FUTURE DEFINITIONS OF EVERYDAY ENVIRONMENTS

Sanna Lehtinen

University of Helsinki

ABSTRACT

The ongoing and accelerating process of rapid urbanisation defines how everyday environments are formed and understood in the future. As the density of the urban tissue on the planet is on the increase, also the experiential qualities of urban environments are evolving and diversifying at the same time. Understanding the profound effects of these processes is essential in order to understand how the aesthetic continues to manifest itself in the sphere of the everyday. Concentrating merely on built space in the traditional sense is not enough to assess the experiential quality of urban environments. Human space, instead, takes as a concept into consideration the totality of planned and unplanned spaces in urban environments from the human point of view. In an attempt to bring whole entities such as cities of different scale under aesthetic scrutiny, a more inclusive perspective is needed to assess how diverse parts of these entities – objects and activities, structures and infrastructures, people and other more or less complex living organisms and relations between them – function in direct contact with each other on a daily basis. By succeeding in this, environmental aesthetics can have a better access to the complex phenomena related to the urban everyday.

Keywords: Environmental Aesthetics, Everyday Aesthetics, Urban Environment, Urban Development

1. NEW URBAN AESTHETICS?

This paper seeks to offer some starting points for the aesthetic study of urban development, or urban aesthetics, as it should be named. As having been presented in a roundtable discussion titled "Extending Everyday Aesthetics", the aim is to venture into a new direction, in which the theoretically solid background in everyday aesthetics could be of use.

The future tense implied by the general title functions as an inspiration to imagine *how* exactly urban everyday environments will look, feel, and open up for experience and discussion in the future. Everyday aesthetics as such is generally considered to be about *restoring* the scope of aesthetics. This restoration necessarily leads towards urban phenomena, which contribute to an increasingly large part of human activity, in some form or another.

As everyday aesthetics is a relatively new field, one has to take into consideration what has happened in other relevant fields concerning the everyday. When considering the notion of everyday environments, for example, the notion of everyday architecture is of assistance. Blurring the lines between different disciplines becomes a necessary step into the direction of understanding how the everyday is constituted in different situations.

Everyday space lies "in between such defined and physically definable realms as the home, the workplace, and the institution, [it] is the connective tissue that binds everyday lives together" (Crawford, 1999, p. 9). This everyday space is distinctly urban in the contemporary world. The rural, agrarian everyday looked, and still looks, noticeably different and somewhat different criteria should be added to it. Now, in post-industrial societies, the urban everyday is developing into new, previously uncharted directions.
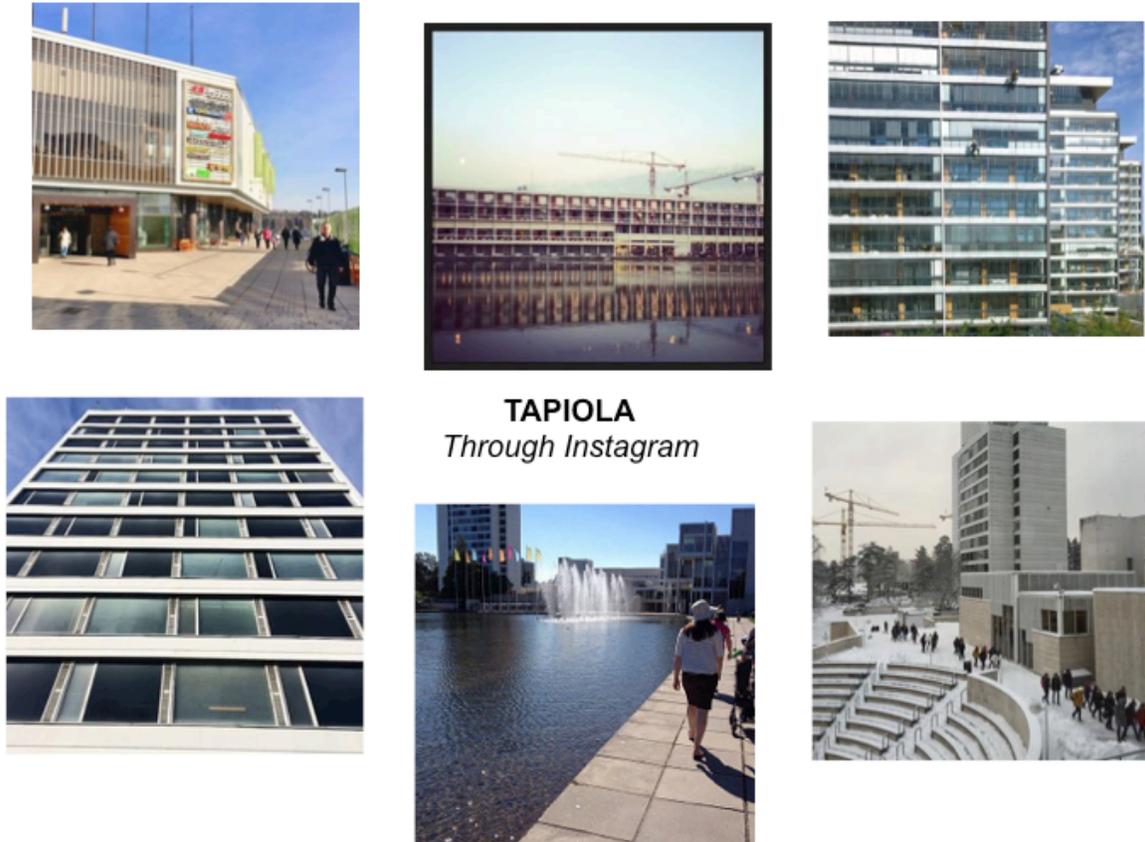
Figure 1: Instagram photos, #Tapiola

As to those living the urban everyday, urban development may seem something externally imposed; an activity, which hides its intention, yet, unavoidably affects the everyday life taking form in the urban tissue of the city. Defining the everyday from the users' point of view leads to defining the intentions in using urban space. Whether individual intention meets with the underlying design ethos, determines a great deal of the capability of an individual to aesthetically engage with the environment. In a way, one can say that leaving the design perspective to designers would omit great amounts of active forces behind urban development. Not all of the factors moulding the urban form of life are positive: some phenomena have a distinctly negative side to them. This necessarily affects the overall experiential quality as well.

The initial question being, what will the urban future look like, one has to define, in a sense, what its specific set of aesthetic questions will be. Instead of starting from the self-inflicted questions stemming from inside the field of aesthetics, basing these questions along the necessities presented by that what we can know of the future, seems a more valid choice. The aim in this paper is to bring the aesthetic discourse into the forefront of the discussion about urban future. Technology, societal change, and multifaceted phenomena, such as radical, unprecedented urbanization or accelerating environmental processes due to the effect of the *anthropocene*, are leading the urban evolution. Critical assessment of the directions taken is needed. Change in itself is also present in the intrinsically human urban processes.

Echoing Douglas Coupland, one is tempted to say that from the purely speculative, the aesthetic discourse has moved to the level where change is already present. Some skill is needed in proclaiming the function of the aesthetic here. What forms does the urban take because of all these different factors? First, it will be of assistance to take a look at the creative agency that an individual can actively pursue in relation with his or her everyday environment.

2. SHARING THE CITY

Urbanisation refers to the process of structural change in societies. "The why" of the urbanisation process

include such multifaceted and tangled problems as migration, economic fluctuation, political uncertainty, and so on. Equality as such points already to "the how" of the process of urbanization, the manner in which urbanization will ultimately take place. Architecture is only one part of the material world that "builds up" into the everyday.

What are then the factors actively affecting the way the urban future will look like. How could those intentional forces that embed the aesthetic into our everyday environments be grouped and their contribution understood. Instead of starting from the questions stemming from within the field of aesthetics, I have been basing these themes along the necessities presented by that what we know of the current situation and what can thus be predicted of the future.

Urban aesthetics is and has to be largely about digging into the previously nonverbalised but commonly shared knowledge of the aesthetic values embedded in the different uses of the shared everyday environment. The aesthetic implications of using, creating, and developing the shared urban environments are plenty and varied.

Instagram photos of Tapiola were chosen to serve here as a starting point because they represent what the inhabitants or everyday commuters see in a place and what they consider experientially and aesthetically worth sharing. These photos have both an aesthetic *and* a social function: they depict some aspect of the relation these people have with a specific urban environment. New technologies enable sharing these glimpses of experiences better, and, in fact, they could be used more in studying urban aesthetic preferences, for example.

3. AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT DIRECTIONS

Case studies that are grouped here under the title of aesthetic development directions depict the level and direction of intentionality in changing and forming the shared urban environment. The idea behind grouping these development directions according to shared features paves way to the preliminary version of the intentionality matrix presented in the next chapter. The ultimate aim is, that the aesthetic consequences of these acts can be better understood and evaluated in relation to each other.

3.1. Bottoms-Up

Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro's largest favela overlooks the high-rises of São Conrado, which in its turn is one of the city's most expensive neighbourhoods. Economic inequality affects aesthetic development in urban areas more in some societies than other. Rio is quite unique in its disposition, in the sense that there exists a clear line of segregation between the poor and the rich and also in that sense, that favelas are dispersed along the hill slopes and, against all odds, are thus uniquely positioned to face Rio's scenic beauty below them.

The case of Rocinha and São Conrado shows that aesthetic flourishment is not always antithetical to economic poverty even in largely self-organized urban developments. However, this functions also as a reminder that aesthetic parity as such is also a factor that should be more looked into in urban aesthetics.

3.2. Smart City

Smart cities based on technology and networking functions in particular, have been on the radar for quite some time already. Planned by Foster & Partners in its entirety to be a sustainable eco-city, Masdar City in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) is a city probing towards the urban future. Is yet to be seen whether Masdar city will grow into a fully functioning city or whether it will become the newest addition on the list of the so-called ghost cities.

New ways to understand the formation of human settlements in the 21st century are needed. Sustainability has to be (and already to a large extent is) inscribed into aesthetic thinking and urban design processes. One has to give credit to the fact that this ideal is visible also in the smart city thinking, whether its results directly lead to success or not.

3.3. Collaborative Models

The case of Tempelhof airport in Berlin exemplifies well one currently growing trend in urban development. Collectively used green spaces are founded from the grassroots level, not just following the official planning decisions. Unused areas in the city are taken into use in imaginative ways, often evoking more collective activity among their users.

Stadtteilgarten Schillerkiez in Tempelhof area was founded as a collectively organized open allotment

community garden in the area that formerly functioned as the airport's runway. The airport was closed in 2008, and the area functions now as a public park. Because the soil in the airport area is polluted, the gardens are based on movable stacks, making the temporariness of the solution more concrete. The initiave to begin the collective use of the airport space has been copied to other cities as well.

3.4. Vertical Green

Tiered gardens of Park Royal on Pickering hotel in Singapore depict a more stylized, design-based version of the green strand in urban development. Designed by Singapore-based architecture studio WOHA, the hotel was opened in 2013. Represents organic design and is best known for its zero-energy sky gardens. Park Royal is described as an oasis in the midst of an expressively urban landscape.

The hotel was used as an example by WOHA in their

multimedia exhibition on urban future in the 2016 Architecture Biennale in Venice. As one future direction of urban development, it shows how the vertical dimension, as in the form of vertical density represented here by vertical ecosystem, provides the cities with aesthetically rich multilevel sustainability.

4. INTENTIONALITY IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

In order to present in a clear way, how intentional activities can be assessed in the context of urban environments, this matrix makes visible how different amounts of intention and different levels of initiative meet when creating any kind of new development inside the urban tissue. This schema will hopefully accelerate the process of assessing the overall aesthetic results these different layers of activity ultimately produce.
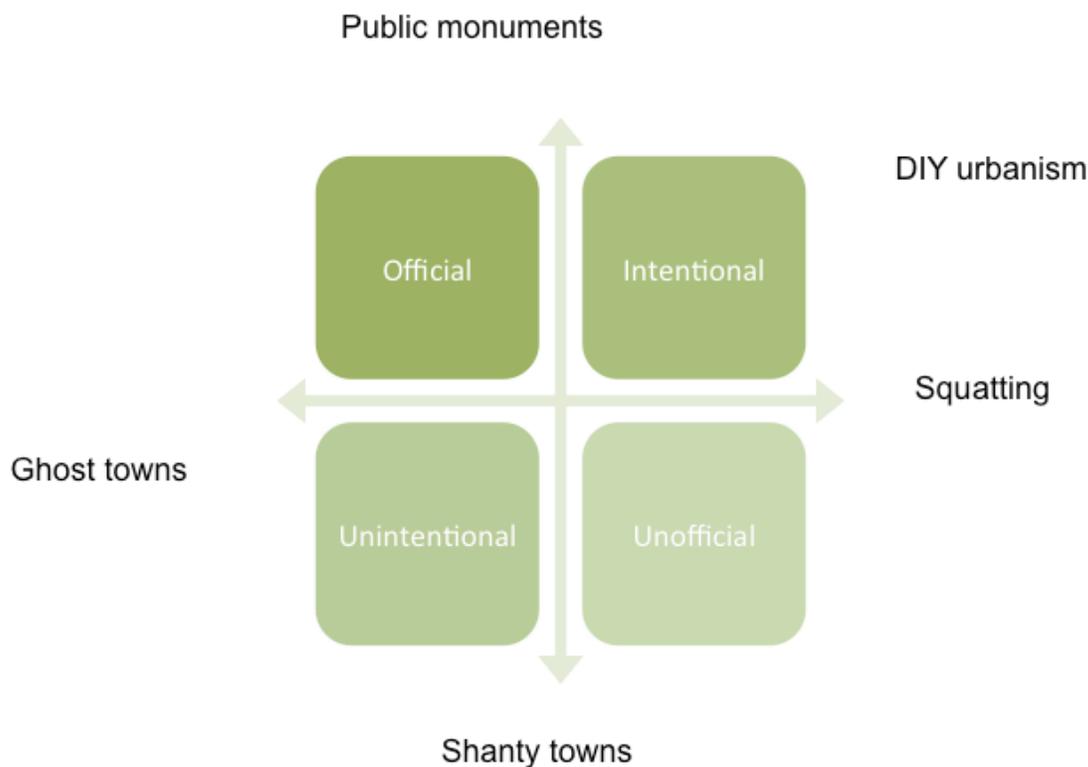
Figure 2: Matrix: Urban development directions

4.1. Official – Intentional

The *official – intentional* level comprises most often of architectural and spatial manifestations of some type of general ethos. This can be national, local, or otherwise commonly and widely recognised, even if not necessarily shared by everyone. Soviet Union, for example, had a very distinct aesthetic formula for its urban outcome. This does not mean creating new places from scratch but can also be a matter of enhancing and protecting or, on the other hand, demolishing and restricting policies.

In its most extreme form, this type of urban development leads often to retrograde architecture, eerie public monuments, or outdated models for using the shared urban space. This is partly because it may convey bluntly didactic purposes or other narrowly presented ideological contents. Assumptions about how the society should function instead of how it actually functions easily lead into this direction of unsustainably manipulating the urban tissue.

On the other hand, aesthetic blandness can be a result of this direction. Cautious, empty design in the sense of being politically all too correct is also related to globally safe formulations that many non-places by definition follow (Augé, 1995).

4.2. Official – Unintentional

The *official – unintentional* axis includes the results of the type of thinking involved in the previous point. When whole parts of cities, built environments have lost their ability to support the core activities necessary to any living urban environment, they become obsolete.

Entire cities can be emptied of inhabitants because of relatively sudden, endemic changes in the economy. The most acute example of this is probably Detroit. Ghost cities can be born from too fast-forward thinking towards the future as well, as newer ghost cities such as the case of Chinese Ordos Kangbashi in their own, puzzling way show.

It remains to be seen, whether new grand eco-city designs such as Masdar City will belong to this category or whether they will grow to function in a sufficiently organic way as urban entities. City as a living and functioning organism can be created "out of nothing", as the example of Brasília shows, but the amount and composition of unintentional factors can easily prove to be unmanageable and lead ultimately to unintentional results.

Also on a smaller scale, the unintentional elements of development processes can slightly alter development processes in cities. A facet of surprise can also lead towards a more experientially interesting environment, even though the original, official ethos of planning would have pointed towards totally different directions.

4.3. Unofficial – Intentional

The easiest way to approach the *unofficial – intentional* level of this matrix is either through squatting or such recent movements as DIY urbanism, hacktivism, guerrilla gardening, and urban knitting, just to mention a few. They are all diverse and participatory forms of transforming places into shared, common projects. These movements underline the propensity of places to be changed, and that this change might be also gradual, spontaneous, and begin from the grassroots level.

The urban space as a shared space comes understood also through different forms of temporary use for buildings. Unauthorized squatting is at the historically earliest end of this spectrum. Newer models for collaboration between different stakeholders have been emerging in cities between property owners, grassroots organizations and city officials.

4.4. Unofficial – Unintentional

The last but not the least important axis in this preliminary matrix is that marked by the juxtaposition of *unofficial* and *unintentional*. This refers most clearly to the formation of different kinds of informal and unofficial settlements such as shanty towns, slums, and ghettos. Their origins, at the very least, can be considered to be unintentional, even though they might grow to form an integral part of the city's ecosystem. It seems also clear, that in any kind of ideal world, people living in cities would have more decent and better-planned living conditions than what can be offered by this type of haphazard development outside safety-regulation and even basic sanitation. However, subpar living conditions are reality for many urban dwellers, and their development is a crucial matter, of which aesthetic considerations are the least urgent proof.

It has to be emphasized, that this type of urban development also has an internal logic of its own. The

case of Torre David in Caracas, Venezuela provides a good example of this. Described sometimes as a vertical slum, the previously abandoned building and its taking into use by people has been documented in a film by Urban-Think Tank.[1] The film has as its motto "When the modern city does not adapt to the people, the people will adapt to the city." The process of taking over abandoned or unfinished built space and turning them it into inhabitable dwelling places is shown particularly well by the case of Torre David.

Some ecological crises, that largely affect urban functions and the structures that support them, should also be included into the last category. Such large-scale catastrophes as Central Italy's earthquakes in August 2016 change permanently the experiential conditions of the urban constellations most gravely affected by them.

4.5. Using the Matrix

Within these different levels of intention, whether from official of unofficial source, a multitude of aesthetic choices[2] is made. The realisation of these chains of choices leads to experientially differing aesthetic environments, possibly even within the area of the same city. The conditions for any kind of aesthetic flourishment in urban setting are created within this type of map of choices. It is important to emphasize that aesthetic and overall experiential quality of urban environment go often hand in hand, but are, however, not to be considered fully identical.

Assessing the aesthetic quality of urban environments can take as its starting point, how those environments have evolved and are evolving currently. The intentional activity behind each decision moulding the environments thus leads to some experiential results. Actions leading to the densification of existing city structures can be preliminary assessed by this distinction by intention and the direction of initiative, whether from the grassroots level or from more official city policy. Different types of development directions suit some types of cities better than others, but the level of intentionality helps also in assessing these directions.

5. THINKING TOWARDS AESTHETICALLY SUSTAINABLE URBAN FUTURE

It has to be emphasized that the basis for so-called urban aesthetics tentatively developed here, cannot rely on any definitive way of predicting the future. *Futures studies* can be of some assistance in understanding the evolution of the logic of the cities, but otherwise fixing the gaze to any specific utopia will ultimately lead to dismissing some part of the already existing strand of development that characterizes urban life.

Active agency and participation in the processes of developing and creating one's own everyday environment can lead to better aesthetic engagement on individual level. However, more research has to be done in order to show this correlation.

Understanding current urban development trends and the relation between them helps in understanding the formation process of new trends in the first place. Understanding the relation between the past and the present is essential in understanding change as such.

Tracing the urban experiential development plays also a role in facilitating a more general, overall democratisation process: participation in cities is shifting from exclusive to inclusive. This is reflected in how experiences are formed and interpreted. Mixing-up in cities[3] has proved to be a solid formula for developing multifaceted sustainability in urban everyday environments.

One result is, that general philosophical questions, such as what is universal and what is singular in the experience, become acute again in this new context of shaping the cities.

6. REFERENCES

Augé, M. (1995). *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London & New York: Verso.

Chase, J., Crawford, M., & Kaliski, J. (eds.) (1999). *Everyday Urbanism.* New York: Monacelli Press.

---

[1] Urban-Think Tank participated with the case of Torre David in the exhibition *The City of Homeless* held in Arko Art Center, Seoul, Korea 8.7.–7.8.2016.
[2] Many thanks to Kevin Melchionne for sharing the sketch of his forthcoming paper on *aesthetic choice*.

---

[3] Idea promoted by MVRDV's Jacob van Rijs, for example.

Crawford, M. (1999). Introduction to *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Chase, Margaret Crawford & John Kaliski. New York: Monacelli Press.

Harris, S., & Berke D. (eds.) 1997. *Architecture of the Everyday*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1997). The Everyday and Everydayness, *Architecture of the Everyday*, eds. Harris, S., & Berke, D. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Oh, E. (2016). *WOHA Unveils Fragments of an Urban Future'' for the 2016 Venice Biennale*, *Archdaily, 2.5.2016*. http://www.archdaily.com/787229/woha-unveils-fragments-of-an-urban-future-for-the-2016-venice-biennale

Upton, D. (2002). Architecture in Everyday Life. *New Literary History*, 33, 4, 707–723.