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Editorial Introduction to the Special Volume on Urban Aesthetics

Sanna Lehtinen

University of Helsinki; Aalto University, sanna.t.lehtinen@helsinki.fi

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Volume: Special Volume 8 (2020)

Editorial Introduction to the Special Volume on Urban Aesthetics

Sanna Lehtinen

1. Aesthetic interest in cities

This Special Volume is dedicated to an increasingly central direction in contemporary philosophical aesthetics that has also been gaining interest in the dynamically developing multidisciplinary field of the philosophy of the city. In addition to these theoretical approaches, more applied and practical fields that deal directly with how our cities look and feel are engaged in the multidisciplinary discussion around urban aesthetics. The built environment, urban nature, and art in the urban environment are examples of topics within the reach of traditional aesthetic inquiry. Besides continued attention on these central topics, it is also clear that new, increasingly multidisciplinary terminology is needed and being developed to better address the whole range of urban aesthetic phenomena. In this editorial introduction to the Special Volume, some but by no means all interesting lines of thinking in philosophical and applied urban aesthetics are identified and future directions are considered based on them, before introducing the eight articles in the volume.

The basis for the current research tradition in urban aesthetics formed during the past thirty years, at the same time as a broadening in topics of philosophical aesthetics and an overall humanistic turn in urban studies took place. Philosophical urban aesthetics has been greatly influenced by environmental aesthetics at large, with its focus on studying the human-environment relationship, especially how the environment appears to and is thus perceived and conceived of by humans.

[1] Urban aesthetics applies these approaches to urban environments, but it is also clear that urban environments require a wider array of approaches to bring forth the aesthetic appreciation of their features to systematic study. That urban aesthetics is neither a purely theoretical or academic endeavor but consists also of practices, policies, and the tacit knowledge of various professional groups working concretely on urban development has to be taken into consideration. The development of urban aesthetics has been more concentrated in recent years to form a central framework for assessing how the urban lifeworld is processed in the human experience.

Focused attention on the specific conditions of urban environments offers various vantage points for studying how cities are envisioned, experienced, and assessed. This, in turn, has implications on the way future cities should be planned. The ethical concerns are inscribed into environmental aesthetics at large, and this applies to urban aesthetics, too. It would be impossible to discuss the aesthetics of urban environments without some type of ecological awareness, for example. Large-scale anthropogenic environmental changes, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, are phenomena that will alter how cities are built and also how they look and feel. Urban environments are not detached from the broader environmental context, even though ecological problems and solutions manifest differently in urban than in natural environments. Nature is present in various ways in cities, and thus human intentionality coexists with nonhuman elements, in aesthetically rich ways. [2] Shifting perspective from environmental aesthetics to a more specific area of urban aesthetics requires some new, sharper definitions to be made: The aesthetico-ethical concern of environmental aesthetics needs to be directed to the study of the entire urban lifeform.

In order to better conceptualize and discuss urban aesthetics, it is helpful to distinguish between different scales of observation. The so-called *macro perspective of urban aesthetics* concerns the look of a city, the visually relevant features, and its overall image. Cities such as Paris, Shanghai, New York, and Rio de Janeiro are recognized for their world-renowned monuments but also for their overall look, determined by the styles and size of building stock, configuration of infrastructure, cityscape, and other recognizable and unique signs of the communities and their past. It takes a relatively long time for cities to grow into these aesthetically unique and recognizable formations. However, this macro perspective is very often the first approximation of what is meant by urban aesthetics. Most cities

have, or are developed towards acquiring, some notable features that reach a level of recognizability, in order to build or strengthen an aesthetic identity that may even be linked to their “city brand.” Identifying the macro-perspective in the study of urban aesthetics helps in assessing these visions, scenarios, and first impressions.

The city, as a place of exchange, is also a vibrant locus of different types of experience. Another layer of observation, titled here the *micro perspective of urban aesthetics*, is no less relevant for a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetic dynamics in cities. This level covers the more subjective, everyday aesthetics, and this direction in research has developed strongly at the same time as the field of everyday aesthetics since the early 2000s. This more detailed perspective focuses on the experienced quality of everyday, urban life. The basal undertone of everyday, urban life is born out of familiarity and the interplay of personal and interpersonal factors conditioning one’s everyday engagement with the environment.

[3] Today’s urban centers can also be interpreted as giving definitions of human flourishing, insofar as positive aesthetic values embedded in the urban environment contribute to the well being of the inhabitants. Shifting perspective from the broad, visually oriented approach to a more comprehensive idea of urban aesthetics puts the emphasis on human bodily perception, and aesthetic appreciation on a more individually relatable scale. This gives attention to the everyday aesthetic preconditions and to a more nuanced understanding of the human experience, for example, through the notion of *aesthetic engagement*. [4] Emphasis on multisensory, embodied, and interactive experiences is especially relevant when studying the diversity of aesthetic stimuli in urban environments. In the urban context, the human population is actively engaged not only in planning and building but, perhaps most importantly, in using and inhabiting these environments.

The prediction based on the general development of the field and by this specific collection of articles is that urban aesthetics, as a subfield of aesthetics and also as a specific approach within the philosophy of the city, will continue to expand its scope and refine its methods. This position at the crossroads, and the links to the practical fields of urban planning and architecture, to name a few, provides the field with an organically multidisciplinary starting point. That urban environments and the urban lifeworld are growing increasingly complex the further we move into the twenty-first century, as lately exemplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, makes it clear that new and more

flexible approaches are needed to understand how and why urban environments are perceived and appreciated in the ways they are.

2. Part of the growing philosophy of the city movement

This volume brings together different strands of philosophical interest in the city and its aesthetics in particular. A self-evidently interesting quest, as such, would be to focus on understanding the definition of urban aesthetics. What does 'urban' refer to, and what aspects of aesthetics are discussed? Another question is whether it should follow a narrow definition and consist only of phenomena of either macro or micro level or be thematically focused on art and architecture, for example. However, going deeper into these questions is of lesser interest in this context, and emphasis is put instead on how different discourses on urban aesthetics are coming together to interpret and assess how various values in the urban sphere are formed and made explicit. This is also intended to clarify how urban aesthetics is a part of the growing interest in the philosophy of the city.^[5] As a pragmatically oriented area of study, the emphasis is strongly on understanding real, existing cities and the opportunities for experiences and action they enable.

For a large part of the twentieth century, aesthetics as a philosophical field was associated with the philosophy of art, especially in the Anglo-American, analytical context. This restricted the range of aesthetic thought to focus on art as an extraordinary form of human intellectual and creative activity. How aesthetic appreciation, judgment, and values are present in human life more broadly did not receive attention until the rise of interest in environmental aesthetics, in the latter half of the 1960s.^[6] Continental philosophy, on the other hand, has been more accommodating, if less systematic, in its approach to aesthetics as a broader, all-encompassing mode of inquiry into the human experience. Phenomenology has proved to be especially well-equipped to study the lived experience of city life.^[7] Most recently, new approaches, such as the framework of somaesthetics, for example, have been applied to describe urban aesthetics experiences.^[8] In contemporary philosophical and applied urban aesthetics, these different strands are represented through a thematic, rather than historical, interest in urban phenomena. This reflects problem-based philosophy at large and links philosophical interest in the city to public philosophy, the goal of which is to reach out to stakeholders outside the academia. This collection of articles has been fueled by a jointly constructed, broader definition for urban aesthetics

that follows from the idea of the philosophy of the city as an open platform for contemporary critical thought on cities.

Historically, urban planning has led the discussion on beauty, in the urban context. These links and influence on philosophical urban aesthetics have not yet been fully opened up. The “City Beautiful” or garden city movements, for example, represent important historical influences in conceiving of the city as an aesthetic entity or urban aesthetic features mediated through interplay with the surrounding nature.^[9] Active attempts to increase livability have since been recurring through the means of planning greener and more spacious cities, although fast development of technology and transportation, in particular, have increasingly diverted urban planning away from the traditional human scale. More recently, an interest in the aesthetic qualities of cities, through the interpretation of visual features or notions such as imageability, has been present in urban theory.^[10] Another wave of more holistic urban aesthetic thinking is aimed at improving the quality of urban life, by focusing on the human scale and walkability.^[11] Surprisingly often, “urban” or “the city” is still equated with the built environment or, even more narrowly, with architectural formations. In this direction, a rich branch of literature in architectural aesthetics has been developed both by philosophers and practicing architects, sometimes focusing on concepts such as atmosphere, which describe the ephemeral features of built spaces.^[12] There is also an increasing interest in more politically and economically aware approaches to concrete forms affecting urban cityscapes, such as skylines.^[13] Tracing back the thinking behind these movements and frictions, it becomes clearer that some of the aesthetic ideals change with time, while others have stronger cultural connotations. It is important to recognize that these discussions take place in fields that directly deal with the production of urban aesthetics, without necessarily even using the word ‘aesthetics’ in their core terminology.

Besides the built environment, different forms of art, such as public art, monuments, street art, graffiti, and performances, are studied in the context of urban aesthetics, linked by definition to the location and situations in which they become perceived.^[14] Besides traditional classifications of art, research has, so far, also recognized participatory art and activities such as festivals, flash mobs, urban exploration, and aesthetically transformative acts of tactical urbanism, such as depaving or guerilla gardening. The emphasis on different forms of urban art or using artworks as case examples to examine urban life is still

one important facet of the study of urban aesthetics, as can be also seen in the articles of this volume. Art has the ability to make explicit the relationship of aesthetics and the distribution and display of power in urban societies. Who makes the decisions over what is beautiful in cities? Who has the right to beauty in the urban context? Why are more affluent areas greener than less affluent ones? Social and economic issues, such as gentrification or homelessness, are among other forms of vast and growing inequalities. The aesthetic dimension of a wide variety of social themes is implied by the need for a more nuanced study of social aesthetics.^[15]

Interpreting the city as an artwork in itself is also one strand of urban aesthetics, whether metaphorically referring to the overall design or identifiable experiential factors.^[16] One important task for both descriptive and normative urban aesthetics is to improve comparative and intercultural fluency. Contesting the normalized Western and especially Eurocentric “mono aesthetic of order” is a crucial task for philosophical urban aesthetics.^[17] Paying close attention to aesthetic qualities beyond the traditionally discussed ones—the picturesque, the sublime or the beautiful with implied ideas of orderliness, harmony, quaintness, and appropriately moderate amount of diversity—is shifting the urban aesthetic discourse towards a genuinely inclusive and globally aware recognition of variation in aesthetic ideals. Understanding the deep-seated perceptions and values related to the use of different types of technology is another area that has been only scarcely studied in the philosophically oriented urban aesthetics.^[18] The philosophy of the city, on the other hand, has been more open to applying philosophy and, especially, the ethics of technology to studying new and emerging technologies in the urban context. This intersection of aesthetics, city, and technology is an especially rife area for future research. A critical and speculative approach to smart city development, together with increasingly complex links of sustainability and technology in contemporary and future cities, will inarguably benefit from approaches from philosophical and applied aesthetics. The technological sublime, for example, is apt to describe some aesthetic aspects in contemporary cities globally.^[19]

One further aspect to take into consideration is the processual nature of urban aesthetics: Cities are not static or stable entities. The physical features of the city change in various ways; degradation, new infrastructure, and natural and human-inflicted disasters are just some examples of this. Social activities and the use of the city also change the purpose of the

observation of the city. During the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, the city streets were emptied of people, making explicit how the sphere of human social activity is a necessary element of urban aesthetics. It also needs to be emphasized that beauty, or even positive aesthetic qualities, in general, can rarely be set as the normative end goal of aesthetically sustainable cities.^[20] Cities are always formed as a result of some type of aesthetic compromises, in which negative aesthetic qualities also have value.^[21] However, people and communities tend to thrive, take better care of and afford maintenance to those features of their environments that actively support the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility in positive ways.^[22] Fluctuation between aesthetically strong identity and manifestations of diversity seems to be important for many flourishing urban communities, thus showing how the multiplicity of aesthetic values present in contemporary cities also reflects the prevalent values more broadly. Overall value conservatism begets conservative preferences in aesthetic taste, whereas liberal values seem to lead to more varied, although often also equally compartmentalized, preferences.

There is an increasing need to understand how philosophy can contribute to the current discussions on urban design and social and sustainable methods to develop the city. Cities are an area in which aesthetics can hardly stay detached from debates over other values. In cities, the shared and contested values of the society become visible through aesthetic means. As we can also see from the articles in this volume, urban aesthetics is a challenging topic to grasp or explore, despite the initial excitement usually linked to it. The city escapes from the discussions, or it is easier to only focus on general ideas or certain limited scenes of urban life. This having been said, the present collection of articles has been selected with a conviction that they will help to realign and address some of the topical questions that make the aesthetics of urban environments such an important area of contemporary aesthetics.

3. Introducing the contributions

This Special Volume presents an array of diverse themes, making explicit the breadth of the urban aesthetic interest. Ranging from urban art to kinaesthetics and urban politics to smart infrastructures, these approaches show how ethics and aesthetics are deeply intertwined in planning and decisionmaking in addition to everyday activities and situational factors. Grouping these contributions under the common title of urban aesthetics will hopefully highlight some of the discussions that have taken place in the intersection of philosophical urban

aesthetics and the philosophy of the city. All articles in this volume also make visible, each in their own way, a point of access for further discussion. There is emphasis on both philosophical and more applied aesthetics, and this interlacing of approaches is central to the volume as a whole. Continental and more analytical approaches, alike, are present, and the overall thematic focus on the aesthetics of urban phenomena shows its strength in bringing these approaches together. The focus is on contemporary cities, with the acknowledgement that we must also look into the past in order to better understand the current conditions.

The Special Volume opens with the question, “What is an Urban Atmosphere?,” asked by Adam Andrzejewski and Mateusz Salwa, in their contribution. The authors underscore atmosphere as a key element of contemporary aesthetics and especially useful when describing the unique features of particular spaces, including urban spaces. The article offers a reinterpretation of atmosphere by framing it as a relational feature of a specific site, existing only when experienced by someone. Reconsidering the notion of an urban atmosphere requires revisiting some of its most influential interpretations and also the ontology of the specifically urban atmospheres. The authors argue that discussing urban atmospheres, in general, and their metaphysics will be of help in grasping the role of urban atmosphere as characteristic of a particular place. They are also interested in considering atmosphere as the quality of an entire city.

Tea Lobo introduces “Urban Kinaesthetics” as a way to answer how a city can be perceived in the first place. Perceptual and sensory engagement with the city concerns its built features but also its social and political layers. The city, as a locus of aesthetic attention, is built on power relations and hierarchies. According to Lobo, the urban sphere of aesthetics is revealed to be experienced always through partial impressions and in its entirety. This is also why she emphasizes the experience of walking as a paradigmatically urban experience, both temporally and spatially building up what we are used to treating as the aesthetic experience of the city. The activity of the flaneur opens up the layers of the city to the human perception. Lobo concludes that bridging aesthetics and theories from cognitive science, the kinaesthetics of the city adds deserved focus on the embodied motion in the perception and aesthetic appreciation of the urban sphere.

In his article, “Visions of Political Form: Kantian Free Play and Urban Space,” Ryan Wittingslow re-evaluates the Kantian notion

of beauty with a focus on its political implications. He traces the connection between “free play” and beauty, insofar as it proves to also be a precondition for specifically pluralistic forms of political thinking and action. The implications of this for urban space is revealed to be significant and thus should be discussed in terms of urban aesthetics. This idea of urban beauty acknowledges the need for collectively used spaces to enable and even encourage different types of activities without oppression. According to Wittingslow, this leads to the fostering and developing of a rich and diverse public life. This view sets the Kantian notion of free play as a guiding principle of a contemporary urban design ethos.

Vesa Vihanninjoki’s article, “Atmospheric Affordances and the Sense of Urban Places,” gives a detailed account of how urban everyday places are fundamentally constitutive for urban experiences. By way of combining philosophical aesthetic considerations with affordance theory, Vihanninjoki reminds us that afforded uses are central for defining our experience of a place. It is, however, less clear why only certain affordances become perceptible to us and thus also become a part of the identity of a place. The familiarity of urban places does not necessarily correlate with all affordances but only a selection of them. The place-based ontology presented by Vihanninjoki is connected to the notion of atmospheric affordances, an even more difficult branch of potentialities to point out but which nonetheless have a significant impact on how everyday urban life is lived and what the role of aesthetics is in this process. Vihanninjoki’s article represents a broad understanding of aesthetics, developed in his contribution to explicate the link between urban identity and the sense of place.

In his contribution, “The Socially Transformative Aesthetics of Street Culture,” Jules Simon revisits Walter Benjamin’s urban aesthetic thinking, spanning from his *One-Way Street* to the unfinished epic, *Arcades Project*. Simon’s article brings together Benjamin’s “phenomenological ethics of urban aesthetics” with what he terms the “ethical aesthetics of the city.” The author especially traces “Baron” Haussmann’s major project of urban spatial domination, as it was in steep juxtaposition with and had a permanent effect on the street life of nineteenth-century Paris. The everyday, lived experience of the city space was faced by the drastic measures of a modern capitalist phenomenon, later known infamously as Haussmannization. Benjamin’s observations help in understanding the relationship between spontaneous forms of collective, bottom-up experiences and the functionalist imperative of governance and extreme top-down forms of urban planning.

Andrea Baldini focuses on street art as a subversive and spontaneous form of human activity against some of the oppressive forms of urban politics. In his contribution, "Street Art, Decorum, and the Politics of Urban Aesthetics," Baldini takes an aesthetic perspective to the complex, yet widely used, concept of decorum and its relation to the prevalent political discourse. According to Baldini, the notion of decorum has in recent decades become increasingly used as a method of authoritarian policies and urban control. Good taste and correct behavior are thus no longer necessarily a personal choice or even a socially conditioned habit but a more fundamental principle for governing the citizens and their use of public space. To see and to become seen are not innocent activities devoid of political friction, especially in the age of increasingly sophisticated surveillance technologies. Controlling the public presence by appealing to aesthetic taste seems like an especially ominous way to forcefully internalize external control and has grave implications for the use of public space. Street art, in this context, is best understood as a liberating means to reimagine how the city could and should be used. Baldini's contribution shows how art, in the urban sphere, is never purely an aesthetic phenomenon. Instead, the urban landscape is where politics merges with aesthetics, echoing the Rancièrian notion of aesthetics as distribution of the sensible.

While Baldini is concerned with artistic expression in street art, David Jenkins focuses on particularly urban forms of loneliness as an aesthetic issue in his article, "Loneliness, Art and the City." The type of loneliness that cities foster as a result of the atomization of communities is discussed by Jenkins through notable examples in art. He presents David Foster Wallace's prose and Edward Hopper's paintings as artistic expressions for this specifically urban form of loneliness. The contrast between the inevitable solitude of the internal life and the defining congestion of the public sphere is especially contrasted in large cities where other people are physically close but emotionally and intellectually distant or even absent. Jenkins argues that urban design that focuses on bringing people together might not be efficient in connecting truly lonely people with others. He goes on to show how art, at best, has the power to raise awareness of the issue of loneliness as the deeply-rooted human need for connection, which is aggravated by the urban everyday and often even by the presence of other people.

In their concluding contribution, "From Footsteps to Data to Art: Seeing (through) a Bridge," Sage Cammers-Goodwin and Michael Nagenborg recount the process of designing, building, and implementing a pedestrian bridge enabled with the Internet of

Things (IoT) technology to a central location in Amsterdam. The authors explore a new area in urban design: How smart infrastructure is experienced and, more specifically, how the bridge is perceived and experienced as awareness of its IoT capabilities increases. The focus of the article is more pragmatic and based on combining a postphenomenological approach in philosophy of technology, with empirical user observation and community design workshops. Also, instead of focusing on the already existing and familiar features of an urban environment, they study a novel and even a futuristic artifact, yet to be implemented in its place. This speculative process offers the opportunity to study how new and emerging technologies are affecting the urban environment and what types of reactions they will elicit. Cammers-Goodwin and Nagenborg point out that instead of technology always withdrawing into the background, its purposes and functioning could also be communicated in aesthetically varied and rich ways by the features of new smart infrastructure.

The intention behind bringing together this selection of articles has been to show current directions of interest in urban aesthetics and, by doing this, to encourage discussion to move beyond the mere recognition of the aesthetic phenomena or applying the already firmly established aesthetic concepts to studying them. This will hopefully lead to a recognition of the breadth of aesthetic phenomena in the urban sphere and enable further forays into the ways that aesthetics is present in different types of urban environments.

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Sanna Lehtinen, Guest Editor
sanna.t.lehtinen@helsinki.fi

Sanna Lehtinen is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science HELSUS at the University of Helsinki and also teaches aesthetics at Aalto University. Her research focuses on urban aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and philosophy of the city. Sanna's publications include journal articles published in *Open Philosophy*, *Essays in Philosophy* and *Behaviour & Information Technology* in addition to articles in

volumes published by Routledge and Springer. She has co-edited *Paths from the Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics* (Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019) and has also edited the *Topical Issue on Philosophy of the City for Open Philosophy* (2020). Sanna is the President of the Finnish Society for Aesthetics and Codirector of the international Philosophy of the City Research Group. Her current research interests are related to aesthetics of new urban technologies and incorporating environmental philosophy into sustainability science. She is working on a monograph on contemporary urban aesthetics.

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