## 4 Reconsidering Design in the Built Environment

Having made the claim that there is continuity between the aesthetic characters of the natural and built environments, I want to consider why it might be important to recognize this continuity, and its implications for our conception of urban design. One motivation for recognizing this continuity involves the fact, outlined in section 1, that, following the classic line of environmental thought, we often view the aesthetic appeal of nature as distinct from, and superior to, that of the built environment. By stimulating urbanites to leave the city in search of 'genuine' aesthetic experience, this attitude has potentially problematic environmental consequences. The possibility of taking the aesthetic character of built environments to be closely related to, rather than radically distinct from, that of natural environments is thus an appealing one.

This has not gone unrecognized by workers in fields concerned with the built environment, such as urban planning, landscape architecture, and the like. Indeed, prominent movements in these fields have been organized around the aim of making cities more 'natural'. These movements, often referred to with the term "ecological design", have a number of aims, including instantiating, in the built environment, processes found in nature and increasing our awareness of urban impact upon surrounding ecosystems.[15] In these efforts, the focus is generally upon producing cities that are more sustainable, via consuming less energy, producing less pollution, and working in greater harmony with surrounding ecological systems.

From the aesthetic point of view, however, such approaches to making cities 'natural' contain a fundamental limitation, which is that the processes that are implemented are generally the product of design. For even an ecologically designed city is still a *designed* city, and as we have seen, part of what is distinctive about the natural environment is that a large part of its functional order is *non*-historical in nature.[16] This causal role functionality is produced by various forces that drive pre-existing elements to *function as* something or other, regardless of how they came to be as they currently are. This is not to say that ecological design is undesirable, or incompatible with a more 'natural' built environment: on the contrary. The point, rather, is that this approach to ecological design *on its own* will not deliver built environments that are aesthetically contiguous with natural environments in the sense that I have outlined. What *is* required then? Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, what is needed is a moderation of the role of design, so as to allow causal role functionality to emerge, as well as, perhaps, greater attention to an already existing functional order.

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[15] On ecological design, see Van der Ryn and Cowan (1996) and Todd and Todd (1994). For discussion of ecological design from a philosophical perspective, see King (2000) and Saito (2002).

[16] In their discussion of ecological design, Van der Ryn and Cowan write that "until our everyday activities preserve ecological integrity *by design*, their cumulative impact will continue to be devastating" (1996, 18; their emphasis).

This approach to planning is not novel: it has been argued for by, amongst others, Jane Jacobs, who urged that "the city is not put together like a mammal or a steel frame building", and should not be regarded as a completely designed entity (1961, 376). Rather, Jacobs emphasized the "complex systems of functional order" that arise out of the interaction of the various parts of the built environment. One of her examples of this order is the manner in which the apparently random flow of pedestrians serves, without any intention or design, to monitor and maintain peace and safety on residential streets (1961, 29–54). Jacobs argues that attending to this sort of functional order is key to understanding the ways in which cities actually work. Of primary interest here, however, is that this functional order involves the same sort of causal role functionality that we find in the natural environment, when, for instance, flooding serves to cue fish spawning and rejuvenate the soil of local floodplains.[17] The approach of Jacobs and others indicate that the toleration of causal role functionality, and the moderation of the role of intentional design that it involves, is not only possible, but also a highly desirable goal for urban planning. Furthermore, it is one that can translate into our aesthetic experience of the urban environment. Jacobs makes this explicit, comparing our experience of the city's "complex functional order" to more typical aesthetic experiences:

> Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city … we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance – not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. (Jacobs, 1961, 50)

I want to emphasize that my proposal for creating built environments that possess an important aesthetic unity with the natural environment is not simply to 'let nature take its course' and wait for the city magically to become aesthetically pleasing. A built environment with no design element is liable to be an aesthetic, not to mention practical, mess and would not mirror the distinctive aesthetic appeal that we cherish in our wilderness. Rather, the aim is to produce a built environment that mirrors the natural in its *mixture* of historical and causal role functionality. The challenge, though, is not only to find the right amount of design, but also to relate it in the proper way to the non-designed functionality at play in the built environment. Here we may look to nature, since in nature selected and causal-role functionality

[17] Jacobs also emphasizes that finding order in the built environment "takes understanding", and that this order is a *perceptual* one: "Once they are understood as systems of order, [complex systems] actually *look* different" (1961, 376; Jacob's italics). Jacobs does not, however, dwell on similarities between nature and the built environment, preferring to characterize cities on their own terms (1961, 376). Nonetheless, she does implicitly draw a connection between them when decrying the view that cities are "the malignant opposite of nature". In cases where natural beauty goes unappreciated, Jacobs says that "an all too familiar kind of mind is obviously at work …. a mind seeing only disorder where a most intricate and unique order exists; the same kind of mind that sees only disorder in the life of city streets, and itches to erase it, standardize it…" (1961, 447).