Nature, Aesthetic Values, and Urban Design

Building the Natural City

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Abstract In this chapter, I consider the relationship between the aesthetic appreciation of the built environment and the aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment, with an eye to pursuing its implications for the role of design in urban planning. In section 1, I describe some ways of thinking about the aesthetic, common in traditional environmental thought, according to which very different forms of aesthetic appreciation are appropriate for each sort of environment. In section 2, I outline a somewhat different approach to understanding the aesthetic, one that holds out the promise of a more unified approach. In section 3, I attempt to deliver on this promise by pointing out a similarity between the 'visual order' of the natural environment and that of the built environment. This also reveals an important similarity in their aesthetic character. Section 4 consists of an effort to clarify this claim, and to draw out some of its ramifications for our broader understanding of urban design processes. In section 5, I conclude by considering three objections to my claim.

1 Some Traditional Thinking about Aesthetic Value, Nature, and the Built Environment

Much classic environmental thought rests on a sharp distinction between the natural environment, especially wilderness, and the human, or built, environment. In attempting to draw attention to the value and importance of pristine nature, many environmental thinkers have focused on what they take to be its unique qualities: ecological harmony and sustainability, for instance, as well its capacity to allow the realization of human values such as authenticity and freedom. As a contrast, they have often portrayed the human environment in a more negative light, as inherently unsustainable or ecologically destructive, for example, and construed life in the

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human environment as a technologically mediated, inauthentic, and spiritually crippling experience.[1] This dichotomy remains a powerful conception, tangible in everything from the symbolism used in advertising campaigns to the rising value of cottage real estate near highly urbanized areas.

One aspect of this traditional wilderness/built-environment dichotomy, and the one I will focus on here, involves the aesthetic character of these environments.[2] Whereas pristine nature, or certain parts of it at least, has become a paradigm of aesthetic appeal, the built environment is more frequently associated with 'eyesores', visual blight and other forms of ugliness.[3] Indeed, some environmental thinkers have gone so far as to assert that the aesthetic character of wild nature, unlike that of the built environment or of art, is universally and even necessarily positive: i.e., there is not, and perhaps could not be, anything ugly in wild nature. This view, often called 'Positive Aesthetics' about nature, remains controversial among philosophers.[4] Nonetheless, its endorsement by many within the environmental movement vividly illustrates the current tendency to see the aesthetic character of nature as categorically different from that of the built environment.

Even putting this radical view aside, one can find within the mainstream tradition of philosophical aesthetics important reasons to view the aesthetics of nature and the built environment as distinct. One of these is the central role played by the sublime in our conception of the aesthetic character of nature.[5] Emerging in the early eighteenth-century as a sub-category of aesthetic experience, distinct from the beautiful, sublime experience was typically associated with vast and/or powerful phenomena in nature. As Kant describes:

> Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening, rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river, and such like; these exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we willingly call these objects sublime … (1790, §28)

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[1] For a review of this tradition, see Cronon (1995).

[2] In keeping with common philosophical practice, I will use "aesthetic character" and "aesthetic appeal" as the most general aesthetic terms, taking "beauty" to be a specific form of aesthetic appeal. However, I do recognize that "beauty" is commonly employed as a generic term of aesthetic appraisal, and that some philosophers employ it in this way as well (Nick Zangwill, for example: see his (1995)).

[3] Perhaps, as Walter (1983) suggests, this is so for North American cultures more than it is for others. The view is evident, for instance, in E.O. Wilson's well-known 'biophilia' hypothesis. Wilson writes that "artifacts are incomparably poorer than the life they are designed to mimic. They are only a mirror to our thoughts. To dwell on them exclusively is to fold inwardly over and over, losing detail at each translation, shrinking with each cycle, finally merging into the lifeless façade of which they are composed" (Wilson, 1984, 115).

[4] For defenses of various forms of this idea, see: Carlson (1984), Hargrove (1989), Godlovitch (1998), Saito (1998), and Parsons (2002). For criticism, see Budd (2002).

[5] On the classical tradition of the sublime, see Monk (1960) and Hope Nicolson (1959).