

Environmental Aesthetics: Philosophic Foundations and Methodological Perspectives

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Abstract: This paper presents, first, a historic-philosophic discourse as the foundation aimed to provide perspectives on critical environmental aesthetics issues by examining the competing paradigms of general aesthetics through the evolving patterns of philosophic positions from classical Greek era to around the end of the 18th century. Then, while tracing through the early 19th century's anthropomorphism to the emergence of scientific study of aesthetic appreciation, which started from around the middle of the last century that mostly employed cognitive approaches with a natural science mentality, a broader probing of non-sensory factors is found to be vital to truly understand the complexity of modern-day environmental aesthetics, including discussions of the possibility that cultural identity, societal sense and even personal preference can lead people to form emotional attachments to their surroundings and thereby develop a greater sense about the value and scope of the study of environmental aesthetics. Finally, an integrated methodology meta-structure composed of cognitive form, cultural knowledge, societal sense and anthropological perspective is proposed and discussed accordingly to accommodate the study of contemporary environmental aesthetics regarding its multi-dimensional and ever-evolving nature.

Keywords: *Beauty, Disinterestedness, Environmental Aesthetics, Form, Picturesque*

1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years or so, the escalated worsening of physical environments has reached an alarmed level that not only gave rise to a political-social outcry on the urge to legislations at identifying and managing public landscape resources [1], but also raised the public awareness about the value of aesthetic appreciation of one's environment, be it natural or human-constructed.

Environmental aesthetics is one of the very recent fields of aesthetics to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. Contrary to general aesthetics discussions and art critics, the study of environmental aesthetics lacks a linear historiographic material to back up its theoretic inquiry. And quite uncomfortable to a serious researcher, except sporadic papers and ad-hoc articles dotting here and there on the shelves in the libraries,

hardly any comprehensive methodological discussion on the research of related issues can be heard or read.

Any field of serious knowledge cannot afford itself to be called a discipline without a solid historic-philosophic foundation to base upon and a proper methodological perspective to look forward to. The present study attempts to construct an integrated methodological meta-structure for the study and research of environmental aesthetics by exposing certain philosophic positions through highlighted historical thinking patterns that were believed to serve the development of current concepts and practices of environmental aesthetics.

2. Philosophic Contentions

Aesthetic appreciation has secured its position as the distinctive feature of modern design without much doubt, but a somewhat either overlooked or, in the other way around, over-hyped puzzle for design practitioners and academic scholars alike. Not only folks say that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, educated people's concept about aesthetics also changes at different times and in different contexts. For more than two thousand years, thinkers and philosophers have pondered the issues of beauty and are perhaps the best of all to look for a comprehensive intellectual foundation for serious study of contemporary environmental aesthetics.

Up to the 18th century the focus of inquiry had been all about 'beauty,' and the very term 'aesthetics' actually came very late and originally was coined by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten which mostly referring to the philosophical inquiry of laws pertaining to a single thing or object. How man has his aesthetical interaction with the beauty of his environment at large was, if any, rarely mentioned. Yet viewed historically, classical philosophic paradigms that provide later day scholars historiographic material for knowing how traditional aesthetics has evolved since and clues on what modern-day study of environmental aesthetics can be based upon.

Socrates could be the first known philosopher to tout the vital value of an environment with aesthetic quality. It was his belief that it was desirable for youth to dwell amongst beauty and thereby be influenced for the better, thus linking beauty and goodness, especially those will be the guardians for the public's wellbeing [2]. If Plato was the one who pioneered the subjectivist concept of eternal beauty with idealized form, Aristotle certainly produced the first objective studies of a concrete aesthetic form. He believed that beautiful objects had to possess a certain size, occupy a specified space, so that observer can appreciate their sense of beauty.

Besides classical subjectivist-objectivist philosophic contentions, Plato also had mentioned as an example the image of humanity as a man stretched between two horses pulling in opposite directions, which also foreshadowed Descartes' dualism of mind and body that claimed that humans have a dual nature within himself that, in turn, corresponds a dual relation to his environments. Such an idea that humans have some common qualities with nature and yet differ from nature in some crucial aspects has shown the fundamental complexity of understanding natural beauty, the very prime subject of environmental aesthetics.

3. Historical Roots—Natural Beauty

Although the field of the study of environmental aesthetics has come into being visible only recently, it has

historical roots regarding our appreciation of natural objects and the overall environment. Through the devoted works of a number of prominent philosophers in Britain in the 18th century the philosophy of aesthetics grew with vigor and nature is the main subject to be dealt with: the observer responds to certain properties in the objects out there around, and the impressed sensory stimuli are thought to be passively accepted by an observer—the concept regarding aesthetic appreciation as being personal and sensual has thus fairly set in place ever since.

But up to that moment the British aestheticians did not define beauty, they only provided the conditions for its perception by an observer [2]. That was Immanuel Kant who applied his philosophy of logic and deduction to the construction of the first systematic study of aesthetics. Central to his philosophy of aesthetics, and one of his biggest contributions to the subject of aesthetic appreciation, was his concept of *disinterestedness*. In virtue of which aesthetic experience was interpreted as distanced from everyday interests, such as the practical and personal. Thus with the aid of disinterestedness not only could domesticated, rural countryside be seen as beautiful, but even the wildest of natural environments could be appreciated as sublime [3].

The coupling of the concept of disinterestedness with the eighteenth-century fascination with natural world resulted in a rich tradition of landscape appreciation and its popular mode of aesthetic quality, the picturesque. At the outset the idea of the picturesque was twinned with a particular sort of landscape having those features common in the landscape paintings of the day. However, it consequently evolved into a more inclusive mode of appreciation that could facilitate the aesthetic experience of any kind of environment simply by focusing attention on picture-like qualities involving sensory surface and formal composition [3].

The consequent development of such a nature-centric norm about the aesthetic appreciation of our world was a theoretical synthesis having disinterestedness as the central philosophic position, landscape as the aesthetic object, and sensual quality as the favored paradigm of aesthetic appreciation.

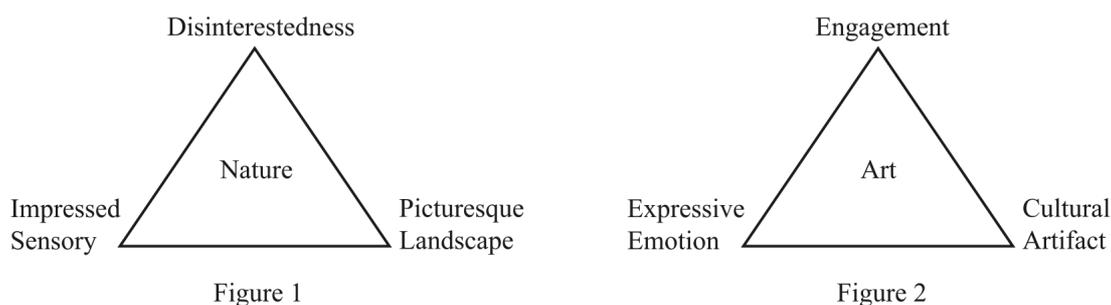
4. Paradigm Shift—Artifactual Aesthetics

In his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche draws between two competing aspects of human nature: things that we could sum up as human culture and all those aspects humans share with nature. Accordingly, the historical development of human culture is the story of the creation of an ever-greater distance between humans' civilized selves and their animal nature [4]. The eighteenth century nature-centric aesthetic synthesis, thus, did not come down to the later ages unchallenged, and much of these challenges were due to the rising status of works of art and which in turn triggered the diminishing role of landscapes as model subjects of aesthetic appreciation.

In the beginning, in contrast to Kant who held nature as the pinnacle of beauty, the other German philosopher, Hegel, argued that art is the highest form of the 'Idea'. The high position bestowed to art as opposed to nature in Hegel's philosophic assertion, and the ascended status of artifactual as opposed to the natural in the late western civilization as a whole has squeezed the natural world into an increasingly marginalized position in terms of general beauty appreciation and environmental aesthetics in particular. [3].

The sudden disgrace of the traditional appreciation of natural beauty and the preeminence of artifactual aesthetics might be best illuminated in most of the twentieth century's writings on aesthetics, which pay heed to almost solely to the artistic works and very seldom to natural subjects, or only in the most cursory manner. Actually, to the more extreme camp that as nature is not intentionally created by an artist its appreciation is not even treated as aesthetical at all. The consequence of this paradigm shift towards the artifactuality lies in the assertion that there should be no confusion between the 'aesthetical' and the 'beautiful'. In a word, the development was institutionalized by virtually equating aesthetic appreciation with philosophy of art.

This brief summary presents key historiographic material that illustrates the background of the emergence of environmental aesthetics and underscores how that basically took the same turns within the general aesthetics development, though coupled with twists of its own traces of ramification: a sea-change from the old school of disinterested contemplation of impressed sensory images from natural landscape (Figure 1) to a new paradigm of richly emotion-charged close engagement with a cultural artifact (Figure 2).



5. The Fermenting of Environmental Aesthetics and Its Studies

It was due to the early 19th century's Romantics that further stressed strong emotion as a source of aesthetic experience, which blended the natural subject and human feeling into a gyrating rage of anthropomorphism inundated that period's artistic work creation and natural beauty appreciation as well. The result was the urge for the artists and the general public alike to attend a mutual interaction with their environments other than mere one-way passive sensual gratitude. The striking progress of the aesthetic appreciation from sensory stimuli to internalized fusion of objective impression and subjective feeling created a broader appeal to the general public for a deeper understanding of their natural surroundings, and for the richer appreciation of overall environmental aesthetics as well.

The emergence of the then new public awareness of the aesthetic quality of the environment also began to evolve that not just focused on sensory, formal qualities of scenic views in the surroundings but stressed the scientific understanding of the environment as a whole and, thus, advocated professional handling of its design aspects. All these triggered a new direction of development that aimed to a more knowledge-based concept of appreciating environmental beauty. Together, these dimensions of progress served not just as the foundation to the fermenting of environmental aesthetics, but also set the starting point from which the next stage of serious study of that matter took off.

Approaching the turn of the 20th century, the concept of environmental aesthetics started to gain serious attention from the ‘scientific’ fields in the hope of making it a seriously objective discipline other than mere a subjective reflection or personal assertion. Furthermore, unlike traditional sublime contemplation, the ethos of these new trends started to approach environmental aesthetics from the very natural science standpoint of experimental psychology. In so do, such studies, carried out within the experimental context of the laboratory, analyzed subjects’ aesthetic responses to artificially constructed stimulus patterns with the aim of exploring differences in these variables supposedly deriving from the collative properties of the stimuli from the surrounding environments [1].

One of the most formalized conceptual frameworks, and that which includes the greatest number of empirical studies within the environmental aesthetics perspective is, without doubt, that proposed by the cognitive psychologists. These researchers have developed a model of environmental preference, which has been concerned with analyzing the types of basic (cognitive) needs subjects have with regard to their physical surroundings. In satisfying those needs, the surroundings automatically generate responses of attraction and/or aesthetic preference in all individuals [1].

Up to this moment, the concept of environmental aesthetics has fermented to its initial fledged stage, which stresses an interactive understanding of one’s surroundings, and the study of environmental aesthetics has finally lived up to its more modern term of being a ‘scientific study of beauty’, which in turn gives the modern environmental aesthetics’ ethos of being ‘public service’ and ‘professional design’ a solid foundation to build upon (Figure 3).

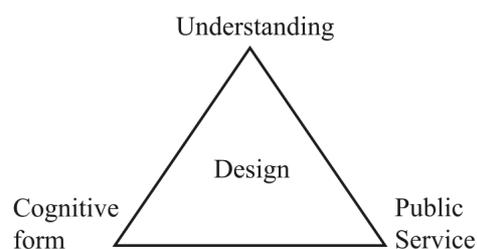


Figure 3

6. Methodological Perspectives of Environmental Aesthetics Research

Environmental aesthetics, though came at a later time, has now been becoming a collective term standing for almost any conceivable subject that relates to the human’s appreciation of his physical surroundings. Though still in its early phase of development, researchers’ interest in general environmental aesthetics quality has grown and many studies have started to churn out over the last three decades. And one would like to see the development of environmental aesthetics study as moving forward along a linear fashion with sequential logics that can be untangled by scientific research and realized by technological feats.

Not surprisingly, what one saw in the past decades was actually many lines moved among different fields of

power which create discontinuities and contradictions in rules and values with apparently chaotically changing contingencies [6]. Also understandably, such approaches failed us to accomplish a unified theory toward a grand solution for the diversity of environmental aesthetic phenomena, in which the capacity for change in nature, and the extent of both individual and cultural differences are, if not imaginable, intractable.

Environmental aesthetics will be increasingly recognized by researchers and laypersons alike as a result of multiple factors played between those aforementioned instead of being taken for granted as a sole ‘given of nature.’ And there is a general agreement that in the future exceptional situations triggered by dissonances between different cultural affiliations and social situations will become more frequent, the number of ‘mixed’ aesthetics—those involving interaction between natural and artificial objects, individual preferences and universal tastes, private turf and public interest—will increase.

Though no consensus on what should be studied has emerged so far, by exploring the methodological perspectives of environmental aesthetics research as it is to be integrated with objects in the surroundings and emotion and imagination in the human mind, the researchers should seek to establish an enriched understanding of the aesthetic response as based on individual yet shared experience. This paper asks for and then proposes an integrated methodological meta-structure that is supposed to be capable of putting cognitive form, cultural knowledge, societal sense and anthropological perspective into considerations within a well-rounded dimension frame anchored upon two canonical axes of universal and individual value considerations and objectivist (out there) and subjectivist (in here) philosophic positions (Figure 4).

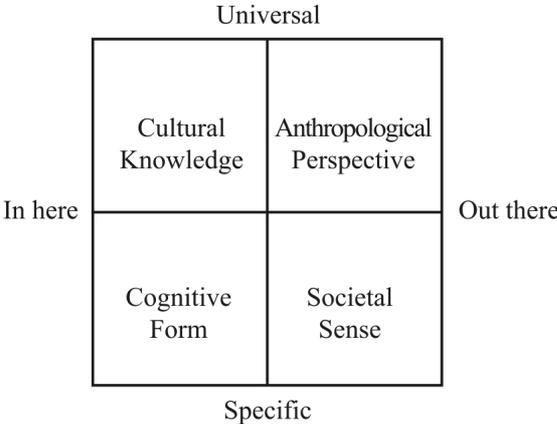


Figure 4

6.1 Cognitive Form

The basic idea of grounding the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of the environment in objective knowledge offers an explanation for the development of the view known as ‘positive aesthetics,’ which suggests that appreciation of environment holds the formal qualities such as order, balance, unity and harmony [3]. This formalistic view can be traced far back to Plato’s ‘ideal form’ and Aristotle’s thesis on the need of sensible properties of beauty to be observable.

It has been demonstrated conclusively that people will, when presented with even the most disembodied of stimuli (colors, lines, shapes, etc.), make aesthetic judgments, and indeed that the task of doing so is apparently meaningful to them [5]. Certainly, mere facing a bunch of sporadic sensual stimuli and a pool of fragmental formal elements won't give one much if one could not conjure these raw materials up to a state of being a 'significant form' [7]. This significant form brings to mind the imagination like the figures of Gestalt psychology, prompting the viewer to apprehend the subject as an organized configuration of lines, colors, shapes, vectors in his or her mind.

This stresses that aesthetic appreciations of nature or artifactuality, art or non-art, are similar in structure in terms of the resonance with the isomorphic cognition process of their formal properties and internalized effects (between eye sights and mental images) [8]. This cognitive formalistic approach can be taken as the common denominator, which contends that if anything is to count as a necessary condition for aesthetic appreciation, it must be a property possessed by every subject being appreciated. In this sense, a cognitive-based formalistic approach holds true to be methodologically vital to the understanding of general aesthetic appreciation and the study of environmental aesthetics as well.

6.2 Cultural Knowledge

The idea taking scientific inquiry as the panacea to the serious study of the appreciation of environment has been challenged from various fronts is no more news when most of the developed countries have stepped into their post-modern era for almost half a century. And the once dominant view of formalist approach towards environmental aesthetics has started to feel pinches and receive attacks is also becoming a routine from any conceivable art critics and increasingly among design discussions. One of the most eminent and heated ones may be called cultural knowledge in our appreciation of environment has been receiving the most attention.

It has been argued that what distinguishes aesthetic appreciation from ordinary perceptual experiences is not only their phenomenal content, but rather also how viewers interpret them relative to certain background history and related cultural knowledge, meaning that the way people respond aesthetically to their surroundings will be, at least partially, determined by what they already have in their minds toward such subject [9]. Such a constructivist scheme and its implications for the field of environmental aesthetics are diametrically opposite to that of positive formalistic thesis.

The critical point of cultural knowledge to the methodological perspective of the environmental aesthetics research can be said as involving the reconsideration of the definition of different forms and ideas of general aesthetics and the enrichment of the value of environment appreciation. Numerous researches on cultural dimensions associate to environmental aesthetics have mentioned factors such as knowledge, attitudes and beliefs to work toward an appreciable surrounding.

While most of us would agree that there is no authoritative reason for asserting the superiority or inferiority of any given culture, there is a fundamental tension between recommending an open-ended process of evaluating cultures and being concerned equality and, thus, the value of one environment than the other. For that matter, the

recognition of cultural factors should be seen as enriching the understanding of our environment as a whole, and the incorporation of cultural dimension into the consideration of the research methodology is better taken to be expanding the scope of a general framework rather than stuffing a unified formula for the environmental aesthetic appreciation.

6.3 Societal Sense

As mentioned above and at first glance, it seems that the notion of fair recognition and worth of value about cultures is a suitable basis for the understanding and expanding the concepts and essences of the appreciation and study of environmental aesthetics. Yet, when used as an argument for the true situation and real operation, the matter turns out to be more complicated than said. More recent studies have considered other factors as influencing the environmental behaviors of people, including their physical traits and their personal variable.

Besides cognitive information and cultural knowledge, it seems evident for the aesthetic appreciation of environments to include important places in the specific localities and for particular peoples. Such societal sense that can be vividly spotted in the landscape descriptions contained in the last turn-of-the-century Irish literatures is one example, instances involving the recent rejections of certain kind of public art installations in some Taiwanese rural areas is the other, and that all together exhibit the diverse roles of societal sense in shaping different people's aesthetic appreciation (and dis-appreciation) toward one's particular environment.

There is little doubt that a social element exists for aesthetics, and one that even impacts upon the biological function of sexual selection further amplifies the inevitable question concerning the extents to which aesthetic choices can be socially, or indeed biologically, constructed. Social theorists explain the drive to control visual appearance by contending that aesthetics serves a display function, signaling position within the social group. Effectively, environmental beauty and its appreciation could enhance a coded culture system and better indicate a social identity [3]. All these conjectures actually point to a simple truth that genuine environmental aesthetics can emerge only from among real people in a real place.

A comprehensive methodological perspective for the research of environmental aesthetics thus should include understanding the import of 'place' or 'locality' in the lives of human beings; investigations of the place of environmental aesthetics have to be started to some degree with the perspectives of sociology and history. For the researcher, one has to be willing to go with an attitude-shift of forgoing his or her 'expert' ego, and let the lay people's real-life experiences tell the stories themselves.

6.4 Anthropological Perspective

Being acknowledged in one's cultural identity with correspondent societal sense is increasingly advocated as an essential of every human being. Yet, all these aforementioned imply that the concept and practices of environment aesthetics may as a result gear for a rather relativistic direction or even swivel in an anarchic fashion. Yet, yarning about a more objective understanding of the issues may still lie in another aspect of our human being heritage, which is seemingly more universal than one can realize.

This stresses that equal dignity must count on the common human nature, a measurements that while all humans share the diversity of differences, it asks fair respect for all upon an agreeable foundation of universal endorsement. The very beginning for our evaluation of other cultures should be the surmise that all human cultures that have sustained whole societies over long stretch of time indeed have something vital to pronounce to all human beings.

Probing through classical philosophic positions reveals the possible archetypes in underlying human perception of aesthetic appreciation. Yet these revealing may be said to be more of 'philosophical' assertions than rational articulations. Only until recent centuries, the objectivist paradigm started to emerge and provided thinkers and philosophers the basis for understanding environmental beauty in a systematic way instead of ad-hoc speculations. For example, it is notable that preferences exist for faces and landscapes that largely transcend cultural differences, and this suggests that certain wired-in archetypes or prototypes had evolutionary value and became genetically imprinted [5], upon which further associations of aesthetic appreciation can be constructed.

All such attempts to identify universal features of varied cultures and societies based upon human being's common anthropological nature have taken to entail two further ideas for the practice of environmental design and the research of environmental aesthetics: first, that aesthetic activity of some kind can be a predicable component of a certain culture or society, and second, that environment itself have identifiable factors that shape cross all human activities and experiences. This universality conception therefore regards aesthetic appreciation of one's environment as a natural human tendency that has gone through million years of biological and psychological evolution and that can be traced further back to an anthropological commonality.

Being equipped with such an anthropological vintage view, not only one's imagination of his appreciation of the environment can be more inclusive in scope and deeper in depth, it also solidifies a comprehensive methodological meta-structure for researchers in the developing of their research methodology and handling study methods for a better understanding of our constantly diversifying surroundings and the ever-evolving nature of environmental aesthetic appreciation.

7. Conclusions

While the focus is still in its early days of soul searching, the infant turf of the study of environmental aesthetics has already been awash with a series of new waves of never-before issues. The complexity of studying environmental aesthetics arises not just because the factors affect the appreciation of surroundings are complex out there in the environments, humans are themselves, for good reasons or bad, deeply ambivalent about their relation to nature. This ambivalence is further amplified by ever changing landscapes in the man-made world and around the natural environment.

The relatively early developments in environmental aesthetics started from the applied side of the field, which, though reflected the new public awareness of the aesthetic quality of the environment and encouraged the genesis of modern design professionals such as landscape architects, environmental planners, their focuses and design approaches primarily footed on the sensory, formal qualities of scenic views. Such narrow, though may

not be outmoded, views not only have been poked and sniffed by environmentalist groups and cultural study camps, but also has started hearing reflective voices from within environment aesthetics field of design practitioners and academic scholars alike.

Researchers frequently found traditional aesthetic appreciation of nature rather unsatisfactory, given its emphasis on pleasing, picture-like scenery that strikes them as both excessively anthropocentric and overly subjective. More and more design professionals also felt mono-dimensional and linear process always cause more negative side effects than they can originally imagine. Against this background, environmental aesthetics has to be treated as a means of developing a more sophisticated account of aesthetic appreciation with various theories of peripheral concerns.

This paper seeks to identify some critical reasons for that complex nature of environmental study, and to suggest that the structure—though not the content—of the research methodology is the very needed for current state of the research of environmental aesthetics besides single shots of research project. With promising perspectives of a comprehensive methodological meta-structure as the starting base, one can hope that a theoretical understanding of the ambivalence of our surroundings and ourselves can be tuned into developing and illustrating a fuller and richer appreciation of the beauty of our environments, or, environmental aesthetics.

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