Physical and Social Connections
Through
Artistic and Structural Aesthetics

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Abstract
What defines a city? This paper is an approach to understanding and identifying aspects that make up a great urban entity. The focus is on art and its relationship with the social psyche of individuals and the communities they live. In particular, one will see the importance of physical nature, defying aesthetics and historical context, and the importance to collaborate with all stakeholders in helping to achieve social unity within communities. For my research I focused my findings on “Art, Community and Environment” and “The 2nd Valencia Biennial: The Ideal City.” Also have sub-resources used to structure and identify the importance of the collaboration of physical and emotional connections.
Introduction

Understanding the complexities and attributes that make up the physical and social frameworks of an environment has been the formal and informal task at hand for many individuals throughout history and in modern-day society. These environments have taken many forms and can be identified and labeled in entities called neighborhoods, cities, regions, et cetera. The issue is not only physically defining these particular areas, but more so, on how to define these areas? One must ask, “Is it the demographics, the urban or rural frameworks, the cultural backgrounds, the physical and social networks?” These are all questions and concerns, many of which not mentioned, that I continue to explore in practice, education, and life itself. In context, “What defines a city?” This particular theme echoes in most of the urban planning work I partake in, and in the social realm of this theme, the question always seems to sneak up when least expected. Director of the Second Valencia Biennial Luigi Settembrini stated his opinion: “The Ideal City invokes, rather, self-reflection, the maintenance of openness, the continuous nurturing of balance flows from urban processes. An art without artist and yet with infinite artists. An ancient, modern, and contemporary art. An art made up of very distinct work in terms of themes, materials, techniques and disciplines” (Settembrini, The Art of Being A City). Always having a budding passion for arts, culture, and architecture, I tended to put these interests away temporarily, due to the overwhelming realities of my education and professional career. However, this particular year and with this particular project, I wanted to take a step back from actually processing and designing, and move towards a direction in which I analyze and understand.

By exploring this idea in practice, I want to accomplish a deeper and more exclusive insight into the future revision of the Northside framework plan and the “Great Streets and Gateway” project. Having realized, that defining the planning “attributes” that makeup a well-defined entity is difficult for many people, including myself, and having come to terms that it is very abstract and inconclusive in nature to have one particular answer; with that said, I decided to explore, question, and
find levels of reasoning, on one particular attribute in the context of an urban entity and in relation to future work. In doing so, my focus will be on how to understand the connection or relationship, or lack of, people possess with the structural and artistic aesthetics surrounding and incorporated into their everyday lifestyles? While exploring this correlation between visual aesthetics and the emotional and social dynamics people possess with them, I will also cover a wide range of areas incorporated with visual aesthetics such as: the physical nature itself, defining and understanding the historical context of emotions and aesthetics, and concluding in the benefits achieved in areas due to the involvement of all stakeholders. Luigi believes that “If art is the fundamental language of difference, the city is the origin and privileged setting of these differences—between man and nature, between people and society, between people and culture, between individuals and its ‘I’—and at the same time origin and privileged setting for communication between differences” (Settembrini, The Art of Being A City).

With cities, urban cores, and miscellaneous entities facing issues such as “massification, anonymity, and loneliness,” Baudelaire discovered the idea that “the city, then, is a living metaphor of the drama of modernity and our late-modernity” (Settembrini, The Art of Being A City). What that statement can recognize, is the mere idea in which cities and the already never-ending complexities they face, will only continue to have issues both in the present and in the future. Fixing these problems or nearly observing them will continue to be a factor in reaching some idea of perfection. Many societies call this movement towards this great place, Utopia. However contrary to that idea, the question always remains, is there is such a thing as Utopia, or is it purely an idea or a catalyst to promote positive change? Whatever answers arise from that question the entire theme for this paper will have more positive undertones towards artistic aesthetics serving entities. Reason for this, is the research discovered throughout this process of understanding this relationship, favored arts and its effect on social impact with people and society.

To further explore this idea, Italo Calvino believes that it is pointless to claim whether or not a city is “unhappy” and that there is no point to dividing these cities into two categories. Calvino feels that instead of dividing cities into happy versus
unhappy, cities should rather be divided into two categories: “cities whose mutations and the passing of time continue giving form to the desires, and cities in which the desires make them disappear, or they disappear themselves” (Settembrini, The Art of Being A City). What can be perceived from Calvino is the idea of whatever position an entity faces, no matter which way it is perceived, or which side it is on, there will always be issues. Luigi concludes in reference to cities and their issues in his chapter of “The Art Of Being A City,” that it “can learn from art to be an open work, which marks out symbolic limits and boundaries to its own identity, always subject to interpretation...any city can present a good kermesse of art, but only something very close to an ideal city could dare to be its framework, or rather a metaphorical representation” (Settembrini, The Art of Being A City).

**The Physical Nature**

To better grasp “The Art of Being A City,” one must have some insight into the physical nature cities, neighborhoods, and other entities physically consist and require within their framework. An urban entity, in general, will involve or acquire the necessities, comforts, and desires of the populations within them. It is the job of professionals and the stakeholders involved within the entity to express whatever those “needs” might be. With taking into consideration that many neighboring communities, cities, and regions all have different needs and desires, one must still adhere to the fact that there is some level of consistency between these areas and secondly, there are always social and significantly structural needs to an area in which people and communities thrive. Throughout history and moving forward into the near future urban entities have always had holes both socially and physically. However, in terms of the physical nature of these areas, these holes have been and continue to be an impact on an area’s inhabitants. In relation to artistic and structural aesthetics being an attribute of what a city consists of, these holes—or negative features or lack of features—can be seen as a burden to these areas.

A small-scale example that encompasses both structural holes in communities and in context of artistic aesthetics—in particular art—Lorand Heigyi explores “Solares Or On Optimism”(Hegyi). Solares, also known as gaps, are
characterized as either empty or partly abandoned holes in a general architecture structure, or gaps on overgrown plots were ruins remain (Hegyi). They often appear unexpectedly and are undecided in nature meaning, they can be open or closed, hidden and on show at the same time (Hegyi). These solares are holes in which there is an informal or formal enticement to fill their empty space with some form of pursuit. Whatever that form may be Hegyi, describes the solares as, "the last guerillas of spontaneity and creativity. Their apparent emptiness can be understood as a potential for the abundance of human energy, creative contributions, and unconventional participation in the process of designing the 'perfect place'" (Hegyi).

As far as the ownership of the solares are concerned, there are many cases in which one can identify ownership and other cases in which one can not directly tell. Sometimes nature can take over these empty spots by erratic bushes, trees, weeds, et cetera. Other cases would be and that are prevalent in most urban communities are parking spaces or unofficial trash dumps. Solares are also used as an opportunity for shelter to either homeless individuals or stray animals. Hegyi refers to this as “temporary living areas” (Hegyi). The opportunity is there, and the need for artists, stakeholders and in anyone within that particular area, must began to act on it; but act only on the basis of thorough understanding. Hegyi believes that these "solares are the visions of emptiness with its negative connotations vanishes and the rather irritating impression caused by a vacuum, is replaced by a perception of abundance, the discovery of wealth of anthropological references. In this process, the solares no longer stand for emptiness, but, on the contrary, they manifest and anthropological wealth which inspires discovery, observation, preservation, and interpretation, encouraging artistic initiatives to cooperate and contribute."

There are many artists and individuals of all backgrounds that continue to take up the opportunities to fulfill these spaces with some sort of positive activity that not only helps highlight that particular community but also help in identifying that community. Artist Polly Apfelbaum is quoted stating that solares are considered: “On optimism. What this immediately suggested to me was that the empty places of the city are the sites of its future, open slots, forgotten places that are waiting for something to happen. I feel that it is important not to fill them in; I
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wanted to mark the emptiness of the sites to find a place where something different will happen” (Hegyi). Apfelbaum created a piece titled “For Alice” based off of the Wim Winder’s film “Alice in the Cities.” This particular piece had flower shapes—inspired by Andy Warhol—positioned all over a photograph of a solares in the city. Apfelbaum wanted to take a sign from the past and place it in the future (Hegyi). By doing this she accomplished a work in which the flowers glow at night in and fade away towards morning “like the city itself, regenerating and fading away in repeating cycles over time” (Hegyi). Another great example would be Gloria Friedmann whose flower art piece entitled; “La Vie En Rose” used flower art buckets to be positioned on side of the building next to an empty lot. Other artists use lighting and aesthetically pleasing features to enhance the solares either temporarily or permanently, which in turn can help add to the artistic and social identity and of a community. It is very important that the physical nature of these places take into account the possibility for growth both socially and physically. Hegyi’s idea is that the “alternative new connections stimulate emotional, social, and political, and aesthetic references, activating situations: the artist wants to take part in the processes, wants to involve others, wants to ‘revitalize’ it, and use the site as a catalyst” (Hegyi).

**Defining Aesthetics and Understanding the Historical Background**

To better understand the nature and relationship between artistic and structural aesthetics in relation to the social emotions of individuals and communities, you must go back to the roots of defining “aesthetic” and understanding the historical background evolved within the premise of “aesthetic.” Aesthetic is merely a feature or attribute of something; however in terms of the relationship between ‘aesthetic’ and social connection there is another definition needed to be explored: aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is defined as, “pleasure associated with perception, an aesthetic response is one in which perception results in arousal of emotions or feelings...all experiences to a greater or lesser degree stimulate an aesthetic response...an experience is aesthetic when emotional arousal commands our attention” (McWilliam). In summary it is the
emotion one feels when walking down the street and looks at the structures surrounding themselves, or when one drives along the highway overlooking a scenic landscape. It is everyday for most people and has become such apart of our lifestyle that sometimes one can forget the importance of aesthetic pleasure. However, not all emotional responses can be described as aesthetic. Stolnitz describes below the key seven characteristics of an aesthetic experience (McWilliam):

- Aesthetic experiences are valued or responded to for their own sake rather than for their potential use or satisfaction of the observer’s needs
- Aesthetic experiences are receptive experiences in which the observer lets the event or object be itself and seeks to relate to it or understand it on its own terms.
- Aesthetic experiences are centered in the present on the object as it is rather than how it came to be or what it might lead to.
- Aesthetic experiences focus attention on the uniqueness of an object or experience rather than perceiving it as an example of a class or experiences.
- Aesthetic experiences may entail a delight in the beauty, harmony or complex unity of an event, but may also involve fear, loathing or disgust
- Aesthetic experiences can involve both emotive and intellectual responses, spontaneous feelings and a reflection of meaning.
- Finally, aesthetic experiences can occur in the presence of any kind of object or event and involve one or all of the senses, or they may be apprehended only by the mind.

Artistic/structural aesthetics or even aesthetics in nature do have a historical background dating back all the way to the prehistoric and medieval times, all stemming to the idea surrounding socio-biological roots in people. This argument claims, “aesthetic preferences must at some time during our evolutionary history gave us significant survival advantages...there is a need for natural pattern, beauty and harmony...aesthetic responses are at root emotional feelings leading to the rejection or exploration of a particular environment” (McWilliam). What is so enticing about this particular theory is the fact it has relevance to how individuals
today feel in certain areas or customize their environments and lifestyles to areas they currently exist in or want to explore. A gentleman named Kaplan constructed a hypothesis that aesthetic preference is based on the following criteria (McWilliam):

- Coherence: the degree to which the scene hangs together through repetition of elements, textures, and colors that facilitate comprehension.
- Complexity: the degree to which places display variety or diversity in space
- Legibility: the degree to which the scene’s composition can be described and it can be explored without getting lost
- Mystery: the degree to which you can gain more information by proceeding into the scene.

Along with historical background, there are other developments supporting aesthetic pleasure such as cultural roots and learned aesthetics (McWilliam).

**Conclusion: Stakeholders and Benefits Achieved**

By now understanding the physical nature, aesthetic pleasure principles, and backgrounds and guidelines surrounding aesthetics, it is important to understand how stakeholders are a necessity in change in order for these urban entities, neighborhoods, or communities to see benefits achieved in the future. There is a need to have an interdisciplinary approach to achieving community art, or improving or implementing artistic/structural aesthetics and seeing social benefits arise from it within these areas. Some agencies such as Creative Scotland (Coutts, Jokela and Steers) have proposed key objectives in solidifying the need for stakeholders’ involvement within community art within these areas:

- To promote understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the arts and culture to people in Scotland, and in particular to seek to increase the number and diversity of people accessing and enjoying them
- To identify, support and develop talent and excellence in the arts and culture;
- To seek to realize the benefits of the arts and culture; and
- To help to support the success of the creative industries
With participation among all demographics within a community, no matter the difficulty or costs, there remains the informal principle of planned cohesive and input in the artistic elements that identify, unify, and beautify a community.

I never realized the true and honest importance of physical structural identity and elements, and its relation to the social psyche of inhabitants within all communities. By limiting our conclusions on the literal elements such as policy, zoning, statistics, costs, et cetera, as a planner, and most importantly as an inhabitant of these communities, you can get lost and remain stuck in a situation were change is not just around the corner. It is not the goal to achieve a measure of perfection; rather it is the goal to strive for perfection, while maintaining a balance of physical beauty through aesthetics and social harmony in the presence of it. With these principles in mind, I plan to take what I have learned and apply it to future class projects.
Works Cited


