

## CHAPTER 18

# Aesthetic Sustainability

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### Abstract

The scope and range of human aesthetic preferences have been discussed recently from the perspective of their role in advancing sustainability in contemporary societies. Philosophical and applied studies in environmental and everyday aesthetics seem to support the idea that knowledge and awareness cause changes in aesthetic values. Aesthetic sustainability as a concept has recently been developed to show why certain objects, artefacts, and landscapes become valued more highly over time. Instead of discussing the temporality of aesthetic values only in terms of historical styles, trends, or tastes, as has traditionally been the case, the concept focuses attention on the deeper layers of aesthetic appreciation, bringing together aesthetic, ethical, and cognitive values. Aesthetic sustainability is introduced here as a conceptual tool that provides insight into how human aesthetic preferences and

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choices function. It is also pointed out how the sphere of aesthetics is an important part of the human capability to imagine more sustainable futures.

## Introduction

We are faced, both individually and collectively, with having to make a wide variety of choices on a daily basis. The everyday life of an individual consists of moments of decision making between two or more options in matters both large and small, and the consequences of many of these decisions are difficult to fully estimate. Those unavoidable choices on an individual level have to do, for example, with one's personal appearance (Naukkarinen 1998), home tasks such as cooking and cleaning (Melchionne 2013), or broader and socially directed situations such as choosing between modes of everyday transportation (Mladenovic et al. 2019).

Many of these choices include an aesthetic component, but they also require taking into consideration exceedingly complex processes with consequences reaching far beyond the sphere of our everyday life and actions. Even when no actual decision is needed, the aesthetic perception and assessment of objects, places, people, and situations is an integral part of the everyday experiential repertoire, which is often so habitual that it does not even draw conscious attention.

Interestingly, and against the often-repeated common phrase, the experience of beauty is rarely only 'in the eye of the beholder' or a matter of purely subjective and illogical opinion. As philosophical study of aesthetics points out, judgement of taste is instead a much more complex phenomenon that unfolds as a result of broader cultural, historical, and intersubjective processes. This chapter further explicates the connections between everyday actions and aesthetic values since it is of vital importance to take greater responsibility for aesthetic choices and evaluations in the face of the urgency of current sustainability challenges. The aim is to show that a better understanding of aesthetic processes can be used to support tactics to move beyond trend-based consumerism.

This chapter focuses on showing how aesthetic values, manifested through aesthetic preferences and choices, can and should be taken into account in the broader framework of sustainability transformations. Human aesthetic values cover a wide range of ideas and conceptions of what is aesthetically satisfactory and pleasing—either based on human perception or, more broadly, experientially. Understanding the scale of individually varying and socially shared aesthetic values is relevant to those aspects of sustainable development that are directly linked to the human lifeworld. This broadly covers the sphere of human experience, ranging from lived everyday environments to consumption habits. The overall idea of this chapter is to present aesthetic sustainability as a conceptual tool and to trace its roots through philosophical and applied theories in environmental and everyday aesthetics, design theory, and sustainability studies.

### **Aesthetics and the Manipulation of Values**

It might seem paradoxical to discuss the concepts of aesthetics and sustainability together. Aesthetics seems to refer only to external features and qualities: to the appearance of objects, people, and places. The very word ‘aesthetic’, in its everyday usage, is associated with the superficial, visually emphasized layer of the human lifeworld. This focus on the perceptually mediated materiality and physicality of very different types of phenomena is, however, a key to understanding why aesthetics is important in solving many contemporary sustainability challenges.

It has been long debated in philosophical aesthetics whether the subject concerns only the aesthetic or if it is more linked to other values. In the Western tradition, the claim of the disinterestedness of the aesthetic experience has been a central idea since Immanuel Kant explored the topic systematically in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790/2007: §2). In environmental aesthetics, disinterestedness is used to explain the disassociation of the aesthetic appreciation of an environment ‘from the appreciator’s particular personal, religious, economic, or utilitarian interests, any of which could

impede aesthetic experience' (Carlson 2019). Following from this idea, a certain disassociated aesthetic attitude prevails when evaluating phenomena that pique our interest with their perceptually manifesting qualities: one has a certain mindset or stance toward the objects (or landscapes, artefacts, people, etc.) of our appreciation or even when initially acknowledging that they are of aesthetic interest. However, the grave contemporary ecological concerns create moral concerns beyond the scope of disinterestedness since they are radically altering the vantage point to the changing aesthetic qualities of the environment (Auer 2019).

It needs to be emphasized that the aesthetic, in contemporary theories, is most often understood so that it does not refer only to aesthetically positive qualities such as beauty, the sublime, picturesque, or cute, but also to aesthetically negative qualities such as ugliness, grotesqueness, or even disgusting features, as long as they wake some level of attention and interest (Saito 2019). The limits of aesthetic interest are also debated, especially in the subfield of everyday aesthetics: according to some theorists, the so-called restrictivists, everyday aesthetics concerns only those phenomena that are aesthetically elevated among the more mundane experiences, whereas expansionists claim that the very mundane, subtle, and even barely discernible qualities of everyday objects, activities, and phenomena are also aesthetic and should be studied as such through more nuanced conceptual distinctions (Puolakka 2018).

One way to distinguish between different nuances in aesthetic appreciation is to categorize experiences and ensuing judgements into the 'thin sense' and the 'thick sense' of the aesthetic (Carlson 2008; Hospers 1946). This distinction between the surface aesthetic (focusing on physical appearance and formal aesthetic qualities such as colour, shape, and composition) and the deep-seated layer of aesthetic judgement is the key to understanding how aesthetic values are intricately tied in with other values—such as ethical and epistemic or cognitive values—which are important to the formation of ecological understanding. Ecological values are of specific interest in relation to sustainability, but it is important to understand that ethical values contribute more broadly to supporting different scopes of sustainability.

Through behavioural economics, nudging has recently gained widespread interest as a concept that sheds light on the mechanisms of soft manipulation (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). With the means of careful deliberation in the placement, order, presentation, and arrangement of objects and services, for example, people can be steered toward making better choices for themselves. What is better or desirable is determined by prevailing ideas on what is healthy, ecological, socially beneficial, and so on. These ideas are based on continually updated scientific knowledge in relation to the prevailing ideologies of society. As a form of soft or libertarian paternalism,<sup>1</sup> nudging aims at gently directing people toward making better choices for themselves and the community. Interestingly for aesthetics, many of the examples used are focused on manipulating people's attention and perceptual processes. An often-cited example is how food perceived as healthy is placed at the beginning of the buffet table so that the plates of the hungry buffet-goers will be filled with them first. Developing the concept of nudging takes these ways to manage behaviour with the means of choice architecture further and makes them explicitly available as a method of governance in contemporary societies.

The theory of nudging acknowledges that what one sees, hears, smells, tastes, or feels is what one's attention will more likely be directed toward. Sudden changes in perception draw attention more easily, and human beings might be intrinsically interested in new phenomena. Novelty value has been studied in Western philosophical aesthetics to some extent, most notably in the analysis of the 'charm of novelty' (Coleridge 1817/2014) but, recently, it has been of interest in more applied fields such as marketing, consumer, and innovation studies. The same applies to other psychologically explained, aesthetically relevant phenomena, such as the Diderot effect, which is used to manipulate consumer behaviour

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of different forms of paternalism, see Dworkin 2020.

toward making additional purchases that they did not need in the first place (Evans 2010).

In philosophical aesthetics, whether focused on art or (human) environments, there has been interest in concepts that are related to novelty value but are more essence-determined, such as originality or authenticity. These place more emphasis on temporal longevity in aesthetic appreciation than on the mere fascination for the new (not necessarily newly produced but also referring to that which is new to an individual's experience). One version of this thematic is also the phenomenology-originated discussion in the subfield of everyday aesthetics, which focuses on how strangeness and familiarity and their interplay are important factors for the aesthetic appreciation of individually determined everyday environments (Haapala 2005; Vihanninjoki 2019).

### **Attractive = Sustainable?**

According to prevailing scientific knowledge, humans exhibit many aesthetic preferences that are of evolutionary origin (Voland and Grammer 2003). The human preference for blue and green colours is one example, while another is linked to preferring certain types of animal species over others: we are affectionate toward cute, furry mammals, whereas we tend to be less interested in or even disgusted by insects or snakes. Foul smells and tastes make us react with physical repulsion, and the preference for certain types of landscapes has been explained through a universally valid, hereditary propensity to favour open vistas with enough greenery to promise safety and nourishment (Dutton 2010).

Based on evolutionary psychology, aesthetic preferences are fairly stable since they have been developed over hundreds and thousands of generations as adaptations that secure the survival of the individual and the continuity of the species. However, human activity and the forms it takes are not only dictated by these types of biologically determined urges or instincts. Many examples from much shorter periods of time show that there are also aesthetic preferences that change much more quickly. In

these cases, it is reasonable to argue that some type of intergenerational change in aesthetic values is taking place. The intergenerational perspective has been more prevalent in philosophical ethics, and environmental ethics in particular (Nolt 2016). However, aesthetic values are also of interest from this perspective to the extent that they are subject to change, sometimes more abruptly but more often gradually. Generational shifts in attitudes, interests or commonly shared knowledge (through education, culture, and socially shared experiences, for example) seem to be important factors in determining changes in tastes. One example of this type of change is the gradual acceptance and ensuing large-scale adoption of landscape-altering sustainable technologies, such as wind turbines—discussion about which still revolves around opposing views of their aesthetic qualities (Good 2006; Gray 2012).

Sustainability as a concept refers strongly to temporal endurance and durability. However, there is, by necessity, some friction between determining which elements should change and which should be sustained in order to increase overall sustainability. This is of crucial importance in sustainability transformations and directing aesthetic attention could help support more sustainable solutions instead of those that are ethically compromised. Change in aesthetic appreciation is a well-known and historically documented phenomenon—for example, in relation to natural environments, ‘when people start appreciating the parts of nature formerly regarded as aesthetically negative’, such as mountain areas or wetlands (Saito 1998: 101).

The roots of aesthetic sustainability as a conceptual tool can be traced through theories in landscape ecology (Nassauer 1997), everyday aesthetics (Saito 2007), design theory (Harper 2017) and, most recently, in philosophical and applied urban aesthetics (Lehtinen 2019). Its development aims at understanding why certain objects, human-made artefacts (e.g. buildings, tools), landscapes, and environments are valued more than others, and how this appreciation increases or decreases over time. Instead of discussing the temporality of aesthetic values only in terms of historically distinct styles or fluctuations in trends, as has often been the case, the concept

directs attention to the deeper layers of aesthetic appreciation that bind together aesthetic, epistemic, and ethical values. In its recent form, the concept of aesthetic sustainability is influenced particularly by intergenerational care ethics (Groves 2014). From the perspective of aesthetic concerns, this means that humans tend to show more attentive and generation-arching care toward those objects and environments that they appreciate aesthetically. This process requires extensive knowledge of the processes and factors beyond mere personal preferences (Lehtinen 2019).

Aesthetic sustainability could be presented as one additional tool for contemporary choice architectures of various types. It seems clear that aesthetic value is an underused leverage in sustainability transformations. However, due to the growing interest in experience research, it is likely that methods for measuring the benefits of aesthetically positive experiences and the overall role of aesthetic values in sustainable processes will be developed more fully in the near future. Stemming from philosophical aesthetic theory, Green Aesthetics (Saito 2007) and the concept of Aesthetic Footprint (Naukkarinen 2011) are examples of this, both having been developed in a multidisciplinary setting with an emphasis on sustainable design practices as drivers for change in aesthetic preferences.

Yuriko Saito's Green Aesthetics is an early attempt to bring together design principles that support the sustainability and positive aesthetic quality of the designed product. Green Aesthetics introduces many of the same ideas that are also central in the notion of aesthetic sustainability as presented later by Harper (2017), namely the emphasis on choosing durable materials that age with grace and thus planning for care and maintenance in the product design phases. Both take into consideration the immaterial ideas and values (e.g. familiarity, cultural references, etc.) that everyday objects often contain beyond purely functional and material features. Green Aesthetics, as well as many pragmatism-influenced accounts of aesthetic experience, emphasizes that we are dealing with forms of multisensory engagement that also cultivate bodily and spatial involvement with the phenomenon in question (Berleant 2010).



Through a deep-seated understanding of aesthetic values, it is clear that objects in the sphere of human everyday life cannot be approached only as items of consumption; they also embody less tangible values, such as memories and emotions, by having come to represent other people, places, and life events. Organizational problems such as the material excess present in most contemporary societies are, on an individual level, linked to this.<sup>2</sup> The number of items owned by an individual or a household has exploded in less than a hundred years. The time and effort to take care of them and maintain order has simultaneously increased. The managerial side of everyday life has become more complex and difficult to maintain, while many of the everyday processes (such as mobility, housework and so on) have become more efficient through technological development.

Aesthetic choice is another new conceptual formulation relevant to explicating the relation of aesthetics, values, and sustainability (Melchionne 2017). It points at what follows the moment of aesthetic appreciation and the acknowledgement of this being of greater aesthetic value than something else. On an everyday level, life is full of small moments in which preferences and values become manifested in the everyday through individually insignificant choices that nonetheless have an impact when scaled up to the societal level. While acknowledging that structural, systemic changes are needed when it comes to tapering consumption or introducing circularity to different industries, individual responsibility on an everyday basis is also of importance. Aesthetics offers one approach to changing attitudes and interests in order to support sustainability in different practices. This could be useful when there is a conflict in values or when it is difficult to gain support for sustainable solutions for no clear reason other than old habits.

Change in some preferences is slow, but since 2007, many of Saito's ideas in *Green Aesthetics* have become significantly more

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jane Bennett on the phenomenon of hoarding (Bennett 2012).

mainstream and aesthetically accepted, as is visible, for example in the cultivation of urban meadows instead of neatly mowed lawns. Corporate greenwashing, on the other hand, is a negative example of how surface-level aesthetics is also used to give false impressions of products or services being environmentally friendly (Richardson 2019). An increasingly relevant worry for the value change perspective is also whether the change toward sustainability-supporting aesthetic preferences is rapid enough and whether it could be precipitated before the tipping points of the earth or social systems are reached.

## Conclusions

In the effort to better understand human decision-making processes, both individual and collective, philosophical and applied aesthetics can provide insight into how aesthetic values influence these processes. It is important to study how personal, individually executed aesthetic choices manifest in the everyday practices of contemporary societies when determining the significance of aesthetic values for sustainability transformations. Aesthetic preferences—or more broadly, taste—are never purely subjective, but are formed in a complex network of personally developed and even biologically determined tendencies to be attracted by something that is intertwined with what is socially valued, acceptable, or avoided. To some extent, the most commonly shared aesthetic preferences seem to reflect the general value ethos of their time. With this in mind, it is not an exaggeration to state that we are currently witnessing the formation of a new aesthetic ethos negotiated through the terms of sustainability.

It seems clear that people will still also continue to enjoy (aesthetically or otherwise) things that are not good for them, others, or the planet; such destructive human behaviour is not satisfactorily encountered by prevailing contemporary scientific paradigms, which tend to emphasize the rational side of human activity. In this sense, the humanities are of crucial importance to the development of sustainability studies, since it will be through history, language, narratives, representations, and art that we will have

at least some possibility of understanding the darker tendencies of the human societies and the overall processes of how human values develop.

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