

# Aesthetics Ethics and Planning

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Planning the environment means to anticipate what will be the meanings of people in the future. Will they recognize in the environment their own intentions, or will they be forced to accept somebody else's meanings? (1) Planning is among the most responsible undertakings one can imagine; it always involves an ethic.

Environmental planning is sometimes conceived as an art – the art of town planning. Everybody has memories of great cities which differ in no way from experiences of art. It seems that planning involves, or at least could involve, also an aesthetic.

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Postmodernist times, as I choose to understand them, bring a new kind of confrontation between aesthetics and

My question in this article is the following: Can the ethics and the aesthetics of environmental planning be combined in such a way that the aesthetic feeling is directly related to considerations about right and wrong?

ethics, different from that of functionalism.

Aesthetics is no longer reserved for art alone (2): e.g. economics and aesthetics meet in the postmodernist *spectacle* of consumption and entertainment; aesthetics is a good selling argument (3). The world as it is presented to us by the media is fragmented, paradoxical, conceptually incomprehensible – we need 'aesthetic thinking'

to get along. (4) Not unlike other living creatures we are increasingly dependent on our sensitiveness (*aisthesis*) when choosing what to react upon in the environment, and less and less dependent on intellectual considerations – there is no time for that.

I argue that we have an aesthetic in our senses, i.e. in our bodies.

Another side of postmodernism could be called the ecological obligation. Ecology is unthinkable without systems theory, it is a philosophy of wholes, not of parts. As obligation it is an ethic of wholes. A slogan of this ethics could read: be wise, mind the purpose. Or: be aware of the context. Planning, on the other side, is almost by definition doing things illadvisedly. It's getting at what you want, fast, disregarding the context. Planning means to take control of some part of

the environment, to disregarding the rest, destroying the ecology. (5) It's man versus environment, reflecting the dualist metaphysics of the modern era.

Ecology brings monism to the fore: in the last analysis everything is nature (Spinoza, Dewey, Hegel, if you read him that way). Even culture is for radical monism one of nature's appearances. (6)

Dualism regards man as ruler over himself and the rest. Monism stresses the obligation in being part of nature's great system. As the cat does right in being just a cat, man should understand how to do the right thing just being the human being that nature invented, nothing more, nothing less.

And so I think I can argue that we have also an ethic in our nature, i. e. in our bodies.

Realizing that I am nature, I have a feeling of solidarity with the other parts that constitute the great chain of being. A good position, I think, for working out a new ethic of environmental planning.

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I have formerly presented an idea of architecture seen as archetypally or genetically conditioned structuring of spatial experience. (7) It was at that time, and still mainly is, an aesthetic idea, not unlike the generic architecture of Christopher Alexander. It seems important now to investigate the ethics of such a position, assuming that there exists, as I argued, in our bodies a biologically conditioned aesthetic and ethic regarding the environment.

This would mean defining environmental aesthetics as expressive representations of archetypal environmental relations, (8) and defining environmental ethics as a necessary respect for those vital relations.

Leaving aside the question of genetic conditioning, I go on to ask: what are the archetypes? I'd like to dispose of at least part of the mystic surrounding them, and therefore propose that archetypes are *habits of a species*, developed through thousands of generations, retaining practices that promote the survival of the species, and extinguishing others. (9) It's an economy of the psyche: you are spared from considering every decision and trying out every behaviour. A nice proportion of sunny and shady places seems 'natural', there should be places to hide and places to be together, it's pleasant to have trees outside the window – archetypes.

Such customs or practices could also be called collective intentions (as distinct from individual fancy), linking the habits to the collective meanings of the environment.

John Dewey, for one, taught that the habits of living species are situated in the relations between the organism and its environment. (10) My conclusion would be that environmental ethics is an economy of the psyche in the environmental relations of the human species. Or as formulated by St. Paul: "...what the law requires is written in their hearts". (11) Archetypes in the body guiding us as we go along forming our environment.

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'Form' is a word we are used to apply in connection with aesthetics, not ethics. In the tradition of functionalism I want to apply the word form also to ethics. (A thing can have meaning only in pattern of relations, i.e. having form). (12)

Ethics bring the user of the environment to the fore; he is the only important person when considering the aesthetic value of the environment. Understood this way the environment has form when it is experienced as meaningful by its user, as he is using it, living in it. I suggest that the user is able to experience the environment as a product of his own intentions, i.e. as meaningful or having form, only when the environment gives expression to the collective intentions, i.e. it has archetypal traits. Only then the environment can also be experienced as beautiful by the user. This would explain why environments considered excellent by critics can raise doubts or even hostile feelings in their users. An environment has form when it conforms to the meanings of the users.

How can this be accomplished? This is the question of environmental ethics. (13)

Environmental planning in a democratic society can not mean forcing people to live in certain ways, as functionalism in its time found appropriate. On the other side, giving everybody the chance to live as she wants is not possible; planning is always limiting the freedom of choice. The 'democratic' way of coming to grips with this contradiction is to reinforce some of the habits displayed in society, and to weaken others. E.g.

using the car is facilitated, walking is made difficult (although the latter is the archetypal way of moving around).

Ethically responsible planning is reinforcing good habits. Bad habits are contrary to form.

To sum up: giving form to the environment through planning means this. The plan, being composed of archetypal elements, corresponds to the meanings of the users, and so it reinforces vital practices of the human species. When the environment has form it makes living easier, and involves a feeling of beauty. Ethics meets aesthetics, as Wittgenstein said they should. (14)

This is possible, I think, only if environmental planning is conceived as an art by the planner. (15) And this should be a professional, not a moralistic attitude. Being an artist means finding the archetypes, the meanings of others, inside oneself. (16) Art is not a question of hard trying. (There are other definitions of art; not many apply to what I am trying to say). (17)

When planning consents to being art, the whole that was lost when trying to control the parts is restored. The planner-artist has a better chance to understand the insanity of our culture than has the

planner technician. (18) The technician in his planning efforts is inclined to precipitate the catastrophe. The artist has a chance to link his skill as a planner to the patterns of survival. (19)

And who can be an artist? Everybody, I think. The resistance against the death instinct, Thanatos, is there, as sensibility, Eros – in the body. It is a readiness to react positively to environmental form, not unlike the positive reaction to unformed nature.

The sophisticated mind doesn't necessarily know what is good for us. Could it be that the body knows?

## Notes

- Jean Luis Ramirez, *Skapande mening. Nordplan*, avhandling 13, Stockholm 1995.
- "That aesthetic experience extends beyond the historically established practice of art should be obvious. It exists, first of all, in the appreciation of nature, not least the part of nature which is the animate human body. But we also find it in ritual and sport, in parades, fireworks, and the media of popular culture, in bodily and domestic ornamentation, from primitive tattoos and cave drawings to contemporary cosmetics and interior decorating, and indeed in the countless colorful scenes and moving events which fill our cities and enrich our ordinary lives." (Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Blackwell, Cambridge (Ma.) 1992, 47).
- M. Christine Boyer, The Return of Aesthetics to City Planning, in Dennis Crow (ed.), *Philosophical Streets. Maisonneuve* Press, Washington D.C. 1990.
- Wolfgang Welsch, Esteettisen ajattelun ajankohtaisuudesta. *Tiede & Edistys*, Helsinki 3/1991.
- Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Ballantine Books, New York 1972, 433–436.
- Hans Fink, Naturens enhed og videnskaberne. Kulturforskning som naturforskning, in Hans Fink & Kerstin Hastrup (eds.) *Tanken om enhed i videnskaberne*. Kulturstudier 6, Arhus 1990.
- Kaj Nyman, *Husens språk*. Art House, Helsinki and Atlantis, Stockholm 1989. Also Stay in My House, in Nordal Akerman (ed.), *The Necessity of Friction*. Physica-Verlag, Heidelberg 1993.
- "... by *arche* I mean an origin that does not lose its power with the passage of time because it has its foundation in the very nature of human dwelling." (Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. MIT Press, Cambridge (Ma.) 1997, 109.) "... the essence of building... its *arche*, its timeless origin" (ibid. 113).
- Not unlike Sheldrake's notion of morphogenetic fields: "... natural systems ... inherit a collective memory from all previous things of their kind... through repetition the nature of things becomes increasingly habitual." (Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past*. Fontana/Collins 1988, introduction).
- John Dewey, *Human Nature and Human Conduct*. Holt & Co., New York 1922, 14. Cit. Timo Jarvilehto, *Ihminen ja ihmisen ympäristö*. Pohjoinen, Oulu 1944, 44.
- Romans* 2:15.
- Bateson (1972), 408.
- "'Ethical' derives from 'ethos'. By a person's ethos we mean his or her character, nature, or disposition. Similarly we speak of a community's ethos, referring to the spirit that presides over its activities. 'Ethos' here names the way human beings exist in the world: their way of dwelling. By the ethical function of architecture I mean its task to help articulate a common ethos." (Harries 1997, 4).

14. "Ethics and aesthetics are one." (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* § 6.421). The idea was never developed further by Wittgenstein. Shusterman connects it, successfully, I think, to the Deweyan conception of the aesthetization of the ethical: "... aesthetic considerations are or should be crucial and ultimately perhaps paramount in determining how we choose to lead or shape our lives and how we assess what a good life is." (Shusterman 1992, 237).
15. I find my own art conception wonderfully articulated in Shusterman's book (1992). The reference is mostly Dewey; e.g.: "Underneath the rhythm of every art and every work of art there lies... the basic pattern of relations of the live creature to his environment"; so that "naturalism in the broadest and deepest sense of nature is a necessity of all great art" (in *Late Works of John Dewey*, vol 10, 155–6); and: "... art's role is not to deny the natural and organic roots and wants of man so as to achieve some pure ethereal experience, but instead to give a satisfyingly integrated expression to both our bodily and intellectual dimensions" (ibid. 122. Cit. Shusterman 1992, 7). Opposing Bourdieu's rejection of an aesthetic where life is given centrality Shusterman points out that "such an aesthetic is not only possible; is is powerfully presented in Dewey's pragmatist theory of art, which makes the energies, needs, and pleasures of 'the live creature' central to aesthetic experience." (Shusterman 1992, 195). "...Dewey would also insist that mere pleasure is far from a trivial thing, for we humans... live primarily not for truth but for sensual and emotional satisfaction" (ibid. 29).
16. "Artistic form is congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental, and emotional life; works of art are projections of 'felt life', as Henry James called it, into spatial, temporal, and poetic structures. They are images of feeling, that formulate it for our cognition. What is artistically good is whatever articulates and presents feeling to our understanding." (Susanne A. Langer, *Problems of Art*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1957, 25).
17. E.g. according to the institutional theory of art, which situates art in an 'art world', outside the life of ordinary people, environmental planning could never be art.
18. "To an understanding of reality that makes our ability to grasp it clearly and distinctly its measure, we need to oppose another that recognizes that something is experienced as real precisely when we know that we cannot finally understand it. Reality transcends our understanding. Art recalls us to this transcendence." (Harries 1997, 361).
19. "Architecture has an ethical function in that it calls us out of the everyday, recalls us to the values presiding over our lives as members of a society; it beckons us towards a better life, a bit closer to the ideal. One task of architecture is to preserve at least a piece of utopia, and inevitably such a piece lies and should leave a sting, awaken utopian longings, fill us with dreams of another and better world." (Harries 1997, 261).



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