

Is There Such a Thing as the Aesthetics of Sustainable Cities and What Could It be Like?

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1 Introduction

If we look around the world, we will have severe difficulties in finding a sustainable city. If we go into details, we might find urban elements, like private and public open spaces, which already function in a sustainable way. I do not want to give a comprehensive definition of urban sustainability, but, with regard to urban open spaces, I assume that sustainability will be higher, the more people can use such spaces in a free and unconstrained manner, and the more nature can grow wildly and spontaneously. It is my belief, that the knowledge of the aesthetic functioning of these urban elements could help to develop an understanding of the aesthetics of future sustainable cities, and gain inspiration for necessary and proper structural changes.

2 The Aesthetic Qualities of Allotment Gardens

As a suitable example of private open spaces I have chosen allotment gardens. Originally introduced as gardens of the poor in the 19th century, they now often serve as leisure gardens. Each lot, furnished with a cabin, comprises approximately 300 m². They are mostly arranged in groups of 40 to 200 lots. As a rule, the members are organised in an association which takes care of common tasks. In their social structure the gardeners often represent a cross-section of the total city population. In Germany the number of garden lots is estimated to be more than 2 million (Fig. 1).

As I expounded in detail elsewhere (Nohl 1987), three basic aesthetic needs – for home, for freedom and for careful handling of resources – play an important role. To begin with the last, the *careful handling* of resources and nature is a fundamental aspect of allotment garden aesthetics. It often leads to a special attitude, which might be labelled *reutilisation creativity*. This means

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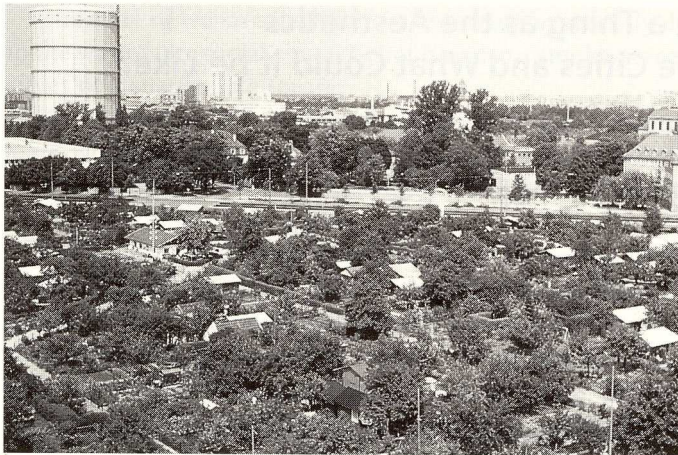


Fig. 1. Allotment gardens

people like to alter the design of their lots with things which are unusable elsewhere, or which were constructed for another purpose. Old bathtubs might serve as water reservoirs, and panes of an old bus function as covers for hotbeds. Cabins are constructed out of demolition materials, and bottles are used to edge flower beds. There is almost nothing which allotment gardeners cannot use, thus diminishing the consumption of resources in an aesthetically conspicuous way.

The second important aesthetical aspect of allotment gardens is due to the need for *home*. The aesthetics of allotment gardens is not understandable without the effects of this marked yearning for home. It is expressed in at least two different forms: familiarity and beautification. *Familiarity* comprises the well known, the usual, and the traditional. It may be most spectacular in the use of elements, which incorporate the "good old days". The handcart, the wagon wheel, the milk can, antique styled vases, buckets and baskets – these are typical objects which signal the need for home. *Beautification*, the other form, indicates the inexhaustible wish of the gardeners, to embellish their lots. Thus, flowers might be found all over the garden, walls are greened with plants, or the gardens are decorated with miniaturised landscapes, such as alpine ridges, moors, heath landscapes etc.

Freedom or *independence* is the third need with peculiar aesthetic effects in allotment gardens. It is less strong yet intensive enough to be detected quite easily in special stylistic elements of the allotment gardens. The unusual, the unfamiliar, the strange, but also the fantastic, the dreamlike, and the chaotic are typical expressions for this need. The freedom seeker, first of all, finds happiness in foreign and unknown situations. In his garden we therefore find

signs of "non-identity" everywhere. In this way, the aesthetic need for freedom is also a need for the *alien*.

This aesthetic need for freedom and the alien appears in at least two forms. In many gardens there is an accentuated preference for the bizarre-scurrilous, and on the other hand a liking for the fairy-tale world. A *bizarre-scurrilous* design is often obtained by use of familiar things in an unfamiliar situation and vice versa, for example a wooden wheel on top of a gate, a bleached cow skull at the cabin entrance, or a tree root remodeled into an electric lamp. The *fairy-tale world*, is visualised in a multiplicity of topics too. Thus the enchanting world of dwarfs and gnomes might be found in many gardens as well as romantic castles, magnificent palaces, or lonely farmsteads.

To put it in an aesthetic-philosophical way, one can say that all three needs owe their existence to the search for a better world, symbolised in the nature of gardens. The need for home is oriented more to the past. It tries to seize hold of a lost home, using metaphors of beauty and familiarity. In opposition, the need for freedom is more future-oriented. Using dream and fairy tale scenes, it tries to make a mark, which points to an independent and self-organised life. The need for careful handling of nature, finally, refers aesthetically to the fact, that all better life has to be realized in a world whose resources are limited, and therefore have to be saved for other people and future generations.

Here we see the connections of such aesthetics with *sustainability*:

- Self-organisation means that people are allowed and prepared to participate actively and according to their own plans and needs in many daily processes. This will enlarge the pool of intelligent solutions considerably, and encompass the chance to save and recover resources and materials in a creative way. At the same time it forms a solid foundation for a new aesthetical approach in sustainable cities, which will be characterized first of all by a fertile co-operation between experts and city dwellers: participatory aesthetics.
- If the example of allotment gardens does not fail, the aesthetic needs for home as well as for the alien will be of particular significance in sustainable cities. The aesthetic form of sustainable cities will probably be determined by the apparently paradoxical wishes, to be at home, and at the same time, to be in places where one can gather new experiences.
- Furthermore, sustainable cities will reflect in their aesthetic structures that the protection of nature and resources belongs to their cardinal goals. The allotment gardens suggest an aesthetic approach, which expresses the careful and economical handling of nature and resources, especially the creative re-use of old structures, elements, and materials.

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3

The Aesthetic Qualities of Derelict Sites in Cities

I now want to address the aesthetics of derelict sites in present cities, accessible to the public. They exist, because their original urban use (industrial, commercial, traffic, or even residential) was given up some time ago due to economic reasons. The combination of the wild growing vegetation and the relics of former use (ruins of buildings, relics of factories, rotten tracks, building rubble, waste material etc.) often impart a peculiar appearance to these sites. If such abandoned land is within reach of residential areas and not contaminated, it is mostly used by people as additional public open space. Particularly, kids, teenagers, dog-keepers, joggers etc. belong to the frequent users of derelict sites (Fig. 2).

If people use these sites, they normally leave behind visible traces which will be erased by nature, if activities are not executed regularly. Nature wipes them away, and the process of use can start afresh. This successful partnership seems to show that abandoned sites aesthetically work like a symbol for a world, in which man and nature are reconciled with one another (Nohl 1988). Thus, in the eye of the beholder, the experience of derelict sites could open a prospective horizon of a better life in the future. I suppose that much of the aesthetic joy elicited by derelict areas, can be explained by this predominantly symbolic meaning of such places.

More than allotment gardens derelict sites are places in which people try to fulfill their needs for *freedom* and the *alien*. Here it is not necessary to build up strange or even scurrilous structures for this purpose. The combination of spontaneous nature and human relics and ruins creates mysterious and excit-



Fig. 2. Derelict site

ing visual scenes. On the other hand, users of derelict sites often leave behind fancy and strange traces. Kids build bold tree-houses, dog-keepers beat secret paths and so on. Therefore the aesthetic experience delivered by derelict sites is predominantly governed by disharmony, disarray and chaos, instead of harmony, order and unity. On the other hand the aesthetic need for *home* can be met here, too. Users often arrange familiar situations by carrying with them tables, chairs, sun-shades and other things for outdoor use. Sometimes a single object like a blanket, a mat, or a towel is used to indicate a home situation, a secure territory. Of course, a vegetable garden in a derelict area is especially apt to give the feeling of a "home place". Although these things are obviously introduced for practical reasons, they work at the same time as aesthetic signals. They tell that some traces of home are needed to feel physically and mentally good and secure, even or particularly in the urban wilderness.

As we have seen, the derelict sites – and that is aesthetically decisive – support the self-organisation of people. Since such places are officially considered as less valuable, people may act here in a very autonomous way, and they are able to leave their marks without having feelings of guilt. In derelict sites spontaneous development of nature and permanent erosion of hard structures generate a quality of space, which might be called *provisional* (Nohl 1990). The provisional allows and encourages creative handling of space and nature, and if it is to remain a provisional arrangement, nature must be allowed to live its own life as well. In a provisional arrangement normally neither does man overpower nature, nor nature take over man. In fact, abandoned sites gain much of their aesthetic charm by this quality of the provisional.

As is the case with the allotment gardens, the aesthetics of derelict sites might be used to approach the aesthetics of future *sustainable cities*, in which self-organisation of people and the protection of nature and resources are of decisive value. Thus the aesthetic discussion of derelict sites brings up the suggestion again, that in sustainable cities people will be much more eager to participate actively in the aesthetic production and organisation of their daily life. There will be strong aesthetic needs, like those for home and for the alien, which must be satisfied to a high degree in cities themselves, if they are to be sustainable. We also might conclude from the analysis of derelict sites, that sustainable cities will have to reflect symbolically, that the protection of nature and resources belongs to their cardinal goals.

4

Concluding Remarks

I do not want to say that derelict sites and allotment gardens are typical aesthetic expressions of sustainable cities. Both types of open space belong to

the contemporary city, which, as a whole, is not sustainable, but the examples show that under conditions of self-organisation people will find themselves in a situation, where they can learn to make use of nature in a way which is beneficial for them, as well for nature. This conciliatory interrelation between man and nature is the aesthetic message, which the sustainable city might one day express.

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