THREE MOMENTS IN AESTHETIC DISCOURSE:
FROM NATURAL LAW TO PHENOMENAL RICHNESS

MELCHER, KATHERINE

University of Georgia, kmelcher@uga.edu

1 ABSTRACT

Although aesthetics distinguishes the design disciplines, including landscape architecture, from others such as engineering, aesthetics remains poorly defined. In order to better understand the role of aesthetics in design, this paper explores the definition of aesthetics through three historically-influential texts: Vitruvius's classical triad of durability, convenience, and beauty; Louis Sullivan's modernist claim that "form ever follows function"; and James Corner's presentation of landscape urbanism in "Terra Fluxus". Each of these authors draws from observations of nature to propose a preferred design aesthetic. For Vitruvius, it is the mathematical proportions found in nature; for Sullivan, the efficiency of natural forms; and for Corner, the dynamics of natural processes. Collectively, these three texts call into question any reference to a "natural law" for design aesthetics, since these natural laws result in very different design styles. However, if we reconsider these texts by setting aside their references to "natural laws"; other elements remain, revealing an alternative definition for aesthetics in design. For all of them, design also involves a subjective, human experience: a pleasurable experience of beauty, according to Vitruvius and a poetic engagement with the physical world, according to Sullivan and Corner. Defining landscape aesthetics as a human experience of "the phenomenal richness of physical life," (Corner, 2006, p. 32) might challenge landscape architects' authority as experts in aesthetic judgment. However, we can reconsider landscape architecture's expertise to be more about understanding the relationships between our physical, sensible environment and subjective experiences rather than about laws for aesthetic taste.

1.1 Keywords

Aesthetics, Design Theory, Vitruvius, Modernism, Landscape Urbanism