

RONALD HEPBURN

THE HUMAN HABITAT
AESTHETIC AND AXIOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVES

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This ambitious study was submitted as a doctoral dissertation to the Faculty of Arts, Department of Aesthetics, University of Helsinki. I start with a rapid sketch of its subject-matter.

Pauline von Bonsdorff grounds her enquiry in a philosophical account of the aesthetic domain, broadly conceived. Her sources and references are drawn from a wide variety of styles and idioms, well assimilated and made her own.

She discusses our experience of the human environment – both natural and built, and our various modes of interaction with it. The focus is upon architectural theory and the planning and building of urban environment, public spaces, squares, parks, roadways. No less important is the interaction between artifice and nature, foreseen and unforeseen. There is frequent shift of perspective between philosophical reflection on the human situation as such – our awareness of self and others in community – and the elaboration of concrete examples, including discussion of particular buildings and projects, and of how they help or hinder our understanding of self and others.

The range of topics is enormous, and so is the task of doing justice to

them in the detail they deserve and imposing a clear and firm structure upon the study as a whole. The author has been aware of the problems: she does, for instance, offer her reader some help through advance-summaries and sub-division headings. Even so, the reader may wish there had been *some* reduction in topics, some sacrifices to create space for fuller treatment of a more limited set of issues.

Although the basic choice of perspective is that of environmental and aesthetic philosophy, some sections belong at least in equal degree to moral or to social and political philosophy. To accommodate this material, the sphere of the aesthetic has to be broadened to the limit. Notice of this breadth is given also in the sub-title, "*Aesthetic and Axiological Perspectives*". In any case, once it is accepted that aesthetic judgement is not confined to sensuous or formal levels of experience, many other strata can be admitted as constituents of environmental aesthetic experience. Cognitive, moral, social and political elements must be chief among these.

To add a comment here: while I am sure that it is right to work with a "thick" rather than a "thin" concept of the aesthetic, it does leave us with the task (the agreeable task) of figuring out how the aesthetic can be thick *and* retain its distinctive identity. That work will continue to occupy us.

Pauline von Bonsdorff has certainly shown resourcefulness in finding ways of organizing and managing her large body of material; but she is perhaps somewhat less successful in presenting a unified overall argument or "narrative" than she is in addressing the individual and detailed discussions – of particular places, buildings and experiences of "habitat". It is in these that the highest quality of her work lies. It is probing, exploratory, never self-satisfied. (These features make it more than usually hard to summarize!)

¹ International Institute of Applied Aesthetics Series Volume 5, Lahti, 1998. (While on footnote-level, let me say – this is a quite handsomely produced book; but any future edition would be improved by more attention to the rules for the hyphenation of English words divided at the end of lines.)

Interestingly, her style of writing, overall, ranges between the austere academic and – occasionally – the more imaginative manner of a literary essayist. That mirrors the varying nature of her topics and approach to them: a reader could not wish it altered. She faithfully indicates previous work done in her various areas, comments upon relevant authors and texts and provides careful endnote annotations and bibliographical apparatus.

Her dissertation is prefaced with a quotation from Merleau-Ponty:

“...the philosopher does not look for shortcuts, he takes the whole route”.

Ms von Bonsdorff herself has certainly taken “the whole route”.

I

After the outline, we need now to open up a little some of the issues explored.

PART ONE develops a many-sided aesthetic theory appropriate to the investigating and understanding of environmental experience. Ideas are drawn and discussed, from Merleau-Ponty (“the perceiver [as] a situated subject: in the environment and of the world” (p. 20)), from Levinas (whom she sees as “importantly complementing” Merleau-Ponty) (p. 45), from Dufrenne and numerous others. Recurrently emphasized are the limits of knowledge. “The subject must not be understood as a spectator who observes the environment from outside, but as an agent immersed in and part of it”: “...not as opposed or strange to nature, for as bodies and persons we are natural as well as cultural beings” (p.50). There are pleasant surprises, such as the theme of “lingering, inattentively ... [as] a way of sensitizing oneself – un-awares – to the richness and inexhaustibility of the environment, ...” (p. 46).

In the analysis of aesthetic experience undertaken in this chapter, par-

ticular attention is paid to the concepts of aesthetic experience as *unified*, as *disinterested* and as *revelatory*. Disinterestedness (and the contemplative) is given a worth-while discussion (involving writings of Stolnitz, Dickie, Berleant, Sircello, Iris Murdoch...), in which von Bonsdorff justifiably rejects the view that this is no more than a now-superseded 18th century concept. “The distinction between action and contemplation is not one between activity and passivity: contemplation is characterised by intense attention”, as well as being “open” and “receptive” (p. 70).

The theme of aesthetic experience as “revelatory” evokes some lively discussion of James Joyce on “epiphany” and Harold Osborne on revelatory experience.

In developing her claim that the aesthetic is a great deal more than “what pleases immediately”, she expands the concept to include “Sensuousness,” “Sensitivity”, “Imagination” and “Evaluation”. To sample these:

Sensuousness concerns “... not only ... the different senses, but ... the integration of sensations in the experiencer’s body” (p. 81). It “addresses us as animals, ... living and sentient bodies”: yet it can be present also in, e.g., mathematical form, as “felt form or character” (p. 81). Sensuousness “highlights the intimate interaction of subject and world in aesthetic experience” (p. 82).

With “*sensitivity*”, the focus is on “savouring and discrimination” (p. 82). “As an ability of the subject, it has a correlate in the object’s experienced expressiveness” (p. 83).

Imagination – is a “dimension of perception and thinking, a way of transcending the immediately given or evident, which is rooted in the materials of the world ...” (p. 84).

Evaluation – “What I am and what the object is are not decided on factual

grounds, but are always also a question of what I desire and value" (p. 89). To "dwell" in a work of art, "...does not mean that one accepts all aspects of it, only that there is a general acceptance of the company of the work taken as a whole..." (p. 89). I like the phrase – the "company of the work".

Under the further heading of "Response", some related ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas are considered and adapted – on aesthetic and moral values ("we do not live with values in the way we live among things" (p. 91)), on the role of the non-conceptual, ethical awareness of the other person, and on responsibility.

II

PART TWO – The Built Environment. The "overriding concern" here is "to illuminate the interrelations between personal experience and collective historical and political strata of meaning", to show how "public meaning" can "become part of" "subjective experience" (p. 99). A sense of "meaning" is delineated, appropriate to this enquiry. Here are explored the temporal dimensions of built environment, its developing and changing (in a "processual" approach). The place of unintended as well as planned features is emphasised.

The study is overtly and confidently normative (cf p. 105), making out the need for building-policies and practices which "respect the site" and acknowledge the requirements of "social and cultural" contexts (p. 105).

"Space and Place". The "space" that interests Pauline von Bonsdorff is experienced, inhabited space, "understood through a body" (p. 119): "place" is local and individual. Well-chosen examples of our perception of particular buildings are deployed to give force to the analyses. The examples here and elsewhere show a wide and reflective acquaintance with environments in several countries, as well

as a detailed appreciation of the Finnish environment, both rural and urban. Our architectural experience is both multi-sensory and integrated, unified. With characteristic desire to give balance to her account, however, she rightly warns against *over*-emphasizing experience, as this "might blind us to the otherness, plurality and resistance of places to any single interpretation" (p. 124).

Place and sense of place are discussed in relation to our modes of inhabiting an area and our sense of personal history connected to it. Sense of place is a "result of aesthetically alert experiencing" (p. 125). The (later, but related) section, "Appropriation and Locus", is rich in phenomenological accounts of what it is to perceive environment. The concept of *locus* receives an intriguingly individual handling: the autobiographical example of a Helsinki bus route ("No. 13"), perceived as a "place" with its own unique atmosphere, is original and well-handled (pp. 214f).

A much-stressed theme is the interrelation between "nature" and "culture". The two are by no means opposites: "We are ourselves both natural and cultural creatures" (p. 133); the two are simultaneously present. "In cultivation, nature does not just change into culture. Nature and culture continue to exist side by side, intertwined, ... interdependent, but without either losing its own character" (p. 133). We seek a "livable balance" between them.

A chapter entitled "Architecture Experienced" centres upon such aspects of "environmental meaning" as "atmosphere" and "expression" – the latter with particular reference to Arnhem, Langer and Goodman; also the history and patterns of current use of buildings.

"Atmosphere" ("how it feels to be in a certain space") is "the most inclusive perspective on the experience of the built environment" and a "strongly

subjective" one. Pauline von Bonsdorff is aware of (but not daunted by) its elusiveness: it often requires language in a "poetical" and "metaphorical" mode. "Atmosphere is evanescent, and can be felt only if one yields to it." "The atmosphere of a city has more to do with the sound of footsteps on the pavement, the speed of traffic, the tones of voices, with how people confront each other, than with precise information about the city" (p. 148). (A comment: For the most part I agree with this account: it is subtle and many-sided; but I would want to emphasize, even more, the elusive individual and personal quality of many instances. Often the subject's experience and account of "atmosphere", of a building, say, or an urban scene, can be indeed "strongly subjective" – but to such an extent as to call in question even the partial objectification in the phrase – "evanescent [and] felt only if one yields to it". The atmosphere can depend very largely on memories and associations of the subject's individual experience – past visits, historical or anecdotal knowledge of the site... and on the way those memories and thoughts present and organize themselves on a particular occasion. To that individual, of course, such atmosphere can be of the highest importance in her (or his) aesthetic life.)

Throughout, the author has been developing her conception of the aesthetic, not as isolated and specialized but as closely interrelated (and interacting) with other areas of life. She sees, for instance, as particularly fruitful to architecture an interpretation of Kant like that of Anthony Savile to whom the Kantian phrase "without a purpose" does not entail that the aesthetic object must lack any function. In sharp contrast, she maintains that the "core meaning" of a building is located precisely in its "institutional functions".

On "social function", she writes, "A building is not only a representation of its functions, it also articulates and

manifests these". "Most social functions *do not exist* independently of their embodiment in physical structures or spatial layout" (p. 165, italics mine). (Strong talk, but it is convincingly supported and illustrated. Indeed, the claim deserves substantial development: von Bonsdorff could fruitfully return to it in other writing.)

The section titled "The Appearance of Areas" explores "relationships between the different perceptual elements of the urban experience of public space", such as "the market place, supermarket and the mall, ... business centres, centres of administration and power", and thus how the "overall meaning which makes areas identifiable arises" (p. 171). Discussion of these is followed by a highly-particularized "excursus" on the Helsinki Senate Square, illustrating in eloquent detail how "the meaning of the built environment" lies in an interaction of buildings, institutions and activities or use.

III

PART THREE Axiological Perspectives. This Part opens with some keen criticism of contemporary trends in building, particularly in relation to the "celebration of values" (pp. 247 ff). Buildings represent "the institutions that are the structural backbone of a society".

"Symbolic architecture" is concerned with "the locations of power and value" in three chief areas:– (i) "the headquarters of big trade corporations": trade centres; (ii) "buildings of cultural or religious importance", and (iii) structures related to transport and communications (p. 251).

In this section and under the above three headings, detailed critiques are offered of specific contemporary buildings in New York and Paris. These are well-observed and well-pondered studies in which the aesthetic merges

with the moral and social, as comments are made about the expressed attitudes to power and money, the presence or (more often, lamentable absence) of "human quality".

A distinctive set of interconnected values possessed by the author herself gradually becomes evident to the reader of this dissertation, though it is nowhere gathered up and formally presented as a systematic aesthetic-moral-social-political view. It locates ultimate value in the life of the individual, and the individual's personal and moral relations with the human "other". It especially cherishes the values of "openness" and "generosity", and requires an environmental setting in which there is time, and place, for meeting the other, for neighbourliness, for meditative "lingering" and for "dwelling". (It is never forgotten that self and other are thoroughly *embodied* persons.) In appropriate ways serious respect is also due to non-human living beings and to non-living nature. This set of values furnishes norms for a sustained critical appraisal of environmental components and complexes. About this appraisal there can be nothing mechanical. Although a popular assumption, it is false that all values are quantifiable.

In different ways (it is argued), nature is today simultaneously valued and devalued: on the one hand, nature is worshipped; and on the other hand, our dependence on nature and our vulnerability are under-acknowledged. Sombre reflection follows on the "long-term and irreversible" consequences of "contemporary advanced technology", consequences (such as pollution) that may exceed "our capacities for control and prediction" (p. 282). The very complexity of that technology reduces the possibility of responsible intervention by individuals (p. 282). Throughout the study, there are many positive, appreciative judgements about human existence and its

setting, but there is a serious pessimism also: even a sense, expressed at one point, of social reality as in fact "disintegrating".

Among specific environmental factors considered in this chapter (and their contribution – for good or bad – to the life of embodied persons), are – traffic routes, their impact on the landscape, housing – in relation to topography, building materials, shopping, entertainment. Very specific instances of the latter – Las Vegas and Disneyland – are seen as far from providing innocent fantasy. "Artificial dreamworlds indicate that there is actually nothing very strange anywhere..." (p. 269). "...built dreamworlds may corrupt the environment and the human mind alike" (p. 270). (Similar thoughts are acknowledged in Arnold Berleant's *Living in the Landscape*).

The final chapter ("Utopian Typologies") turns to a discussion of ideal or potential environmental values, (1) in relation to power – the *political* axis (law-making: the sphere of ultimate values, (2) in relation to society – the *social* axis: human interaction, enjoyment, vulnerability ... and (3) in relation to nature – *natural* axis: the ultimate ground of our being. I can quote only a few characteristic sentences:

"The parliament, as a democratic institution, deserves respect, but there is nothing transcendental or mystical about its value. Totalitarian power, on the contrary, typically attempts to integrate the highest values in its symbolic buildings" (p. 295).

"Materials or walls which enclose areas we cannot peep into affirm the irreducibility of difference in the real and concrete world..." (p. 301)

"If the public realm is ideally constituted as the interplay of different viewpoints, it is my duty not to give up my own" (p. 301).

“Spaces and buildings may be more or less receptive towards the individuals who inhabit and visit them. A receptive building gives room for the individuality of its inhabitants and visitors. ... The building seems receptive to different moods, and while it does not force its own emotional states upon us, it is as if ready to listen to us and receive our feelings without intruding” (p.313).

A further set of comments is elaborated on the relation between types of built environment and the modes of human social life which they encourage or discourage, the importance of “shared urban space” in which one can feel at ease.

“Cultivated and Wild” is a section containing more general reflection on “living in and with nature”, “without denial of either finitude or the infinite”. The importance of the always partial, finite nature of our knowledge, perception and memory is stressed repeatedly and in various contexts. A sense of responsibility, preservation of nature’s otherness, and respectful interaction with it are fundamental requirements.

The final chapter ends – perhaps unexpectedly, but very aptly – with a short essay on light. Light “epitomizes *natura naturans*, creative nature: it perceptibly touches the world and calls it to life”. “The way a building receives light is traditionally one of the most valued qualities of architecture”. ... “The felt generosity of a room flooded with sunlight or the solace of dusk have their origins in the cosmos, in a universe that appears not as cold and neutral but as holding us. Seasons and diurnal rhythms are rhythms of life, of rest and vitality” (p. 330).

Almost as useful as many of the argued conclusions of this study is the object-lesson it provides of how to reflect, philosophically, critically, personally, independently and (I am sure) pleasurable on a scarcely limited range of

everyday, familiar objects and situations, urban or rural, monumental or domestic.