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Stephanie Ross

University of Missouri - St. Louis, ross@umsl.edu

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Paradoxes and Puzzles: Appreciating Gardens and Urban Nature

Stephanie Ross

Abstract

To explore our appreciation of gardens and urban nature, I propose a recursive definition of original or wild nature together with guidelines for discerning degrees of naturalness. Arguing (contra Robert Elliott) that nature can be restored as well as degraded, I characterize four varieties of urban nature - interrupted, altered, constructed, and virtual. I build on Stan Godlovitch's comments about scale to suggest two modes of appreciation - macroscopic and fine-focused. I close by discussing some particular examples - parks, environmental art, gardens - and drawing some conclusions for the appreciation of vernacular gardens.[\[1\]](#)

Key Words

appreciation, nature, degrees of naturalness, urban nature (interrupted, altered, constructed, virtual), vernacular gardens

1. Introduction

Our transactions with both gardens and urban nature pose puzzles. In each case questions arise about our activity and its object.[\[2\]](#) Addressing these questions draws on work from several areas - garden aesthetics, the aesthetics of nature, the nature of appreciation. In what follows, I will approach these issues from the perspective of nature appreciation. After presenting some background to frame the discussion, I will focus on questions of definition and try to characterize the proper object of nature appreciation. Next I will turn to the paradoxical category of urban nature and offer a tentative taxonomy. Finally, I will turn to some specific cases and consider what appreciation ought to encompass. I will conclude with some consequences for the appreciation of vernacular gardens.

Let me make one preliminary remark about the notion of appreciation that will be in place here. I am using appreciation as the generic or default term to capture our desired interactions with works of art and our aesthetic responses to nature. I am inspired here by the multi-pronged analogy Ted Cohen set up in his rich and amusing paper "Jokes." To investigate the relation of a joke to its proper effect, as well as why we occupy ourselves with jokes, Cohen compared and contrasted jokes, arguments, and works of art.[\[3\]](#) Successful jokes compel laughter, successful arguments compel belief. In a footnote (p. 121), Cohen suggests that the corresponding effect for works of art is hard to specify. He canvases a few possibilities -- understanding a work, liking it, knowing that it is good - seeking the proper analog to feeling a joke's funniness. But then his closing remark, characterizing "what is appreciation?" as "an absolutely basic question in the philosophy of art" also, in my opinion, provides the answer. Appreciation is the proper effect that parallels, in the case of art, the relation of laughter to jokes and of persuasion to arguments. It is particularly useful that the term 'appreciation' can embrace a variety of responses - sensory, cognitive, emotional, imaginative and more. Thus adopting this term does not close off particular avenues of analysis or pre-determine the shape of my account.

2. Setting the Stage - Philosophical Work to Date

The recent interest in nature appreciation was triggered by Ronald Hepburn's 1966 article "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty." Hepburn took philosophers to task for neglecting the natural world. In addition, he set out two distinctive aspects of nature appreciation. First of all, the spectator, rather than being static and disengaged, is often

surrounded by, immersed in, nature. "We are *in* nature and a part of nature."^[4] And second, nature comes unbounded and unframed, which "precludes full determinateness and stability in the natural aesthetic object."^[5] Both these traits - our being immersed, and nature being unframed -- make nature appreciation decidedly different from art appreciation.

Allen Carlson, in a series of papers beginning in the 1970's, has attempted to clarify the differences between nature appreciation and art appreciation. The crux of his view is the paradoxical claim that the aesthetic appreciation of nature must be science-based. In the paper "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," Carlson argues that we seriously misconstrue the natural world if we view selected segments of it as we would view sculpture or view selected scenes as we would view paintings.^[6] Neither model acknowledges the essential traits we ascribe to nature, the unboundedness and lack of framing that Hepburn pointed out. We must bring to bear appropriate theory to facilitate our appreciation of nature. And so Carlson proposes that science (along with supporting chunks of common sense) play the roles with regard to nature appreciation that art theory and art history play in the appreciation of art.

Carlson's theory has been much discussed, and I won't rehearse all the criticisms that have accumulated. They cluster into two groups: those that attack the scientific knowledge Carlson champions, and those that concentrate instead on other appreciative modes he has overlooked or discounted. Critics in the first camp complain variously that scientific knowledge is not necessary for the aesthetic appreciation of nature, that such knowledge is not available or is ever-changing; that science, in tracking generalities and positing natural kinds, overlooks uniqueness, and that science inappropriately demystifies nature.^[7] Those in the second camp promote alternative modes of appreciation, including imagination, emotion, instinct, association, non-scientific narratives, and non-discursive acquaintance.^[8] These last writers differ on whether the appreciative modes they promote should supplant or merely supplement Carlson's science-based approach.

My interest in Carlson's theory is two-fold. I am eager to find an adequate definition of nature, so that we can know just when the debates he has triggered are invoked. I also want to identify those cases where his approach seems especially appropriate and helpful.

3. Defining Nature

Before turning to the aesthetics of nature, we must settle the prior ontological question, "What is nature?" - or more practically, "Where is nature?" (The challenge is intensified when we consider the paradoxical notion of urban nature.) Extreme answers are tempting when we seek a definition. On the one hand, it can seem that there's no nature left: everything has been affected by human culture, no part of the earth has escaped our influence. On the other hand, it can seem that everything is nature: since we're natural, then so too are our activities and their products. Clearly the first point of view equates nature with wildness. Paradigm cases of nature would include virgin forest, vast deserts or badlands, the open sea. Yet if we seek such realms utterly unaffected by human activity, we are bound to fail. Effluents in the air, acid rain, agricultural run-off, global warming have all caused even the most remote and expansive natural landscapes to bear some evidence of human activity. And so nature is extinct.

This first understanding of nature, at once wistful and pessimistic, is criticized by William Cronon in his essay "The Trouble with Wilderness." He decries accounts whereby "The place where we are is the place where

nature is not," noting that such dualistic construals deny us the middle ground where we make our home. [9] Cronon's solution to this definitional dilemma is to deem nature a cultural construct. This is all very well, but what construction is called for? What concept of nature should we put in place?

It doesn't seem useful to adopt the alternative view, one declaring everything natural and nature still abundant. This rings false in all sorts of cases. When we view the tragic scenes of Hurricane Katrina's destruction in August 2005, it seems reasonable to deem the storm itself and the rain that fell as natural, but not the New Orleans landmarks - Superdome, skyscrapers, elevated highways - sitting in the floodwaters, nor the oil drilling platforms that washed ashore. If anything, commentators want to question even the naturalness of Katrina, arguing that human-induced global warming has intensified the germination of hurricanes and tropical storms. Our concept of nature, appropriately constructed, should flag our sense that nature and culture are oppositional, and that we are unlikely to find pure examples of either. Let us grant, then, that nature and culture interpenetrate and that naturalness comes in degrees. We can and do make judgments about the degree of naturalness of particular cases. A human walking across a pristine beach and leaving footprints is quite a different matter from a developer constructing condos all along that same beach.

4. Restoration

Before I indicate my approach to a definition, one more issue must be addressed, the problem of restoration. If nature and naturalness come in degrees, then it should be possible to enhance as well as degrade the naturalness of a given site. Yet some argue that nature can never be restored. In the paper (and later eponymous book) "Faking Nature," Robert Elliott assimilates nature restoration to forgery in art. Elliott's specific claim is that restoring natural areas cannot bring back the value that was previously there. [10] Elliott traces value to origins in both the case of nature and the case of art. He claims that natural objects possess "a special kind of continuity with the past" (p. 159) and suggests that "What is significant about wilderness is its *causal continuity* with the past" (p. 160, my emphasis). This continuity is breached when, say, mountains are re-formed after strip-mining, forests re-planted after clear-cutting, wetlands relocated after development. And so Elliott's complaint is not merely that restored nature is less valuable than original nature, but rather, that it is no longer nature at all because it is no longer tied to its past.

To further his argument, Elliott describes two more radical sorts of faked nature. The first is a Nozickian experience machine, which generates in properly plugged-in experimental subjects a compelling illusion of hiking through wilderness. The second is an artfully simulated plastic wilderness through which subjects actually walk; it too generates a compelling illusion. Clearly these are virtual natures. They deliver experiences indistinguishable from being in actual nature, while containing no natural material. Elliott takes the restored mining site he first discussed to be no less duplicitous. His trio of examples is meant to establish that neither being indiscernible from nature nor having entirely natural contents suffices for being nature. Required instead is continuity of process, where current contents result from, or are preserved by, uninterrupted processes of a certain sort. When a strip-mining site is reshaped and replanted, the right sort of contents reappear, but the causal continuity has been cut. A similar (though more longstanding!) gap applies to Alan Sonfist's environmental installation "Time Landscape," a city block in downtown Manhattan planted to create precisely the sort of forest that would have greeted explorers in Colonial times.

5. Original Nature: A Recursive Definition

We are now in a position to offer guidelines for discerning degrees of nature. To establish a baseline, we can construct a recursive definition of original or wild nature. At one time everything was nature. Pick any moment from the Paleozoic era. (Any pre-human point will do.) We can then non-circularly identify nature-preserving processes as those studied by the various sciences - physics, astronomy, meteorology, geology, biology, and so on. So, our initial moment is entirely natural, and any state that results from the specified processes acting on the initial moment is also natural, as is any state that results from those processes acting on subsequent natural states. Such an approach yields a holistic nature, one rife with cataclysm, destruction, extinction. Yet not one where the degree of naturalness changes. The unfolding processes specified don't increase the naturalness of the world. Nor do the large-scale disastrous events - meteor hits, climate change, tectonic shifts - decrease it. So long as the processes flagged in the recursive definition of original nature continue, that nature exists.



Wild nature, Sierra view/Photo: John Martin

6. Human Intervention and Degrees of Naturalness

The world described so far is not the world we live in. The notion of degrees of naturalness, which seems to characterize our world, does not take hold until we introduce something oppositional -- processes that thwart or undermine those that constitute original nature. Those processes arrive with us.

How should the advent of humankind be treated? If this is introduced as a set of events unfolding within the purview of evolutionary science, we have captured the "everything is nature" view. This probably is the proper way to treat the activities of our early humanoid precursors. But at some point our ancestors acquired the ability to change the naturalness of their environment. Some commentators take the development of agriculture to be the watershed moment, monoculture representing a stark change imposed on what might otherwise have occurred in the plots cultivated. Key here is the etiology of the changes imposed on the natural world -- they come from us -- as well as the implicit counterfactual claim -- this wouldn't have happened otherwise. That is, without input from us, the processes that constitute original nature would not have brought about this effect - be it acres of maize all planted in rows, a stream backing up behind an immense

dam, atoms splitting to release vast stores of energy. (A more fully developed version of this proposal would recast the counterfactual claim in statistical terms. It is not *logically* impossible that processes of original nature would cause rows of maize to supplant a forest, a deep lake to replace a stream, and so on, it is just extraordinarily unlikely. Recall the old riddle of a pocket watch found on a deserted mountaintop.)

Holmes Rolston attempts to distinguish nature and culture along lines compatible with this idea. He flags the differing processes used to transmit information - genes in the case of nature, education/neural alterations in the case of humans.^[11] The goal is to erect some divide between (1) instinctual and (2) intentional and/or learned behavior, with natural outcomes lying on the instinctual side. Learned or intentional behaviors that alter the underlying processes indicated in the first part of our definition above or supplant their products with human artifacts are occasions where an individual, a place, a species, a region, or an ecosystem may become less natural.

7. Refining the Definition

I am not in pursuit of an essential definition of nature. The notion of relative naturalness functions as a cluster concept, at best. The sketch produced so far needs refining in several respects. Let me touch on four points. First, it won't do to simply equate the natural with the unintended. The disastrous consequences of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, for example, were surely never intended, but they shouldn't be deemed natural. Rather, we should stipulate that any causal chain initiated by human intentional activity has the potential to increase or decrease the degree of nature at a given site. (The effects might also be more widely dispersed.) Once human activities have altered the degree of nature in a given respect, subsequent calibrations of comparative naturalness should refer to this new baseline. Second, contra Elliott, we should allow that past environmental damage can be undone. Human activity can increase naturalness. Restoration occurs when the intention to champion non-human nature results in our re-introducing natural contents and protecting or re-instituting constitutive processes.

This presupposes a third point. Judgments of degree of naturalness seem to make reference to contents as well as to process. Recall Elliott's strip-mining example. It involved restoration with the plant and animal species that had earlier been in place. It was certainly more natural than the virtual alternatives - for instance, the plastic world that looked convincingly natural, but was entirely ersatz. There are also occasions where humans alter a landscape by introducing new ingredient types that, though natural, were not previously in place. Consider non-native species, tree-snakes in Hawaii, cane toads in Australia, purple loosestrife throughout the US. Their introduction seems natural compared to the addition of non-living artifacts into the landscape, nevertheless, it still serves to reduce the overall level of naturalness of the site. I believe claims of this sort that purportedly refer to contents could, in principle, be cashed out in terms of underlying processes. The resulting judgments would again track counterfactual intuitions, estimating the likelihood that, absent human intervention, processes already in place would bring about these changes. Arcane scientific knowledge would have to be recruited in formulating such arguments. So in practice, we probably base our actual judgments on some informal sense of the foreignness of content.

Can we hope for any sort of agreement in judging degrees of naturalness? Compare and contrast strip-mining, intensive agriculture, golf courses in the desert, suburban lawns. There is no threshold we can specify for determining when nature can be said to have been altered, no counting of contents that answers the question. To adopt an example from Robert

Nozick, emptying my 6-ounce can of tomato juice into the ocean neither makes it mine *nor* makes it non-natural. Nor is there some fixed size after which an oil spill has that effect, though we'd certainly agree that the oil spill is more harmful than poured juice. It may be that we could increase agreement by concentrating only on pair-wise comparisons. Oil spill vs. tomato juice is a no-brainer. I wager agriculture would trump suburban lawns, strip mining trump the desert golf-course, in pair-wise judgments of non-naturalness. But other pairs might simply seem incommensurable (Versailles vs. an equivalently sized segment of Scotland's St. Andrews golf course?), nor should we expect sets of these judgments to behave transitively.

Finally, Hepburn's earlier point about the framelessness of nature complicates this discussion; it affects not only our aesthetic judgments but also our judgments of comparative naturalness. How should we focus our attention when debating the naturalness of a particular individual, area, event, and so on? How do we determine what portions of nature are affected when processes are altered, contents removed or introduced? It doesn't seem right to parse all actions in or directed towards nature holistically. So we need some way to focus our attention when considering naturalness. Perhaps each claim or debate could be indexed -- to an individual, to an event, to a process, to a delimited geographical area, to a specified ecosystem or subsystem, and so on. Here, once again, we would need information from various sciences in order to lay out such an indexing process.

The sketch I have just offered for assessing degrees of naturalness is not complete and perhaps not even completeable. But I believe it captures the spirit of our pre-theoretical judgments. So let me turn now to some applications.

8. Urban Nature and Considerations of Scale

The notion of urban nature is nothing if not oxymoronic. Since nature is often associated with wildness, nature and culture -- and even more so, nature and things urban -- seem antithetical. Where or how, then, might nature be a part of the urban landscape? To answer this question, we need to add one more element to our analysis. Stan Godlovitch, in a paper entitled "Icebreakers," tried to work out an acentric account that characterized nature as aloof, mysterious, and, above all, utterly indifferent to human activities, interests, and needs.^[12] He was inspired, in part, by Thomas Nagel's account of objectivity in the book *The View from Nowhere*. The important result, for our purposes, was the way Godlovitch calls our attention to questions of scale. In his characterization of an indifferent, acentric nature, he emphasizes natural processes and events that aren't perceptible by humans - those that generate effects outside the range of our senses, or that unfold in systems of time (biological, geological) of which we remain unaware.

Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term "aesthetic" in the 18th century to indicate a variety of sensuous knowledge. It follows that aesthetic appreciation can only occur within the range of our receptive capacities. Certainly, this must apply to our aesthetic appreciation of nature. And so we cannot aesthetically appreciate the imperceptible aspects of nature discussed by Godlovitch. His account does, however, suggest appreciative options that have to do with scale. We often have a choice between two sorts of focus, the macroscopic and the microscopic. That is, we are able to direct our attention and perceptually zoom in or out, noticing vast items -- panoramas, weather systems, astronomical relations and events -- or minute ones -- a tiny insect, a single blossom, a drop of dew. I believe that urban nature is particularly susceptible to appreciation at these perceptual extremes, it also sustains a third case I will lay out shortly.

The account sketched above of degrees of nature suggests that urban nature would be relatively diffuse, beleaguered, rare. The density definitive of urban development precludes large expanses of land supporting the plant and animal communities that would otherwise have thrived there. Of course, many cities develop as a result of natural features that facilitate basic human activities and needs -- rivers, estuaries, mountains, plateaus, wetlands, plains, . . . -- and these founding features are not displaced. But within cities, there would not be large tracts of land resembling original nature. I would like to propose three distinct ways in which we're able to appreciate these 'remnants' that constitute urban nature. They can be characterized in light of the discussion above. First of all, even within the most densely developed cities, nature provides certain framing effects for our experience. I'm thinking of the events and effects visible in the sky and on the horizon - constellations and the phases of the moon, weather fronts that move through and bring a panoply of changing looks and feels, surrounding geographical and geological features that provide the constant backdrop to our urban experiences. These would call for the wide-angle lens of macroscopic appreciation.

Second, there are aspects of urban nature that call for microscopic appreciation, though this term is a bit misleading, and so I will in the future refer to this as fine-focused appreciation. I am thinking of bits of nature left behind in or thrusting up through the urban infrastructure, traces of the ecosystems that development supplanted. Examples here would include living things - plants sprouting up through the sidewalk, trees still present in the urban scape, animals like squirrels and pigeons thriving in proximity to human habitation, not to mention rats and cockroaches! The edges of our suburbs provide encounters with even larger emissaries of the natural world - mountain lions, bears, and coyotes all make their presence felt in parts of California. Such fine-focused appreciation can extend to inanimate objects as well - rocks and pebbles, seasonal streams, a distinctive slope, textures underfoot.

9. Fine-Focused Appreciation

Let me elaborate briefly on fine-focused appreciation of urban nature. The objects of such appreciation will often be singularities, items considered on their own rather than in any larger natural context. Allen Carlson argues against such appreciation in rejecting the object model, claiming that it wrongly takes natural items out of the environmental contexts that sustain them and give them meaning. And in fact, I have claimed elsewhere that Carlson's theory would handle what I'm calling fine-focused appreciation less effectively than it would handle macroscopic appreciation, because the issue of originating forces comes into play much more in the latter. By contrast, Malcolm Budd has argued that, with nature and culture everywhere mixed, we must perform acts of abstraction in order to appreciate nature as nature. This would seem especially true of fine-focused appreciation. Budd cites examples of an animal in a zoo and water in a fountain. His thought is that our acts of appreciation focus only on those traits of the object that would be present in a natural setting. So we key in to the zebra but not its cage, to the water but not the fountain from which it is propelled.^[13] Note that it might take considerable background knowledge to perform this task well. One would need to marshal the sorts of scientific and common-sense knowledge that Carlson makes requisite for the aesthetic appreciation of nature in order to even determine which traits of an object warrant aesthetic attention.^[14]

I haven't yet mentioned one other variety of nature appreciation that might seem apt in an urban setting. We often admire flowers in a pot, an entire garden, or even a more expansive park. Each of these would count as an example of nature re-inserted into the urban landscape by intentional

human activity.



Wild flowers in urban landscape/Photo: Stephanie Ross

While some, but not all, gardens count as works of art (see below), I think the other cases deserve some scrutiny. In fact, I would like to co-opt some of Elliott's examples in order to characterize these additional opportunities for appreciating urban nature. Recall that I reject one of Elliott's premises and allow that nature can on occasion be restored. Moreover, since I allow nature to come in degrees (to have varying degrees of naturalness), restorations could be more or less successful. Some would increase the degree of nature present at a given site. But what I would like to build on here are the cases that Elliott offers up rhetorically for our ridicule: those where an appreciator is deceived by virtual nature and plastic nature as well as by a more straightforward restoration. Rather than endorse Elliott's strong requirement of uninterrupted causal chains leading us back to origins, I propose we recognize a continuum of cases - interrupted nature, altered nature, constructed nature, virtual nature. I claim that some of these constitute important sources of aesthetic value in urban settings.

10. Interrupted, Altered, Constructed, and Virtual Natures

My labels "interrupted," "altered," "constructed" and "virtual" are meant to indicate an increasingly more intrusive or artificial set of ways in which nature can be captured and presented for our aesthetic approval. The first would comprise examples where causal chains are severed and similar chains renewed; the second would occur where at least some different processes and contents were put in place; the third would cover cases where illusory experiences of nature were constructed using natural materials, the fourth would cover those cases like the plastic world and the experience machine where natural contents were not replaced but rather simulated. I suggest that many of our rewarding interactions with urban nature come from the first three types of cases. Let me describe some examples.

Consider waterways. Rivers with cities along their banks are relatively distant from their original natural state. Effluents are discharged into the water, the riverbanks are often realigned or even put into concrete channels, while on navigable rivers systems of locks and dams control water flow. The Charles River in Massachusetts runs through bucolic suburbs

before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean in Boston Harbor. During my stint in graduate school, a longstanding water-quality project was in place with the avowed goal of making the Charles River once again swimmable. Appreciation would certainly have been enhanced could one not only walk along but also dive into the river!^[15] I take the Charles River project to be one that sought to return the river to a previous more natural state. Should the project succeed overall, I would see the naturalness of the river as interrupted, then resumed.

Many other water-related battles are being fought in the United States. Environmental groups are suing the Army Corps of Engineers in an attempt to remove systems of dams that interfere with the spawning of salmon in the West, as well as systems of locks and dams that interfere with the natural cycles of flooding along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. Champions of the Florida Everglades are seeking to protect that ecosystem from damaging agricultural runoff from nearby sugar-beet fields and protect it as well as from increasing salinization. Each of these cases involves an attempt to restore an area or entity to a previous, more natural state. By contrast, some environmental projects seek instead to build entirely new natures. For example, as the general public becomes more aware of the beneficial effects of wetlands, environmental policies are being put in place requiring that developers who destroy wetlands build replacement wetlands elsewhere. Achieving the ultimate goal, 'no net loss of wetlands,' could involve considerable construction of 'new nature!'^[16]

We can of course imagine bad faith attempts to comply with the requirement. Were new wetlands constructed miles and miles from the river (so as to free up desirable building sites on the water), then they would not serve their intended ecological purpose. The newly built distant wetlands would count as constructed nature (a verdict reinforced by our counterfactual thought experiment, looking back in time and asking the question "what would have been here otherwise?")

A recent restoration project in my home town of St. Louis straddles the first two sorts of interventions I'm discussing. Forest Park was established on 1370 acres west of the city in 1876.^[17] It initially conformed to conventional notions of wildness with curvilinear roads leading through wooded groves. A vast building project ensued when the park was chosen as the site of the 1904 World's Fair. The trees were levelled and a stream that ran through the park - the River Des Peres - was channeled and sent underground so as not to interfere with the World's Fair pavilions being constructed.



Constructed Wetland: Forest Park, St. Louis/Photo: Stephanie Ross

As the centennial of the 1904 World's Fair approached, a good deal of money was invested to restore the park. At present, Forest Park is far from wild. It contains museums and cultural institutions and many areas devoted to sport - golf courses, tennis courts, baseball fields, soccer fields, an archery range. Yet the recent park improvements involved the deliberate naturalizing of certain sections. Significantly, the River Des Peres was brought back above ground. Both wetlands and prairie areas were put in place. So segments of the park are more natural than they have been in 100 years. These areas are definitely urban nature. Skyscrapers and construction cranes are visible in the near distance. And I doubt prairies and wetlands ever abutted quite so intimately on this piece of land. The restored segments have been miniaturized and compressed. Nevertheless, visitors who stroll through this area of the park are treated to a convincing and delightful sense of being immersed in nature. Flowers abound in the prairie areas, and wading birds patrol the pools and stream. At night, a pair of great horned owls can habitually be found in the bare treetops overlooking a swamp. In this area, nature has been restored, reconstructed, and enhanced. An illusion of wildness results but not one marred by deception.



My third category of constructed nature was meant to embrace examples that serve human interests rather than ecosystem needs. That is, I'm thinking of creations that meet our aesthetic, amenity and recreational needs by building a new chunk of nature. Here's an example. An early commission of landscape architect George Hargreaves was Byxbee Park in Palo Alto, California.^[18] The 35 acre site, on a peninsula surrounded on two sides by water, was a reclaimed landfill (i.e., a garbage mound). Consider the following passages describing the experience of walking through Byxbee Park:

A walk there is similar to hikes in the English Lake District, where the natural hills form an immediate horizon that dissolves when one approaches the next rise. This perceived increase in space and distance through valleys and elevations is something that Olmsted understood when he created the illusion of deep perspective with undulating paths There are no trees, though, in the thirty-five acres of Byxbee Park, for fear that the roots would disturb the one-foot-thick impenetrable clay cap sealing the landfill under two feet of soil. (p. 78)

The park mixes various natural and artificial features. The commentator mentions that the "clusters of hillocks (reminders of Ohlone Indian shell heaps) planted with lupines and other wildflowers offer both shelter from the wind and a lookout over the long vistas." (p. 78) "The thick hedgerows lining the banks of Mayfield Slough are interspersed with triangular, cedar-plank viewing platforms for bird-watching over the wetlands." At one point, "On the descending slope, five berms of compacted soil and rock infill, set in ever larger arcs for erosion control, give the impression of rippling water," (p. 78), while "As the walk continues around the point, a conceptual forest comes into view, a dramatic grid of weathered green cedar posts. These create an exciting visual rhythm as the grid shifts and finally disperses into randomness..." (p. 78).

I am struck by the way this site combines natural and artificial means to provide an experience like that of actual nature. There are birds to watch, flowers to identify, vistas to admire. A wave-like series of hills mimics the experience of hiking in the Lake District, while interlocking berms and gridded posts function as conceptual waves and forest. All of this on a reclaimed garbage heap. Compare and contrast two examples from the artworld. Alan Sonfist's "Time Landscape," mentioned above, reconstructs a colonial-era forest on a block of downtown Manhattan, thus qualifying as what I deem interrupted nature. It is at the same time a didactic piece of environmental art. Recently, a design by the late environmental artist Robert Smithson has been realized for a floating island to be constructed on a barge and towed around Manhattan by a tug.

Smithson specified many of the trees to be put alongside the barge's boulders. Some but not all are native species. Since we have no reason to think there ever was an actual island, now lost, somewhere alongside Manhattan, and since the barge supporting the ensemble is not a natural item, "Floating Island" is best classed as constructed nature. [[See Smithson's drawing and realization of plan.](#)]

11. Gardens

Since I have already made the segue to artworks, let me turn from the topic of urban nature to that of gardens. Obviously, we are not in the business of constructing essentialist definitions of any of the terms discussed here. Gardens straddle the divide between art and nature. Most,

but not all, gardens contain natural materials; most, perhaps all, are intentionally designed. (We should leave open the possibility of aleatory and found gardens.) Some gardens are works of art. Following the theories of Arthur Danto and of Noël Carroll and Jerrold Levinson, I would classify those as gardens that make statements and require interpretation, or as gardens knowingly inserted into the history of art (and the history of gardens) by makers self-consciously extending and reacting to that history. Let us call gardens without such aspirations vernacular gardens.

Given what was said above about essentialist definition, the borderline between what I have called constructed nature and gardens, whether art gardens or vernacular gardens, is a porous one. I would like to briefly describe two interesting gardens that are works of art and that have special relationships to nature. Then I shall conclude by discussing some bases for aesthetically appreciating vernacular gardens.

The first garden I'd like to consider is Charles Jencks's Garden of Cosmic Speculation in Portrack, Scotland. It is not open to the public but there is a lavishly illustrated book that gives readers a virtual tour.^[19] The first account I read of this garden described it as about chaos theory. In fact, the garden touches on many of our theories of nature. It is in a long tradition of gardens that aspire to be microcosms of the universe. A distinctly modern and scientifically literate exemplar of that tradition, it has, according to Jencks, been designed "to celebrate what we know about underlying forces and forms of nature" (p. 17). Shaped mounds called the snail rise and fall in the pattern of a double helix, as does sculpture in the DNA garden. The Garden of the Five Senses contains sculpted silver hands, nostrils, lips, and so on, characterizing our sensory access to the world. A Black Hole Terrace offers a nod to recent theories in physics. The many stunning gates throughout the garden were inspired by soliton waves, which "can travel through each other and keep their identity" (p. 77). The gates represent waves of energy travelling through the metal elements as a series of twists. The spare, modern shapes of the built mounds and shaped bodies of water are stunning in and of themselves. They can be appreciated on purely formal grounds. Yet they gain greater resonance when their scientific content is explained. The forms and shapes Jencks has imposed on the land here would not have occurred naturally, yet they are congruent with waves, forces, and phenomena that cutting edge scientific theories take to constitute our world. This garden, because of its beauty as well as its content and its discursive ambitions, belongs in what Mara Miller has called the tradition of grand gardens, gardens that properly claim to be works of art.^[20]

While Jencks's garden is about the natural world in a deep sense, another recent urban garden stands in a different relation to nature. I have in mind Robert Irwin's recently designed garden at the Getty Art Museum and Institute in Los Angeles. The entire Institute sits high above Los Angeles on a dramatic promontory. The hilltop campus of travertine and glass buildings designed by Richard Meier recalls a medieval fortified city. The museum itself echoes this complexity; it consists of a soaring entrance hall and five linked pavilions. Visitors ascend to the Getty on trams. Thus the complex is set apart from its urban and its natural surroundings in a number of respects. Within this complex devoted to the acquisition, display, and study of art is a central garden designed by an artist, Robert Irwin. His account of its creation (also documented in a lavishly illustrated book^[21]) makes clear that he thought carefully about the choice of every design element, the selection of every plant.

Unlike Jenck's Garden of Cosmic Speculation, Irwin's Getty Garden does not, to my mind, have a set content viewers are meant to puzzle out. Yet in many ways Irwin's garden is about nature and about nature's relation to

art. Its features prompt visitors to think about beauty and design, abundance and artificiality. The area of the garden that most interests me is the switchback path that visitors trace as they descend from the museum to a terrace below anchored with a striking central emblem - a trilobed maze formed from azaleas, all sitting in a circular pool. The descending path crosses and re-crosses^[22] a stream consisting of a bevelled channel laden with carefully chosen rocks.

A rhythm develops; the rocks become larger and more numerous, the water more visible and more forceful, as the descent continues. Irwin notes that he wanted viewers to feel that no two stream-crossings were ever the same: "[a]s the stream goes down, it changes in character and sound every time it passes under a bridge...One of the things I wanted to do is that every time you cross the stream, I wanted it to be different..." (p. 39).

I believe that Irwin's descending path functions much like parts of Byxbee Park, discussed above. The path replicates, in carefully calculated ways, the experience of walking along a stream in the natural world, having it continually disappear from view, then reappear, as the stream meanders in different directions. Here, then, in this citadel to art, an artist has constructed a garden that offers up an experience that straddles my categories of constructed and artificial nature. The plants and water are natural, and subject to Budd's abstraction-based appreciation. The journey along the path alludes to a journey through nature, yet that path delivers visitors to a highly artificial garden complex whose central motif is surrounded by rings of plants chosen - and replanted on schedule - to ensure a steady array of colors and blooms. Another feature at the lower level that further underscores the interplay between art and nature is a series of sculpted metal 'cages' within which native bougainvillea trees grow and bloom.

I have suggested that Jencks's garden is properly appreciated by noting not only its severe beauty but also the theories it propounds, and that Irwin's is properly taken in by savoring not only its variety of plant material but also its distinctive design elements and its allusions to experiences of nature. How ought we to treat gardens that don't have the vast ambitions of this pair? That is, how ought we to comport ourselves with regard to the many vernacular gardens we see and visit, gardens that don't aspire to be works of art? I believe our discussion of nature and nature appreciation offers some cues. Even when gardens don't aspire to deliver discursive content, we can appreciate pleasing formal qualities, overall design, color and texture, the beauties of particular plants. But in addition, we can recruit our botanical and scientific knowledge to track two additional qualities - rarity and difficulty.

These last become apparent when we employ the sort of counterfactual thinking that played a role in our judgments of naturalness. Thus I am suggesting that vernacular gardens can be appreciated not only on aesthetic grounds, but also based on how far removed they are from nature! This may sound paradoxical, as the great majority of such gardens are assembled from natural materials. But if we ask ourselves, "what would have been here otherwise?" we get a sense of how far away from the home ecosystem the gardens' contents are. With regard to particular plants, similar questions take hold. We can ask ourselves whether they're rare, whether they're special hybrids, whether they've been coaxed or bred to be double rather than single, triple rather than double, whether they're ordinary denizens of this climate, whether they're ever found juxtaposed with the blooms alongside them. Thus that old saw, that gardens straddle the divide between nature and art, aids our appreciation of vernacular gardens as well as gardens that aspire to be works of art. While we appreciate the latter by noting their ties to the artworld, we can appreciate

the former, at least in part, by noting their distance from the world of nature.

Endnotes

[1] This paper was presented at the conference "Gardens and Urban Nature" sponsored by the International Institute of Applied Aesthetics in Lahti, Finland Sept. 29-30, 2005. I thank two anonymous referees for *Contemporary Aesthetics* for helpful comments.

[2] Some philosophers will object that I have built my environmental aesthetics upon a reactionary framework. They see talk of appreciation and its object as importing metaphysical error - much the same error that comes with traditional aesthetics' appeal to disinterestedness. The alternative to this approach is said to be a merging of subject and object (see FN 4 below). The desired result is variously described - engagement, participatory involvement, absorption, immersion. I resist recasting my account in these terms, however, for a number of reasons. I don't understand what total engagement amounts to; I'm not convinced it obtains in any, let alone all, instances of aesthetic appreciation; I believe insisting on a merger of subject and object precludes acknowledging aesthetic qualities that play an essential role in appreciation; and, finally, I believe that Hepburn's key insights, cited below, can be captured using the metaphysics that I endorse.

[3] Ted Cohen, "Jokes," in *Pleasure, Preference, and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 120. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[4] Ronald Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," reprinted in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 45. In *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) and subsequent books, Arnold Berleant has developed a notion of engagement that is very much in keeping with Hepburn's insights.

[5] Hepburn, p. 47. Hepburn goes on to note that any aesthetic quality in nature is "always provisional, correctable by reference to a different, perhaps wider, context, or to a narrower one realized in greater detail."

[6] Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, pp. 63-75.

[7] See, for example, Thomas Heyd ("Aesthetic Appreciation and the Many Stories about Nature"), Ronald Moore ("Appreciating Natural Beauty as Natural"), and Stan Godlovitch ("Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics"). All three papers are included in the Carlson and Berleant volume cited above.

[8] These include Emily Brady ("Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature"), Noel Carroll ("On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History"), Thomas Heyd ("Aesthetic Appreciation and the Many Stories about Nature"), Yuriko Saito ("Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms") and Cheryl Foster ("The Narrative and the Ambient in Environmental Aesthetics"). All five papers are included in the Carlson and Berleant volume cited above.

[9] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" reprinted in *Environmental Ethics: Concepts, Policy, Theory*, ed. Joseph Desjardins (Mountainview, CA.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 378, 381. Another way he puts this point is that "our very presence in nature represents its fall" (p. 378).

[10] Robert Elliott, "Faking Nature," reprinted in *Environmental Ethics: Concepts, Policy, Theory*, ed. Joseph Desjardins. Elliott rejects what he calls the restoration thesis, according to which "the destruction of what has value is compensated for by the later creation (recreation) of something of equal value" (p. 156). Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[11] Holmes Rolston, "The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed" reprinted in *Environmental Ethics: Concepts, Policy, Theory*, ed. Joseph Desjardins, p. 383.

[12] Stan Godlovitch, "Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics" reprinted in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant.

[13] Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Budd claims "...it is possible, with more or less difficulty in particular cases, to focus one's interest only on what is natural. . . .At a zoo...you can ignore [a caged animal's] surroundings and appreciate the animal itself. . . .In looking at a fountain...you can appreciate some of the perceptible properties of the water...." (p. 8).

[14] That said, I continue to think that Carlson's theory is much more congenial to the macroscopic appreciation of nature, for it is there that the processes that formed an item are more routinely a factor in appreciation. They do not ordinarily play a role in appreciating micro-processes like photosynthesis or the decomposition of leaf mould, or in appreciating a single living thing.

[15] This would of course enhance recreational use, but also aesthetic appreciation based on tactile values - immersion in the water, the joy of slicing through it, and so on - as well as improved visual (clarity) and olfactory affordances.

[16] Whether a wetland built in compliance with the mandate just cited should count as interrupted or as altered nature on my scheme depends on the history of the site in question. If wetlands were previously in place, then the project is one of restoration, and nature in that locale was merely interrupted. If wetlands never occupied that particular site, then the project results in altered nature.


[17] Even today, St. Louisans boast that our park is considerably larger than New York City's 840 acre Central Park.

[18] Hargreaves is currently Chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. His Byxbee Park project is described in the article, "Resurrection: The Built Landscapes of George Hargreaves," by Paula Deitz in *The Changing Garden: Four Centuries of European and American Art*, ed. by Betsy G. Fryberger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). The volume was the catalog for an exhibit at the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Visual Arts at Stanford University. Subsequent references to this article will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[19] Charles Jencks, *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (Frances Lincoln, Ltd., 2003). Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[20] Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

[21] Lawrence Weschler, *Robert Irwin Getty Garden* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002). Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.



[22] Irwin notes that this aspect of the design was necessitated by the demands of wheelchair accessibility. See Weschler, p. 9.

Stephanie Ross

Department of Philosophy

University of Missouri - St. Louis

sross@umsl.edu

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