Towards an Urban Aesthetics

The Aesthetics of Human Environments
Edited by Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson
Broadview Press, 2007

Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts
By Giuliana Bruno
MIT Press, 2007

Reviewed by Aleksandra Kaminska

Urban aesthetics challenges us to take into account perception, movement, and affect while also including familiar problems of use and form. *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, a collection of essays edited by Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, presents the range and inclusiveness of urban aesthetics and offers exciting possibilities for the field. But it is through contributions like the book *Public Intimacy* by Giuliana Bruno that we start to see the real potential of this ecological approach; by suggesting that we turn inwards to understand our environments, Bruno offers an insightful way of thinking through the relationship between built form and experience. Using this aesthetic frame raises new kinds of questions through which to address urban design and assess conviviality and the role of public space, and organizes the experience of the city as emerging from a combination of public and private engagements.

Human Environments is a follow-up to the editors' *The Aesthetics of the Natural Environments*[1] and is divided into three broad themes: Architecture and the City; Special Places and the Home; and Landscapes, Gardens and the Countryside. The editors define environmental aesthetics as a discipline that brings together various methodologies for understanding the aesthetics of space, including quantitative approaches that try to literally measure visual beauty, qualitative analyses that aspire to determine the value of visual and non-visual aesthetic characteristics, and phenomenological tools for interpreting the active nature of perception. In this encompassing view, environmental aesthetics "concerns the appreciative engagement of humans as parts of total environment complexes, where intrinsic experiences of sensory qualities and immediate meanings predominate."[2] To consider a city aesthetically is to not only judge its buildings and architecture, litter and noise, but also to include historical and social elements as part of its total sensory package. The editors are calling for aesthetics to be integral in the planning processes of urban spaces, proposing, perhaps too eagerly, that to do so "is to put the city in the service of the values and goals that we associate with the full meaning of civilization."[3] While some contributions suggest that developing the aesthetic qualities of a city results in its appreciation, others argue that "appreciation" is itself a problematic notion because it is vague and difficult to define and justify. The question of what it means to appreciate a city is indeed one of the challenges of urban aesthetics.

The idea of appreciation is especially relevant in the debate on treating the city as a work of art. In "On Aesthetically Appreciating Human Environments," Carlson contrasts two ways of defining urban aesthetics. The first is what he calls the "designer landscape approach," which is primarily concerned with environments that have been purposefully designed for aesthetic contemplation. We often treat architecture in this way, but, Carlson argues, we should not confine ourselves to the aesthetics

(and rhetoric) of art to make sense of our architecture and our spaces; rather we should use the ecological framework of environmental aesthetics. He offers the method of "functional fit" as an alternative, which treats the city as a system that must be assessed on the efficiency of its different components to work together, and where the appreciation of human environments is based on "the functions they perform."[4] New elements must grow organically from the existing system, ultimately achieving an "ambience of everything being and looking right or appropriate, an ambience of it looking as it should."[5] Unfortunately, to have things look "as they should" is not the most satisfactory guideline for shaping a city. This kind of ambiguity plagues *Human Environments*.

In her essay "Urban Richness and the Art of Building" Pauline von Bonsdorff suggests, like Carlson, that to understand architecture we must look beyond the surface of buildings to consider the functions they fulfill both within a culture and as elements of the environment. She anchors her ideal urban aesthetic on "human, natural, social, cultural, historical, and political"[6] diversity; however, she offers that there should also be "an attunement of elements so that they do not conflict aggressively" such that "an aesthetic goal of building might be to respect variety and to create or support the overall character and individuality of the place."[7] Since von Bonsdorff also argues that "beauty and harmony are worthwhile goals"[8] for urban aesthetics, we might begin to question whether her assumptions about the limits of diversity and her definitions of conflict, beauty, and harmony as applied to the city can in fact be taken at face value. Through the work of Jane Jacobs and others, there has developed an agreement that diversity of use in a city is desirable, but there is more hesitation and confusion when discussing forms or surfaces. Sometimes architectural statements are praised but often they are criticized, resulting in this "attunement of elements" which creates a compromised, comfortable, and measured variety. A city such as Toronto, which is often accused of "messy urbanism," can be perplexing. It forces its citizens to rethink what the "right kind" of diversity is and challenges preconceptions about whether conflict (and even chaos) is necessarily *un*desirable. The question of an aesthetic of diversity is more nuanced than what von Bonsdorff presents here.

Thomas Leddy inadvertently also tackles the question of diversity in "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: Neat, Messy, Clean, Dirty." Leddy offers some insightful explanations and implications of the messy and the clean, tracing their histories and applications from artwork to rooms, and suggests that "messiness and clutter are not necessarily negative aesthetic qualities ... although they are usually cast in that role."[9] It seems implausible to expect that when speaking of our cities we would all agree on not only what constitutes the messy and the clean, but, more importantly, on which is desirable. Both these contributions imply that spaces, and in this case the city, can be manipulated to achieve beauty and harmony (however these might be defined). They assume that we have control of the city, and yet the urban space is often precisely intriguing and exciting because, as a dynamic system, it is usually out of our individual hands.

In "Walking in the City," David Macauley takes a look at the experience of the pedestrian. Much of it will be well-trodden territory for readers familiar with urban literature or the work of psychogeographers, for example, but Macauley nonetheless provides a useful overview of the many elements of the urban walk, from the problem of the car and the contested spaces of sidewalks and parking lots, to questions of rhythm and horizon. Again, as with much of *Human Environments*, the author skirts around established theory, and therefore the essay lacks context and grounding. But here, as throughout the volume, the insight comes from making connections among the separate contributions. A reference to a 1959 Massachusetts Institute of Technology study on the experience of walking is particularly interesting in regard to our attitudes towards aesthetic diversity in the city. This study suggests that on a walk people most remember the breaks or gaps in spaces of continuity but also that "walkers are constantly searching for or injecting order into their surroundings so as to make sense of their disparate impressions and to join their perceptions into a coherent picture,"[10] often even finding imaginary similarities to create this coherence. There is perhaps a meaningful correlation to be made between our memory of the ruptures within spaces of coherence and our desire for homogeneity, uniformity, "cleanliness," and order. When we consider a juxtaposed, disjointed, or "messy" architectural environment, it is almost simplistic to dismiss this aesthetic entirely based on unjustified negative connotations of an aesthetic of incoherence. To clarify these ideas, it would be useful to elaborate on what exactly is meant by an imaginary coherence (especially since coherence is as problematic a concept as diversity). Many would argue that beauty in fact often emerges from "messy" urban collages and may wonder what happened to postmodern idea(l)s if we still judge cities with the expectation of uniformity and continuity. And, to perhaps stretch the point slightly, if we consider

monuments, public squares, or other architectural landmarks as abnormalities, gaps, and ruptures of coherence (and therefore as discontinuities), then how does the disruptive (aesthetic) nature of these sites play on their frequent role as spaces where we experience a sense of place, identity, and community? These are the kinds of questions that appear between the lines of *Human Environments* and that leave the reader wishing the authors had explored their ideas in more depth and with more awareness of their place within larger fields and modes of inquiry.

From contributions examining the built environment, the collection moves to essays concerned with sensory experience. In "Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic," Berleant uses the concepts of perceptual awareness and bodily consciousness to study the relationship between people and place and the ways that sensory perception creates reciprocity between the city and its inhabitants. Ultimately, Berleant argues, "the aesthetics of the city is an aesthetic of engagement,"[11] in which the conscious body is in constant conversation with the environment. Although these are all crucial concerns for developing the project of urban aesthetics, it is perplexing that Berleant fails to reference Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, which is centered on these problems of bodily and sensory perception, or to reference other scholars who have explored some of these issues at length. These omissions leave the reader wishing for a more careful elaboration of these processes of perception.

Yrjö Sepanmaa suggests that each city has a sense-identity, or that, put differently, the identity of a city "depends in part on the dominant sense."[12] Although we may associate a city with a sense (the author suggests, for example, that Venice is a sound city because of the characteristic sound of the water in the canals combined with the absence of cars), we still experience the city as a multi-sensory environment, something akin to Richard Wagner's total work of art, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is "intended for all of the senses simultaneously."[13] While the comparison is fruitful, Sepanmaa warns that environment is not art and that we should not treat them in the same way. To experience and perceive a city with all senses could be *over* stimulating, which might teach us something about how to achieve, or how to conceive of, a balanced urban aesthetic. Sepanmaa also emphasizes the active process of aesthetic experience, describing it as a "doing and action, being together with others" and reminds us, as Berleant did, that it is "the presence of people that brings these spaces to life."[14]

The motorway is an interesting space taken up by both collections. In "The View from the Road and the Picturesque" in *Human Environments*, Malcolm Andrews finds that these corridors and the cars we use to move through them reveal the problematic nature of the landscape, and suggests that we can mediate landscapes through real or invisible frames and pictures. He uses road signs on France's motorways, depicting historic locations or events, as a case study to discuss the pictorialization, or the constructed visual composition, of landscapes. The motorway attempts to neutralize and flatten the "physical roughness" of the natural landscape it traverses. The speed of the car augments this visual stimulation, transforming the landscape into a spectacle that is literally framed through the car windows, creating what Edward Dimendberg has called the highway as cinema.[15] Andrews updates Marc Augé's notion of non-places, suggesting that the motorway has rather become a domesticated space, a familiar hallway along which pictures hang, pictures that function as divisions between the viewer and the (unfamiliar) landscape. For Andrews then, the motorway is a site of visible juxtapositions between the known and the unknown. Like Dimendberg, Giuliana Bruno might compare this motorway experience to cinema or to being in a museum. But for Bruno, it is not only the mediation and contrasts of the landscape that are important, but the particularity of the drive down the motorway as an example of movement. In *Public Intimacy*, a collection of the author's previously published essays, Bruno places movement, both physical and psychic, as a cornerstone of her project. On the motorway movement frames experience, so that walking rather than driving along a motorway could be disconcerting and confusing. Although one cause for this disorientation would be our expectation to be gliding through space at fast speeds, we would also experience this disorientation because we are used to a different sort of movement between exterior and internal space, between the public and the intimate, a movement which results in a different affective experience. And although juxtaposition and movement both try to explain relationships between different states or sites, the first is focused on form and surface, while the latter adds human presence into the equation. Indeed, Bruno looks beyond the visible and gives us tools for thinking of spaces not as external to us, but as tied to our psyches and to the topographies of our emotional terrains. Other contributors in *Human Environments* also try to integrate experience as an important element of the aesthetic, but Bruno reveals these relationships between self and environment more directly and convincingly.

Bruno traces this movement from exterior to interior experience within the histories of film spectatorship and museum-going and argues that this passage "is not only enacted on the walls of the museum, and in curatorial practices that have absorbed a cinematic itinerary, but is staged, structurally, on the surface of the architectural premise itself."[16] If the movie house and the museum are architectures of geopsychical movement, then it becomes possible to consider what inferences could be made on the architectures of the urban landscape by treating the city as a museum or cinema. If we remind ourselves that the consumer of architectural spaces was a prototype for the film spectator,[17] then architectural experience regains some of its complexity. Rather than being a seemingly static structure, architecture is a medium, Bruno suggests, that must be experienced in motion, where space "is a practice that engages psychic change in relation to movement."[18] People who live in cities may know this instinctively, and may argue that often the best way to explore a city is on foot, not only for the freedom it provides in terms of physical movement, but also for the more "authentic" aesthetic appreciation it enables and the more direct "interfacing of affect and place"[19] it provides. Movement allows the city dweller to conceive of urban spaces such as the square or the park as transitory, as moments of stillness or reprieve, as welcome pauses or challenging disruptions. But if architecture is shaped through interactions in time and space and reveals itself in movement, does the same apply to spaces in general? Perhaps it is not through dwelling in a space that it can be appreciated fully, but rather in passing through, treating architectural space not as permanent and fixed but as fluid, changing, and responsive. This distinction between architectural and spatial appreciation reminds us of some of the concerns of *Human Environments*, such as the assertion that the built form is only one element of the aesthetic qualities of a city.

Cinema remains foundational to Bruno's work, but this collection brings together her writings on a variety of other visual media, from installation art to the spectacle of the anatomy lesson. Architecture, urban design, and interactive art installations are for Bruno all similar in that they work with ideas of movement through space,[20] to the extent that Bruno suggests that artists and architects speak the same language since they both conceive of environments through which viewers move both physically and imaginatively.[21] The movement from exterior to interior experience in public space is something Bruno terms *public intimacy*. She deems the spaces of the movie house and the museum as public, though in many ways these are in fact private and enclosed spaces carefully designed to allow for personal experience within a community of strangers. Nevertheless, if the representation of spaces through the images hanging or projected in a museum or cinema stimulates internal journeys, then the spaces themselves ought to provoke the same effects and be intimately tied with personal emotion and psychic experience. If in fact the urban landscape is "a work of the mind" composed "of the memories, the attention, the imagination, and the affects of the inhabitant-passengers who have traversed it,"[22] then do the formal features of a space take a backseat to the personal and affective ways people respond to certain places? Architectural elements are often manipulated to focus public perceptions or create certain types of engagements. If the internal journey is the apex of urban experience, what makes a space public, in the sense that it stimulates a collective desire for external interactions and journeys, while also allowing for our need or desire for privacy to be overcome by the public ambience of a space? And although stepping outdoors to navigate the city has become our most pervasive example of public intimacy, perhaps we can characterize successful public spaces as sites of release in which we shed the cloak of privacy by an aesthetic provocation into publicity.

Human Environments and *Public Intimacy* are two books that show the range of scholarship concerned with the city. The development of an aesthetics in *Human Environments* hinges on the appreciation of forms, structure, and function. This ecological approach to the city shows promise, but, as presented here, falls short. Many of the essays skim the surface of complex issues. The contributors take on topics that are often addressed in research on cities, and yet their backgrounds— half are affiliated with philosophy departments—provide them with a perspective that seems removed, for better or worse, from the entanglements of the field of urban studies. The essays in this volume tend to leave the reader curious rather than committed and ultimately fail to provide concrete tools for moving forward the study of city space and urban experience; instead, these pieces skirt around established or developing theoretical approaches and never truly engage with or contextualize the merits of particular perspectives within current debates. There is no clear sense of purpose in these captured moments, which are often read as loose observations or impressions rather than analytic and grounded explorations. *Human Environments* doesn't ever quite make it clear where such an appreciation of the city, through its smells or architectural forms, its messiness or elements of beauty, takes us, or indeed, what makes its approach unique. And yet it does

provide interesting and useful insights that merit attention in the ongoing discussion on the urban environment. A book such as Bruno's *Public Intimacy* is illuminating in conjunction with *Human Environments*. Bruno perhaps unwittingly contributes to the development of an urban aesthetics by moving beyond the often unsatisfying concept of appreciation with a thoughtful articulation of the interconnections and extensions between space and affect. She adds movement to experience, integrates affect and perception with the dynamism of the city—the city as both a built and living form—and uses her cinematic framework to provide one possible way of grounding the project of urban aesthetics. Together, *Human Environments* and *Public Intimacy* suggest the possibilities of a careful combination of an environmental approach with affect and movement, and hint at the potential of urban aesthetics as a useful method for demystifying experiences of city life, but also for evaluating urban space and unfolding the intricacies of personal and public engagements with our cities.

NOTES

1　Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004).
2　*The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, 16.
3　Ibid., 19.
4　Carlson, "On Aesthetically Appreciating Human Environments," in ibid., 61.
5　Ibid., 53.
6　Pauline von Bonsdorff, "Urban Richness and the Art of Building," in ibid., 71.
7　Ibid., 72.
8　Ibid.
9　Thomas Leddy, "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: Neat, Messy, Clean, Dirty," in ibid., 167.
10　David Macauley, "Walking in the City," in ibid., 112.
11　Berleant, "Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic," in ibid., 90.
12　Yrjö Sepanmaa, "Multi-sensoriness and the City," in ibid., 92.
13　Ibid., 95.
14　Ibid., 97.
15　Malcom Andrews, "The View from the Road and the Picturesque," in ibid., 279.
16　Giuliana Bruno, Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 29.
17　Ibid., 20.
18　Ibid., 66.
19　Ibid., 39.
20　Ibid., 46.
21　Ibid., 70.
22　Ibid, 70.