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## Arguing the Obvious: The Connection between Environmental Aesthetics and Sense of Place

It may seem intuitive, even commonsensical, that there must be a relationship between environmental aesthetics and sense of place. After all, the most basic requirements of environmental aesthetics are a place and a perceiver whose senses are engaged with that place. Just noting the relationship, however, does not do justice to the strong significance that I think can be uncovered here. Though we may agree that there is *some* kind of connection, the exact nature of this connection – what it is, how it works, what it means – deserves a closer look. In this paper I am going to explore what I see as a fundamental and substantive connection between environmental aesthetics and sense of place, in relation to both experience and value, and suggest why I think this is a very rich and promising avenue of inquiry.

I will look at discussions of aesthetic experience and aesthetic value in philosophical literature and compare these with sense of place theories. I will also do a bit of philosophical cross-pollination by considering some empirical studies of sense of place experiences and values in various sociologically-based disciplines. Finally I will show just how the relationship I am suggesting has the potential to bring environmental aesthetics into a position that I think it ought to occupy: the center of environmental decision-making.

### The Experience of Environmental Aesthetics and Sense of Place

To begin, we might consider that this aesthetics-sense of place relationship could play out in several different ways. First, we could discover an extremely strong connection, even a direct identity, between the two, so that an aesthetic experience of the

environment just *is* sense of place, and sense of place *is* aesthetic experience. Conversely, we might not be able to juxtapose one on the other; there may be too many distinct variables in each, so that in the end, we find that the connection is only incidental. And, there are less polar possibilities for exploring whether one might be a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the other. My claim will be that in this complex relationship some form of a sense of place is inherent in aesthetic experience; moreover, aesthetic experience plays a necessary and crucial causal role in the development of sense of place.

I want to take up the strongest possibility first, admitting that I am intrigued with the notion that the aesthetic experience could be identical with sense of place experience. Consider that the aesthetic experience of the environment happens by necessity in a *place*. There has been much discussion in philosophical literature, thousands of years' worth, about what constitutes a 'place' as opposed to a 'space' or a 'location'. For this discussion I will assume, along with sense of place theorist Yi-Fu Tuan, that a space becomes a place when human presence and activity are brought to it. (Eisenhauer, Krannich & Blahna, 2000, p. 423) From the objectivity of 'space', we constitute the subjectivity of 'place'. So at the very least for my discussion here, I have a person in a specific place in which she may (or may not) have an aesthetic experience and may (or may not) feel a sense of place.

If she does have an aesthetic experience, then what exactly does that entail? Among philosophical explications of the nature of the aesthetic experience, Arnold Berleant has suggested the phenomenological aesthetics of engagement, where "when we appreciate environment we do not leave the perceptual realm but engage with it in ways that intensify and enlarge our awareness" (Berleant, 1992, p.14). Place and person are interrelated. Though not all philosophers embrace Berleant's theory entirely, most concur on the general nature of the aesthetic experience of the environment. It is invariably based in the perception by an individual of the sensual qualities of a particular place or environment. To be aesthetic rather than non-aesthetic, the perceptions must be deliberate, the result of an actively focused perceiver both responding to and engaging with the perceptual qualities of the place. The place, and the sensual qualities there, necessarily informs the aesthetic experience, as does the perceiver and his sensual

awareness. So, it would be difficult not to claim that the literal sense-of-a-place is a necessary condition for an aesthetic experience.

But to locate the aesthetic experience in a purely sensual context and call it sense of place does not really get us where we started out to go, since that short-changes both the aesthetic experience and sense of place. I think we need to strengthen the definition of both concepts a bit, and explore whether an identity relation would hold. Most philosophers, me included, would argue that the aesthetic experience of an environment can not, by nature, be confined to the purely sensual awareness of the formal qualities of a place. There is just too much going on, too much richness in an environmental experience of any kind to reduce it to a single dimension. The aesthetic experience may include all the senses, but to give a more inclusive characterization, it is not limited only to perceptions. Emily Brady claims that the experience may involve affective, cognitive, and imaginative mental states. (Brady, 2003, p10) Berleant, too, notes that as “we rarely if ever have pure sensation” (Berleant, 1992, p.18), our aesthetic experience calls on background factors of social and cultural experience, habits and belief systems, traditions of behavior and judgment, even styles of living (Berleant,1992, p.18). So it seems that even a minimal aesthetic experience of the environment presupposes a sense or sensations of place as well as some degree of cognitive and imaginative overlay. The experience itself is a rich relationship between the person and the place.

With the larger notion of aesthetic experience in mind, I want to look at how sense of place experience has been characterized. Sense of place is a wonderfully fertile concept with relevance that ranges over a host of disciplines. Literature, philosophy, geography, anthropology – all these areas of interest and more have something to say about sense of place. Understandably, the concept varies in its application, and scholars recognize that there can be multiple manifestations of sense of place. Nevertheless, there is a way in which the concept of sense of place resonates across disciplines, so that even while acknowledging that there are distinct variations of the sense of place experience, sense of place in the broad meaning signifies a unique sort of experience. Environmental psychologists Bradley Jorgensen and Richard Stedman make the observation that sense of place in general is the meaning attached to a particular spatial setting by a person or group of people. (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001, p.233) Tuan’s definition supplies the

subjective element of care and concern for a place, emphasizing human emotions and relationships. (Eisenhauer et al., 2000, p. 423) Looking at sense of place literature from various disciplines, I suggest that an acceptable description of a sense of place experience would begin with the perception of the salient features of a specific setting, bring in personal and collective meanings, progress toward an affective bond between the individual and the particular place (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001, p.187), and result in “an appreciation for the land that goes beyond its use value” (Eisenhauer et al., 2003, p. 423). Given this broad definition, it seems that the sense of place experience, like the aesthetic experience, presupposes a perceptual focus as well as cognitive and imaginative overlays. If we look at both experiences with these descriptives in mind, we see that the sense of place experience and the aesthetic experience share a potentially similar mix of perceptual, cultural, cognitive, and imaginative components. Since these elements are the multilayered facets of the individual’s own experience, it seems logical that both aesthetic and sense of place components overlap. As Emily Brady says, “It isn’t easy to say where aesthetic appreciation ends and sense of place begins”. (Brady, p.81)

If the line between the two is sufficiently blurred, perhaps there is an identity relation. To me, it seems obvious that some sort of sense of place experience, even if it is only the minimal sense-of-a-place, is involved in every aesthetic experience. Whether this counts as identity depends on the particular cognitive and imaginative overlays that supply meaning to the experience. I can speculate that in cases where the landscape setting is especially dominant and evocative, the same meaning-laden sensations of aesthetic experience and sense of place converge. I can also entertain counterexamples, though, where some particular meaning or emotion may not fit readily or equally into both types of experience. The sense of place that you feel for the scenes of your childhood may have more to do with memories than with aesthetics, even though aesthetics would be in the background. Since so many elements go into the making of both the aesthetic experience and the sense of place experience, it seems more probable that a consistent coincidence of meaning and sensation would be rather serendipitous. I think it wiser to resist making an identity claim, but I will continue to suggest that some sort of sense of place experience is part of every aesthetic experience.

That claim eliminates my second possibility that there is no relation between the two, but I really want to emphasize the critical significance of the connection and make two other claims that are fundamental to my project here. Both of these are focused on the importance of the aesthetic experience to the sense of place experience. First, given the fact that sense of place experience must begin with and evolve within some sort of attention to and recognition of the sensual qualities of a place, I claim that aesthetic experience is a necessary condition for developing sense of place. I will underscore that I think the aesthetic experience is highly significant among the determinants of sense of place, no matter what sort of sense of place experience is involved. My second related claim is that there is a direct causal relationship from aesthetic awareness to sense of place. Although sense of place experience can be quite varied, every instance of it springs in part from an aesthetic awareness of the particular place, enriched by cognitive and imaginative overlays. If there were not initial, and perhaps continuing, aesthetic awareness, then there would be no development of sense of place.

Taken together, these three claims describe a complex interaction that turns on the importance of environmental aesthetics. What is particularly intriguing to me is that these claims are consistent with positions brought out in empirical studies. Since I am venturing out of philosophy here, I will supply some background information relevant to the studies in question. Sense of place literature often recognizes three important components: meanings, attachment, and satisfaction. (Stedman, 2003, p.672) Place attachment is considered a core component of sense of place, involving the emotional bond between people and their environment. Place satisfaction is analytically distinct, but complementary to place attachment. Place attachment indicates the degree to which someone feels linked to a place, while place satisfaction indicates the degree to which someone may like or dislike the setting. (Stedman, 2003, p. 676) The two need not be closely correlated in intensity. Meanings are important in that they inform the other two components, and can arise from many different aspects of the sense of place experience.

Some thinkers suggest that the sort of meanings that give relevance to a sense of place are not intrinsic to the place itself, but rather are cultural overlays brought to the experience by the perceiver. For Tuan and others, the meanings assigned to particular environments are social constructs that arise from experience but are not directly

dependent on the landscape itself. (Stedman, 2003, p.672) If that is the case, then the close connection that I want to defend between aesthetic experience and sense of place dissolves. If sense of place is just a cultural construction, then the particular aesthetic features of the landscape are only incidental.

In an interesting study, however, Richard Stedman argues, quite convincingly as far as I am concerned, that characteristics of the physical landscape itself, and the responses generated by that landscape, are integral to the heart of sense of place. (Stedman, 2003) In his study Stedman considered three possible models of how the physical landscape might produce a sense of place, directing his inquiry into just how strong the relationship between characteristics of the physical environment and sense of place might be and which model would provide the best explanation. The first model was the *genius loci*, or direct effects model. *Genius loci* refers to the essence or spirit of a place, and the model claims that this essence, through the actual physical characteristics of the landscape, directly affects the sense of place that a person might feel. In this approach, the sense of place would be “grounded in those aspects of the environment which we appreciate through the senses and through movement, color, texture, slope, quality of light, the feel of wind, the sounds and scents carried by that wind” (Stedman, 2003, p.673). Clearly, the *genius loci* model captures the essence of what we would call the aesthetic experience of the landscape.

The meaning-mediated model, by contrast, does not attribute sense of place meanings as arising directly from the environment, but claims that the physical features of a place influence the symbolic meanings that the landscape may take on. An example would be that places relatively uninhabited might take on the symbolic meaning of wilderness, which would lead to a particular sort of sense of place experience. The final experiential model posits that the features of a landscape encourage certain types of experiences and behaviors that shape the meanings that make up a sense of place. The behaviors or experiences serve as ‘lenses’ through which humans attribute meanings to a place. Both of these last two models clearly echo the sorts of cognitive and imaginative overlays that featured in our earlier philosophical definitions of the aesthetic experience.

Stedman’s study, which was focused on a region in north central Wisconsin that has numerous lakes, demonstrated that, contrary to sense of place literature that gives

socially constructed meanings of the environment paramount importance, “landscape characteristics matter; they underpin both place attachment and satisfaction” (Stedman, 2003, p.682). He does not discount any of the three models for developing this strong relationship between sense of place and the physical environment, but in this study the second model, which suggests that actual characteristics of the landscape are the basis of meanings, best fits his results.

Stedman’s conclusion provides an empirical basis for the claim that I have made concerning the dependence of sense of place experience on aesthetic experience. In the case of the lake country residents in Stedman’s study, it was impossible to separate their aesthetic experience and appreciation of the environment from the sense of place experience and the meanings that it holds. Other studies bear this out. One study done on attachments to places in southern Utah showed that the “analysis of the reasons places are considered special indicated that the “environmental features/characteristics” of a place are one of the primary reasons underlying emotional attachments with special places” (Eisenhauer et al., 2000, p.423). The authors of another study were led to “posit that an abundance of aesthetic and wilderness/natural landscape features...help create the conditions that lead to place attachment” (Brown & Raymond, 2007, p.108). So, I will argue again that aesthetic experience plays a necessary and particularly crucial causal role in the development of sense of place experience.

### Values in Environmental Aesthetics and Policy Making

There is a further conclusion that I would like to draw here, and one that Stedman also suggests: both aesthetic experiences and sense of place experiences incorporate values, and these values in turn lead to certain responses. (Stedman, 2003) This observation moves directly into the heart of my project here: if aesthetic experience and values are closely related to sense of place experience and values, and if aesthetic values and sense of place values provoke action stemming from those values, then aesthetic experience and values are implicitly influential in environmental decision making.

Before I move to that final claim, however, I should say a bit about the relationship between experience and value. Following Bryan Norton, I think that the

aesthetic appreciation of the environment is a performative act in which both appreciating and valuing are united (Norton, 2005, p.334). To aesthetically appreciate a particular place *is* to value it, and to form some sort of commitment to it. It is also a multi-level and relational experience, where we value both the experience itself - the aesthetic moment - and the aesthetic object (which from a phenomenological perspective could include the valuer). While it is not my intention here to reconstruct discussions surrounding the nature of aesthetic value, there are several points in the literature that are important to my project. I would say, with Brady, that initially aesthetic value is a non-instrumental value (Brady, 2003, p.25), but I would also extend that characterization in two ways. I agree with Berleant when he warns against “single-value thinking”, in that I think it is extremely tricky to separate out aesthetic value from other values in any particular situation (Berleant, 1992, p.184). Also, I will appeal again to Norton and locate aesthetic values within the catalogue of sustainability values as a constituent of “community-identity value,” which includes aesthetic and sense of place values (Norton, 2005, p. 371). If we agree that the aesthetic experience is a necessary condition for sense of place experience, then it follows that sense of place values incorporate aesthetic values, a recognition that opens up an intriguing realm of possibilities.

Sense of place values are described as manifesting themselves in ‘emotionally charged’ feelings of attachment to or satisfaction with particular places. As I mentioned earlier, place attachment usually includes some sort of identification between the individual and the place, perhaps captured in the feeling of being ‘at home’ there. People who live in mountainous regions, for example, seem to grow quite attached to their mountains. Place satisfaction reflects an attitude toward a place that incorporates a collection of beliefs about the place, usually positive, but not inevitably so. (Stedman, 2002, p.564) Following the *genius loci* model, someone could be completely captivated by the colors, fragrances, and birdsongs evident in my front yard in spring, and derive great satisfaction from the place itself. Usually both types of values are accompanied by a “desire to maintain closeness” (Hildago & Hernandez, 2001, p. 274) to the particular place or community.

Just how does aesthetic value inform sense of place value here? For one thing, the type of affective mental state captured by both instances of sense of place values

mirrors the type of affective mental state brought about in valuing in an aesthetic context. Brady credits Roger Scruton in providing a good explication of aesthetic valuing as a desire to go on having the aesthetic experience, or, in the case of environmental aesthetics, remaining close to the landscape (Brady, 2003, p.25). The mountain lover would probably dislike leaving his vistas for a flat landscape. The person appreciating my front yard may not want to walk on by too quickly. In both examples, the recognized aesthetic value of the place provides the causal stimulus for the development of a sense of place. Both place attachment and place satisfaction spring in part from aesthetic valuing and the aesthetic component is highly influential in their construction. Also, when we value something, we tend to want to protect it. Aesthetic value would serve as the touchstone for preservation, since, as Norton has noted, aesthetic value is generally identified as a key goal of sustainability. (Norton, 2005, p.390) So, I want to emphasize my claim that aesthetic values are both necessary for and are particularly critical determinants of sense of place values.

This gets us to the most important part of my argument. Recent work in sense of place theory, particularly in environmental psychology and ecological sociology, has emphasized the direct correlation between sense of place and responses by individuals and groups to environmental action. These “unique ties between people and places” form a connection with the landscape “based on an appreciation for the place that incorporates emotive elements and intense caring for the locale” (Eisenhauer et al., 2000, p 423). Various studies have looked closely at the sort of care and concern that arises from sense of place, and measured those sentiments against proposed environmental policy and decision making. Not surprisingly, most studies draw the conclusion that environmental decision making, whether as ecosystem management, local landscape development, or policy-making, should factor in the sense of place values held by the stakeholders affected by the environmental activity. Many studies make recommendations directly relating sense of place and environmental decision making. For example, one study suggests that “landscape-scale ecological initiatives might profit from an incorporation of the (sense of place) construct in their formative stages” (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001, p. 187). Another says those “interested in the linkages between people and environment should care about sense of place not as an end in itself but as predisposing action

(Stedman, 2002, p. 577). Another study cites the conclusion “We believe that by putting the human bond with nature in the foreground, rather than treating it as an interesting but insignificant feature of the background for resource planning, managers can begin to give the relationship between people and the land the careful, systematic attention it requires and deserves” (Eisenhauer et al., 2000 , p. 424).

Several significant points stand out here: first is the conclusion, based on empirical studies, that sense of place does play an important role in environmental decision making. Secondly, many of these studies underscore the necessary relationship between sense of place and aesthetic interests by purposefully including aesthetic concerns in the parameters of their studies. Remember that I earlier characterized aesthetic value of the environment as non-instrumental, and so perhaps a non-quantifiable intangible. As a component of sense of place, however, aesthetic interests show up repeatedly in the studies’ methodology. Since the studies convincingly illustrate the need to include sense of place values in environmental decision making, they simultaneously illustrate the need to include aesthetic interests in decision making. This provides compelling support for the notion that environmental aesthetics should be in the forefront of environmental decision making. Insofar as sense of place values are a crucial element in formulating environmental policy and aesthetic values are one of the most important determinants for sense of place values, aesthetic values clearly have an important role to play in the policy arena.

I think there is an advantage for environmental aesthetics in theoretical areas too. The weight of aesthetic values in forming sense of place does not appear to depend on whether those values can be shown to be objective or subjective, intrinsic or instrumental. Therefore, the concern about defending environmental aesthetics against the charge that it is hopelessly subjective, and casting about for ways to prove its objectivity, becomes tangential. Also, this serves to move disagreements about the nature of aesthetic value into the background. With recognition of the vital role of environmental aesthetics in sense of place, and the subsequent importance of environmental aesthetics in policy making, both the subjectivity/objectivity debate and the intrinsic/instrumental value debate lose their urgency.

My purpose here has been to call attention to something perhaps obvious, but unsung. I have laid out a relationship that surely needs to be exploited. I would hope that acknowledging the important connection between environmental aesthetics and sense of place will provide a springboard, both for validating the power of environmental aesthetics and for recognizing the role it plays in environmental decision making.

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