Interview of Arnold Berleant by Almantas Samalavičius

1. Despite the rise of global ecological awareness, few people involved in urbanism, even experts, realize the deep connection between environment and aesthetics – the bond you discuss in your book Sensibility and Sense. How could you describe aesthetic’s relation to ecology in a broad sense?

Ecology is the scientific study of the environmental complex of interdependent organisms and their habitat. Human ecology, which studies the interrelations of humans in their natural, social, and built environments. It recognizes that humans, wherever they are present, are part of that complex. Now perceptual experience is the fundamental source of cognition and the ramifications of meaning. Yet perception is basically aesthetic in the original sense of that word (aisthēsis, perception by the senses). From this it can be seen that the human ecosystem is fundamentally a sensory system and so is necessarily aesthetic. The world we create and live in is a holistic perceptual world, that is, an aesthetic world.

2. In recent decades more and more people on the globe tend to live in cities and it seems that among many other transformations, the human relation (or to be more precise attachment) to earth is gradually being lost. Accordingly natural environment is changing significantly – Jorgen Randers [interviewed earlier in this series] in his recent book 2052 goes as far as to suggest that there will be hardly any “natural” places left in the second half of this century. Can we expect that urban dwellers will somehow reshape their attitudes to natural and built environment so as to appreciate its beauty? Or will the understanding of environment’s beauty vanish with further developments of urban civilization?

This is a troubling prediction but it harbors confusion, confusion between the natural environment and humans’ experience of environment. While it is unfortunately true that the human imprint on the natural world is to be found everywhere, that is not the same as saying that the natural environment is disappearing. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that in many cases it is increasing in scope. As people congregate more and more in cities and as factory farms take over agricultural production, the abandoned farms quickly revert to woodland and forest. This is found throughout the northeastern states of the U.S. and, I suspect, in many other parts of the world, so that in the U.S. the extent of forested land has greatly increased over the last century. At the same time, throughout the so-called developed world, the recreational industry has grown tremendously as city people take holidays backpacking, camping, river rafting, and boating. It is true that in many respects this is a commercialized nature experience, but not always or everywhere, and a great awareness of nature and natural beauty has developed. Environmental education needs to be increased and environmental values promoted. That is our best hope in the relentless wave of urbanization. (See my response to the last question.)
3. In Sensibility and Sense you suggest that “Urbanism has now moved beyond <…> 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.” However, despite a notable trend in recent urbanism, this important paradigm shift seems to be in the making, or at least these attitudes remain marginal as far as mainstream urbanism continues its road taken during the last century? Do you have hopes that we might see significant changes in near future?

I can hope although I cannot predict. It is true that the course taken in the process of urbanization is often an unimaginative simple increase in the size and quantity of building and infrastructure. Yet there are signs of an increasing awareness of natural values, and environmental groups have grown in size and influence. They have become influential forces in the dialogical process that directs social and environmental change. I hope that as people become increasingly aware of the irreplaceable values of the natural environment and the serious threats to its (and our) survival, there will be enough enlightened decision-making in politics and industry to reverse the self-destructive trends of the present day. The most critical threat today is undoubtedly global warming, of which we have seen only the earliest and least devastating signs.

4. The legacy of modernism in urban theory and practice continues to shape the core trends in current urbanism. Despite of the fact that Le Corbusier hardly managed to implement his urban mega-utopias, his thinking seems to have captured the imagination of several generations of city planners and urban designers. Having in mind your critical attitude towards this legacy, do you expect this era of urban thinking to end soon? Or are we destined to witness its further triumph in this century as well?

I wish I could make an optimistic prediction but that would be foolhardy. What is encouraging is that there are significant signs of a change in thinking from an industrial model of urban development to one that is more environmentally sensitive and harmonious. Imaginative environmental designers have emerged, such as Fernando Chacel in Brazil, Patricia Johanson, in the U.S., and Kongjian Yu in China. They have demonstrated ways in which ecological and aesthetic values can be conjoined to create human environments that are more functionally effective as well as more humane. These alternatives provide real choices for decisions on urban development.

5. New Urbanism has developed a novel approach to urban planning and design of cities quite curiously re-considering the legacy of city building of many centuries and considering modernist phase as a kind of excess. Can history of aesthetics offer us some new insights into understanding or rethinking beauty in urban environment? If so what sources of aesthetics throughout history you would consider as worth revisiting? And do you think concepts and practices of New Urbanism will provide at least one of the ways of re-imagining and re-building our cities?
While philosophers have sometimes speculated about ideal cities, such as Campanella’s seventeenth century City of the Sun, aesthetics has had little to say on the subject until recently. Modern aesthetics dates from the eighteenth century and its focus has been almost entirely on beauty in the arts and nature. Aesthetics continued the classical prejudice of devaluing practical matters, both theoretically and behaviorally, until philosophical movements such as marxism and pragmatism forced a revaluation by insisting on the continuity of theory and practice. Even at present, very few scholars have written on urban aesthetics. Besides occasional isolated essays, the only work I am familiar with besides my own handful of articles are the two books by the geographer-aesthetcian Nathalie Blanc, Vers une esthétique environnementale(2008) and Les nouvelles Esthétiques urbaines (2012). The concepts and projects of New Urbanism have great significance as exemplifications of the kind of thinking that could inform aestheticians interested in urban aesthetics. This is a case in which practice precedes theory!

6. Throughout the last century urban architecture was largely dominated by new building technologies and materials, meanwhile earlier building traditions were abandoned almost all over the globe (during my stays in various parts of Southeast Asia, Japan and South Korea I was shocked to realize how largely modernism (in all senses) has neglected local building traditions and architectural aesthetics. Do you think that Asian countries that possess such rich architectural legacies of their own are capable to come to terms with their architectural aesthetics and building traditions? Or perhaps they are already lost forever?

As you have discovered, Western designers tend to impose their cultural predispositions on non-Western cultures. Incorporating isolated features from traditional architecture in what is essentially a Western, modernist style, is actually a form of neo-colonialist condescension. However, the resurgence of ethnic identities in recent decades may change this pattern, especially as architects and designers are being trained in their native countries in Asia and the Middle East and not necessarily sent to the West for their professional training. They are also coming to value their own architectural traditions and turn to indigenous sources for inspiration.

7. Some architects (for e.g. Leon Krier) or writers (like James Howard Kuntsler) think that we are witnessing the end of an era hooked on cheap fossil fuels and that postcarbon age is slowly but definitely coming into being. Do you cherish any hopes that by the end of this century people will see changes in their urban environments: more and more natural and environment-friendly materials will be used, skyscrapers and earthscrapers will give way to more ecological building? If so what consequences will these shifts have for urban aesthetics?

It is tempting to make rosy predictions but until urban aesthetics emerges as a strong domain, there is little on which to base thoughts on future possibilities. The principal engine of change is necessity, and as new sources of non-polluting energy become not only available but necessary, this will inevitably affect building design and urban form. The need to change our sources of energy identifies just one part of the many basic alterations in urban life that will come from climate change. These changes include social, political, and geographical transformations, population growth and redistribution, and food and water production and distribution. There are beginning efforts to devise and try new techniques that are less
environmental destructive, but to make a difference such innovative techniques and practices must become common. The extent of change is universal and so are the consequences.

8. Despite the strong visibility of architects in various building projects (and the phenomenon of “starchitects” now trotting around the globe) it is not aesthetic but financial or economic considerations that are shaping present cities. It is building companies and developers that have say in most spheres of urbanism, including urban aesthetics. Most praised urban architectural projects, despite of highly acclaimed “ auteurs” are in fact productions of financial capital. Can we still speak of individual architectural aesthetics in times when “money speaks louder than democracy” (as Nikos Salingaros said in one of my previous talks)? And more generally – do you think that new urban aesthetics will finally take shape?

I am not an optimist in these matters. As I said above, necessity will be the principal source of movement in urban design, but that has always been the case. Design is a collective process and has always been so, from indigenous architecture and design to modern urbanism. Creative individuals can influence the collective process.

What is encouraging at the present time is that more attention is being given to the human side of the urban equation. As people in industrialized countries coalesce in cities and as the greater affluence in cities frees people from being slaves to necessity, it is possible that greater awareness of the essential importance of quality of life will take hold and spread. As part of this change, we can hope to educate not only architects but developers, investors, and politicians. No city dweller stands outside the urban process and everyone is implicated and affected. No one stands outside. The present plan in China to move 250 million people into urban areas, already underway even if not fully formulated, can serve as a case study. The true test, here and elsewhere, will be the quality of human life that results.