

**BEAUTY IS IN THE BODY OF THE BEHOLDER**  
**The engaged experience of every day landscapes**

**Rudi van Etteger**

Wageningen University  
PO Box 47  
6700 AA Wageningen THE NETHERLANDS  
+31317483472 [Rudi.vanetteger@wur.nl](mailto:Rudi.vanetteger@wur.nl)

**Abstract**

Landscape is regularly quoted to be defined in the dictionary as: that which can be seen in one gaze from a particular point of view. Unfortunately many landscape architects seem to implicitly hold the same definition of landscape as leading. The aesthetics of landscape architecture seems thus to be based on scenic, rather than everyday perception. In this paper I want to plead for a wider definition of landscape and its experience, which has implications for the aesthetic evaluation of works of landscape architecture.

Though environmental psychologists and philosophers have made progress with theoretical and experimental insight into the nature of landscape experiences, very little of this work has filtered through in landscape architecture. Landscape experience cannot be reduced to visual experiences only, where aesthetic evaluation is concerned. Thought-experiments about landscapes that look good, but are disturbed by obnoxious noise or smells, can prove this point. Taking the notion of 'engaged experience' as introduced by environmental philosopher Arnold Berleant as a starting point, I sketch a theoretical image of a much more inclusive experience of landscape. If we are not just excluded gazers, looking at the landscape from a distance, if we are involved and engaged with everyday landscapes, then this has serious consequences for the role of other senses than vision in landscape

experience. This theoretical image has serious implications for the definition and aesthetics of landscape architecture.

Using an inclusive notion of landscape experience in teaching has already yielded results. In recent student work a sound collage was provided of the sound of their designed landscape. If this strikes you as unique, and maybe even innovative as opposed to standard, like it has struck me, then that is a reason for concern, as I argue in the paper.

The paper is developed through theoretical reflection and argumentative reasoning. Through reflection on the phenomenology of landscape, I develop the right questions to be asked in quantitative and qualitative research on landscape, rather than just questions about scenic views of landscape. It aims to be the basis for developing anthropological fieldwork and for experiments in environmental psychology.

#### **Keywords**

Everyday landscapes, engaged experience

#### **References**

Berleant, A., 1997 *Living in the landscape, towards an aesthetics of environment* 1<sup>st</sup> edition Lawrence: University press of Kansas

Carlson, A., 2000 *Aesthetics and the environment, the appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition London Routledge

Saito, Y., 2007 *Everyday aesthetics* 1<sup>st</sup> edition Oxford: Oxford University Press