

How Has a City Become an Aesthetic Issue

ZHANG Yu^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Political Science and Public Management, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

A city is a huge artificial work, and is the result of the human transformation of nature and society. It also has a multi-layered feature different from the general artifacts. It is practical, aesthetic and symbolic. On the one hand, because it is essentially an artificial work, it is still the object of the power of human nature, and has the basic feature of being shaped in accordance with the law of aesthetics. On the other hand, because of its multi-layered nature, city aesthetics is not only a landscape aesthetics, but also should reflect the beauty in practices and symbols.

Key words: City aesthetics; Practical; Landscape; Symbol

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1986 Arnold Berleant published the article *Cultivate The Aesthetics of A City*, as an object of aesthetics, city has officially entered the theoretical horizon of aesthetics, and has become an important object of study. "City aesthetics" has become a branch of aesthetics. This paper tries to explore the developmental path of city aesthetics

from the essence of city and the multi-layered attribute of city.

1. THE ESSENCE OF CITIES

The origin of cities is quite early. Only for China, the history of its urban civilization can be traced back to the pristine settlements in the mid-Neolithic period 6,000 years ago. Until the late Neolithic period, in Yangshao, Hongshan, Hemudu and other cultural districts new settlements with class differentiation have emerged, which showed the nature of early cities.

For the initial impetus of the formation of cities, there are a variety of speculations. Kevin Lynch in *City Forms* says:

With the development of civilization, the role of a city increases a lot more than the original. It has warehouses, bunkers, workshops, markets and palaces, but no matter how it develops, a city is firstly a religious shrine,

such as Acropolis is the holy land of worship and guard Athena. Mumford examined the process of civilization in the Nile and Mesopotamia, and considered it's the royal institution to promote the emergence of cities. "The king occupies a central position. He is the pole of the city magnet, and attracts all emerging forces into the heart of the city civilization, and put them under the control of palaces and temples." (Mumford, 2005)

However, no matter what's the reason, from the perspective of the emergence and developmental history of a city, a city is the product of human productive labors and social practices, and is a great human creation.

Firstly, a city is the achievement of the human transformation of the natural environment. Urban environment is a "human" nature, and is an artificial environment transformed by the human creative activities. Artificial environment or a combination of artificial environment and natural environment is the difference between city and rural area or wilderness. In this way,

everything in a city is not an existence of “pure nature”, but a part which cannot be separated from human social lives. Therefore, an urban environment, as Marx says, is the “personified nature”.

A city is the object and carrier of human social lives. Building activities of a city are an important aspect of human social lives, and is the content and expression of human social lives. Human constructive activities of a city is conscious creative activities, which embody the human spirit pursuit in the city construction, and are also integrated with human emotions and ideals. A city, from simple to complex, from single function to multi-functional, from small town to urban agglomeration, city belt or network city, from a city on the ground to a multi-dimensional city, shows different aspects of human social lives.

Broadly speaking, a city is a “container of civilization.” As a great artifact, a city spawns and contains a wealth of material and spiritual civilization in its own being. Whether it is politics, law, or culture, art, or business exchange, it can get the most adequate growth and performance in cities. If there are no cities, human culture is impossible to spread and growth so quickly.

2. MULTI-LAYERED NATURE OF CITIES

Although a city is essentially an artifact, and is a great achievement of humanization of nature, it's still different from an artwork, and different from the general complexity of an artifact.

Firstly, a city has a practical property. It is a living space, and a city's function in the most fundamental level should be suitable for people to survive and to meet people's basic needs. The selection of a city's location must be considered with the natural environmental factors, including climates, resources, transportation, securities and so on. The selection criteria, clearly, should be suitable and convenient for living. For a city's buildings, streets, communities, etc., from a single building to the overall spatial layout, the primary objective is to settle people, and let people get a place to live.

Meanwhile, we need to see that, if a city is a place of living, then a countryside or a family is also a place of living, but apparently a city as a place of living has its own characteristics. Firstly, it is not a general sense of a place to live, but a crowded place inhabited with populations, so inevitably there exists a wide range of social labor divisions. Accordingly, the functional layout of a city is actually more brought about by the social labor divisions. Secondly, the city inhabitants are highly intensive, and the group living inevitably requires power distributions and interest exchanges. The more intensive the inhabitants are, the more frequent the distributions and exchanges are. In other words, the practicality of a city is realized in these distributions and exchanges. Wealth and powers can be the most concentrated here, and also be circulated in the highest degree here. So we can see

that the most important places in a city tend to be the town hall and market place. Even in the ancient China, the city market is also very important. Of course, the most important is the government office (in the imperial capital is the royal palace), in fact, both of which also correspond to the power and wealth. Thirdly, if we say that the practicality issue of a city is a “living” issue, of course, yes, but this “living” is not only about living, but about the full range of city lives. People construct and transform a city in the requirement of a full range of urban lives, which is filled with all kinds of facilities and a variety of transactions. At the same time, this full range of urban lives also transforms the inhabitants. “A city has become a major place to transform the inhabitants and has given full play to their human personalities.” (Mumford, 1989, p.83) There is not another place where an individual can obtain a freedom which can match the degree of freedom in a city, where people can obtain a more suitable living through intensive exchanges.

Secondly, the city also has the aesthetic property in addition to the practical property. The aesthetic property, the most externally and visually, is reflected in the landscape of a city. This landscape is not only reflected in the artificial environment of a city, but also in the natural environment of a city. For the natural environment, a city's topography, mountains and rivers, forests and vegetation can exist as a kind of landscape. A city's part natural objects or the natural environment after transformations can also exhibit a pleasant scenery. For the artificial environment, it is mainly reflected in buildings. “A city can be used as an important ‘architectural environment’, and is often used as a typical case of architectural technologies and architectural arts.” (L·Burnett, 2000, p.5) We cannot rule out that some buildings are only created to satisfy the practicality of living and without any aesthetic purpose at all, but more constructions both have practicality and outstanding aesthetics, which tendency in modern society gets increasingly apparent, and is also a direct reflection of a kind of living art. Not just buildings, since a city is a living place constructed pursuant to the law of aesthetics, the living spaces throughout the city are all with artificial marks. No matter a variety of functional architectures or the layout of the city, or the man-made natural landscapes in the city, they all play a beautification effect on the city at their different levels.

But if we only understand the aesthetics of a city as the landscape, it is too superficial. Because a city is not just an object to watch, but also a place to live where events occur. In a city, we can truly feel the full sensory experience brought about by the full arrangement of urban lives, where smells, hearings and touches are all awakened. More importantly, in a city we can access to unique psychological feelings and spiritual experience. The rational urban layout and good order can offer the inhabitants with comfort, and make them appreciate a pleasure through the harmonious interactions with

the nature and society. In urban lives, people enjoy the convenience of lives, but there are also histories and cultures which are a part of the city, and pass a wealth of information and emotions to the inhabitants. Therefore, this pleasure is not simply a sensory pleasure, but also the senses of identity and belonging which are a more sophisticated aesthetic experience. From this point of view, it can prove once again that the so-called traditional aesthetic theory without any involvement of actuality sends out a strong Utopian flavor, which regards beauty as an unreal thing in a sealed glass bottle. But in fact, beauty is closely related to utility, life and the world. Only in a series of practical events, beauty can be perceived, cultivated, distributed, and developed.

Thirdly, a city has a symbolic meaning. Since a city is a huge artificial works, then no matter its partial facilities or the overall planning of its constructions, they have an inevitable spiritual guidance behind. These guideline are reflected not just as the governance to the real city, namely the real city has been constructed under certain spiritual concepts, but also as an urban ideal, namely the call to the real world. Of course, what is the urban ideal varies due to the differences in ages, ethnicity and cultures, but the common ground is that each ideal is a concept full of philosophical and cultural factors. Cultures in every age have an ideal vision for the relationships between human and nature, human and society. This ideal guides the city's construction, hoping to express the non-material orders and understandings for the world through the visible materialized images. For example, China's Confucian doctrine, or the religious spirit of the Christian world can be seen with its profound impacts in their respective cities. Of course, a city is not a simple isolated item. It is huge and complex, involving many areas and levels, so it's impossible to have a single spiritual significance, but must have diverse significance. In short, the image of a city is generated toward a philosophy of the highest level, and the reflection toward a philosophy shows the natural, social, political, ethical and other metaphysical thoughts. As Professor Liu Chengji comments:

In modern society, there is no another object can occupy an important position in the country's political, economic and cultural lives like a city, and no another object can bring together the ingenuity of human artistic creations like a city, and dominate human aesthetic experience and value judgment. (Liu, 2012)

3. THE DEVELOPMENTAL PATH OF URBAN AESTHETICS

The rise of urban aesthetics has realistic backgrounds, that is, the expressive ways of the traditional aesthetics are undergoing tremendous changes. Since Hegel explicitly defined aesthetics as a philosophy of art, in the traditional aesthetic concept art has become the core of study in general. However, as life becomes more and more artistic

and art becomes more and more life-affirming, the boundaries between the two have become increasingly blurred, and the boundaries of the traditional aesthetics are melting. It is against this great background city has become an increasingly important area of aesthetic study.

In the traditional aesthetics, beauty often focuses on arts and regards artworks as the manifestation of a human spirit and a materialized expression of aesthetic pursuit. Its creation and appreciation of artwork is super utilitarian, aesthetic and free. However, Marx points out in *1844 Economics - The Philosophical Manuscript* that,

A animal is just created in accordance with the scales and needs of the species which it belongs to, while a man knows how to produce in accordance with the scales of any species, and to measure objects by the inherent scales anytime and anywhere; Thus, human also produce objects in accordance with the law of aesthetics. (Marx, 1979, p.50)

Clearly here the beauty is no longer a super utilitarian spiritual existence, but a man-made product. Human exist in the world, constantly transform the world with their own strength, and mark the outside world with human imprints. During the transformation of the nature, human make a variety of artificial works, including labor tools and daily necessities, and all these artifacts are essentially the manifestations of human powers which embody human labors and spirits, revealing that the nature is constantly transformed toward human.

From this perspective, a general artwork has no essential difference with other artifacts. Beauty can be presented in an artwork, but it can also be presented in other artifacts. An artwork is created by the motivation of aesthetics, and other artifacts are also produced in accordance with "the law of aesthetics". The so-called beauty not only exists in the super-utilitarian area, in fact, it also exists in functional items. Aesthetics is no longer an isolated event from the secular lives, but belongs to a more expanded experiential area.

As previously mentioned, in all artificial works, a city is the largest category. Human construct buildings, plan streets and construction communities in a city, and in all the imprints of human transformation of the nature, a city is the most concentrated place. Although this is a huge work, greater than any other artifacts, but in essence, it has no fundamental difference with other artifacts, or even artworks. It's still a manifestation of human powers and is created according to the law of aesthetics.

However, because of the multi-layered feature of a city, the urban aesthetics also show the multi-layered feature. Of course, a city is firstly a physical existence. Whether it's a macro plan or a specific building, or a landscape blended with the nature, it's firstly a physical existence. But when the physical state develops upward, it reaches the conceptual level. When the concept drops as a specific city appearance, correspondingly, the physical state of the city develops toward the conceptual world. The two interact with each other, which forms the developmental path of urban aesthetics. Therefore, the study of urban

aesthetics is not just a study of landscape, but also a study of history and culture. A city is not just a place for activities and a visible object, it is also an imaginable object. People interpret a city on the conceptual level, and this interpretation reacts to the construction of the city. The physical state of a city can arouse people's recollections and imaginations, pointing to the past and future, making invisible concepts to transform into visible manifestations.

CONCLUSION

On the aesthetic study of a city, we should start from the images, and then shift toward the spiritual and philosophical levels, which are the sublimation to beauty. If we say that in a city's practical property, the pleasure which can be felt by people is aesthetic, then in the philosophical thinking toward the urban image, and in the analysis of how a city image reveals philosophical concepts and cultural values, the pleasure felt by people is also an aesthetic experience. Narrow urban aesthetics regards a city only as a landscape, which is obviously unreasonable. We must expand urban aesthetics, reveal beauty in practices, and inspire beauty in symbols. Urban aesthetics is not only for the watch, but also must be for living, not only is visual, but also should be spiritual.

In this sense, it reveals the response of urban aesthetics to aesthetic transformation. Aesthetics has become a cultural philosophy, and beauty has been filled with the overall judgment. From this perspective, regarding a city as the object of aesthetic study is not only theoretically justified, but also great practical significance.

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