



Informed aesthetic consensus and the creation of urban environments

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the aesthetics of urban environments. One central feature of urban environments is that they are surroundings that we share with each other and hence their aesthetic outlook belongs to our *common world*. One may then ask how common, i.e. shared surroundings should be planned, designed and managed? The author claims that an informed aesthetic consensus is needed. Throughout the paper he discusses why it is important to think about a consensus within urban aesthetic decision making in postmodern times, he presents the notion of an informed aesthetic consensus and its importance for aesthetic theory, finally—he explains how it may be applied to democratic processes of urban aesthetic decision making

Key words

Aesthetics, consensus, democracy, urban management

1. Introduction¹

More and more people in all parts of the world are living in urban surroundings. Urbanization is a central feature of societal development in the present that is unlikely to decelerate in the future. For most human beings on earth, the commonplace environment is an urban environment. Taking this for granted, it is surprising that until now the aesthetic importance of urban structures has only on rare occasions been analyzed philosophically, even within the ever-growing philosophical discipline of

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environmental aesthetics,² and even within its latest development, the analysis of day to day surroundings that is sometimes called the *aesthetics of everyday life*.³ Urban aesthetics is a field that still needs a lot of groundwork to be done.⁴

There is no intention to provide part of this groundwork here. In what follows, I will rather focus on a specific and, as I believe, highly important question—important from an aesthetic as well as from a political point of view. One central feature of urban environments is that they are common environments, surroundings that we share with each other. To be sure, many forms of land, buildings, and infrastructure can be owned privately, and nothing in this essay challenges that. Nevertheless, from an aesthetic point of view this private property, in its myriad forms, is part of our urban environment as well. We might not be allowed to enter a certain garden or work place, but the sensual appearance of the garden and the factory, as far as we can perceive it via walking on the street or stopping in front of an old and rusty forged fence, is still an important part of our aesthetic experience. Borrowing a term from Hannah Arendt, the aesthetic outlook of our urban surroundings belongs to our *common world*.⁵

How shall we design and develop common surroundings that we share with each other? And how should we decide about these questions of design and development, how should decision procedures be framed? In this paper I will consider these questions from an *aesthetic* as well as a political point of view. The focus is on the aesthetic aspects of urban design as opposite to, let us say, the ethical, technical, social, or ecological aspects of urban planning.⁶ In addition, the focus is also political, as I will concentrate on the question of how aesthetic decision making with regard to shared urban surroundings could be framed in a way that is adequately responsive to contemporary ideals of democracy and civic participation.

The following paper is divided into four further sections. In the next section (2), I will briefly discuss why it is important to think about the role of informed

2 In his short history of environmental aesthetics in “ten steps,” Allen Carlson mentions the broadening of its focus “to include human-influenced and human-constructed environments” as the eighth step of this discipline’s development (Carlson 2014, 20). Important contributions to urban aesthetics include Berleant (1997; especially chapters 2 and 7), von Bonsdorff (1998, 139–160, especially chapter 4), Haapala (1998), Carlson (2001), Berleant and Carlson (2007).

3 For an excellent introduction into the field of *aesthetics of the everyday* see Saito (2007).

4 For possible and worthwhile directions of future research in urban aesthetics within an interdisciplinary setting see Lehtinen (2017).

5 “The term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately-owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common” (Arendt 1989, 52).

6 Obviously, in real cases a sharp distinction between these different planning aspects is impossible, as there are manifold interconnections. In any case, the focus on the aesthetic aspects of planning is necessary for a clear theoretical exposition of the central concepts that are under discussion in this text.

aesthetic consensus within urban aesthetic decision making in postmodern times. After that the notion of an informed aesthetic consensus and its importance for aesthetic theory is presented in detail (3), followed by an example of intentional consensus-formation applicable to urban aesthetic decision making (4). The final section (5) will deal with questions of feasibility. I will explain that the idea of an informed aesthetic consensus might be used in the creation of participatory planning scenarios that are feasible and at the same time acceptable from a democratic point of view.

Two further comments might be useful at this point. First, I will not discuss at length the existing literature on the ethics of planning, on different modes and models of civic participation in urban development. To be sure, this discussion is of great importance for the present topic. A comprehensive treatment of the foundations of democratic urban planning would have to include this strand of thought, especially in light of the fact that conceptions of consensus have been deployed within communicative approaches to planning theory.⁷ In this text, my attempt is rather to confront some contemporary political philosophies directly with aesthetic questions that arise in the context of urban planning. The leading question is whether applied environmental aesthetics can benefit from incorporating certain developments within political philosophy. This approach does not conflict with the search for an ethics of planning. It should be seen as a complementary theoretical enterprise. Second, in the previous paragraphs I have already used the terms *environment*, *space*, and *surrounding* for describing the entities that are dealt with in this paper. These terms are basic for environmental aesthetics, and, consequently, the use of these terms is controversial. Nothing in this paper is meant to imply a defense of one of these terms' specific interpretation. I use all of them interchangeably in a rather colloquial way. For the purposes of this paper, there is no need to get into extensive discussions of terminological fundamentals.⁸

2. Pluralism and the Necessity to Act

In this paper, the notion of informed aesthetic consensus—that is, consensus between citizens (in this case, between a city's inhabitants)—will be developed at length. To many, the connection between aesthetics and the idea of consensus might be irritating straightaway. Aesthetic values and aesthetic judgments might be interpreted in an objectivist or a subjectivist way, they might be a matter of taste,

7 The rise of modes of inclusionary, participatory, and communicative planning is described in Innes (1995); Sager (2012) offers a description of political philosophy's influence on planning theory, putting special emphasis on those political theories of consensus that are employed in this paper as well.

8 For discussions of the concept of "environment" as it is used within environmental aesthetics, see Berleant (1992, chapter 1) and Carlson (2002, chapter 4). For the concept of "space" (and its relation to "place") and its importance for environmental and urban aesthetics, see Lehtinen (2015, chapter 1).

but they surely cannot be a matter of majority decisions or, even stronger, of consensus among citizens. Hence, what would be the point in discussing the notion of informed aesthetic consensus? The answer to this question contains one undeniable assumption and two observations. The assumption is this: citizens live next to each other within a shared urban environment. They inevitably use the urban space together—even if it consists of both privately and commonly owned buildings and places. This urban space has to be created and designed in a certain way. Decisions have to be made concerning the urban environment’s aesthetic outlook. There is no way to avoid making these decisions, as a refusal to decide implies the acceptance of *laissez faire* or the city’s officials’ competence to decide these matters.

Decisions concerning the aesthetic outlook of urban surroundings are unavoidable. Someone has to make them, but who? Here, my first observation comes into play. One could answer that the experts in this field should decide—the urban planners, architects, artists, or maybe even philosophical aestheticians. Such procedures of decision making are well known from other areas: if one does not know, one asks the expert who knows all the relevant facts, considerations, and arguments and is therefore able to decide *correctly*. Such a procedure seems to be possible in areas of decision making where there exists a body of knowledge commonly shared and agreed on by the experts in the respective area.

Unfortunately, things are different with regards to aesthetics. The notion that it is possible to find an expert who objectively knows how a particular urban surrounding has to be designed, who could decide on the aesthetic aspects of urban space correctly—in the meaningful sense of this word—seems to be wrong. Such a notion presupposes the existence of commonly accepted, objective criteria of urban beauty or urban aesthetic value that an expert might apply in a reliable way to a specific urban surrounding. For a long time, aestheticians believed in objective criteria for beauty. For instance, Aristotle (1976, 96) claimed “the main forms of the beautiful are order, symmetry and definiteness, which are what the mathematical branches of knowledge demonstrate to the highest degree”. And, even in the 20th century, varieties of objectivism have been very influential. Monroe Beardsley (1958, 462), to mention just one famous example, claimed that unity, complexity, and intensity are those features of aesthetic objects that are essential for the magnitude and value of aesthetic experiences.

In our days, however, the attempt to find objective criteria of aesthetic value seems to be misguided. Obvious shifts in values, the development of modern arts, the plurality of cultures and subcultures within a modern society impede the hope for such a straightforward solution to questions of aesthetic urban design. This by no means implies that expertise is not relevant for aesthetic decision making. On the contrary, I will argue in section 4 that it is very important in the process of informed aesthetic decision making. However, expertise in the field of urban

aesthetic is relational, depends on personal training, specific perspectives, and developed preferences. There is no general answer to the question of “What makes X an aesthetically rewarding urban surrounding?” that is not linked to the personal point of view of the respondents.

Nothing I have said so far is new or surprising for those engaged in contemporary aesthetic discourse. Nevertheless, it is important to bring these considerations to mind, as they are paralleled by similar considerations within political philosophy that might be helpful in finding an answer to the problem discussed here. Political philosophers are confronted with a comparable difficulty. For, say, Plato, the answer to the question of “What should a good state look like?” was in a way quite simple: there was a set of primary facts about the world, about its function, its value, and the individual’s place within it. The expert—the philosopher king—knew these facts. And because of this superior knowledge, he was capable of designing a state and a political order that adequately reflected these facts. The state’s order was somehow deductively derived from primary facts.⁹

In modern times, with its pluralistic cultures and multifaceted societies, politics cannot be based on such an objective theory of the good of the world, the state, and the human. An alternative is needed. And some of the most important political philosophers of the late 20th and early 21st century believe that consensus is a promising alternative. I will mention only two approaches. In his *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls (1972, 141f.) claims that a political order can be justifiably based on principles that are (or should be) acceptable for everyone under certain conditions.¹⁰ People might have very different conceptions of good and value in life, but, whatever else they might want and wish for, they have an interest in living in a society where these principles are realized.¹¹

The consensus Rawls envisages is primarily an abstract, theoretical consensus, even though, in later works, he assumes that it could be a factual and real “overlapping” consensus between reasonable persons living in liberal democracies.¹² However, there are other theories that adopt the idea of consensus and that try to apply it in a more concrete, realistic manner. Probably the most important theory

9 Concerning objectively just order and the individual’s place within it, see Plato’s *Politeia* 433a–b; concerning the rule of the expert, see e.g., *Politikos* 293c.

10 It is important to emphasize that this unanimous agreement does not presuppose any collectively shared theory of the good. Rawls rather accepts the existence of “a plurality of reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines” (Rawls 2005, XVI). This reasonable pluralism is, according to Rawls, a typical feature of modern liberal democracies.

11 Rawls assumes, in his scenario of unanimous consensus, that the parties involved “take an interest in primary social goods, in things that men are presumed to want whatever else they want” (Rawls 1972, 260). A full account of “primary goods” that everyone wants to possess and that make consensus possible is given in Rawls (2005, 178–186; lecture V, § 3).

12 In the *A Theory of Justice*, the consensus is an abstract one between those parties gathering together in the *original position*—a theoretical, exactly defined scenario. See Rawls (1972, 118–122, 146f). The principles that are chosen unanimously in this scenario are presented in Rawls (1972, 302f) and Rawls (2005, 137). The idea of a broad overlapping consensus developed between reasonable people is presented in Rawls (1972, 144–150; lecture IV, § 3).

in this field is Jürgen Habermas's *Between Facts and Norms* (1997).¹³ According to Habermas, "only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent (*Zustimmung*) of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted" (1997, 110).¹⁴ The discourses Habermas envisages are not merely theoretical abstracts, but *real* discussion between citizens: "What is valid must be able to prove its worth against any future objections that might *actually* be raised" (1997, 35; my emphasis). Ideally, as Habermas's *democratic principle* stated above indicates, these discourses lead to consensus.¹⁵

The parallels between the "aesthetic case" and the "political case" are remarkable. People have to live together in a society. A city's inhabitants have to design their commonly shared urban environment in some way. It is a practical necessity and hence there is no option but to institutionalize society, to design common urban space. At the same time, no valid singular conception of the good life is capable of validly serving as an "objective" fundament for a society's political and institutional order. Likewise, there is no singular conception of the aesthetically rewarding and valuable city at hand that might serve as a blueprint for "correct" aesthetic decision making. Confronted with this problem, political philosophers regularly propose consensus as a suitable solution. Why should the same not be true for aesthetic decision making as well? It seems well worth developing this parallel further and investigating the prospects of consensus-based urban design.¹⁶

There is one further reason for pursuing the proposed analysis: even if one does not agree that aesthetic matters in our time lack the kind of unambiguousness assumed here, one should still consider the prospect of aesthetic consensus building. The entities under discussion are public spaces, commonly shared urban environments that belong to all inhabitants. Even if a certain person might reasonably and on good grounds claim that she is an expert concerning the design of a certain place and that she somehow knows best concerning what the citizenry should do, it is far from clear that because of her expertise she should decide. The very idea of democracy comes into play here. If living together in a city should be organized democratically, the inhabitants should have the last word. They might be prudent

13 Habermas's philosophy is one of the cornerstones of communicative approaches to planning theory mentioned above (note 6). For a recent discussion of its merits and its difficulties with regard to urban planning in general and urban planning within complex cultural situations (e.g., multicultural megacities) in particular see Mattila (2016).

14 Habermas derives this *principle of democracy* from the general *discourse principle*: "Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses" (Mattila, 2016, 107).

15 Even though, practically, the consensus often won't be a substantial consensus but rather a procedural consensus, an agreement on procedures to find decisions: "The consensus fought for and achieved in an association of free and equal persons ultimately rests on the unity of a *procedure* to which all consent.... The citizens want to regulate their living together according to principles that are in the equal interest of each and thus can meet with the justified assent of all" (Mattila 2016, 496).

16 Further similarities could be analyzed: for example, within politics as within urban aesthetics there is—at least normally—no *creatio ex nihilo*. Rather, the principal task consists in further developments of existing resources, institutions, and structures.

in opting for the solution presented by an expert; nevertheless, they certainly have the right to decide otherwise.

The analogy between political philosophy and urban aesthetics can be stressed a bit further—and this is my second observation. Many political philosophers who defend democratic decision making and the ideal of consensus understand the apprehension that democratic procedures might lead to irrational and populist decisions. In order to diminish these dangers, they conceive of procedures that not only lead to consensus but to *informed* consensus. The consensus should somehow adequately reflect all available information that is important for the subject in questions. Therefore, Rawls claims that a consensus in the *original position* should be formed “in the light of all the relevant facts” (Rawls 1972, 417).¹⁷ And Habermas describes the discursive search for consensus as follows:

deliberations are inclusive and public. No one may be excluded in principle; all of those who are possibly affected by the decisions have equal chances to enter and take part.... Deliberations are free of any internal coercion that could detract from the equality of the participants. Each has an equal opportunity to be heard, to introduce topics, to make contributions, to suggest and criticize proposals (1997, 305).

These prerequisites, *inter alia*, guarantee that everyone is free in introducing those reasons they consider to be important for the subject under discussion. If a consensus is formed as a result of such free discourse, it will probably be a consensus properly supported by relevant reasons. Surely, the same can be true with regard to urban aesthetics. A consensus is more reasonable if the inhabitants who participate in the process of consensus formation are well informed and sufficiently acquainted with the urban environment in question and its relevant *aesthetic* dimensions.¹⁸ Consequently, the next step in this analysis consists in answering the question of which conditions ought to be fulfilled for an aesthetic consensus be an *informed* aesthetic consensus.

3. The Concept of Informed Aesthetic Consensus

It is now time for a closer look at the formation and functioning of informed aesthetic consensus. I cannot develop a full account of the complex process of consensus formation here, but it is important to highlight some essential features of consensus.¹⁹ An aesthetic consensus is an agreement between some people or a group with regard to the aesthetic value of certain entities. Aesthetic consensuses

¹⁷ See also Rawls (1972, 70)—the parties in the original position “reason only from general beliefs shared by citizens generally, as part of their public knowledge. These beliefs are the general facts on which their selection of the principles of justice is based.”

¹⁸ See Haapala (2005) concerning the ideas of aesthetic acquaintance and familiarity with everyday environments.

¹⁹ In Müller-Salo (2016), I analyzed the process of consensus formation and its importance for an adequate understanding of aesthetic value judgments, thereby focusing on the aesthetic evaluation of natural environments.

are ultimately grounded in the individual aesthetic experiences of human beings. A person experiences a certain object, a landscape, a surrounding, or an environment, natural or artificial, as aesthetically valuable or worthless. Based on this and similar experiences, she might form an aesthetic judgment on the aesthetic worth of the entity in question. Whenever two persons start a discussion about the aesthetic experience of the object in question, they begin to negotiate on the possibility of aesthetic consensus between them. If they agree on an aesthetic value judgment, if their agreement is stable and continually accepted by other persons as well, then an aesthetic consensus can be formed within a society. Such consensuses can be stable over time, as they are typically conserved via the media, via art, literature, and their integration into educational programs.

Aesthetic consensuses are a vivid part of our daily cultural experience. Think about societal consensuses concerning the high aesthetic value of certain works of art. Consensuses are present in advertisements, where the same motifs and depictions of landscapes are used again and again on TV, on leaflets, and on postcards. Consensuses appear in the construction of look-outs which are installed at sites commonly considered to be of enormous aesthetic value.²⁰ Finally they can be found in the literature and cultural memory of a society, which connects specific places and urban settings with particular aesthetic attributes.

Consensuses, as these examples show, are developed within certain times at certain places between certain people. They are limited by space and time; they can be deeper or more superficial. They can include nearly every member of a society or just some group as *avant-garde* or a certain subculture. Consensuses should be distinguished from random coincidences between different peoples' individual tastes. This differentiation is not always possible or easy to recognize, but, in general, consensuses are evaluational agreements that, unlike architectural trends for instance, possess a certain temporal stability and societal visibility.

So far, I have indicated how consensus formation might work and how the existence of aesthetic consensuses can be experienced within everyday life. Aesthetic consensuses that are focused on the aesthetic evaluation of a certain urban environment function in quite the same way. People have aesthetic experiences within these environments; they discuss them with each other, and eventually a consensus between some of them might form. At this point, however, one feature becomes of crucial importance. If aesthetic consensuses, as the last section suggested, should be an adequate base of aesthetic decision making for urban environments, it is important that these consensuses are formed *within an adequate group*. If a consensus is to legitimize an aesthetic decision, it has to be a consensus that includes all relevant stakeholders. It cannot simply be a consensus between some random people or between certain groups of citizens. In the case of urban aesthetic decision

²⁰ See Sepänmaa (1986).

making, the inhabitants all together form the group of stakeholders that is relevant. Consequently, an aesthetic consensus concerning a certain urban environment can be an adequate and legitimate fundament of aesthetic urban design if and only if this consensus is a consensus formed between the city's inhabitants.

Certainly not every aesthetic consensus is an *informed* aesthetic consensus. In what follows I will propose three conditions a consensus has to fulfill in order to be an informed aesthetic consensus. These conditions can be called *sufficient personal engagement*, *sufficient basic knowledge of the object*, and *sufficient knowledge of the object's aesthetic interpretation*.

Sufficient personal engagement: I borrow the term 'engagement' from Arnold Berleant's (1992) well known work on environmental aesthetics. The main idea in positing this condition is that an appropriate aesthetic judgment must be grounded in a person's longer lasting aesthetic engagement with the object in question.²¹ This engagement certainly includes different personal aesthetic encounters with the object that endure over a certain period of time. With regard to urban environments, one can reasonably claim that several aesthetic experiences should be had that reveal the environment's different facets, as they appear in different seasons, under varying weather conditions and times of the day, etc.²²

Sufficient basic knowledge of the object: The second condition requires that a person has enough basic knowledge about the object she is evaluating from an aesthetic point of view. This does not imply that it is not possible to have a rewarding aesthetic experience of an object that one does not understand. Nevertheless, an informed aesthetic consensus needs informed citizens. The knowledge needed is provided by those disciplines that study the object in question scientifically. As we all know, with regard to urban surroundings, many disciplines are relevant; the most important ones include urban planning, human geography, architecture, history of urban life, history of art, and urban sociology.²³

²¹ This is not the place to develop a full theory of aesthetic experience and aesthetic value judgments. Nevertheless, this first condition surely implies the thesis that aesthetic judgments are different from other forms of judgments in at least one important way: they have to be based on personal experience. A world-famous critic can tell me that a novel is aesthetically rewarding, but I cannot know of its aesthetic value until I have read it myself, whereas I can know its length via reading the critic's text which mentions the number of pages the novel includes. As this understanding of aesthetic experience seems to be widespread, the first condition for informed aesthetic consensus can be assumed without discussing these matters further.

²² A fully developed account of urban aesthetic engagement would have to confront several problems that cannot be discussed here. One important difficulty is this: how can one engage aesthetically with an urban environment that does not exist yet? A possible answer could emphasize the importance of studying planning models (e.g., digitally presented and animated urban spaces) and direct aesthetic interaction with the current state of the land chosen for urban construction.

²³ This second condition's main idea is well known from other areas of philosophy, especially medical ethics. If some treatment is only acceptable if the patient undergoing this treatment *agrees*, the patient's consent can only be valid if she has been adequately informed about the treatment, its benefits, and its risks. This is the very idea of *informed consent*, see Beauchamp and Childress (2013). The same is true with regard to informed aesthetic consensus: informed aesthetic consensus is a legitimate basis of urban aesthetic decision making because the individuals concurring with

Sufficient knowledge of the object's aesthetic interpretation: The third condition requires one's acquaintance with traditions of aesthetic interpretation and evaluation regarding the object in question. One could make the claim that this is a part of the second condition as some scientific disciplines deal with the histories of cultural interpretation and symbolic usage of urban surroundings. But I think it is worth positing this aspect separately, as knowledge of these areas can be gained not only through the mentioned disciplines but also through direct individual engagement with the cultural symbols in question. Think, for example, about the contrast between small towns in rural areas and big metropolises. If one evaluates the aesthetic experiences of a small town, one should be familiar with the attitudes, mentalities, descriptions, and other cultural images that are associated with small towns in one's own culture, as they are, for instance, presented in novels and music. These might have a big impact on one's own perception and judgment.

Obviously, these three conditions do not apply to an aesthetic consensus as such, but rather to individual persons. However, the relation is clear: an aesthetic consensus will be an informed aesthetic consensus if the people participating in forming or upholding this consensus—or at least a sufficient number of them—individually fulfill these criteria. Sufficiently informed citizens are able to build informed aesthetic consensuses.

4. Strolling through the district, reaching informed aesthetic consensus

It has been explained how aesthetic consensus formation works and which criteria are suitable for qualifying a certain consensus as informed. Subsequently, in this section I will answer the question of how an informed aesthetic consensus might be reached in practice using an example that illustrates how processes of consensus formation can be initiated and guided intentionally.

It is by no means self-evident that an aesthetic consensus concerning a certain environment has formed within a local group or within a bigger society. The formation of such consensuses depends on very different cultural factors and influences. In my view, one of the main difficulties urban aesthetics has to confront is the fact that few urban surroundings are the object of an aesthetic consensus, no matter whether they are informed or fluid, vague, and superficial. Explaining this observation merits an in-depth analysis that I cannot offer here and that probably should be left to a historian or sociologist. That being said, at least one plausible explanation should be mentioned: Yuriko Saito pointed out in her intriguing work on the aesthetics of the everyday that the Western tradition of taking fine arts and

this consensus have adequate basic knowledge about the urban environment in question. Consensuses' legitimizing force would be much weaker if this criterion were given up. Carlson prominently defended the idea that knowledge is important for an adequate aesthetic appreciation of human environments, see Carlson (2000, chapters 4 and 5).

the individual engagement with fine arts as the most important, paradigmatic case of aesthetic experience and aesthetic evaluation probably contributed to the aesthetic negligence of the everyday—and urban surroundings are an important part of the everyday (Saito 2007, chapter 1).

In any case, this problem has to be tackled if the idea of consensus is to be used as a device for the structuring of urban aesthetic decision making. The formation of an aesthetic consensus is impossible unless those myriad “ordinary” urban environments come into focus of aesthetic attention. Urban aesthetics as applied aesthetics should conceptualize methods and tools that create possibilities for a city’s inhabitants to engage aesthetically with their daily urban surroundings. Furthermore, citizens have to be provided with opportunities for gaining the knowledge required for the formation of informed aesthetic consensus.

Imagine an urban district in a city of average size, a district in which people both live and work, a district that has been built over a long period of time as is typical for many European cities, a district that consequently comprises buildings of very different eras and styles of architecture. Imagine further that, in the local parliament or committee, some competing plans for further urban development are under discussion. As the topic is very controversial, the local parliament furthers the citizen’s participation. Hence, they ask scholars working in the field of urban aesthetics to design projects for informing and including citizens. Without a doubt, this example is highly idealized. Nevertheless, it is well worth pursuing it. The problem of idealization and practicability will be addressed in the subsequent section.

An urban aesthetician in the example could, for instance, create a series of guided and unguided promenades through the district in question.²⁴ These promenades have to include elements that enable citizens to fulfill those three conditions necessary for informed aesthetic consensus mentioned in the last section. First, sufficient personal aesthetic engagement with the district is needed. Therefore, there should be a series of promenades rather than just one. Throughout this series the citizens should cross all important streets and areas of the district—and it might well be the case that some hidden street corner is aesthetically more important than a bigger road. Some of the promenades should be experienced by daylight, some in the dusk, others in the middle of the night. They should walk in winter and in summer; they should experience a hot summer afternoon, when the heat is interrupting the city’s normal life and when every move through town is inconceivably arduous. They should experience a rainy day in the spring as well. They should walk but maybe sometimes take a bike or the bus as well.

²⁴ In designing tools for urban aesthetic engagement, urban aesthetics can naturally rely on models of communicative planning, as mentioned in section 1 (see above, note 6) and as they are extensively discussed in the literature on urban planning. Nevertheless, in this case, those models are adapted as well as transformed, as they are used for preparing grounds for informed consensus.

Second, an informed aesthetic consensus is only possible if the inhabitants know enough about the district—that is, if they gain sufficient aesthetically important basic knowledge. Therefore, some of the promenades should be accompanied by experts, who, due to their profession, have a certain perspective on the city and the inhabitant's lives. Needless to say, one promenade should be headed by an architect or a historian of architecture who might explain important characteristics of the town's appearance. They might, for example, explain why houses of a certain sort are of greater value in this city as they are one of the first buildings of a new style or the result of an extraordinary political or historical process.

Besides these experts, the urban aesthetician should think about including some persons in the promenades that are not experts in any particular discipline but experts of the district, persons that possess local knowledge that might not be scientific. Think of the classic example of the old neighbor who has lived in the quarter for almost fifty years and who knows exactly how they used to handle certain problems in the area a long time ago. But think as well of persons who, due to their profession, might have a very unique view of the district. For example, take the refuse collector who works for public services. He might describe how the district looks everyday early in the morning when the streets are empty and when last night's trash has not yet been removed. Go on like this, think of a police officer working in the district, a cleric, and a bus driver.

Third, sufficient knowledge of the object's aesthetic interpretation is needed for informed aesthetic consensus. The already mentioned architects and historians of architecture might be very helpful in passing on the relevant knowledge. Nevertheless, in this case, other disciplines might be needed as well. Think of a sociologist or a historian of mentalities. Those scholars, accompanying the promenades, could explain that certain types of houses are a symbol for a certain style of politics—for example, a social democrats' politics fostering owner-occupied houses for working class people. Likewise, they could explain that certain types of residential areas are often connected within the realm of arts and cultural imaging with certain mentalities, worldviews, and political attitudes. For example, in German culture, single family houses with garden gnomes in the front yard are often associated with some form of narrow-minded conservatism.

This example could be developed in much more detail. I think that a city's inhabitants who participate in such a series of promenades would be adequately equipped to evaluate some general plans of district development or some plans for the design of a specific site from an aesthetic point of view. Between these inhabitants, informed aesthetic consensus seems possible. They might agree which development or design plan is preferable from an aesthetic point of view.

5. The Problem of Practicability

In this final section, the time has come to address a central problem: is there any chance of realizing the ideas developed so far? It might be true that informed aesthetic consensus could be an adequate basis for aesthetic decision making in urban planning. It might be true that programs like the series of promenades presented in the last section could be an appropriate way to enable citizens to form adequately informed aesthetic consensus. However, is the argument presented above anything more than ideal theory? Is it not utterly unrealistic to assume that a city's inhabitants will ever agree in preferring one planning scenario to another one from an aesthetic point of view? Furthermore, it is certainly unreasonable to assume that all inhabitants can participate in programs that, like the series of promenades, foster aesthetic sensibility in an appropriate way.

Doubts like these are perfectly understandable and need a careful reply. Such an answer consists of two parts. The first is this: many practical, especially political, philosophers envisage theoretical scenarios, develop them with great diligence, and, at the same time, are perfectly aware that these scenarios will never become reality because they are highly idealized. Nevertheless, these scenarios have an important function: due to their abstraction, they can be used to clarify concepts that are relevant within a particular field. They can elucidate the mutual connection between these concepts. Therefore, within these scenarios a level of conceptual accuracy can be reached that is impossible in real world scenarios. Finally, these abstract scenarios allow for the development of ideals that can be used as a standard for the measurement of daily practice's legitimacy, righteousness, improvement, etc.

This leads me to the second part of the answer: once again, the analogy between the "aesthetic case" and the "political case" is very helpful. Political philosophers deploying the idea of consensus are confronted with the very same problem—namely, that, in practically every imaginable political act, the achievement of consensus is highly improbable. They developed strategies that can be appropriated used as well within the urban aesthetic framework presented in this paper.

One such strategy is to work with the concept of "mini-publics." Mini-publics are conceptualized in different ways, but some key features are common to all proposals.²⁵ A small group of citizens meets at different occasions over a certain period of time to discuss a clearly specified political problem. The citizens are selected by a random procedure that guarantees the group's representativeness. The discussions within the group are structured in ways that try to ensure that the real discourses are as close to ideal discourse situations as possible. Amongst other things, the

²⁵ For an overview, see Goodin (2008).

participants are provided with all the information that they themselves consider to be of importance for the issue under discussion.²⁶

Within such a framework, a consensus between those parties involved in a mini-public's discussion does not seem to be a utopian hope any longer. However, it should be assumed that in some cases consensus will still not be reached. Even in those cases, the deliberative framework introduced here will be of use. Habermas comments on majority decisions as the final element of deliberative discourses as follows:

Deliberations aim in general at rationally motivated agreement and can in principle be indefinitely continued or resumed at any time. Political deliberations, however, must be concluded by majority decision in view of pressures to decide. Because of its internal connection with a deliberative practice, majority rule justifies the presumption that the fallible majority opinion may be considered a reasonable basis for a common practice until further notice, namely, until the minority convinces the majority that their (the minority's) views are correct (Habermas 1997, 306).

If a due deliberative process has taken place that included all relevant aspects and that has been conducted fairly by all parties, motivated solely by “the unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1997, 306), a majority decision is appropriate. The process of deliberation guarantees that all relevant reasons are present and somehow adequately reflected in the majority's final decision.²⁷

These reflections on the application of normative ideals of consensus can be of use within urban aesthetics as well. They make clear how the problem of practicability can be solved. The series of promenades that has been described in the last section could be undertaken by a group that adequately represents a city's inhabitants and that forms an “aesthetic mini-public.” If the discussions within the group are structured adequately, it is reasonably imaginable that the group members reach a consensus that a certain design or development plan should be preferred from an aesthetic point of view.²⁸ Even if consensus cannot be reached, the whole setting of the decision procedure, the individual inhabitant's participation, the listening to the different experts accompanying the walks, and the different aesthetic encounters in the urban environment in question make the assumption plausible—namely

²⁶ James Fishkin, one of the leading political theorists of mini-publics, mentions the extent of access to relevant information as one of five criteria that are important in scaling the quality of a deliberative process (e.g., a mini public's discussion). See Fishkin (2014, 31f.).

²⁷ A very similar idea of combining a mini-public's search for consensus with a final majority decision and its usefulness for participatory urban planning is discussed in Sager (2012). The example presented in Macdonald (2012, 116f) suggests that it is not utterly unrealistic to strive for *aesthetic* consensus with regard to urban environments.

²⁸ Whether consensus is achieved or not partly depends on the design of the decision situation the group is confronted with. For example, a consensus seems more probable if the mini-public does not have to decide on the appropriateness of certain aesthetic descriptions of a surrounding or on some general evaluative statements, but rather on a number of well-developed proposals for urban design or urban development plans. It is surely easier to agree that a certain design proposal fits aesthetically better in a specified urban area than to agree whether this area should be described as, say, romantic, fabulous, or picturesque.

the assumption that a final majority decision adequately reflects all aesthetically important aspects. Of course, the critic can still reasonably claim that the whole procedure is time-consuming and cost-intensive. Surely, an urban planner deciding on her own would be quicker in settling the aesthetic matters in question. Nevertheless, and after all, democracy is not chosen because it is the fastest and the most cost-effective way of doing things.

In this paper, I tried to conceptualize possible paths for urban aesthetic decision making in times of aesthetic and democratic pluralism. If urban aesthetics is to be, at least partly, be a field of applied aesthetics, it should be connected with democratic theory. Urban aesthetics, as a subdiscipline of philosophy that is still in the making, should defend the independence and importance of the aesthetic point of view in contexts of urban planning and urban development. This defense, so I believe, will be more convincing, if it is reconciled with democratic ideals of civic engagement and political participation.

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