Arnold Berleant

CULTIVATING
AN URBAN AESTHETIC

I

For most people the city, particularly the industrial city, is the antithesis of the aesthetic. While there may be sections that have their charm, trucks and automobiles have conquered the urban streets and pedestrians scurry before them like vanquished before a victor. Gardens and parks are occasional oases amidst the stone desert of concrete and asphalt, but the dominating features of urban experience remain mechanical and electronic noise, trash, monolithic skyscrapers, and moving vehicles. The personal and intimate are swallowed up in mass structure and mass culture. And the human place—precarious and threatened.

This is no exaggerated picture but a realistic portrayal of the urban environment that is experienced in the great industrial centers of the world and, to a lesser degree, in smaller regional cities. Urban centers offer important gains, to be sure, primarily in the ability of such concentrations of wealth and population to support a cultural life rich in range and variety. But there are sacrifices, too often decided by those who do not make them, by

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people whose financial and political power enables them to insulate themselves against much of the urban dross and to escape frequently for respite to places of luxury and leisure.

Yet the gains of urban living need not require human sacrifice. There is no necessary principle of *quid pro quo* governing industrial civilization which demands that grace, delight, and beauty be foregone in the name of material progress. Both city and civilization originate in the idea of community, and the city still holds the promise of the classical world as the place where people become human.

But what is a human, a humanizing city? What are the conditions for experience which an environment contributes to the life of its inhabitants and how do these conditions affect the quality of their experience? We can understand such conditions best, I believe, through the idea of perceptual awareness. This is the sensory awareness of a person as an embodied consciousness, an awareness that resonates within the chambers of history, of the accrued meanings of a culture, of the social interplay of communal life, and of personal activities. Such an awareness holds a central place in the notion of the aesthetic. This signifies far more than what is beautiful or pleasing; it involves the full range of intrinsic perceptual experience as the center of value. Understood in this way, the aesthetic lies at the center of being human and it is the urban environment that holds the greatest possibility for achieving it. How is this possible?

In exploring this question, it is important to know what we mean by a city, for the same term can be applied equally to ancient places of a few thousand population and to modern metropolitan agglomerations of many millions. The word is certainly relative, for qualitative changes in the nature of physical organization and social life take place concurrently with quantitative ones. It will serve our purposes best to be most inclusive and consider a city to be a concentration of people and structures of such size and complexity that its proportions are no longer intimate but exceed the daily life activities of most of its inhabitants.

While cities in the Orient, especially China, were often planned in advance, this was not as frequent in the West where, until early in this century, it was common for cities to develop by accretion. In either case, when planning was done, it was usually for special

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needs, in particular political, military, or religious ones. Trading colonies and military garrisons required coordination and order to operate effectively, while sacred cities typically exemplified some geometrical shape that symbolized the cosmos. Instances of such cities lead us to the trading city of Naucratis in Egypt in the seventh century B.C. and to the religious city of Persepolis in Persia in the sixth, although evidence of planned cities takes us back far earlier, at least to the temple city of Sakkara in Egypt, ca. 2700 B.C.

Different physical layouts developed for different purposes. The rectangular block units of the ancient Chinese and later of Milesian planning in Asia Minor facilitated commercial activities and political control, while the organization of ideal cities was sometimes circular, a plan that could be of assistance for purposes of defense but that also had powerful symbolic appeal as a reflection of cosmic order. These special needs imposed requirements that determined the organization of the cities that fulfilled them, set their character, and generated the mood and quality of the life within them.[1]

Moreover, while special circumstances did lead to the construction of planned cities, residential areas within them often developed with no such guidance, and the bulk of the rural population that lived in towns and villages received little assistance from any such rational organization. However, the development of most towns and cities at the slow pace of pre-industrial technology allowed for deliberate action, both personal and social, at least in the case of bourgeois dwellings. Decisions tended to be long range ones and, while there may not have been bureaucratic reviews, there prevailed a sense of time as gradual and steady and of the future as ageless. The slow and regular succession of years joined with the steadying hand of tradition in a process of balance and homogeneity to produce the architecture and organization we admire and study today. What was unsuitable was eliminated by the attrition of long deliberation or of the vicissitudes of weather and climate, and what proved itself under those conditions

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[1] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961, pp. 124, 191-193; Yi–Fu Tuan, *Topophilia*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1974, ch. 11, esp. p. 152.

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endured. Thus diverse urban textures developed that were layered over the passage of years in a cumulative process that resulted in physico-cultural environments, each of which had a high degree of integration and a distinct identity.

We feel more than curiosity and quaintness in the villages, towns, and old cities in so many parts of the world. There is a strong sense of the harmony of time, of place, and of the kind of movement they generate. There is a feeling of identity, of a place to which people belong that has a distinctive character with which even the casual visitor can sense and associate. As with trees of great age, there is an awareness of a conjunction of past and place, and so such urban clusters possess the precious quality of human continuity. It is not surprising that these are the very qualities we recognize and seek to preserve in the old cores of most modern cities, where so much tends to be dismissed and obliterated through blindness, personal gain, or the expedience of standardization.

II

Still more may be present than time and history. We experience cities perceptually as places of vital activity, and the presence of large numbers of people engaged in a wide range of activities stands at the center of the urban character. Some cities are pedestrian cities, where people crowd the streets at most times of the day and often of the night, producing a prolific mixture of activity and sensation. Indeed, most important for understanding the urban aesthetic are the sensory qualities that cities generate. These are profuse and varied, and not only visual but olfactory, kinesthetic, and auditory. Urban places produce an exuberance of sensations, sometimes stimulating, sometimes oppressive. These sensory environments may be fertile places in which a creative culture grows, or they may be maelstroms of sensation that overpower and drown any perceptual sensitivity.

Thus the city, whatever else it may be, is an aesthetic environment and, like any human environment, it is the product of human agency. With quickened time, self-conscious perception, and the lessons of heedless development before us, we have come to realize that the processes of forming and re-forming this environment can no longer be abandoned to profit or politics, just

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as they cannot be left to the geological pace of pre-industrial time or the geometrical planning of the contemplative mind. How, then, can urban design features be shaped in ways that will create an environment that is rich in aesthetic interest and values? How can the elements of urban experience be coordinated so as to produce a condition of perceptual awareness that encourages the productive and vitalizing qualities of collective life—curiosity, interest, exploration, discovery, wonder? More specifically, how can we generate the conditions in a city that have occurred in the past mostly in fortuitous and inconsistent ways, circumstances that encourage perceptual development, creative activity, and human satisfaction and fulfillment?

In the past, unguided development had its genius: the city was a social creation shaped under the discipline of climate, of function, and of time. Such development has resulted in vernacular techniques, styles, and structures that both reflect and direct the social patterns and the ethos of regional cultures. Industrial technology, however, has loosened most of these constraints. Building materials are shipped to areas to which they are foreign and exotic: marble-clad skyscrapers rise in regions of sand or granite; mobile homes stand beneath groves of evergreens. In the United States, the ranch house and the colonial stand side by side in suburban developments across the country. Similar designs are placed in vastly different conditions whith total disregard of local climate patterns and are then equipped with powerful systems of heating and air conditioning to compensate for that disregard. Standardization and mass distribution bring the same perishable foods at great cost into the same supermarkets on the same Main Streets to be prepared in the same kitchens of the same development houses, irrespective of region, of geography, of season and climate, and even of nationality.

An identical fate has befallen people. From individual personalities who associate ourselves with distinctive places, we too have become standardized items, removable, replaceable, easily transported and transferred from one location to others. Our ideas, our wants, even our needs are produced to meet the requirements of the mass market. It is hard to know how our patterns of behavior originate, whether they be of work, sex, family relationships, or recreation, since new modes of thought and action

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are taken up and exploited by the media so quickly that they lose their spontaneity and the honesty of their reponse to the conditions under which they first appeared. We are thus *like* our environment. In fact, we *are* our environment. The Marxist critique of alienation no longer applies. That analysis holds when people can be distinguished from their tools, their work, their productive and social forms, their ideologies. When we are wholly absorbed in and by these, when we are unified with them into a single socio-cultural-environmental complex, then there is nothing foreign to us. The process of adaptation soaks through us to the bone and we are one with our world. In an earlier epoch this was a harmonious condition of reciprocal fulfilment of person and place; in our own age of industrial and electronic technology, it represents a state of the invisibility and indeed the disappearance of the individual human factor. The unguided development of the physico-social city has its sacrificial victim.

Unhappy as this loss of a separate identity may sound, it is not, in fact, the consequence of pervasive industrialism and a mass commercial culture. Such unity of person and physico-social place is the observation that anthropologists and geographers tend to make about human cultures in general. Our recognition of it now is a combination of the extreme degree to which human sensibility has been pressed under present conditions and the contradiction of this situation with the modern myth of the separateness of the individual and the social order. The moral issue lies, then, not with the fact of this unity but in its quality.

There is a contradictoriness, too, in the qualitative experience of the modern city. Its very combination of exhilaration and inhospitality makes the city difficult to assess. The city has always been a vital center of human culture (I use that word in its anthropological sense) and now, with its size and complexity far exceeding any previous period, its exemplary character is all the more brilliant. The modern city is the heart of the social organism, the central force in the activity of a living society. It is the place where a society discloses its most visible forms and forces, not just its commercial, institutional, and social patterns and changes, but its perceptual forms, as well.

These forms do not appear only in the structures that constitute the physical city but, perhaps more subtly, in both the arrangement

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of its physical structures and, most important here, in its sensible environment. The architecture, parks, and physical plan of a city, and especially its texture of visual, auditory, kinesthetic sensations, offer the exemplary social environment of a people. In one sense, the city is a museum, not a house of past accomplishments shorn of their roots and their entanglements with the activities from which they emerged, but a living, participatory, unedited collection of the social world of a contemporary culture. It is obvious how store windows are museum cases housing the art and artifacts of a society and how shops are their special collections. Yet we must look further to recognize commercial streets as linear markets and shopping districts as the marketplaces of the local and regional population. These constitute an urban fair that offers the excitement of the color, movement, and sounds of a living culture, a richly qualitative perceptual environment.

Such intensely social activity bears on its face the problems as well as the marvels of the city. Speaking here only of the qualitative conditions of modern urban living, there are many less fortunate aspects. Many of these are common to most industrial cities of the world and vary considerably in degree, while others are more specific to certain places. Although these may be well known and even hopelessly tolerated as unavoidable, they are not less important or regrettable. The invasion of the city by trucks, buses, and automobiles has resulted in a barbaric desecration of nearly every outdoor human place. They have turned urban streets into perilous places for health as well as safety, often defeating their very own purpose of rapid movement in a kind of reflexive self-destruction. Urban squares have been turned into parking lots and street level façades are barricaded by parked vehicles. The inescapability of air pollution and its immediate harm has received a great deal of journalistic and somewhat less legislative comment, but fume-generating machines remain visibly present and most cities are encased in a carcinogenic mushroom cloud. Furthermore, noise is invisible and intangible and thus not recorded in photographs, and it is usually ignored. Yet ambient sound is inescapable, indoors as well as out. Not only is there the background drone of traffic and its surface saliencies (to which must be added the omnipresent lawnmower in the suburbs). There are also the sounds that subtly subvert the human voice by

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absorbing it, such as the hum of air conditioners and ventilation systems and the buzz of fluorescent lights. Perceptual circumstances like these may be called oppressive, a kind of environmental oppression, and this can take many forms. There is architectural oppression from both the intimidating masses of skyscrapers and the naked exposure of over-scale plazas, themselves an interesting dialectical opposition, and from inhospitable physical surroundings in general. Thermal oppression occurs from the difficulty of adjusting the temperature level in public buildings, institutional offices, and hotel rooms. Social oppression takes many forms, ranging from loud voices and blaring radios to the constant fear of crime. Most generally, we may suffer from the oppression of inescapable sensory overloading. Perhaps the most extreme case is the New York City subway, the oldest and largest underground rail system, and today the most abyssmal collective dungeon of industrial devising.

III

Urban perception thus may take many forms, at times life-enhancing, at times oppressive. It is a rich, often an over abundant mélange of perceptual notions, some of which are positive tor us, some of which are negative. Still, at other times and places the city provided a harmonious environment, never without its difficulties and fears, perhaps, yet at its best an interplay of forces that provide a fertile opportunity for florescence and fulfilment: Periclean Athens, Elizabethan London (apart from its low degree of cleanliness), Renaissance Venice, Antwerp in the sixteenth century, Kyoto during the Heian period. Perhaps a complete reconciliation of opposing forces is a goal never entirely realized, and surely the city has its history of ideal projections, from Plato and Thomas More to the nineteenth century and present-day utopian communities. Nevertheless, some semblance of community did develop on occasion from classical times on, when the city functioned, not as an anarchistic jungle, not as a battleground for conflicting parties operating by legal or extra-legal rules, but as a social and physical environment in which individuals and groups have acted within a confluence of forces toward mutual fulfilment. This is a condition perhaps more likely

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found before the modern nation state attempted to submerge and absorb regional traits and traditions into those of the most powerful group. And it appeared before modern scientific technology introduced rapid and disruptive changes into the texture of urban life and which now, with growing internationalism, has carried the standardization of products, institutions, and people to a scope that now moves threateningly close to becoming universal.

If perception, broadly construed, is the central feature of experience, how can we understand environmental experience in its terms? Surely not as a passive receiving of external stimuli. That legacy of eighteenth-century empiricism has increasingly given way during the past century and a half, under the combined influence of scientific and philosophic developments that stress the active contribution to our experience that we make as perceivers and actors. Marxism, pragmatism, *Gestalt* psychology, and existential phenomenology are some of the intellectual sources that have contributed to this transformation of perception which is still incomplete.

These developments have led us to recognize not only our formative influence in the perceptual process but the difficulty of defining a boundary between our human presence and our environment, between ourselves as conscious bodies and the conditions within which we live and act. We are beginning to realize that the environment is not a foreign place outside us but that it is continuous with our bodies, with our selves. Like the concentric ripples that move out from an object dropped in still water, our environment rings us as a setting of which we are the activating center. As vernacular architecture uses local materials and indigenous designs that evolve over long periods into forms that harmonize with the landscape and come to belong to it, so do we join with other aspects of our urban landscape, take on its coloration and its contours, respond to its masses, join in its movement. There is constant pressure toward compatibility between person and place but it is not always a happy conjunction. Many of us are like the androgenous lovers in Plato's *Symposium*, searching, however, not to rejoin the severed halves of our bodies but for the *places* that will finally complete us and make us whole again. Some, by good fortune, have not far to look; most must

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search widely; and there are those few who can shape it to suit themselves.

These places necessarily include other people, for we are social animals and the community of others is most attainable and comprehensive in the urban environment. As an environment, the city places more in our hands than any other. It is the pre-eminently human environment, that which is almost entirely the product of human agency. Although the natural landscape is *human* nature, infuenced by human action, from its vegetation and precipitation to its climate and land surface, the urban landscape is the pre-eminently human landscape. With a bare nod at major topographical features, such as great hills and watercourses, the city is the creation of people. There is almost divine omnipotence in the way the human animal has shaped masses and open space, influenced climate, affected wind patterns, exercised mortal power over the kinds and numbers of inhabitants, from insects and birds to domesticated animals, including humans. But we are interested here more in the moral environment than the physical one, in the climate of values and normative actions that define human society, and still more in the aesthetic environment than the moral, in the qualitative sensibility that activates and directs perception. For whatever else it may be, the city is the aesthetic environment *par excellence.*

How does that aesthetic environment show itself? Certainly beyond physical dimensions and layout, for the city is a perceptual world, a realm in which the qualitative domain of sensible awareness is fashioned and in which our encounter with this domain is directed. Here is a region of mass and space contrived almost wholly by human agency. The size and placement of buildings, the order and dimensions of interior spaces, the breadth and directionality of streets, the location of squares and parks, all these create a physical setting which determines the opportunities for people's movement and the conditions of their interaction. These are not just physical arrangements; they are physical *presences* felt kinesthetically by the body and the senses as inviting or hostile, intimidating or embracing, oppressive or comfortable, and all the nuances that lie between these contrasting conditions. The same is true of the other perceptual aspects of the urban environment. The ways light and shadow are modulated by the

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siting of structures, the textures and colors introduced by surfaces, the materials of roads, buildings, and the choice of plantings, these qualitative sensory aspects of the environment are equally significant in forming the urban environment. Similarly with sounds: cities have their soundscapes, no less apparent for being intangible, and these occur in the same variety as the other qualitative features of environments. Industrial sounds, traffic noise, radios and tape players, and the human voice all contribute to a three-dimensional auditory texture that is thick as it is broad, permeates solid walls, and envelopes everything within its realm.

Urban aesthetics thus constitutes the perceptual realm of the city, the ways the city is experienced through a kind of bodily consciousness by people as thoughtful, perceiving organisms. Cultural and historical meanings fuse with the data of sensory awareness to form an almost liquid medium of sensibility. I use "sensibility" in its double significance, referring both to the senses and to meanings, for perception and import are joined in the integrity of our experience.

Moreover, as I have already noted, a moral dimension lies hidden here, for while perception is qualitatively neutral, it is not morally so. Mass and space occur, howsoever they may be arranged, and the analysis of their configurations may assume the quasi-objectivity we associate with science. But whenever people are present, human values appear and these cannot help becoming a central concern. As condition for human consciousness and action, an environment radiates a kind of influence that is not neutral. Endless variation is possible here, certainly, yet we can nonetheless discriminate between those environments that enlarge the awareness of their inhabitants and those that confine and constrain it, between those that expand human activity and those that inhibit and discourage it. There is no real mystery here, only obfuscation, and to eliminate the human perceptual element in planning as being personal, subjective, intangible, or variable, is to lose the very point of all decision and action: the meeting of human needs, including those that are distinctively human.

Environments, then, are a human product, and none more than the urban environment. Insofar as it forms the conditions for living and largely directs patterns of behavior and the kinds and qualities of experience, the environment is suffused with human values.

Yet the modern city is a thick, often an overly rich mixture of perceptual activity, some of which leads and extends us, some of which threatens and denies us. Can we recapture the humanized aesthetic of the pre-industrial city for the urban world of the future? How can we locate the qualitative features of exemplary human environment and guide them toward human ends?

Much modern development has failed here. Political and economic motives have produced environments that have largely overlooked the intangibles of perception and the central place of human experience. It has created false environments, environments that are urban *trompe l'oeil*, giving us the illusion of real places instead of substantial ones that meet real human needs.

What is a false environment? In our late industrial-commercial societies we suffer from environments that surround us with surfaces, not contents, that provide images, not substance, and that therefore fail to satisfy our longing for a place in which we are at home and to which we belong. This falseness is found most blatantly in development housing, including luxury developments, where we are given stock plans, a standard variety of façades with virtually identical interiors which bear little relation to each other, to the site, the region, its history, or the personalities of the people who inhabit these houses. It is the general condition of the suburban regions of the industrial world, areas that house a pervasive dissatisfaction with the order of things. This is more than personal prejudice: there is a real condition here that has not been diagnosed or analyzed effectively. What is perhaps more obvious is that these environments, sometimes oppressive, sometimes sterile, sometimes demeaning, but always deceptive and false, are conditions people endure, usually without the least awareness of what these conditions are and without recognizing that they offend our humanity and produce a generalized frustration and unhappiness. Can it be surprising that such a situation would lead to aggressive behavior or at the very least create a predisposition toward it? Understanding the significance of these environmental conditions may help explain both the overt forms of urban violence and the quieter forms of desperation that populate suburban areas.

On the other hand, the notion of a false environment allows us to see, in contrast, what a humane environment would be like. Such an environment would reduce or eliminate such destructive

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feelings and responses and encourage us to direct our energies in ways that are creative and fulfilling. It would be based on the recognition that the environment does not lie around us but is continuous and integrated with us, an idea that must replace the notion of the environment as external and apart, which is the theoretical source of the false environment.

IV

How can we characterize a true place, the kind of authentic environment where people not only belong but are at home, joining in a domestic attachment of affection and fulfilment? Where can we turn to find such a place? Perhaps it is possible to glimpse a genuine environment, one that is part of its time, place, and people, in those pre-industrial towns that have survived two centuries of transformative change without losing their personal character. We may sense some of its qualities in those nineteenth-century cities that did not surrender their human proportions and appeal in the interests of industrialization. Again, signs of an authentic environment may persist in the old districts of modern metropolises. And fictional projections of ideal cities can illustrate features not present but thought to be desirable in the future.

People are now trying to reach out to such places, not sure where to find them or what to look for. The current widespread interest in the preservation and restoration of historic buildings and districts acknowledges the environmental values that places from the past embody for us. While this may romanticize that past, there is more here than mere nostalgia. There is a recognition that social history is associated with particular locations and that places are inseparable from people and events. This is valued all the more as human qualities continue to be bulldozed away, for most new building continues the present trend toward increasing monumentality, usually coupling it with nondescript standardization and impersonality that cannot be behind a polished, "high tech" look. Such is the typical case from eastern Europe to the western hemisphere. The impulse of post-modern architecture to recapture the individual traits of past places is an effort toward the same end by combining variety of detail with historical allusion. Its syncretism, however, offers more a collage

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of stylistic features from architectural history than a place that generates its own authentic character.

Indeed, the retention of the past, whatever form it take, is ultimately a futile grasp at a social condition that is no longer our own. We need to feel our history by having it around us, but we cannot retain districts or towns unchanged without turning them into lifeless museums by a kind of architectural taxidermy, as in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Williamsburg, Virginia and their numerous progeny. Nor can we manufacture the qualities of a humanized place by merely imitating past styles. Such efforts attempt to seize important values, yet we have grave difficulty translating those values into forms that will work in a mass post-industrial society. Is there some way we can recapture and enhance the qualitative individuality and proportions, the human-scale aesthetics of the old city?

Simply retaining its outward features is not a solution. Take the square or place, for example. As the pedestrian has disappeared from vast areas of the city, the urban square has become a parking lot, as in the *Grand' Place* in Brussels; a traffic circle, as in the *Place de la Concorde* in Paris; a center for drug dealing, as in Washington Square Park in New York. Yet even the traditional square has not always been a place for human activity, except peripherally in the most literal sense. People have typically been relegated to benches arranged along the boundaries and edges of spaces designed as visual patterns to be appreciated from a distance or for the rational appeal of their geometrical order. The great exception, of course, is the most famous and successful square of all, the *Piazza San Marco* in Venice, for centuries a model place for social life, and new and old squares alike have emulated it.

The fountain is perhaps a more powerful traditional example of an urban design feature that retains its human significance. One of the most ancient of social centers, the fountain has retained its magnetism, drawing people through circles of traffic to its edges and even inside. From the village well to the water that spouts, gushes, flows and falls at the heart of modern cultural centers and shopping plazas, the fountain continues to exercise a magical hold on us.

Urban sounds, as we have noticed, are less apparent but quite

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as pervasive as any feature of the city. Present at the very beginnings of human society, the history of social sounds has only begun to attract scholarly attention.[2] It is possible to offer a taxonomy of urban sounds that points up, perhaps better than a consideration of any other environmental feature, the changes and needs of humanized urban design.

Natural sounds are least distinctive of the city. They were present before people came to dwell on any particular site and have accompanied their habitation: the rushing of wind, the aural pointilism of rain, bird calls, perhaps the sound of running water. While natural, these sounds have been influenced by city structure. Cities create winds and we hear their passage through trees, around the corners of buildings, funnelled down the canyon-like streets between skyscrapers. Trees, parks, gardens, streets, and squares all influence the presence of birds and selectively encourage some species and not others, the most hardy survivors in United States cities being the English sparrow, the starling, and the pigeon. Rain has a repertory of tunes and our structures become sounding boards and resonating chambers on which it plays—automobile roofs, windows, housetops. Even puddles produce their distinctive song. Streams and rivers may flow through a city, but the first are generally channelled through underground conduits and the latter usually make little sound. Yet city streets create their own brooks and ponds in a heavy rain, and they may offer an auditory accompaniment to our walking and driving. Although we do not often associate natural sounds with cities, they are nonetheless present and important.

Organic sounds are more obvious: the cries of street vendors, fragments of conversation, sounds of children's play, a parent's calls, the murmur or roar of crowds, the animal sounds of barking dogs, wailing cats, horses' hooves. These are the direct sounds of life and whatever else they convey, they offer proof that living things are actively present.

Such direct sounds of life, however, are generally overpowered by mechanical sounds. Trucks, automobiles, buses, trains, motorcycles, airplanes, chain saws, and construction equipment fill the air with noise and exhaust fumes that are insistent and

[2] Cf. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, New York, Knopf, 1977.

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inescapable, polluting two senses at once. There are bells, whistles, and sirens, wheels and tires against the pavement. All contribute to a mostly pitchless cacophony in outdoor spaces that surrounds and conquers the human voice.

Finally there are the new sounds of the electronic age: horns, loudspeakers, public address systems, radios, tape players, television. More and more these exert their presence. Less impersonal than the sounds of the machine, they are only falsely the sounds of people. Will these constitute the aural ambience of the city of the future, insistent and insinuating, giving us the appearance of human presence behind which are nothing but the chips and wires of robotic electronics?

How can we recover the human presence in sound? Can we create an aural climate in which the voice reasserts its preeminence so that what we hear are the direct sounds of people and not of machines or speaker systems? The auditory dimension of the perceptual environment is as penetrating as it is pervasive. Once we include our bodies in what we understand by the environment, we must acknowledge that sound has no less a physical presence than space or mass, and directing its forms and proportions is equally a part of the design of environment.

This discussion points up certain essential features of the urban aesthetic. Squares, fountains, and sounds are aspects of the urban environment whose long history and continued importance provide clues for a modern aesthetic of the city. Spaces that require the human presence for their completion, places for social gathering, the sounds of people's activities are among its essential components. And as sounds are not local but spread far in all directions, so the experience of the city is not an encounter with a separate, isolated object from which we can set ourselves apart. It is a perceptual plenum, a sensory realm filled with meanings and associations which we enter and in which we participate. Perhaps we can think of the city as a continuous medium of varying density in which people are but a single component among many. Buildings, streets, squares, parks, vehicles, sounds, textures, temperature, smells, humidity, wind, color—these are part of a long catalog of perceptual objects and qualities that join with the active human presence to constitute the living environment we call the city. In this respect the city may be a paradigm of all art. More

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strikingly and insistently than in any other case, the aesthetic of the city is an aesthetic of engagement. Is is a condition of perceptual activity and response that so takes up the sensibilities of the person that we have continuity rather than separation, involvement rather than isolation and distance. Each becomes the complement of the other: the city of its inhabitants, its people of their city.[3]

This is not a paean of praise to the city. The mutual fashioning of person and place that is central to the urban process is a thick and complex process, often compared to a drama on a universal stage.[4] The endless succession of episodes that constitute this urban theater is perhaps more tragic than comic. Yet unlike the traditional stage, it is a theater without spectators, only participants. Nor is its space as well defined and its place and time as organized. Once we recognize these traits, it is easier to understand the aesthetic character of urban life and how shaping that life requires both the artist and the philosopher, the first to guide us in molding the conditions under which experience goes on, the latter to help direct those conditions toward the goal of human fulfilment.

Recognizing the human importance of the aesthetic is essential here, but developing the urban environment is neither simple nor straightforward. We cannot accept the engineering mentality that regards all problems as technical ones that have technological answers. Problems are at bottom human difficulties and these require solutions that take into account their effects on the quality of people's experience. Moreover, the aesthetic qualities of a city should not be thought of as prettifying features, imposed from without upon an already formed urban structure, a surface veneer on a functionally complete object. Nor should an urban aesthetics be taken merely as a separate component of a total plan determined *ab initio*, without regard either to the particular conditions of location, geography, culture, and history, or to the

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[3] Cf. my essay, "Aesthetic Participation and the Urban Environment", in *Urban Resources*, I, 4 (Summer 1984), 37-42.

[4] J.B. Jackson gives a most instructive account of the use of the theater and drama metaphors for describing landscapes during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cf. "Landscape as Theater", *Landscape* 23, no. 1 (1979), 3-7.

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peculiarities of the political and social weather and the vagaries of the people involved.

The agricultural metaphor of my title is deliberate. It suggests the need for cultivating the urban environment, including the aesthetic dimension that is part of every place, so that it offers the conditions under which people will develop and flourish. Humane environments require time to grow and should emerge out of local needs, conditions, and traditions. What was once spontaneous urban growth of a proportion and scale to match the human body and activities that completed it must now be deliberately chosen and quickly accomplished. But the same organic principles apply. Planning under these conditions demands a gardener who is talented and sentitive, one who understands that the balance of differences among the components of an environment must be nurtured by being responsive to the distinctive qualities of each, to the interrelations among them, and to the unpredictabilities inherent in a complex and temporal process. This is the essential reciprocity of people and place, and the aesthetics of environment rests on a perceptual engagement between them. The capacity to cultivate the functional and the aesthetic as inseparable aspects of the same urban growth is what makes planning an art and the planner an artist. Can there be any act more profound or scope more significant?[5]

Arnold Berleant
(*Long Island University*)

[5] An earlier essay develops some different aspects of the urban aesthetic. See A. Berleant, "Aesthetic Paradigms for an Urban Ecology", *Diogenes*, 103 (Fall 1978), 1-28.

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