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Urban Kinesthetics

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Abstract

The question how a city can be an aesthetic object or a beautiful object can be posed in a more fundamental manner: how a city can be perceived in the first place. By city, I mean both a built environment *and* its less tangible social and political reality, such as hierarchies, interactions, and alliances. A city is never perceived, in this sense, as a whole but only as snippets of buildings, the smell of pollution, and so on. Therefore, it is not accidental that urban aesthetics have traditionally been associated with the figure of the *flâneur*, a leisurely stroller through urban landscapes. The perception of a city is one of impressions unified by the act of walking. In this paper, I will argue for a kinaesthetics of the city: for a study of the perception and aesthetic appraisal of cities *in embodied motion*, while uniting the fields of cognitive science and aesthetics.

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Key Words

architecture; Walter Benjamin; city; cognitive science; ecological system; embodied cognition; everyday aesthetics; *flâneur*; Immanuel Kant; kinaesthetics; subjectivity

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1. Introduction

The question how a city can be an aesthetic object or a beautiful object can be posed in a more fundamental manner: how a city can be an object of *aisthesis*, namely perception, in the first place. A city is both material, as a built environment, *and* a less tangible social and political reality consisting of hierarchies, interactions, alliances, and individual and collective utopian and heterotopian fantasies and traumas.^[1] In this wider sense, a city

is never perceived as a whole—we never encompass *Paris*, as such, with our gaze—but only snippets of buildings, sidewalks, the smell of pollution, and so on. Even from the top of the Eiffel Tower, its material form may be visible all at once but not the life of the city, the nooks and crannies inscribed by urban practices and life-forms. Therefore, it is not accidental that urban aesthetics have traditionally been associated with the figure of the *flâneur*, a leisurely stroller through urban landscapes. The perception of the city is one of a series of impressions unified by the act of walking. In the following, I will argue for a kinaesthetics of the city: for a study of the perception and aesthetic appraisal of a city *in embodied motion*, while uniting the fields of cognitive science and aesthetics.

The term ‘kinaesthetics’ is composed of the Greek words *kinesis*, meaning movement, and *aisthesis*, meaning perception, which has acquired the meaning of the study of the beautiful since the eighteenth century. I will discuss the kinaesthetics of the city as experienced while walking (or cycling, or driving, or rollerblading) through a city and connect this discussion with current theories of embodied cognition, as proposed by Alva Noë and others.^[2] I will compare and contrast this notion of kinaesthetics to classical aesthetics, which is usually a static contemplation and tranquil absorption in an object of art on display in a museum, in conditions of ideal lighting and perspicuity. I will compare a kinaesthetic notion of a city as a beautiful object with Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics and argue that an urban kinesthetics, rather than a static aesthetics, provides richer grounds for a Kantian reflection on the conditions of subjectivity. The latter is namely understood as embedded in a social and political reality objectified in the material form of a city, rather than free-floating in pure thought.

2. The city as a kinesthetic object

As Alva Noë, one of the main proponents of enactive and embodied cognition, has argued, *all* objects of perception are too complex to be observed as a whole and all at once. He draws our attention to the simple act of looking at a tomato. From whatever angle you observe, a side of it is always occluded. This is why the body, in its motor function, has such an important role to play in perception. The hidden side of the tomato is experienced as potentially available to perception because it is possible to move the eyes, the head, and the whole body, in order to view this other side. He notes, “My emphasis here is on a special kind of understanding that distinctly overwrites our *perceptual* access to objects and properties, namely sensorimotor understanding.”^[3] The proprioceptive

sense of the body in motion and locomotion is an inherent component of visual experience, including the experience of the city. While the city as an object of perception might at first appear problematic because we cannot obtain a panoptic perspective of it, it becomes, in fact, a paradigmatic object of perception, if we adopt the view that all perception is necessarily embodied and that it presupposes sensorimotor engagement, that is, it requires some kind of motion (eye or head movement) or locomotion (walking from A to B) to be actualized.

The embodied view of perception is the philosophical underpinning of a new generation of cognitive sciences called the 4Es paradigm.^[4] The 4Es stand for adjectives describing cognition: embodied, embedded, enactive and extended. They are posited in contrast to traditional cognitive science or the computational model of cognition, and their proponents often cite the work of phenomenologists, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who developed an embodied theory of perception as early as 1945, in addition to American pragmatists, as their inspiration. Like Merleau-Ponty, the proponents of the 4Es are against the traditional model, according to which mental states are understood within a Cartesian framework of a dichotomous relationship to the body, akin to Descartes's distinction between an immaterial mental *res cogitans* and the physical *res extensa*. and the body is understood akin to a prosthesis that carries out commands from the brain, which is, in the more recent Cartesian-inspired anatomical imagery, understood as a central computer system. As an alternative to this computational model, the new 4Es paradigm offers a perspective on cognition that is not brain-centered but rather conceives of cognition as *embodied*, as necessarily shaped by the sense modalities available to the organism in question and its possibilities of motion (head, eye movement) and locomotion (moving from A to B). Cognition is necessarily *embedded* in the environment the organism interacts with, and much of the meaning produced, for instance, in visual perception is only to be understood from complex engagements with the structures of the organism's surroundings. It is *enactive* in the sense that meanings have to be teased out in a skillful manner. Also, it is *extended* in the sense that tools or features of the environment often amplify or enable perception in the first place.

Cities have indeed been used as an example of an environment perceived in an embodied manner in 4Es literature. For instance, in their classic work, *The Embodied Mind*, while considering the applications of cognitive science to robotics,

Varela, Thompson and Rosch cite a memorable example of a robot driving through an urban environment. Here, they criticize the traditional, computational account of cognition according to which knowing how to appropriately react to the external stimuli consists in internally representing possible viable options and then selecting the optimal one. The authors point out that this approach only works in an environment with finite options, such as a chess game, which has a clearly defined playing field and a limited number of rules. By contrast, if a robot were to navigate a city, internally representing all possible actions would be impossible, since their number is indefinite:

One can still single out in this “driving space” discrete items, such as wheels and windows, red lights, and other cars. But unlike the world of chessplaying, movement among objects is not a space that can be said to end neatly at some point. Should the robot pay attention to pedestrians or not? Should it take weather conditions into account? Or the country in which the city is located and its unique driving customs? Such a list of questions could go on forever. The driving world does not end at some point; it has the structure of ever-receding levels of detail that blend into a nonspecific background.^[5]

This example shows that the computational model of cognition fails to work even for computers, that is, computer-controlled robots, a problem now acutely felt in the design of self-driving vehicle (SDV) technologies or robot cars. Rather than imagining some sort of a central processing unit that first represents each and every feature of one’s environment, along with all rules for engaging with them, and then commands the body to perform the most suitable action, the authors suggest a decentralized motor intelligence of the body. And they use the example of the city as a complex environment *par excellence* to underscore this point.

Furthermore, in an anthology about embodiment directed at the Germanophone academic community, *Philosophie der Verkörperung*, Joerg Fingerhut, Rebekka Hufendiek and Markus Wild describe embedding, one of the 4Es, with an example from the built environment. The mind is often epistemically dependent on exterior features of the environment, in order to navigate it. For example, pedestrians or drivers are vitally dependent on street signs and traffic signals for any sort of movement within a city. These structure public space.^[6] It is these exterior artifacts that provide orientation to human sensorimotor abilities, and, according to the authors of the anthology, the epistemic embedding achieved with city signs is an instance of niche construction common to most living beings

but developed to an unprecedented sophistication and complexity in our species.

Embodied accounts of experiencing the city are not unique to philosophers working on issues in cognitive sciences. Walter Benjamin offered rich accounts of the flâneur's sensorimotor acquaintance with urban landscapes, in addition to the manner in which the city's material form presented affordances or obstacles for the now-bygone flâneur's form of life. For instance, Benjamin describes George-Eugène Haussmann's demolition of medieval Paris and the construction of long, wide avenues as a mechanism against revolts. Benjamin notes in *The Arcades Project*:

Der wahre Zweck der Haussmannschen Arbeiten war die Sicherung der Stadt gegen den Bürgerkrieg. Er wollte die Errichtung von Barrikaden in Paris für alle Zukunft unmöglich machen. [...] Haussmann will sie auf doppelte Art unterbinden. Die Breite der Straßen soll ihre Errichtung unmöglich machen und neue Straßen sollen den kürzesten Weg zwischen den Kasernen und Arbeitervierteln herstellen. Die Zeitgenossen taufen das Unternehmen »L'embellissement stratégique«.[7]

The real aim of Haussmann's works was the securing of the city against civil war. He wished to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all time. [...] Haussmann intended to put a stop to it in two ways. The breadth of the streets was to make the erection of barricades impossible, and new streets were to provide the shortest route between the barracks and the working-class areas. Contemporaries christened the undertaking: 'L'embellissement stratégique.'^[8]

Haussmann's redesign of the city has the specific purpose of organizing the circulation of bodies through nineteenth-century Paris, with the express political intent of preventing further revolts and maintaining established power. Benjamin's practice of walking through the streets of Paris as a flâneur produced his observations in *The Arcades Project*. A flâneur would understand, on a visceral level, what these new architectural forms signify for the everyday of people living there and walking its streets: how the new avenues shorten some routes and make them more policeable, and make lingering and meeting in hidden, dark corners impossible and therefore, as intended, make clandestine assemblies, the building of barricades, and revolt planning significantly more difficult. By changing the modes of circulation, walking possibilities, and therefore conditions of perceptibility, urban design can influence social and political possibilities for a city's inhabitants.

3. The city as a beautiful object

Since classical eighteenth-century aesthetics, architecture had its venerated place as one of the five individual art forms and subject matters of aesthetics but lay at the bottom of this hierarchically conceived list.^[9] Immanuel Kant's influential account of the autonomy of art established aesthetic reflection as disinterested, in the sense that the art object does not serve any other purpose outside of itself and outside of the pleasure of aesthetic attention. Clearly for Kant, architecture (*Baukunst*) is *limited* by the instrumental purpose its objects need to fulfill per definition and, hence, inferior.^[10] Works of architecture are built so that people live in them, or work in them, or use them in a variety of other ways. They do not possess the kind of pure aesthetic quality Kant demands of art. Similarly, in the nineteenth century, Hegel continues the legacy of considering architecture a "lower" art form because, for him, it is only an inferior embodiment of the spirit. For Hegel, buildings can only house the spirit, in the sense that temples house statues of gods, but cannot express it by means of their own aesthetic form, the way, for instance, statues themselves do by representing a god, or a beautiful human form.^[11]

This tendency changes in the twentieth century, and Walter Benjamin favorably considers the aesthetic appreciation of architecture as a model for a more democratic conception of art, one that does not necessitate leisurely absorption in a work of art displayed in a museum. Rather, architecture is appreciated *en passant*, while the viewer is perhaps jostling elbow to elbow in crowds, and in a much more tactile and embodied manner.^[12] This concept of architectural aesthetics downplays the notion that the functionality of architecture limits its aesthetic qualities. Furthermore, it neatly dovetails into the kinesthetic account of urban scenes, in which the city is not contemplated from a distance but is aesthetically appreciated in a visceral, embodied manner, by walking its streets. The notion of disinterestedness does play a role in the flâneur's demonstratively leisurely, purposeless strolling through the city. He or she is not rushing in order to get from point A to point B or to run an errand.^[13] Rather they are walking in the city for no other interest or purpose beyond of just walking in the city, and that is how they appraise it as a distinctly aesthetic object, rather than barely acknowledging it as a backdrop to their everyday struggles. Also, Kant's notion of the free play of the imagination can conceivably have a role in a kinaesthetic understanding of a beautiful city. The Kantian notion of the beautiful is highly intellectual and inextricably linked to an experience of reflection on the conditions of one's own

subjectivity.^[14] Therefore, a beautiful city would enable this reflection, just as other non-walkable works of art would. In fact, it would do so in a richer way, since by walking through a city a flâneur would not only reflect on the conditions of his or her subjectivity *in abstracto* but also on its social and political embeddedness as symbolized by the material form of the city.

For instance, a flâneur in early twentieth-century Paris, like Benjamin, would study the city by walking its streets, the majestic, new avenues constructed by Haussmann at the turn of the previous century, and because of bodily scale they would have the effect of imposing on him or her. They are, of course, meant to be larger than life, a triumphal expression of France's glory as represented in the capital city. The scope of the scene opened up by the avenues precludes intimate gestures or meetings; everything is presented to the stark lights of the public. The city is a stage for newest fashions, for newcomers from all corners of the globe seeking a better life, and technologies, such as cars. All of this can be felt in relation to the walking body: the turning of the head after a peculiar hat, the elbows of a passer-by in a crowd hurrying to work, the startling effect of a vehicle passing by at a high speed. The historicity of one's subjectivity becomes apparent. The flâneur is walking at a peculiar time in which the world is changing at breakneck speed, and these changes, as all innovations, are first experienced in the world's large cities. Whether one feels exhilarated or lost while walking these avenues will partially be determined by one's social class, gender, and political affiliation. The avenues have a specific function, creating transparency, preventing revolts, representing national and imperial glory. But this function is not external to their aesthetics; rather, here aesthetics and functionality are inextricably intertwined.

An interesting suggestion for conceptualizing architectural aesthetics in a manner that includes the functional socio-political and institutional aspect of the built environment, as opposed to *a priori* considering them to be a constraint on the aesthetic quality of architectural objects, is offered by Allen Carlson. He argues that everyday architecture can very well be an object of aesthetic appreciation and links his account to discussions on landscape aesthetics from the 1990s. Just like landscapes are appreciated both for their beauty *and* for their ecological function, so we can also consider urban landscapes as aesthetic objects both for their potential beauty *and* in the function they fulfill. In this sense, the building's ecological functions can be extended to include the socio-cultural and political functions they have for the human life-form.^[15] It can

be argued that the kind of functionality the city affords is also an aesthetic matter, for functionality can be considered crucial to structuring the pace and the rhythm of moving through a city. It is hard to consider a city beautiful when one can hardly find a place to sit and rest and experience its hustle and bustle from a static point of view. Similarly, it is hard to consider a city beautiful if its traffic is so badly regulated that one is constantly stuck in some traffic jam or other, or pedestrian stampede, never achieving a pleasurable flow of experience. In the case of Paris, the sinister functionality of creating transparency to monitor and police the population is realized, in aesthetic means, by wider and longer avenues creating the impression of majesty and glory. Their construction is an intervention into the urban ecological system that destroys some niches in which previously oppositional movements could thrive undisturbed by the government and creates others.

5. Further implications and conclusion

Proponents of embodied cognition are starting to think through the implications of their theory for the perception of built environments and the complex sociocultural and political aspects of urban landscapes.^[16] At roughly the same time, urban planners and designers are also starting to reflect on the importance of cognition, that is, on city users as cognitive agents for understanding the dynamics of a city. In *Complexity, Cognition and the City* (2011), Juval Portugali summarizes developments in urban studies, namely the understanding of a city as an emergent dynamic complex system, as opposed to as a static object conceived in a top-down manner. He argues for the necessity of engaging with cognitive studies in order to better understand urban experience and briefly mentions the development of embodied cognition as the new paradigm in that field.^[17] There is an entire emerging field of *architectural cognition*, of which the communication between the designer/architect and the user is the least researched.^[18] As cognitive scientists Thora Tenbrink et al. argue, in "Cognition and Communication in Architectural Design," the *embodied* perspective of the user is often neglected in architectural education, and more focus is placed on the interaction between the client, that is, the investors or the governmental institutions that commission a building, and architects or planners: "Users experience a building in a sequential fashion while moving through it, viewing the building from an egocentric perspective, perhaps guided by signs."^[19]

It is precisely this embodied, kinesthetic experience of architecture that requires further investigation, as I have argued. In order to have a positive experience of the city as a beautiful place, it is necessary to understand how urban landscapes can be viewed at all. According to proponents of embodied cognition like Noë, the sensorimotor—or, in the terms of this paper, kinaesthetic—sense of the body in motion and locomotion is an inherent component of perceptual experience, including, I would add, the experience of a city. The implication for an urban aesthetic, in Kant's sense, that is, the experience of the beautiful in the city, might be that one's own movement and circulation through the city is experienced as meaningfully addressing the conditions of one's own subjectivity. It is a peripatetic exploration of the manner in which the city's social, historical, and ecological strata are connected and how they relate to the walker in terms of bodily scale, pace of locomotion, need for rest, and other kinaesthetic factors. Walking in a city that, in its architectural forms, positively instantiates social belonging, free circulation, and political participation rather than oppression, segregation, or alienation affords a fuller realization of one's social and political subjectivity, hence experienced aesthetically as beautiful.

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Endnotes

[1] Here I agree with space syntax proponents Hillier and Vaughan's account that the material-spatial and the social

aspects of the city should be studied together and are mutually co-constitutive. See Bill Hillier and Laura Vaughan, "The City as One Thing," *Progress in Planning* 67, 3 (2007): 205-230.

[2] I focus on walking not because I think that it is more embodied than other means of locomotion. I do not. Rather, I would argue that technological means of extending the body are, by and large, viable means of extending one's range of embodied agency. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the primeval act of walking for three reasons. First, I think that walking affords the kind of sensorimotor de-acceleration conducive to aesthetic appreciation. Second, I would like to link this account with the cultural tradition of the flâneur and to point out this tradition's philosophical significance, that is, what the flâneur does is essential to a kinaesthetic understanding of a city and not simply idleness or a curious piece of historical trivia. And third, I focus on walking for the sake of simplicity and coherence in a relatively short text. It would be worthwhile to comparatively explore the aesthetical relations between walking, cycling, and other means of urban locomotion, but this would require elaborate empirical inquiries beyond the scope of the present paper.

[3] Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 20.

[4] Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin and Shaun Gallagher, "4E Cognition: Historical Roots, Key Concepts, and Central Issues," in *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*, ed. Albert Newen et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 4. Cf. also Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991); Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004); Anthony Chemero, *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2009).

[5] Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, p. 147.

[6] Joerg Fingerhut, Rebekka Hufendiek and Markus Wild, "Der eingebettete Geist," in *Philosophie der Verkörperung*, ed. Joerg Fingerhut, Rebekka Hufendiek and Markus Wild (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013), pp. 73-74.

[7] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk. Erster Band*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), p. 57.

[8] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 12.

[9] Robert Stecker, "Reflexionen über die Architektur: Bauwerke als Umgebungen, als ästhetische Objekte und als Kunstwerke," in *Architekturphilosophie*, ed. Christoph Baumberger (Münster: Mentis, 2013), pp. 50-66; ref. on 50. (Translation of Robert Stecker, "Reflections on Architecture: Buildings as Environments, as Aesthetic Objects and as Artworks," in *Architecture and Civilization*," ed. Michael H. Mitias (Amsterdam: Elementa, 1999), pp. 81-94).

[10] Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), B208.

[11] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2., p. 888. Cf. Also Paul Crowther, "Art, Architecture and Self-Consciousness: an Exploration of Hegel's Aesthetic," in *Philosophy and Architecture*, ed. Andrew E. Benjamin (London: Academy Editions, 1990), pp. 65-73.

[12] Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), p. 41.

[13] I thank Osman Nemli for drawing my attention to this point. Kant introduces the notion of disinterestedness in *The Critique of Judgment*, part I, §§1-5: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).

[14] For this reading of Kant's aesthetics, see Andrea Kern, *Schöne Lust. Eine Theorie der ästhetischen Erfahrung nach Kant* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000).

[15] Allen Carlson, "Die ästhetische Wertschätzung alltäglicher Architektur," in *Architekturphilosophie*, ed. Christoph Baumberger (Münster: Mentis, 2013), pp. 111-127. (Translation of Allen Carlson, "The Aesthetic Appreciation of Everyday Architecture," in *Architecture and Civilization*," ed. Michael H. Mitias (Amsterdam: Elementa, 1999), pp. 107-122).

[16] Cf. e.g. Matthew Crippen, "Body Politics, Revolt, and City Celebration," in *Bodies in the Street: Somaesthetics of City Life*, ed. Richard Schustermann (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 19-20.

[17] Juval Portugali, *Complexity, Cognition and the City* (Berlin: Springer, 2011), pp. 113-139.

[18] Dalton et al., "Architectural Cognition and Behavior," in *Handbook of Behavioral and Cognitive Geography*, ed. Daniel R.

Montello (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), pp. 337-356; ref. on p. 337.

[19] In: *Space in Mind: Concepts for Spatial Learning and Education* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), pp. 263-280, ref. on p. 271.

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