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Garden as Symbol: Nature/City

Curtis Carter
Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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My approach to environmental aesthetics here begins with reflections on previous encounters with the subject, focusing initially on aesthetics of the city. Then follows a brief look at current theories of environmental aesthetics as they relate to nature aesthetics. The final section will consider garden as a symbolic link of nature/city. Nelson Goodman’s theory of exemplification will serve as an account of garden as a symbol linking nature and city.

I. Beginnings

This first section will serve as an introduction to various issues relating to aesthetics of the city. The investigations noted here began in 1972 with a symposium at Marquette University with which included the invited speakers Philadelphia city planner Edmund Bacon, New York architect John M. Johansen, who designed Island House and River Cross for the Roosevelt Island community project in Manhattan, Swedish aesthetician Teddy Brunius, architectural historians, city officials, street artists, and representatives from community organizations who contribute to the aesthetic environment. The aim of this symposium was to gain a better understanding of aesthetics of the city and perhaps to inspire public officials to take a greater interest in aesthetics as they form new plans for reshaping the image of the city.

The insights provided by Bacon, author of Design of Cities, were drawn from his leadership as chief of city planning responsible for transforming the then dying city of Philadelphia. His recounting of experiences in this role showed the importance of vision, charismatic leadership, and links to the sources of political power as essential elements in any major attempt to reshape a city.¹

John M. Johansen’s keen sense of the importance of aesthetics in urban planning, and his commitment to avant-garde solutions in architecture,² were instrumental in shaping architectural components in the revival of Roosevelt Island. Roosevelt Island is located in the midst of the East River between Manhattan and Queens, New York and was formerly known as Welfare Island, and before that Blackwell Island, when it served as a home for prisons, hospitals, and a notorious lunatic asylum. Owned by the
city of New York and leased by the state of New York’s Urban Development Corporation for 99 years beginning in 1969, this site was envisioned as a model of innovative city planning incorporating not only diversity of race and culture but economy of land use, efficient transportation, and other amenities necessary to an aesthetically pleasing urban life style.

Johansen’s architectural solutions for Roosevelt Island, together with those of other leading American architects including Philip Johnson, Louis Kahn, and Josep Lluís Sert, provided dwellings to accommodate a range of low, medium and high income urban residents. Their aim was to create a balanced environment endowed with amenities necessary for harmonious city living.

The main insight for the aesthetics of the city that emerged from this symposium was the need to incorporate aesthetic values into city planning. This is most achievable when attached to urban leadership willing to take responsibility for aesthetic decisions in the field of action. One pragmatic lesson disclosed in both the Philadelphia and the Roosevelt Island projects is that an understanding of aesthetic values is an essential component in the training of city planners and others responsible for decisions concerning the development of cities.

Following this symposium, I organized a research seminar on the subject, “Aesthetics of the City,” which sent students out into the Milwaukee community to investigate specific sites using interviews, the camera, and observation in conjunction with insights from the symposium and readings on aesthetics of the city. The aim of this process was to identify key elements in the environment that contribute to the aesthetics of the city. Interviews and seminars with key officials, artists, architects, planners and everyday citizens, together with visual and written documentation, provided important information that could be viewed alongside the theoretical works on urban aesthetics by such writers as Lewis Mumford, Kevin Lynch, Grady Clay, Bacon, Johannes, and other theorists active at the time of these projects. Through these endeavors, the students and I, working with members of the community, acquired a greater sense of the importance of incorporating multiple voices in any approach to the aesthetics of the city.

Further research on aesthetics of the city in 1975 took me to Greece where I studied the still standing remains of the ancient cities. Life in classical Greek times (circa 450 B.C. E) was mainly urban in character, as most of the people lived in city states ranging in population from 1000 to Athens with a population estimated at approximately 150,000 and an additional 50,000 slaves and workers. The arts — including architecture, theater, sculpture, poetry, music and dance — were an important part of Greek city life. Remaining architectural forms from these sites provide for us today the core remains of their aesthetic features. Most notable among these architectural remnants are the skeletal remains of ancient theaters in Epidaurus and Delphi and the temples on the Parthenon in Athens that continue to define Greek culture. Also of interest were the architectural remains found in other ancient cities including Olympia, Corinth and
the Islands of Crete and Corfu. The remains of ancient cities, including architecture and the arts of theater, poetry and sculpture, in Greece give testimony to the value placed on aesthetics by the citizens of these ancient cities.

Subsequently, I journeyed to Japan to explore the evolving forms of modern urban cities in Japan as representative of an Eastern approach to the aesthetics of city. The visit to Japan involved first hand observations, consulting with architects, aestheticians, and planners along the way. Visits to Tokyo, Kyoto, Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Nikko, Kamakura, Nara and others cities in Japan including a remote village on the Japanese sea coast, afforded the opportunity to experience a broader range of the aesthetic elements found in living cities in Japan. Here too the architecture past and present gives testimony to the importance of architecture in forming the aesthetic face of a culture. Of particular interest in this research in both Greece and Japan was the constancy of decay and renewal through the changing environments of the cities.

The next phase of my study of aesthetics of environmental aesthetics took on a broader approach focus on human settlements from an interdisciplinary approach. This phase followed from an invitation to represent the American Association for the Advancement of Science at the United Nations Vancouver Conference on Human Settlements known as Habitat, from May 31-June 11, 1976. The Vancouver Habitat meetings brought together the views of anthropologist Margaret Mead, global visionary Buckminster Fuller, economist Barbara Ward, politician Pierre Trudeau and other global thinkers to reflect on the problems of human settlements worldwide. Held in the city of Vancouver located on the Pacific Northwest Coast, this gathering offered a range of perspectives featuring aesthetic, economic, political, scientific, and broadly diverse-cultural views concerning quality of life issues from Native American Indian to African, Asian, and European perspectives, as well as the views of North and South Americans. The aim of the Vancouver Habitat Conference and subsequent UN Habitat forums was to aid policy makers and local communities in developing both an understanding and working solutions for contemporary urban environments.

Following the Vancouver UN Habitat meeting, under joint sponsorship of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Endowment for the Humanities, a group of 13 interdisciplinary scholars representing architecture; philosophy, history; economics; chemistry; psychology; sociology; mathematics; urban planning; and environmental studies, converged in Washington, D. C. during the summer of 1976 for joint research on “American Values and Human Habitation.”

My role in this project was to represent aesthetics and philosophy and to serve as chair of the research team. The principal aim of this group was to attempt to design a research agenda of topics for future investigation of the problems of human environments. Among the insights that emerged in the deliberations, as initially pointed out by anthropologist Margaret Mead, a participant in the project, is that the popularity of research themes is cyclical. This did not mean that research into recurring environ-
mental problems is unfruitful, but rather that each cycle contributes to “a spiral of knowledge” in which each cycle offers some advance in our understanding. Among the interdisciplinary themes identified in the American Values and Human Habitation project are these: the image of the habitat, the impact of demographic trends on habitat, the relations between individuals and institutions and habitat, human rights and habitat, and the theoretical contributions of the various disciplines.  

II. Current Literature on Garden, Nature Aesthetics

Among the leading philosophical writers on environmental aesthetics today, Allen Carlson has argued persuasively that aesthetics and science are compatible territories with respect to understanding the aesthetic aspects of environment. Carlson maintains that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is best understood when based on knowledge achieved through the natural and environmental sciences, which focus on qualities actually present in the environment.  

Noel Carroll argues, contrary to Carlson, that appreciating nature “often involves being moved or emotionally aroused by nature …by attending to its aspects.” According to Carroll, aesthetic experience of nature need not depend on the cognitive knowledge provided by scientific categories. Also against Carlson’s scientifically based environmental aesthetics, Budd points out that such values as order, regularity, and harmony recognized in scientific theories concerning nature do not as such translate into aesthetic appreciation of the environment.

Drawing upon the contributions of phenomenology and alternative non-Western sources, Arnold Berleant bases his approach to environmental aesthetics on the notion of aesthetic engagement. Berleant’s theory of aesthetic engagement posits the continuity of human beings in concert with an understanding of nature, but also includes the social and political and the experiences of everyday life, as well as the natural.

These and other current discussions of the aesthetics of nature are well argued and critiqued in the writings of Malcom Budd, Glenn Parsons, Emily Brady and others. Parsons and Brady respectively offer a critical overview of the subject of environmental aesthetics of nature, each lending additional insights into the various approaches to the topic.

Among the questions of interest to environmental aestheticians is the dispute over whether aesthetic valuing of nature is intrinsic (valued as an end in itself based on properties appreciated for their own sake), or instrumental (value based on function or use). Given our experiences with the projects noted earlier, and a review of the literature concerned with environmental aesthetics, it seems best to override any attempt to choose between intrinsic or instrumental value when interpreting the aesthetics of nature. Kevin Lynch, author of A Theory of Good City Form, put the matter succinctly:
"Practical and esthetic functions are inseparable. Esthetic experience is a more intense and meaningful form of that same perception and cognition which is used, and which developed, for extremely practical purposes."\(^\text{12}\)

It seems clear that the environment found in both nature and city can be valued for intrinsic qualities offering life-enhancing experiences, as well as for contributions to the practical solutions required to address ecological issues. Thus the life-enhancing aesthetic experiences afforded by both nature and city extend across the boundaries of intrinsic and instrumental aesthetic values. They include satisfaction based on the appreciation of a beautiful landscape or an architectural masterpiece as well as the practical benefits afforded by ecologically sound uses of nature and well-formed city environments.

III. Concepts: Garden, Nature, City

The remaining sections of the essay focus on showing how garden serves as a symbolic bridge between the environments of nature and city. Garden, nature, and city are key terms in the analysis that follows.

**Garden.** Virtually every city is endowed with a significant variety of garden as an essential part of the urban environment. Garden is in the sense used here is a public space established for "display, cultivation and enjoyment" of plants, flowers and other forms of nature. Garden is created from natural materials including soil, living vegetation, trees, grasses, flowers, rocks.\(^\text{13}\) (The discussion here will be limited to gardens featuring plants and other natural elements, although I am aware of the views of Stephanie Ross and others who employs a wider notion of the term garden).\(^\text{14}\) However, alongside these natural elements, garden often includes architectural constructions and may embrace a variety of functions both recreational and symbolic. Like city, garden is a constructed environment using principles of design to organize the natural elements in some order suitable for aesthetic appreciation. Garden is thus a microenvironment that offers creative opportunities and multisensory delight to both its creators and appreciators. As well, garden contributes to other life-enhancing practical functions of city. For example, garden serves as an important design element in the spatial organization of city and attractiveness of city environments for its residents and visitors. Garden differs from park which may include some of the elements found in garden, but is also used for various purposes such as hosting monuments, recreation, playgrounds, and swimming.

**Nature:** In examining the literature of nature aesthetics, one finds a wide range of understandings of nature. For some, nature consists of picturesque visual vistas, featuring mountains, forests or lakes. In this popular sense, nature is valued mainly for its visual features, and its aesthetic value is sometimes likened to appreciation of a
painting. This view of nature has been criticized for its failure to differentiate aesthetic appreciation of nature from appreciation of art, and for its failure to address ecological values that contribute to aesthetic appreciation as well as to other aspects of human well being. Recent interest in the aesthetics of nature, as noted above, has viewed the appreciation of nature in a more comprehensive manner so as to include information provided by the natural and environmental sciences. A contemporary understanding of nature is further complicated by its alterations resulting from "natural evolution" and from human interventions and exploitation of natural resources resulting in significant changes in the "natural landscape."

City: City is a specialized space in nature. City offers a constructed environment representing human values and interests, shaped by the density of human settlements and specialized functions including its economic, political, and cultural processes. While city offers a plenitude of images for aesthetic appreciation based on its visual properties, aesthetic appreciation of cities follows from active participatory experiences in its spaces, including activities that extend beyond the visual. Engagement with architecture, commerce, government, manufacturing, transportation, and cultural life all offer possibilities for aesthetic participation. As Arnold Berleant has observed, the focus of interest and influence in cities has shifted throughout history and continues to evolve. The one constant in city environment is change.

IV. Garden in History

Hence, in the present context, I propose to examine garden as a cultural construction that provides a bridge between the aesthetic environments of nature and city. A brief look at the history of garden will show that garden is present in the histories of cities worldwide. Garden has existed for centuries, for example, in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete, Mexico, China, Japan, and Africa, as well as in Western Europe and the Americas. Moreover, garden is an integral component of modern cities. Historically, some of the principal types of garden include royal gardens attached to palaces, gardens next to shrines or monasteries, Zen gardens intended for philosophical contemplation, and public gardens such as Central Park in New York Zen Gardens in Eastern cultures are intended for philosophical contemplation. Gardens in contemporary cities such as Cairo also provide services to promote social welfare of the needy as well as to advance social interaction and healthy life-styles. Botanical gardens offer rare species of both aesthetic and scientific interest. Currently there are over 1800 botanical gardens in 150 countries.

Garden Design East and West

For the purpose of gaining some perspective on the garden as a source of aesthetic appreciation, it is useful to compare Western European gardens of the 16th to 19th cen-
uries with Chinese gardens which represent different philosophical and cultural values as well as different approaches to styles of landscape design. Garden in both cases includes natural trees, flowers, grasslands, streams and ponds, and rocks. As well, they may include sculptures, architectural buildings, pavilions, and bridges and their supporting engineering systems. All of these elements are orchestrated according to a particular style of landscape design.

European gardens such as the gardens at Versailles Palace in France are arranged symmetrically along a central axis. Perhaps following the rationalist philosophy from Pythagoras to Descartes, natural and constructed elements of the European garden are carefully ordered according to a geometrically based formal order as in the Versailles gardens. This style of garden emphasizes the aesthetic values of harmony and balance. Even the organic manifestations of the natural plants are carefully manicured to accent the formal aspects of the overall garden design.

Major cities in China including Beijing and Shanghai, as well as XuZhou, Nanjing, and Yangzhou in the south of China all support important gardens as integral parts of their contemporary urban adornments. The styles of Chinese gardens have evolved for more than three thousand years. In contrast to the geometrically based garden design, traditional Chinese garden design favors irregular patterns. Accordingly the hand of the garden designer is concealed as much as possible. Although there are common natural and constructed elements in the different city gardens; each bears the style of the locale where it resides. Natural elements such as rocks, stones and water in the Chinese gardens are intended to bring the garden experience as close as possible to the experience of actual mountains and streams as they exist in nature. In some Chinese gardens, the plants are used as symbols. For example, bamboo suggests strength and resilience of character; pine connotes longevity and persistence, while the lotus symbolizes purity.

Perhaps reflecting the influence of Chinese scholars in governance, this emphasis on nature in the design of gardens is in keeping with philosophical Taoism and Chan Buddhism. Both Taoism and Buddhism identify the human relationship with nature as a source of refuge from the worldly complexities and as a form of spiritual nourishment.

In Japan, traditional gardens dating from the tenth to the twelfth centuries echo, in part the influences of the Chinese gardens. Here sparse plantings, colorful flowers, deciduous plants and a mountain-shape mound located on an island in the center of a pond are signature elements. Two or more bridges connect the mountains to the shore. Also prominent, especially in Kyoto beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are Zen gardens intended to facilitate meditation. Zen gardens such as Saionji located in Kyoto favor sparse, abstract designs using stones to represent mountains.

The urban gardens cited thus far mainly serve as objects of aesthetic appreciation offered by physical and psychological engagement attained from being present in the environments. However, these gardens serve other important purposes by contributing
to the overall attractiveness of the city as a center of culture benefitting the quality of life and tourism, thus aiding economic wellbeing. On another level, the garden may serve as a means of educating the citizens by providing knowledge of flora and fauna and the other forms of nature that are represented.

Gardens in contemporary cities also function in other practical ways directed toward enhancing city life. For example, Al Azhan Garden Park, created by the Aga Kahn Trust, has participated in renovation of the historic Das Al-Ahmar area of Cairo. It also offers support for low income Egyptians including rehabilitation, support for healthcare, and education. Another garden park with expanded public services is the Koya Garden Project. The Koya garden project establishes garden in third world countries around the world to benefit the poor and homeless by developing community gardens. Both projects use the concept of garden to provide social interaction and healthy life-styles. These projects illustrate the notion that aesthetic enhancement though garden has a practical, extrinsic dimension as well as the intrinsic. In such instances the aesthetic is achieved through the successful fulfillment of the activities undertaken to advance human well being.

The aim of this brief look at garden in the environments of city in different cultures has been to show that garden is an essential contribution to the urban environment. It brings together elements of both the natural and the constructed fabric that comprise the well-being of life in the city irrespective of other cultural differences. Even its most elemental forms as an expression of personal interest and creativity, the private gardens that populate cities across the world inevitably draw the attention of passersby, who pause to enjoy the look and feel of garden as well as to admire the effort that its makers have extended to enhance city environment.

V. Garden as Symbol Linking Nature and City environments

In the remaining section of this paper I propose to frame the relation of garden to nature/city in a more philosophical setting. In order to undertake this task, I will refer to Nelson Goodman's theory of aesthetic symbols. In his *Languages of Art* and elsewhere in his writings, Goodman introduces language to discuss the symbolic functions of works of art. I will draw upon only a small segment of his rich and complex account of artistic symbols to try to suggest how we might understand garden as a symbol that helps to explain the relation of garden to nature/city. The concept that best serves our purposes here is exemplification. Exemplification is one of three main forms of symbols used to explain how art works function as symbols. Exemplification, as distinct from representation or expression, refers to a relation between a symbol and its referent. In this case, the reference is to the relation between garden and city/nature. Symbols exemplify properties that they both possess and refer to.
symbols as such require literal possession of the properties they exemplify, and the principal route or direction of the reference is from what is being symbolized (in this case nature/city) to the symbol (garden). Exemplification is also one of symptoms or indicators of the aesthetic in Goodman’s account of artistic symbols and may perhaps lend support to my view that garden may function as a form of aesthetic symbol.

Exemplification literally takes place between garden and nature as both contain living trees, flowers, rocks and water. In Chinese gardens, for example, rocks with animated forms and surfaces exemplify the mountains and garden ponds reference smooth lakes of natural landscapes. Similarly, exemplification takes place between garden and city, for example, through the presence of architectural pavilions and other buildings in both garden and city. Garden also exemplifies features shared by nature and city (that is the very same features are found in all three). For example, bridges connect portions of land that are separated by streams of water. In nature and city the bridge establishes a connection between two naturally divided regions of the environment. In this instance, bridges in nature and in city both show the intervention of human design and construction. Garden too possesses these same features. On another level, garden literally exemplifies cycles of growth, maturity, and decay that also occur in both nature and city.

My proposal to think of garden as a symbol for understanding nature/city connections also involves the use of metaphor. According to Goodman, expression is metaphorical exemplification. Following Goodman, I will understand metaphor as a conceptual process where “a familiar scheme is implicitly applied to a new realm or to its old realm in a new way.” In keeping with the example cited above, the growth, maturity, and decay that are experienced in garden may also serve as a metaphor to express the occurrences of these processes as they might occur in nature and city.

Since garden is a work of art in at least some instances, metaphorical rather than literal reference seems an appropriate symbolic means suited to focus on the aesthetic aspects of garden. In such instances, the literal features of garden translate into metaphors endowed with aesthetic richness that succinctly captures aspects of the relation of nature and city that extend beyond the literal connections.

Metaphorical understanding of garden, allows for garden’s exemplifying traditional aesthetic values such as natural or formal beauty, and pleasure as well as other particular expressive properties such as harmony, balance, or elegance, that aestheticians might desire to associate with aesthetic features of nature and city environments. As well, metaphor seems to capture the essence of mood and feeling, even imaginative reflections that one experiences when enjoying the spaces afforded by garden. None of these qualify as literal or “objective” qualities of the respective environments.

Hence, garden as symbol may employ literal exemplification as when it focuses on certain features of the natural or city environment in order to make them salient, or to show how the two are linked. The features may then be straightforwardly recogniz-
able in nature or city or both, or available to be metaphorically applied to nature or city or both. For example, in the Jewish Museum in Berlin there is a garden that contains plants from all of the countries where Holocaust survivors settled (literal exemplification). The ground of the garden is uneven. There is no place where you can get a firm foothold. The garden is thus a metaphor for the refugee experience that is literally exemplified in the garden by virtue of the plants from the respective countries of Holocaust survivors.24

The ethno-botanical garden of Oaxaca, Mexico exemplifies both natural references to the landscape and cultural references to the history of the region. Located in the former 16th century monastery of Santo Domingo, the garden is organized by climactic zones and also shaped to convey a sense of past history of the region beginning with the use of seeds 10,000 years old. The ensemble of plants chosen by the anthropologist includes prickly pear and organ pipe cactuses and a rich sampling of additional plants from the region. Together these plants evoke a sense of the natural landscape known as a land of cactus and serpent “flower-bedecked and thorny, dry and hurricane-drenched....” (Pablo Neruda) A red dye obtained from squeezing native white parasitic insects known as cochineal colors the water in a garden fountain, thus serving as a polemic reminder of the ancient blood letting rituals of Zapotec ancestors and also of the blood shed during Colonial conquests of the region.25

The use of garden to exemplify features of nature/city does not presuppose the existence of an established symbol system as might exist with a language or language like system. Rather the reference class for discussing garden and its use as a symbol for understanding nature/city matters is based on experience. Experience in this case will include knowledge of what constitutes garden, the variety of garden in history, and what properties garden has in common with nature/city.

Reference in the use of garden as a form of symbol here is perhaps in some respects perhaps closer to pictorial competence that enables us to comprehend pictures than to linguistic competence based on a system of semantic or syntactic rules. This is true to the extent that our experience of garden is significantly influenced by visual sensations and perception. However, appreciating the experience of garden, unlike that of painting or other visual arts, invokes all of the senses with the possible exception of taste. In the words of Catherine Elgin, “We hear the sounds of the birds and the insects (and in a city garden the muted sounds in the city in the distance). We smell the flowers and fallen leaves. We feel the ground under our feet (and perhaps feel other plants as we walk past them).”26

The reading of garden for insight into nature or city environments draws on a broader range of experience and knowledge connecting these entities. The principal basis for understanding garden as a symbol of the connection between nature and city is the “natural” relation that exists between the symbol (garden) and its referents (nature/city), by means of shared features, e.g. living plants, rocks, water from nature.
and architecture, bridges, sculptures linked by design contributed by the human mind and actions. Interpretation of garden as a symbol of nature/city connections depends on a complex array of experience drawing upon observation, including visual, auditory, and other sensory experiences of every day encounters with nature and city, as well as the various systems of acquired knowledge gained from historical, scientific, philosophical and aesthetic sources.

The field of reference for identifying, comparing, and interpreting garden, as symbol is not an abstract system. Rather, it is the substantial body of gardens in cities throughout the world. Each instance of garden brings attention to the natural and cultural elements particular to the city environment in which it resides. The symbolic relationship in this instance is one of sampling the properties characteristic of nature and city in garden rather than describing or depicting.

The "rightness" or effectiveness of a symbol as Goodman pointed out depends on what we want the symbols to accomplish. Standards vary with the type of symbols. Since our interest here is in understanding the aesthetic features of nature/city, it is useful to focus on aspects of symbols that best articulate the aesthetic features of our subject. In any event, the measure of a symbol’s worth rests on its ability to inform perception and enhance our understanding of the matter under consideration. Garden will best inform our understanding of city/nature when our experience takes into account a wide variety of gardens in reference to a range of nature/city configurations.

It is not sufficient, however, simply to introduce symbols for the sake of novelty alone. The concepts that we introduce should serve some useful interest. In this case the theme of the conference, "Nature/City" calls for rethinking how we might better understand how nature and city are connected. One of the issues in conceptualizing nature and city environments is identifying images of sufficient richness to contemplate the complexities of these entities. Garden offers a living symbol which directly embraces aspects of city/nature that are less accessible to human perception or understanding through either verbal or pictorial means of understanding the nature/city environments. Hence, the use of garden as a symbol in the present context seems altogether worthy of consideration.

**Conclusion**

To conclude this discussion of garden as a symbol linking nature/city, let me summarize briefly and draw some implications. I have argued that that garden functions as a cognitive symbol exemplifying both literally and metaphorically important features of nature and city environments. Like the concept of city, garden covers a range of artifacts from the Imperial Garden of the Chinese Qianlong Emperor (Qing Dynasty) in Beijing’s Forbidden City intended as a living space for the Emperor in his retirement,


24 Thanks to Catherine Elgin who provided me with this example.


26 Catherine Elgin, Letter commenting on an earlier draft, June 14, 2012.