching urban aesthetics, such as "Aesthetic Paradigms for an Urban Ecology" (1978), Aesthetic Participation and the Urban Environment (1984), and Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic (1986). Would you like to introduce your basic ideas related to my questions?

B: This is a challenging question! In general, what I want to say is that urban experience is experience of a distinctive kind of human environment. Recognizing this, the need to recognize its human consequences is paramount. This has powerful implications for the use of space, of volume, and of the sensory dimension of urban experience, such as sound, smell, kinesthetic (involving movement and the experience of space and of distance). In general, the touchstone for planning decisions in the urban environment is their consequences for human wellbeing.

C: Thanks a lot. Hope to get more opportunities to ask for your advice.