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Aesthetic Engagement with Built Landscape

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ARTIKEL door Yuriko Saito

Everyday aesthetics, the subject of my recent work, aims to illuminate those aspects of our lives that are normally not the focus of aesthetic attention. Objects of daily use and the environment we inhabit are commonly regarded as a background against which various events and activities take place. As such, they are taken for granted and generally do not give rise to a memorable experience, unless their familiarity is disrupted.

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The same applies to landscape. Exceptional, grandiose, or exotic landscapes tend to garner our aesthetic attention and appreciation while ordinary landscapes of our immediate surroundings get neglected. This tendency, what I call 'scenic aesthetics,'^[1] is particularly prominent in the United States due to 'wilderness aesthetics' developed within a specifically American cultural and historical context. The poster-child of landscape under this aesthetics is the American National Park, such as Yosemite and Yellowstone. In comparison, unscenic landscapes like salt marsh, swamp, and prairie do not receive the same kind of attention because they lack exceptional visual appeals. This situation led Aldo Leopold, one of the pioneering writers of American environmental thought in the twentieth century, to lament that "American conservation is ... still concerned for the most part with show pieces" and that "there are those who are willing to be herded in droves through 'scenic' places, who find mountains grand if they be proper mountains with waterfalls, cliffs, and lakes, To such the Kansas plains are tedious."^[2]





Figure 1: Bamboo support for a tree and shrub to protect them from snow. Entrance to a condominium. Sapporo, Japan.



Figure 2: Protective support and rope for pine trees. Walkway to a governmental office. Sapporo, Japan.

This scenic aesthetics can have serious consequences. People's relative indifference toward ordinary landscapes can result in their insufficient protection, as indicated by the historical decimation of wetlands in the United States.^[3] Furthermore, our everyday environment, more than remote travelling destinations like the American National Park, determines the quality of life in the most direct manner. Familiar landscapes, such as a town square, a neighborhood park, and a riverfront, characterize the town and make up our lived world. We interact with these environments on a daily basis and their aesthetic character cannot but affect the quality of life. I suspect that these implications of scenic aesthetics are not unique to the United States.

Attending to and appreciating our everyday landscapes can be challenging. It requires us to be humble, patient, mindful, open-minded, and willing to explore, because those landscapes have become too ordinary and familiar to stimulate our aesthetic appetite. At the same time, these demands placed on us encourage us to actively engage with these landscapes. The characterization of aesthetic experience as engagement has long been held by the pioneer of environmental aesthetics, Arnold Berleant.^[4] According to him, aesthetic experience results from the meeting and responsive interaction between the experiencing subject and the object of experience. The experiencing subject is never a passive spectator, simply 'receiving' the object's aesthetic qualities; nor does an aesthetic experience get created merely by her imaginative faculty. It is a process of the object affecting the agent whose response in turn affects the object's sensuous qualities. The content of the aesthetic experience of a landscape then is determined by the collaboration between the features of the landscape and the experiencing agent's engagement through active perception and imagination.

Although the notion of aesthetic engagement applies to all kinds of aesthetic experience, memorable and standout landscapes tend to overpower us, predisposing us to sit back, get entertained, and derive pleasure. In comparison, familiar and ordinary landscapes with subtle aesthetic qualities are more conducive to active engagement because they encourage us to be a partner in creating an aesthetic experience. I believe the caution recently issued by Abel Coenen and Sascha Geneste in this journal against "design with cliffs and gorges" to aim for "the exceptional experience," as well as against "theme park," is motivated by the similar concern.^[5]





Figure 3: Rock arrangement in a temple garden. Kyoto, Japan.

An aesthetic experience understood as engagement thus requires practice on the part of the experiencing agent. Some recent landscape projects in the United States seem to challenge America's well-entrenched and commonly-accepted canon of domestic landscape, in particular the time-honored tradition of a velvety-smooth green lawn adorned by exotic flowers at the border. The "Edible Estate" projects by Fritz Haeg question the aesthetic appeal of a green lawn that is based upon its timeless appearance, lack of biodiversity, inhospitable habitat for natural creatures, and general sterility, as well as the assumption that the literal fertility of fruits and vegetables is not aesthetically appreciable.^[6] Similarly, landscape projects by Piet Oudolf, such as High Line in New York City and Lurie Garden in Chicago's Millennium Park with wildflowers, embody his vision expressed in the following statement: "I think it's the journey in your life to find out what real beauty is, of course, but also discover beauty in things that are at first sight not beautiful."^[7] With wildflowers subjected to the seasonal vicissitude, we are challenged to embrace decaying and withered plants, not a typical example of beauty, as part of a life cycle.

While I thus believe that the resident/viewer/visitor plays an important role in creating an aesthetic experience, the landscape itself must also be aesthetically worthy of an enriching, edifying, and deeply satisfying experience. It is the task of the artists, designers, and architects, as well as non-professional citizens, to provide landscapes that reward the experiencing agent's aesthetic attention. There are many design desiderata, but let me mention three of them.

First, landscapes that challenge the appreciator, like the ones designed by Haeg and Oudolf, need to be accompanied by some familiar cues, such as a neat border. Otherwise, particularly those who are accustomed to orderly appearance of landscape consisting of a green lawn, exotic flowers, and the like, may mistake the disorderly appearance of a vegetable garden and wilted flowers as suffering from neglect. Joan Nassauer, an American landscape architect and educator, emphasizes the importance of familiar landscape vocabulary, such as an orderly frame, to signal to the viewer that what is framed within is also intentionally designed and worthy of attention and care. These "cues to human care" promote what she calls "cultural sustainability," because "landscapes that attract the admiring attention of human beings may be more likely to survive than landscapes that do not attract care or admiration."^[8]



Figure 4: Stepping Stones in Katsura Detached Villa, Kyoto, Japan.

Two other design strategies are taken from Japanese garden-making. My reference here, however, is not to propose that these strategies specific to Japanese garden should be adopted and copied indiscriminately, but rather to derive from them a general attitude toward materials and experiencing agents that can have wider applicability.

The first is respecting and taking advantage of the native characteristics of the material, whether it be a rock, stone, tree, or the site itself. Materials used in Japanese gardens are not exotic imports but indigenous kind, such as various kinds of pines, azalea, iris, and the like. Their arrangement and maintenance are informed by their native characteristics. For example, trees and shrubs are pruned, supported, and protected so as to articulate their growth

pattern rather than being molded into a shape that has no relationship to their organic outline, such as a pyramid or a corkscrew, or left to wild growth and exposed to natural elements (Figures 1, 2). Rocks are chosen and arranged in a rock garden often in contrasting pairs, so that each rock's characteristics, such as size, shape, and texture, get mutually illuminated (Figure 3). Stepping stones are also chosen and arranged in a rather irregular manner to highlight each stone's features, rather than in a geometrical and orderly arrangement that tends to call less attention to each stone's features (Figure 4).

While topiary and use of exotic materials are certainly appropriate in some contexts, what we can learn from Japanese garden-making is that a deeply satisfying aesthetic experience can be possible with readily available materials when their native characteristics are highlighted. This kind of design strategy not only provides an aesthetic experience but also invites the experiencing agent to cultivate an attitude of respect and humility toward the materials. For example, we are encouraged to appreciate the gift of a pine tree's dignified appearance with its outstretched horizontal branches that are also enhanced by a specific manner of pruning and, if necessary, protective ropes and supports.



Figure 5: Stone bridge made with staggered stones, Kyoto, Japan.



Figure 6: Gently curving walkway entrance to a condominium and support for trees, Sapporo, Japan.

Another design strategy we can gain from Japanese garden-making is its sensitivity to the way in which the visitor experiences it. A garden, like any other physical artifacts, is a spatial entity. However, experiencing it takes time and occurs in a specific order, thereby requiring the designer's sensitivity to the temporal dimension of the experience. For example, the stepping stones and paths are often meandering rather than straight, and bridges are many times shaped in a zigzag form or made with two rectangular-shaped stones or planks placed in a staggered manner (Figures 5, 6). These arrangements modulate the visitor's viewpoint sequentially, affording a multi-foci experience that unfolds gradually rather than a one-dimensional experience focused straight ahead on the terminus. The irregular arrangement of stepping stones also facilitates varying speeds and viewpoints with which to experience the garden-cape. The technique of *miegakure*, meaning "now you see it, now you don't," is often used effectively to hide a certain view that gets revealed gradually or sometimes suddenly. Even a rock garden that cannot be walked on but rather to be seen from a verandah of an adjoining building facilitates a sequential experience, such as from left to right or from a farthest corner to the forefront. When successful, those designs executed with consideration of the temporal dimension of the visitors' movement invite them to take time with their experience and gratefully acknowledge and appreciate the thoughtfulness expressed.

Aesthetic experience takes place when there is a mutual responsiveness between the experiencing agent who is willing to go out and meet the landscape through active engagement of perception and imagination and the built landscape that has been designed with sensitivity and thoughtfulness regarding the materials and the viewer's experience. It is not a one way street; rather, it is made possible by the willingness on both sides to meet the other halfway. The role of landscape design is to facilitate this process and reward the experiencing agent with a richly satisfying experience.

References

- [1] I discussed the notion of scenic aesthetics in "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56.2 (Spring 1998): 101-111.
- [2] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (NY: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 193 and pp. 179-180. The book was originally published in 1949.
- [3] This history is documented by Ann Vileisis in *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America's Wetlands* (Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1997).

[4] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). Berleant has been consistently developing the notion of aesthetic engagement in his subsequent works, particularly by opening the fields such as environmental aesthetics, social aesthetics, and negative aesthetics.

[5] Abel Coenen and Sascha Geneste, "Why Experiences Matter to Landscape Architecture," *TOPOS* (07-05-2014).

[6] Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, 2nd ed. (NY: Metropolis Books, 2010).

[7] Quoted by Alainna Lexie Beddie in "On View | A First Look at a New Documentary About the Master Gardener Piet Oudolf" at tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com (April 9, 2014).

[8] "Cues to human care" is from Joan Iverson Nassauer's "Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames," *Landscape Journal* 14.2 (Fall 1995), p. 163. "Cultural sustainability" and the following passage is from her "Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology," in *Placing Nature: Cultural and Landscape Ecology*, ed. Joan Iverson Nassauer (Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1997), p. 69.

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