

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

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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

2 INTRODUCTION

“Beautiful things are difficult,” Socrates concludes in Plato’s *Hippias Major* (385-370 B.C./2000, p. 304e). In the dialogue, Socrates challenges Hippias to define absolute beauty. They consider whether the useful, the beneficial, or the powerful can determine what is beautiful. Yet each is found lacking. They then turn to the pleasure of the senses, specifically, sight and hearing, as the source of beauty. But they cannot find a common essence between what is seen and what is heard that contains beauty, so they end their dialogue in unresolved difficulty.

Within landscape architecture theory today, defining beauty – and, more broadly, aesthetics – remains difficult. In *Landscape Architecture Theory*, Michael Murphy (2016) observes, “even with traditional concepts of beauty and aesthetics, description is difficult” (p. 173). This difficulty makes it a challenge to teach or judge aesthetics in design. For example, Kathryn Moore (2015) observes that because it is “Spectacularly ill-defined, design is often seen as a highly personal, mysterious act, almost like alchemy” (p. 49), and “Teaching the real nitty-gritty of the discipline, the designing part of design, is clouded for most by an air of subjectivity, and therefore is seen, somehow, as impossible to teach” (p. 49).

In response to this difficulty, designers and design educators shy away from discussions of aesthetics. One might be tempted to ignore the aesthetic discussion for the more comfortable and straightforward scientific aspects of the design process. As Moore (2015) suggests, “And then there is the dangerous idea that it is possible, indeed preferable, to hide behind the supposed objective neutrality implied by the more scientific, technology-based, problem solving approaches” (p. 50). Elizabeth Meyer (2008) observed a similar issue in a university design critique, where a juror used the terms “beauty and aesthetics” dismissively, while favoring the more functional term “performative” (p. 9). Perhaps this is why, although Murphy (2016) claims that “design as art, design as science – are no longer understood as mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing” (p. 30), there remains a concern, as expressed by Girot and Imhoff (2017) that “aesthetic concerns... have all too often been overshadowed by a positivistic scientific discourse about nature” (p. 7).

Yet, despite its difficulty, aesthetics remains the quality that sets landscape architecture apart from other professions. According to landscape architect Laurie Olin,

It is the aesthetic endeavor that separates us from social and natural scientists, from engineers and policy planners, from politicians and preservation administrators. We make things in the endeavor to produce environments that are more complex, more stimulating, more useful, and more beautiful than if we had not intervened. (qtd. in Herrington 2017, p. 9)

It is also the aesthetic dimension of landscape architecture that has the potential to engage people in more meaningful ways with the environment. Given the contemporary ecological crises, Girot and Imhoff (2017) argue that “Landscape architecture must be one of the few disciplines capable of merging a deeply symbolic and cultural understanding of nature with the massive environmental transformations to come” (p. 11). Therefore, for landscape architecture to merge aesthetic and scientific thought and realize its potential strength to address our most pressing challenges, we first need to be comfortable engaging in the difficult discussion of aesthetics. We need to find ways to debate, evaluate, and teach aesthetics in design. We need to be able to articulate what makes design more than a means-end functional solution.

To contribute to this discussion, this paper explores definitions of aesthetics through three historically-influential texts: Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (Vitruvius)’s (1st century B.C./1960) classical triad of durability, convenience, and beauty; Louis Sullivan’s (1896/2007) modernist claim that “form ever follows function”; and James Corner’s (2006) presentation of landscape as a dynamic process in “Terra Fluxus”. Each of these three texts is representational of a significant period in architectural design: the classical, the modern, and the contemporary, respectively. At the same time, concepts from these texts, especially Vitruvius’ and Sullivan’s, have repeated to such a degree that many people refer to their ideas without consulting the texts themselves. By limiting the scope to these three texts, one can consider how each of these authors defines aesthetics more closely than a broader survey of aesthetic thought could. Criticisms and concepts from philosopher Arnold Berleant, landscape architecture theorist Ian Thompson, and architectural theorist Douglas Spencer are brought into the discussion to illuminate and support the interpretations. This comparative reading reveals that, despite their differences across time, all three rely on nature as a justification for their aesthetic directives. Yet, if one sets aside these references to a so-

called “natural law,” other aesthetic inspirations are revealed, those of a subjective engagement with the richness of the physical world.

Underlying this paper is the premise that aesthetics cannot be objectively described but is, instead, a concept that is constructed through discourse. In Murphy’s *Landscape Architecture Theory* (2016), he quotes philosopher Jerome Stolnitz’s claim that “aesthetics is a process, not a product, an inquiry, not an almanac” (p. 173). This paper, although limited in scope to three key texts, hopes to contribute to this inquiry. It is not proposing a definitive answer of what aesthetics is in landscape architecture; it cannot do so because many important theorists have been left out of this discussion. Recently, several landscape theorists, such as Catherine Howett (1987), Ann Spirn (1988), Elizabeth Meyer (2008; 2015), and Susan Herrington (2009), have developed sophisticated descriptions of aesthetics as personal interactions with the world, or what Meyer (2015) calls, “a perceptual entanglement between a sensing body and the world” (p. 33). This paper’s aim is to provide some concepts that will hopefully encourage more discussions about how to evaluate or teach aesthetics in landscape architecture. By bringing assumptions that underlie aesthetic judgments to light, we can engage more directly in aesthetic debates, instead of ignoring aesthetic judgments in favor of more easily-proven aspects of design or claiming that aesthetic taste is intuitive and cannot be explained.

3 AESTHETICS AND DESIGN: THREE MOMENTS IN THEORY

3.1 Vitruvius and the Classical Period

Vitruvius wrote *The Ten Books on Architecture* to provide Caesar Augustus with “definite rules” on “the quality of both existing buildings and of those which are yet to be constructed” (p. 4). Widely-considered the first text on architecture, *The Ten Books* (Figure 1) is a blend of practical advice such as how to slake lime for stucco, how to find water sources, and how to string and tune catapults, along with more theoretical reflections on the art and science of architecture. Vitruvius lists six fundamental principles of architecture: order, arrangement, eurythmy, symmetry, propriety, and economy. However, it is his statement that all architecture “must be built with due reference to durability [*firmitas*], convenience [*utilitas*], and beauty [*venustas*],” that has been repeated and revised within architectural theory for centuries (Pollio, p. 17). This triad reappears in the Renaissance in Leon Battista Alberti’s “utility, dignity, and delight”, Sir Henry Wotton’s “firmness, commodity, and delight” (1624), and more recently in Ian Thompson’s “Ecology, Community, and Delight” (2000). Additionally, Immanuel Kant’s division of cognitive faculties into scientific thought (pure reason), moral reasoning (practical reason), and aesthetic judgment also roughly parallel Vitruvius’ triad. Durability - how well a building works structurally and withstands the forces of time - can be likened to Kant’s pure reason, utilizing the scientific laws of materials for specific ends, such as a sound structure. Convenience - how well a building works for the people who occupy it - relates more to Kant’s practical reason, making sure that the building serves human needs.

In his triad of durability, convenience, and beauty, Vitruvius suggests that beauty (and therefore aesthetics) is a separate aim from durability and convenience. Durability and convenience can both be classified as belonging to what philosopher Arnold Berleant describes as practical function: “Practical function involves a context of use in which an object joins with a person in a relation of means to ends” (p. 90). Most design objects have a practical function – their human use. In fact, Berleant cites architecture as the “exemplar of practical function” (p. 93). In defining practical function, Berleant claims, “Things here do not delight in themselves; their attraction lies wholly in the uses to which they can be put” (p. 90), which may be why Vitruvius included beauty as a third goal for architecture, and Kant developed his third critique around aesthetics.

According to Vitruvius, the experience of delight or pleasure does not fit within either of the categories of durability or convenience. What is it, then? Vitruvius defined beauty as, “when the appearance of the work is pleasing and in good taste, and when its members are in due proportion according to the correct principles of symmetry” (p. 17). Beauty in architecture, according to Vitruvius, comes from utilizing the mathematical proportions and symmetries found in nature. The most well-known example of natural proportions that inspired Vitruvius’ architecture are the proportions of the human body. Vitruvius claims, “since nature has designed the human body so that its members are duly proportioned to the frame as a whole, it appears that the ancients had good reason for their rule, that in perfect buildings

the different members must be in exact symmetrical relations to the whole general scheme" (p. 73). These proportions were revived in the Renaissance, most notably in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man.

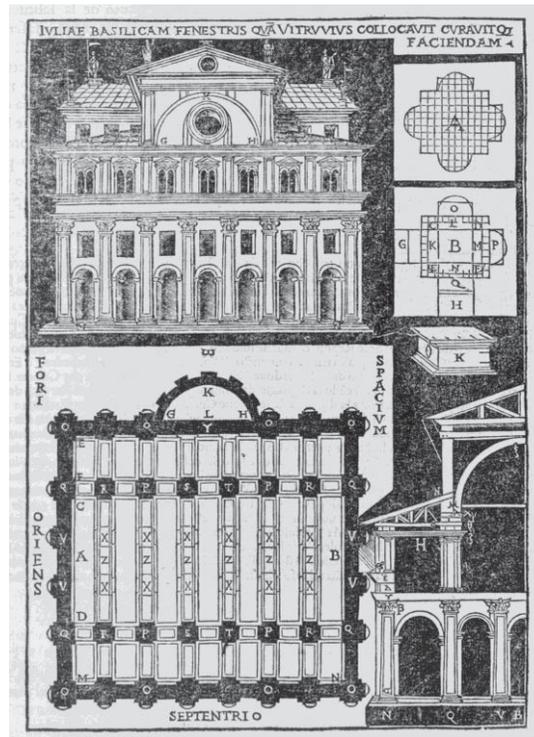


Figure 1. Illustration from *De architectura* by Vitruvius Pollio; tr. & ed. by Cesare Cesariano, 1521. Source: Library of Congress, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2004682214>

Although Vitruvius sets up practical function and beauty as separate aims within architecture; each having a value to architecture on its own terms. But in Berleant's description of practical function, one can see how that separation is not absolute. Berleant observes that it has been "difficult ... to keep aesthetic involvement unsullied by practical interest" because all artistic acts involve an intentional human use of materials (p. 91). Conversely, Berleant suggests that proper function can lead to aesthetic success. He says, "As architecture's practical function improves, its artistic success often increases" (Berleant, 1997, p. 93). Berleant implies that, although Vitruvius considered aesthetics and practical function as separate values within architecture, in actuality, they intermingle in both the design process and in our aesthetic appreciation of designed objects. The two cannot be easily-separated, yet at the same time one cannot be completely dissolved into the other.

3.2 Louis Sullivan and the Modern Period

At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, architects wanted to break from past conventions and to embrace the progress implied in the industrialization of society. One of the most notable expressions of this embrace was the skyscraper (Figure 2). "Form follows function," the maxim developed then (and still repeated within design schools today), was adapted from Louis Sullivan's 1896 article "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered". In that article, Sullivan observes: "All things in nature have a shape...a form, an outward semblance," and "these shapes express the inner life, the native quality of the animal" (p. 91). Sullivan argues that, like nature, architecture should have a form that expresses its essence. That essence is not found in mathematical proportions, as Vitruvius suggested, but in how an object functions. Sullivan proposes,

Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight or the open apple-blossom, the toiling work-horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, *form ever follows function*, and this is *the law*. (emphasis added, p. 92)



Figure 2. Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building, Saint Louis, Independent City, MO. Source: Historic American Buildings Survey (Library of Congress), <https://www.loc.gov/item/mo0297/>

Modernist architects Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius took Sullivan's idea of the functional efficiency of nature one step further and likened designed objects to a machine. Gropius (1926/2007) states,

An object is defined by its nature. In order, then, to design it to function correctly ... one must first of all study its nature; for it must serve its purpose perfectly, that is, it must fulfill its function usefully, be *durable, economical and "beautiful"*. (emphasis added, p. 138)

It is interesting to note that Gropius' triad of durable, economic, and beautiful reflects Vitruvius' triad, except for two differences. First, Gropius puts beautiful in quotation marks, suggesting an uneasiness with the term as a definitive quality. Second, Gropius substitutes Vitruvius' convenient with the term economic, indicating a new emphasis on efficiency. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant (1920/2003) are more explicit about the link between nature and efficiency, declaring that natural selection is "a tendency toward certain identical aspects, corresponding to constant functions, functions which are of maximum efficiency, maximum strength, maximum capacity, etc., that is, maximum economy. ECONOMY is the law of natural selection" (p. 240). They then link natural selection to what they call "the great law" of mechanical selection (Le Corbusier & Ozenfant, p. 240). The machine-like aesthetic in modern architecture was justified through the natural law of efficiency. "Form follows function" came to mean that good aesthetics occur when all that is not necessary to function is stripped away and the design functions well.

In the term "form follows function," Vitruvius' beauty gets merged into his concepts of durability and convenience. Gropius and Le Corbusier's theories exemplify Berleant's category of mechanical

function, where an “object adapted to a specific task ... performs with a maximum economy of movement and minimum of wasted effort” (Berleant, 1996, p. 86). Designed objects are thought of as machines, “a collocation of parts designed to work together to fulfill an external task” (Berleant, 1997, p. 88). Berleant describes mechanical function as lacking aesthetic consideration: “No thought is given to imagination, delight, or any other quality for its own sake, but every attention is devoted to its external end of productive results” (p. 87). Despite this lack of attention to aesthetics for its own sake, machines during this time period achieved the status as aesthetic objects. I argue that this is not due to some natural appropriateness to their form, but because the machine’s form became a symbol of people’s cultural ideals and hopes for the time. In art movements such as Futurism and Constructivism, one can see how the ideal of the machine, “particularly the industrial machine,” as Berleant observes, “has pierced the very heart of human activities to affect the arts themselves” (p. 87). According to Berleant, “Simplicity, regularity, and repetitive patterns of machine products” became aesthetic ideals not because of their efficiency but because they represented the human hopes that made that efficiency into an ideal (p. 88).

Although it appeared that the difficulty of separating aesthetics from function was resolved by subsuming aesthetics to function, culture emerged as a critical link between the two, demonstrating that aesthetic form is not a natural outcome of mechanical function. Instead, aesthetics becomes attached to mechanical function due to its cultural significance. This suggests that aesthetics cannot be reduced to a practical, means-end function because as humans we inevitably attach meaning and emotions to our experiences.

3.3 James Corner and the Contemporary Period

James Corner of Field Operations, designer of the High Line in New York City (Figure 3), is closely associated with the contemporary theoretical movement of landscape urbanism. Like modernism, landscape urbanism is also inspired by how nature works. However, it is not modernism’s efficiency of natural forms that inspires landscape urbanism; it is the metabolic processes of ecosystems. As Corner states: “In conceptualizing a more organic, fluid urbanism, ecology itself becomes an extremely useful lens through which to analyze and project alternative urban futures” (p. 29). “Function” in landscape urbanism relates to Berleant’s classification of organic function, which “is characterized by an integrity in which all the component elements maintain a harmonious equilibrium by adapting reciprocally to one another” (p. 88-9). Unlike the machine, which can be broken down into parts, the organism interacts with itself in an evolving process, where it generates its own ends. In organic function, Berleant notes: “This sense of function cannot be described analytically by its elements alone but only through reciprocal relationships” (p. 89).

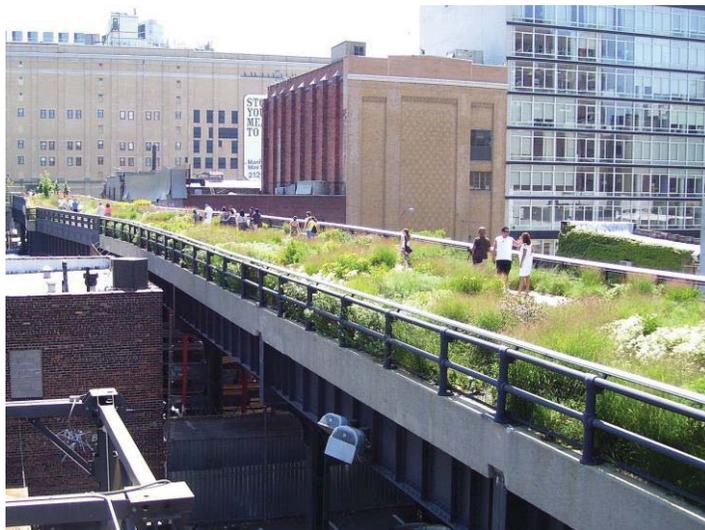


Figure 3. The High Line in Manhattan, New York City at West 20th Street, looking downtown (south). Source: Beyond My Ken - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10811588>

Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's call in *A Thousand Plateaus*, to consider objects not through their meaning or forms but through how they function with other objects; landscape urbanists are less concerned about what a city, building, or landscape looks like than about what it does. Unlike modernism, where form is the focus of architectural design; in landscape urbanism, form becomes secondary to process. According to Corner, form-based design is too static; "a particular spatial form" is "merely a provisional state of matter, on its way to becoming something else" (p. 29). It is the relationships, processes, and movements that matter in an organic function. This prioritizing of process over form can be seen in many places in Corner's "Terra Fluxus." For example, he criticizes modernism for its "fixed, rigid form" imposed upon "the dynamic multiplicity of urban processes" (p. 28). He praises the "more significant" traditional urban landscapes such as Boston's Bay Back Fens and Stuttgart's greenway corridors because they are "[m]ore than aesthetic and representational spaces," they "possess the capacity to function as important ecological vessels and pathways" (p. 24).

Although this demotion of form in design can be read as a critique of modernism, it can also be read as yet-another prioritization of function over aesthetics. In landscape urbanism, form does not follow function; it is dissolved into function. As critic Ian Thompson (2012) points out,

[Landscape urbanism] seems to be the heir to those Modernists who thought that predicating design upon function would take care of the aesthetics, or perhaps to those ecologically zealous landscape architects who believed that if you look after the ecology, the aesthetics will take care of themselves. (p.12)

Either way, the role of form and therefore aesthetics becomes secondary to function.

The ecological determinism implied in landscape urbanism and its demotion of form as a primary focus for design raises fundamental questions about the role of designers, as architects and landscape architects have traditionally considered form as their primary medium and creative agency their primary method. Theorist Douglas Spencer (2014) warns that in landscape urbanism, "The thought and practice of design is subsumed by the overriding logic of metabolic and ecological principles" (p. 114). He worries that, "Rather than having the architect as their author, design principles and practices are now authorized and underwritten by the laws of nature themselves" (p. 113). Consequently, the designer has been dislocated "from a position of creative or critical agency" (p.113). What has taken the designer's place is a reference to a natural or ecological law.

4 DEFINING AESTHETICS

4.1 Aesthetics as Natural Law

According to Spencer, landscape urbanists turn to ecological metabolisms as a natural imperative for design decisions. In doing so, like Vitruvius' rules of natural proportions and Sullivan's natural law, they justify their aesthetic choices through a reference to a natural law (that of ecology). In all three texts, despite the centuries and decades that passed between them, the author ties aesthetic ideals to some property or characteristic observed in nature. For Vitruvius, it was the mathematical proportions found in plants and animals. For Sullivan, it was the functional efficiency of natural forms. And for Corner, it is the ecological processes that run across our landscapes.

Sullivan admits a 'natural' element is difficult to argue against. He says, "we say, simply, it is 'natural' it should be so" (p. 91). By claiming a link to nature, their design theories become, as Sullivan and Le Corbusier both explicitly say, law. Spencer is concerned that basing all design decisions on an understanding of nature will mask the human choices that actually go into design:

It appears that nature – its laws, its organizational processes, and its productive efficiencies – is simply spoken through the medium of designers and their work. It is in fact, though, nature that is the dummy in this ventriloquist act. It is nature that is made to speak of efficiency, productivity, and organization, and in the service of other agents, interests, and agendas. (Spencer, 2014, p. 116)

By viewing these three texts from very different time period side by side, we can see that Spencer has a point. In Vitruvius' time, nature spoke of Euclidean geometry; in modern times, it spoke of evolutionary efficiency; and currently, in landscape urbanism, it speaks of ecological processes. One could argue that our understanding of nature has just become deeper, but, I think, in these cases, nature becomes a front for decisions and choices – including aesthetic choices - made by humans. In hindsight,

we can see that each of these architectural time periods express a distinct aesthetic style. We can also see that as design styles changes across time and place; these aesthetic choices are not solely contingent on the function of the building or landscape. Thompson (2012) questions whether landscape urbanism's dismissal of aesthetics is truly a dismissal or if they just are glossing over the aesthetic choices that they make. He says, "As with the Modernists, we might wonder if Landscape Urbanism is truly indifferent to aesthetics, or is simply proposing the replacement of traditional aesthetics with some new ones" (Thompson, 2012, p.12). Aesthetic choices are human choices; they are not simply determined by natural systems. They are choices that involve the material world and its constraints but also allow for some variety within those limits.

4.2 Aesthetics as Experience

This selective review of aesthetic discourses in architecture and landscape architecture demonstrates that we have posited one universal principle after another to justify aesthetic choices, often based on what we claim to be natural. At the same time, within these three foundational texts, there are suggestions of an aesthetic not determined directly by a natural rule or function. If we return to these texts and remove from consideration their references to natural laws, there is a remainder. When each of them discuss design, they hint at a human activity that goes beyond mathematical principles, functional efficiency, and ecological processes. As an inspiration for design, they describe a personal and poetic engagement with the world around them. From these remainders, I propose that we can construct an alternative definition of aesthetics.

Vitruvius defines beauty as three things: "when the appearance of the work is *pleasing* and *in good taste*, and when *its members are in due proportion according to the correct principles of symmetry*" (emphasis added, p. 17). If we put aside "the principles of symmetry" because they appeal to a so-called natural law, and if we put aside "in good taste" because it tries to make subjective taste into a universal social law; we are left with an aesthetics that occurs "when the appearance of the work is pleasing" (p. 17). This pleasing appearance, interpreted as a personal, subjective experience can form the beginning of an aesthetics not based on appeals to universal rules. For example, Figure 4 of the Pantheon in Rome suggests that there is something more to its experience than its classical proportions.



Figure 4. The Pantheon, Rome, Italy. Source: Katherine Melcher

In Sullivan's essay, even though what is most-widely remembered is the call for efficient forms, personal experiences within the physical world take center stage when he describes his inspiration for design:

Yet to the steadfast eye of one standing upon the shore of things, looking chiefly and most lovingly upon that side on which the sun shines and that we feel joyously to be alive, the heart is ever gladdened by the beauty, the exquisite spontaneity, with which life seeks and takes on its forms in an accord perfectly responsive to its needs. (p. 91)

His poetic invocation for design, might draw inspiration from nature, but it seems to be about something grander than practical and mechanical functions:

Yet the moment we peer beneath this surface of things, the moment we look through the tranquil reflection of ourselves and the clouds above us, down into the clear, fluent, unfathomable depth of nature, how startling is the silence of it, how amazing the flow of life, how absorbing the mystery. (p. 91)

These experiences he describes are not a simple, efficient, means-end relationship with the world around him. It is not just what is in good taste, nor just what works well. As he describes the depth of nature, the amazing flow of life, and the absorbing mystery of it all, he is describing his inspiration for being a designer – what I interpret to be an aesthetic experience of being alive and connected in the world. I think that Sullivan's aesthetic experience is an intense engagement with, to use Corner's phrase, "the phenomenal richness of physical life" (p. 32). One can also observe in Sullivan's architecture (Figure 5) that his invocation of "form follows function" did not mean to him a stripping away details and ornament, but instead is more of a celebration of the complexity of natural forms.



Figure 5. Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building, Saint Louis, Independent City, MO. Source: Historic American Buildings Survey (Library of Congress), <https://www.loc.gov/item/mo0297/>

Like Sullivan, Corner also waxes poetic about one's physical engagement with the world. To the natural richness in the world as described by Sullivan, he adds and juxtaposes our cultural richness:

The lyrical play between nectar and NutraSweet, between birdsong and Beastie Boys, between the springtime flood surge and the drip of tap water, between mossy heaths and hot asphaltic

surfaces, between controlled spaces and vast wild reserves, between all matters and events that occur in local and highly situated moments, is precisely the ever-diversifying source of human enrichment and creativity. (p. 33)

Obviously, to portray Corner as a pure functionalist or ecological determinist is to misrepresent him. He might dismiss a design aesthetic that relies on static form, but he promotes an aesthetic of engagement with the world. He states: “The collective imagination, informed and stimulated by the experiences of the material world, must continue to be the primary motivation of any creative endeavor” (p. 32), and he concludes his essay with the statement: “I can think of no greater *raison d’être* for persisting with the advancement of landscape urbanism than this” (p. 33). Although he is not explicit about what this “imaginary” approach may be, his phrases suggest a design that values “material physicality”, “intimacy and difference”, “the tactile and the poetic”, as well as “local and highly-situated moments” (p. 33).

From these remainders – what is left within these theorists’ writings after the fascination for natural forms and functions are removed - we can develop an inspirational, attractive, and, useful definition of aesthetics. Aesthetics can be defined as an experience: a pleasing experience, as Vitruvius suggests. Drawing from Sullivan and Corner, we can conclude that it is an intense experience of engagement with the natural and cultural world in all of its phenomenally rich physicality. Defined this way, aesthetics is not another universal law dictating how a place should be designed or what it should look like; it celebrates the singularity of each person’s experience in the world. The aesthetic experience contains all types of functions (practical, mechanical, and organic), along with personal memories, cultural meanings, and the materiality of the physical world.

5 CONCLUSION

In these selected texts, aesthetic choices are legitimized by reference to so-called natural principles: Vitruvius uses the mathematical proportions found in nature, Sullivan turns to the efficiency of evolution, and landscape urbanists such as Corner claim ecological metabolisms as a natural imperative for design decisions. Especially in modern and contemporary theory, these so-called laws suggest that aesthetic choices should be determined by how nature functions, putting into question the role of human agency and creativity in design. However, each of these architectural periods expresses a distinct aesthetic style that is not contingent on a natural law or function; suggesting that, in design, there remain aesthetic choices that are human choices and not simply effects of natural systems or laws.

A closer reading of these texts reveals that, for their authors, design includes more than mathematical principles, functional efficiency, and ecological processes. 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. Aesthetics is described as an experience that combines practical functions, cultural meanings, personal memories, and affective responses with the material world that includes but is not limited to form.

This description of aesthetics is not a radical break from contemporary thought on aesthetics in landscape design. In fact, it complements the general understanding of aesthetics as a personal experience as seen in Spurr, Howett, Meyer, and Herrington’s work, and defined by Meyer (2016) as “a mode of interacting with and knowing the world” that involves “an art and science of sensory perception and cognition” (p. 35). But it does suggest that the idea of aesthetics as experience has been embedded within design from the beginning of its theorization, even when we considered it subordinate to natural law or functions.

What does this understanding of aesthetics as a personal engagement with the physical world mean for how we teach, practice, and evaluate design? On first consideration, at best, aesthetics as a subjective experience has little to give in guidance for how we design. At worst, it might challenge landscape architects’ traditional authority as experts in aesthetic judgment. If we believe that aesthetics are about subjective experiences, any solid grounding for aesthetic judgment (a guide for how we should design or how to evaluate what is designed) is impossible to find because each person has their own experiences, values, and tastes. This threatens landscape architecture’s traditional authority as expert designers – if everyone’s aesthetic judgment is equally valid, then why hire an expert? Perhaps this is the fear that keeps landscape architects from engaging with debates surrounding aesthetics.

I believe that this shaky ground for aesthetic judgment is not a threat but an opportunity for redefining the expertise of landscape architecture. Perhaps, as professionals, landscape architects’

expertise is not as an aesthetic taste-maker, but instead in the understanding of the relationships between our physical, sensible environment and our multiple, varying subjective experiences. Through attention to the detailed, tactile, and particular sensible environments we experience every day and a celebration of “the phenomenal richness of physical life,” designers can facilitate the engagement of people with their shared places on a humanistic and meaningful level. How aesthetics is defined and evaluated must therefore be highly-situated, based on both the people and the place involved. But, just because this aesthetics not grounded in law does not mean that we cannot debate it.

Yes, beauty is difficult, but it is difficult because it cannot be reduced to universal laws or natural functions. Aesthetics is not a science. It is a concept that we have created to explain something about how we experience the world that could not be captured within other concepts we had created. In this way, it escapes a definitive, objective, and measurable statement. This does not mean that we should put aside our aesthetic debates in pursuit of more concrete, achievable endeavors; it means that we can actively and creatively engage with the debate surrounding what aesthetics means, what we want it to mean – and in doing so, also debate what we want design to be. One version of this – based on the limited exploration of these three texts – is shared in this paper.

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