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Beyond “Sustaining Beauty”
MUSINGS ON A MANIFESTO

In 2007, I had grown dissatisfied with the status of sustainable design discourse in landscape architecture. By adding an additional dimension to the “three Es” of sustainability—environment, economy, and equity—I asserted that sustainable design needed to be more than a technical response to improving ecosystem function or increasing access to public space. From Vitruvius to modern landscape architects Charles Eliot and Jens Jensen, designers have written of the inextricability of aesthetics, function, and structure. Motivated by that knowledge, I called for (re)inserting aesthetics into the sustainability triad (see list below).¹

After writing this declaration of my values and beliefs in manifesto form, I continued to expand my knowledge of sustainability discourse in readings and discussions with my students, as well as through public lectures.² Two journals, one academic and one professional, published the manifesto, thus increasing the range and type of reader (Meyer 2008a and 2008b).³ Their collective responses were startling. In the twenty-five years I have been lecturing and writing about contemporary landscape design topics, no other publication has touched such a strong chord, elicited so many varied responses, or reached such a broad audience.

Therefore I want to share my musings about the values, often implicit, behind the
reception of “Sustaining Beauty,” as well as my own unexamined assumptions. I want to renew my investment in the entanglement of social aesthetics with experiments in making and living. Finally, I also want to lay bare my process of reflection, critique, and extension—the invisible work between publications that occurs in conversations and debates with students, colleagues, and strangers.⁴

**BASIC TENETS FROM THE MANIFESTO “SUSTAINING BEAUTY”**

1. Sustaining culture through landscape (Landscape architecture is a cultural practice, not just a professional practice)
2. Cultivating hybrids—the language of landscape⁵
3. Beyond ecological performance
4. Natural process over natural form
5. Hypernature—the recognition of art⁶
6. The performance of beauty⁷
7. Sustainable design = constructing experiences
8. Sustainable beauty is particular, not generic⁸
9. Sustainable beauty is dynamic, not static
10. Enduring beauty is resilient and regenerative
11. Landscape agency—from experience to sustainable praxis.⁹ (Meyer 2008a and 2008b)

**Background: Reception of “Sustaining Beauty”**

“Sustaining Beauty” was intended to provoke and challenge the status quo as much as to persuade. A design manifesto requires the declaration of beliefs, the taking of a stand. Disgruntled as I was with what landscape architects were saying, or not saying, about sustainability, the manifesto seemed to be the most optimistic and efficacious mode of redirecting the discourse.

Sustainable landscape design is generally understood in relation to three principles—ecological health, social justice, and economic prosperity. Until recently, aesthetic values had not factored into the discourse of sustainability, except in negative asides conflating vision, visuality, and formalism with the aesthetic, and rendering all of that secondary to ecological function, performativity, quantitative metrics, or ecosystem services. To the contrary, however, I believe that, as a body of knowledge and a way of experiencing the world, social aesthetics can play a critical role in a sustainability agenda. It will take more than ecologically regenerative designs for our early twenty-first-century neoliberal consumer culture to be sustainable.

What is needed are designed landscapes that provoke those who experience them to
be more aware of how their actions affect the environment, and to care enough to make changes in their actions. This involves recognition of the role of aesthetic environmental experiences, such as beauty, wonder, awe, ugliness, and repulsion, in re-centering human consciousness from an egocentric to a more biocentric perspective. Such recognition is dependent on new conceptions of human and nonhuman entanglements.

Many who heard or read my manifesto agreed that landscape architects were too narrowly construing sustainability as a new form of extreme functionalism, realized through green infrastructure or eco-technologies. But they did not share my understanding of aesthetics. Some thought of aesthetics as a retrograde concern, or a call for universal types, or a synonym for natural beauty. Post-publication, therefore, I started revising the manifesto, finding additional sources for my assertions, combining a couple of the tenets, and adding a new one called “Sustainable aesthetics challenge through difference and dissonance.” This tenet was necessary to shake up those who could not get beyond a limited sense of beauty, so they might appreciate a broader argument about the role of new, alternative forms of aesthetic experience in a sustainable design agenda.

The questions about these issues compelled me to read philosophers such as Arthur Danto (1999), Alexander Nehamas (2007), and Elaine Scarry (1999) more closely. More significantly, other theoretical arenas opened up, such as the theories of affects. A second set of questions, however, exposed a flaw in the manifesto—my focus on one aspect of aesthetic experience, the beautiful. Since I had written so extensively about postmodern conceptions of the postindustrial landscape sublime, I was blind to how narrow the manifesto appeared to those who did not know my earlier writing. The following passages therefore elaborate on these aspects of the manifesto and offer more nuanced accounts of the entanglement of everyday life and aesthetic experience, socio-ecological ethos, and the often unexamined values embedded within the designed landscape.

ON BEAUTY

Beauty is a malleable category, and not a universal type. Contemporary designers create new forms of beauty. They stretch known categories through their exploration of new relationships and attempt to incorporate new functions and processes in their projects. I am impatient with designers who say that “the public” expects a particular kind of natural landscape beauty: this implies that the beautiful is only about the pleasurable and insipid, without regard for the sensual, the practical, and other emotions, or
that beauty requires disinterestedness, a separation from the world, as if Kantian beauty was the only conception of beauty.\textsuperscript{13}

Throughout history, we can find numerous examples of changing values about beauty in many practices and places. Didn't Frederick Law Olmsted and John Charles Olmsted create a public park in the 1880s predicated on an unfamiliar landscape type and experience, a saltwater marsh? Three decades ago, Anne Whiston Spirn wrote about their nervousness and audacity in doing so: “Olmsted felt the juxtaposition of the salt marsh and the city would be novel, certainly, in labored urban grounds, and there may be a momentary question of its dignity and appropriateness . . . but [it] is a direct development of the original conditions of the locality in adaptation to the needs of a dense community” (Spirn 1984, 148, citing Zaitzevsky 1982, 57).

In another example, architect Ignasi Sola-Morales described the role of contemporary landscape photography in altering his appreciation of the urban landscape. He credited contemporary photographers’ depictions of “forgotten” highway interchanges and abandoned postindustrial sites—depictions of spaces beyond conventional streets, parks, plazas, and gardens—for revealing the latent possibilities in\textit{ terrain vague}, the strange, interstitial spaces formed by the processes of modernization that lay outside the bounds of accepted urban design theory (Sola-Morales 1995, 120).

Twentieth-century art is also rife with accounts of the stretching of the boundaries of beauty.\textsuperscript{14} Landscape theorist and historian John Beardsley suggested that surrealism, particularly Louis Aragon’s fascination with “the marvelous” and André Breton’s declaration that “Beauty will be convulsive,” intersected neatly with my thinking about beauty’s cultural and historical malleability. The key concepts of surrealism are grounded in Aragon’s belief that the marvelous is found in the contradictions of the real. Breton called these concepts the veiled erotic, the expiration of movement, and the magical circumstantial. They resonate with counterconceptions of beauty found in the works of Diet Studio, Turenscape, Gilles Clément, and Peter Latz, to name a few designers who inspired my manifesto.

Re-reading Rosalind Krauss’s essay on surrealism afforded me new tools for discussing beauty as an experience of excitement caused by \textit{frisson}, dissonance, tension, delayed or disturbing pleasure (Krauss 1985/1991, 112–13). Designed landscapes located within forests disturbed by timbering, abandoned steel mills, and military installations, or mining sites degraded by toxic wastes, do not intrinsically contain new conceptions of beauty. However,
through the interventions of a designer, new configurations and calibrations of landscape forms and processes come into being. What is perceived to be outside the bounds of landscape beauty is stretched. Thus new conceptions of landscape beauty can be convulsive, disturbing, and challenging; through them we confront the entanglement of personal consumption, waste, and the postindustrial site.

As an expression of cultural values and an extension of personal experience, beauty is malleable; hence the qualifications created by theorists and philosophers, such as difficult beauty, or convulsive beauty, or functional beauty (Parsons and Carlson 2008). Dissonance can also be an aesthetic experience. As Theodor Adorno wrote, beauty is not just about pleasure. It can originate in the ugly, its antinomy. “The definition of aesthetics as the theory of the beautiful is so unfruitful because the formal character of the concept of beauty is inadequate to the full content [Inhalt] of the aesthetic” (Adorno 1970, 50). Writers Adorno, Breton, and Aragon, as well as designers Julie Bargmann, Richard Haag, Peter Latz, Ken Smith, Ignasi Sola-Morales, and Kongjian Yu offer examples in words, images, and places of beauty. The beauty of their work, however, may be stretched beyond what is immediately and visibly pleasing to new forms of beauty that are, in Dave Hickey’s words, “strangely familiar,” and that call into question assumptions about our perceptions of found and constructed nature, as well as our conceptions of sustainable living and making (Hickey 1993).

This explication of the ways that beauty can be stretched in response to changing functions or widened capacities for experiencing pleasure answers some of the skeptics who assumed I was calling for a return to conventional ideas of natural beauty, or a new formalism. But my failure to state more forcefully and convincingly that I was interested in sustainable aesthetics, not just sustainable beauty, was a fundamental flaw. And although I wrote with my prior writings on aesthetics, environmental perception, and ethics in mind, I did not mention them. In those writings I explored the postmodern sublime in two public parks built on postindustrial sites (Meyer 1998) as well as the influence of phenomenology, earth art, and site-specificity on the practice of recent landscape architecture in the United States (Meyer 2001) and the importance of scale and duration in the immersive experience of large parks built on disturbed sites (Meyer 2007). Without knowledge of my prior writings, especially my interest in how the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stretched the beautiful and the sublime into strange new forms and experiences of the contemporary designed landscape, it could
have been easy for readers to assume that I was only interested in beauty, one component of aesthetic experience.

Here, let me underscore that beauty is only one of many aesthetic experiences possible in the world. As my colleague Julie Bargmann says, “Let’s name and claim” the others. In the same way that eighteenth-century art and landscape theorists created the concept of the picturesque to describe a new aesthetic experience between the beautiful and the sublime, we need to be attuned to new aesthetic experiences, to name them, to understand their agency, and to explore their possibilities in the designed landscape (Reimer 2010).

AESTHETICS: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF SENSE PERCEPTION AND COGNITION

In the manifesto, I defined aesthetics as the art and science of sense perception and cognition. Drawing on the writings of pragmatist and phenomenological philosophers as well as landscape architects, I understand aesthetics as an experience, not a formal language, not surface appearance (Berleant 1991; Dewey 1934; Spirn 1998). Aesthetic perception requires an exchange, a perceptual entanglement between a sensing body and the world; it requires a pause and duration. As an art and science of sensory perception and cognition, aesthetics is a mode of interacting with and knowing the world. Aesthetic knowledge combines theory with method to guide action.

Like Spiri and Dewey, geographer Nigel Thrift grounds aesthetic experience in everyday life. He writes, “It is crucial to note here that aesthetics is understood as a fundamental element of human life and not just an additional luxury, a frivolous add-on when times are good. Postrel puts it thus: ‘Aesthetics is the way we communicate through the senses. It is the art of creating reactions without words, through the look and feel of people, places and things.’” Thrift continues, “It is an affective force that is active, intelligible, and has genuine efficacy: it is both moved and moving. . . . It is a force that generates sensory and emotional gratification. It is a force that produces shared capacity and commonality. It is a force that, though cross-cut by all kinds of impulses, has its own intrinsic value” (Thrift 2010, 291–92). In landscape terms, aesthetics is not a synonym for that which is seen, or the surface appearance of things. Aesthetic experience occurs within an affective world that implicates bodies, objects, spaces, values, experiences, and networks. A theory and practice of landscape affects and effects would recognize that encounters between people and places are exchanges of emotions, agency, and energies.
By situating the design of landscapes within this strain of everyday aesthetic theory, and not limiting oneself to a Kantian state of disinterested contemplation, links can be drawn between design, ethos, politics, socio-ecological networks, and bodies. Cultural theorist Terry Eagleton implicates the aesthetic as follows: "That territory between aesthetics and life is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together—the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world" (1990, 13). A landscape architecture inspired by Eagleton and Thrift's rich description of the aesthetic would do more than accommodate programs or afford immersive sensory experiences. It would calibrate the density, proximity, accessibility, and distribution of landscape spaces and surfaces relative to the desired effect of that strike on the individual and collective body. Those affective strikes would occur during the socio-ecological practices of everyday life, such as using (bathing to gardening), storing (from cisterns to rain gardens), and conserving (from native plants to grey water systems) water, in and through a designed landscape. Maria Hellstrom Reimer's concept of "Unsettling Eco-scapes" (2010) resonates with this practice of creating challenging, uncanny, at times discordant, everyday landscapes.

**Aesthetic Experience Requires Duration**

For designers of landscapes familiar with this literature, aesthetic experience is a slow process. It is not immediate, nor is it exhausted by a glance. It is not synonymous with the visual although it includes looking. These insights draw on philosophers spanning a century, from Henri Bergson to Arthur Danto and Alexander Nehamas, as well as contemporary art historians and neuroscientists exploring empathetic aesthetic responses through brain scans. This literature has rendered several of the following principles upon which "Sustaining Beauty" is based and through which I continue to refine my beliefs about the socio-ecological agency of the designed landscape:

1. Beauty is connected to appearance but not exhausted by it. Time is required to apprehend the beautiful (Nehamas 2007, 42).
2. Aesthetic experience is delayed, requires duration, and exists in the exchange between what ones sees/experiences and what one knows (Danto 1999; Nehamas 2007).
3. Beauty draws us near, and makes us want to know more and to act. It urges us to
create (Haidt 2006; Nehamas 2007, 76, 132; Scarry 1999).

4. Aesthetic experience builds a mode of intuition that combines feelings and knowledge. It produces its own form of cognition (Bergson 1907).15

Recent findings in neuroscience resonate with these musings. Art historian David Freedberg and neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese’s recent experiments demonstrate that aesthetic responses are registered in the brain and manifested in somatic responses in the body. They found that visible traces of the artist’s hand or mark, and vigorous handling of the painterly or sculptural medium, led to aesthetic response that was more than emotional. It was embodied and created empathy between the creator, the work, and the viewer (Freedberg and Gallese 2011). This begs the question whether perception of the conscious marks of the designer or gardener of landscapes—versus the recreation of natural beauty or the appearance of a wild ecosystem—might intensify affective bonds between humans and the nonhuman natural world.

Affects and Social Aesthetics

Why does a broader understanding of aesthetics matter to a sustainability agenda?

When talking about a delayed or prolonged experience in a public space, such as a park, a city street, or a campus, one cannot help but consider the collective experience of new configurations of urban nature. Can the experience on the ground of new socio-ecological entanglements—expanses of flooded or moist surfaces with novel material conditions or spatial practices—over time, result in more than self-absorbed reverie? Having wondered and worried about this when writing “The Post-Earth Day Conundrum” (Meyer 2001), I now realize that the duration of experience that I was considering through an aesthetic lens still needs to be broadened. We need to consider how landscape architects, in light of Guattari’s “ethico-aesthetics,” can “develop a creative responsibility for new modes of living as they come into being” (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010, 14). We need to explore how designing for the practice of everyday life in the designed landscape, an extended durational experience, can contribute to a new social aesthetics, a new ethos of sustainable perception and living.

Ben Highmore, a cultural theorist and scholar of everyday life, builds upon Gregory Bateson’s 1958 concept of ethos as a “culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and emotions of the individuals,” having “a definite set of sentiments towards
the rest of the world,” and “an emotional background” (2010, 128). In his persuasive argument for recasting aesthetics as a social issue, not a personal experience, Highmore describes the connection between ethos and social aesthetics in ways that resonate with landscape thinking and making: “Ethos, to borrow a term from Jacques Rancière, could be thought of as the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (le partage du sensible): ‘the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience’ (Rancière 2004, 13). Ethos, then, would be the orchestration of perception, sensorial culture, affective intensities, and so on: more pertinently it will be the interlacing of these” (Highmore 2010, 128–29).

This connection between landscape space, form, material, perception, and social aesthetics is just below the surface of what I have been writing and thinking about over the past decade. Several colleagues and students suggested that “theories of affect” might afford insights into specific issues that had troubled me since writing “The Post-Earth Day Conundrum” (Meyer 2001). Much writing about aesthetics is about individual experience; yet, numerous, simultaneous individual experiences in a public space comprise an aesthetic collectivity and create new ways of living in and thinking about the environment. Thus, to better understand the agency of aesthetics in sustainability discourse, a promising area of research and speculation resides in what Patricia Clough describes as “the affective turn” (Clough 2007).

Affects impress on the emotions; they touch us and move our hearts. According to Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth-century philosopher, affects connect the mind and body; they can be actions or passions. But unlike the interest in the body in either feminist theory or phenomenology, for instance, contemporary theories of affects entangle bodies with the world of technologies and networks, from the ecological to the logistical to information, suspending them in the space of duration during which time affects take place and affects unfold.16

This passage from Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg’s introduction to The Affect Theory Reader (2010) conveys the import for sustainable designers interested in the interconnections across scales and systems, from the body to the territory, from the biological to the technological: “Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and to be acted upon. . . . That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body and otherwise), in those resonances that
circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds. . . . Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1).

In the mid-1990s, a group of cultural critics and theorists including Brian Massumi, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank, developed strains of this particular approach to philosophy and cultural theory. They were reacting partly to the overly textual basis of structuralism and post-structuralism, and partly to the extraction of the phenomenological body from the entangled force field of flows, space, materials, and affects that constitute the world. However, aesthetic experience of landscape is inextricable from the world’s complex, intertwining systems and flows. This may be the single most important trajectory that “Sustaining Beauty” has launched me on. It constructs a discursive field between writings on sustainability and aesthetics with those on landscape infrastructure and logistic landscapes. In doing so, it has the capacity to transform a landscape designed for individual sensation or experience to a landscape that reinforces a sensorial culture aware of how interlaced human routines are with the movement, as well as the scarcity or abundance, of materials and energies. Over the past few years, I have seen or read about several projects that deploy on-site affective intensities as a bridge to a broader network awareness, but Taylor Cullity Lethlean’s new garden for Australia’s Royal Botanical Garden was the first that I experienced and thought about through this lens.

Descriptive Entanglement: The Australian Garden at Cranbourne, Victoria

While on a “Sustaining Beauty” lecture tour in Australia, I visited a new botanical garden with jarring, unsettling, and saturated spatial sequences that alluded to national water-practices and gardening preferences. The institution’s mission to propagate, display, and advocate for the native species and habitats of Australia maps readily onto this shift from a phenomenology of personal emotions to social affects and social aesthetics. The Australian Garden demonstrates several ways that encounters with the landscape may change bodies, from the individual to the collective, from the human to the nonhuman (such as an underappreciated plant species). The passage below describes my aesthetic experience, and allows others to witness, vicariously, how the
Fig. 2.1. The central Red Sand Garden, designed by Taylor Cullity Lethlean landscape architects in collaboration with sculptors Mark Stoner and Edwina Kearney. The 4-acre space is marked with drifts of thin, white, shiny striations and shallow dark-green vegetated disks. A crisp constructed horizon edits out most of the demonstration and exhibition gardens that cluster around the inaccessible center. Photograph by author.
garden's effects and affects were extended, prolonged, delayed, and entangled with the following two weeks of travel throughout Australia, and beyond. I hope my account of one landscape encounter allows others to see the potential of affect theory for creating, perceiving, and interpreting new modalities of sustainable landscape design. I offer up this garden encounter as an example of an imaginative counter-tradition of sustainable socio-aesthetics that values the fluctuating, the particular, and the dense force field that weaves together encounter and memory, event and network, perception and cognition, experience and action.

As I reach the bottom stairs, a shallow red-orange bowl fills my visual field. I have read that this inaccessible, tilted landform is a representation of the Australian continent—its dry, red sandy center of dune fields and ephemeral stream beds, and a sculpture designed by a landscape architecture firm and two sculptors. Colleagues in Melbourne had explained the meaning of the Australian Garden's central space. Surface, lines and events—rendered in sand, ceramic and vegetation—evoke the yet unseen continental vastness [fig. 2.1].

But as soon as I turn my head and move my feet these descriptions are insufficient, replaced by a myriad of competing associations. The wide panoramic view that introduces a visitor to the Australian Garden is larger than one's cone of vision. Unable to take in the figured-ground plane in a glance, I turn to the left, where the red-orange sand garden slips below low billows of textural plantings, the edges obscure. What kind of sculpture folds this seamlessly into its setting? Without familiar plants to orient me and confronted by this odd, inaccessible, and assertive foreground, it is as if I am listening to a foreign language, trying to discern meanings from the context when the individual sounds do not congeal into a recognizable verbal pattern. If not for the gardeners—on their knees caring, weeding, and planting like the figures in a Bruegel engraving—I could easily forget I was in a botanical garden [fig. 2.2].

Fig. 2.2. The perimeter space to the left includes a sequence of demonstration gardens of various plant ecologies and habitats where gardeners speed up and slow down time through practices of care, management, and cultivation. The visitor must deploy a double gaze apprehending both the stable visual symbol and dynamic material edge. Photograph by author.
In their cultivation of the plants, these gardeners remind me of the purpose of this place. This is not a sculpture garden, or a garden with a sculpture in the middle of it. The actions of the gardeners, on the margin between the surreal otherness of the red-orange sand garden and the public path, make visible the propensity of this landscape. It exists between a visual symbol of another landscape, transposed from the continent’s interior, and an embodied, dynamic, unfolding landscape.17

I then look to the right, passing my eyes along the folded, dune-like edge of the red-orange center as it slopes down towards a thin green verge and a horizontal channel full of water and reflected sunlight [fig. 2.3]. My initial reading of the center as a symbol, or a sculpture, or perhaps a scenic view but not experience, can no longer be sustained. I am jolted out of my comfortable assumption that, after all the shock of the entrance, this is a typical botanical garden of tended plots. Adjacent to this barren, inaccessible, high and dry, sculptural center is a beckoning space of extreme wetness. These conditions are juxtaposed so abruptly and the state shift from dry to wet so compressed, I struggle for orientation. My feet are compelled towards this spatial and material joint, this condition of oscillation between sand and water, dry and wet. I am engaged, immersed, and curious.
Botanical gardens are institutions for research and education as well as entertainment. Their missions have moved beyond nineteenth-century aspirations to collect, catalog, and curate. The Australian Garden’s sponsoring organization, the Royal Botanic Garden, defines itself as a leader in “the conservation of plants... through biodiversity research, conservation programs to protect rare and endangered species and the study of habitats” (Roberts 2007, inside cover). Clearly, Taylor Cullity Lethlean’s and their consultant Paul Thompson’s knowledge of native plants, as well as their arrangement of the beds surrounding the sand garden, fulfill this mission. The gardens bring the public into close encounter with native plants that may be unfamiliar to them.

But, how does this dissonant entrance into the botanical garden contribute to that mission? From one’s first encounter in the garden, plants are understood in relationship to site and habitat. Yes, the sand garden can be understood as a synecdoche, or fragment, that stands for the relationship between the continent’s dry interior and its more temperate, vegetated coastal perimeter. But the patterns and arrangement of plants are also related to the availability of moisture, and to processes of land formation and water flows here in Cranbourne. The garden quickly shifts in one’s mind from a miniature and an abstraction to an actual landscape comprised of varied “to-scale” habitats, microclimates, and related plant groupings. One’s experiential apprehension of plants in specific situations and habitats in the garden increases one’s familiarity with plants and, more generally, the conservation of plants in their native habitats (fig. 2.4). As Seigworth and Gregg note, a body is never alone; it is
Fig. 2.5. The original Royal Botanical Garden in South Yarra, Melbourne, created in the nineteenth century. Its picturesque gardens of subtropical plants drew on an established conception of landscape beauty replete with lawns that were familiar to British colonists of the time. Photograph by author.
“always aided and abetted by, and dovetails with, the field or context of its force-relations” (2010, 3).

How is this achieved in design terms? Lethlean spent a year studying gardens in Japan when he was in college. His account of the lessons gleaned from observing and documenting these gardens, many of them *kare sansui*—dry sand or rock gardens—expanded my interpretation of the Australian Garden. So did his mention of Fred Williams’s abstract paintings of the Australian landscape that have inspired and influenced the Taylor Cullity Lethlean design team.\(^\text{18}\) I have imaginatively revisited the garden numerous times—studying the photographs I took on site and recalling the sequence they record. My newfound knowledge of these multivalent references—the disparate force fields of geomorphology, native habitats, abstract modern art, and traditional Japanese garden theory—filtered through the eyes of an Australian-born and -educated landscape architect, imbues the garden with an even stranger beauty than before.\(^\text{19}\)

The Cranbourne garden engaged my feet, my eyes, my body, and my mind over the following weeks and months. During the time in the garden, my awareness of the Australian landscape began. As I traveled, I returned to the garden, mentally, re-calibrating my reactions. The garden’s plants and materials, and their arrangements, swirled within a field of flows and forces as large as the continent, as old as the English-picturesque botanical garden in Melbourne and the geological morphology I studied from the plane (figs. 2.5 and 2.6).

I now appreciate the connection between places and affects as being less about one-to-one correlation to morality, ethics, and care—issues I explored in previous writings—and more about opening up the possibility of altering how people relate to one another and the natural world. This “maybe,” or promise, of affect is captured by Lauren Berleant in her modest proposition that “the substitution of habituated indifference with a spreading pleasure might open up a wedge into an alternative ethics of living, or not” (2010, 105). Seigworth and Gregg suggest, “Maybe that is the ‘for-now’ promise of affect theory’s ‘not yet,’ its habitually rhythmic (or

Fig. 2.6. The vast dry landscape of Australia’s continental interior viewed from an airplane, 2010. Photograph by author.
near rhythmic) undertaking: endeavoring to locate that propitious moment when the stretching of (or tiniest tear in) bloom-space could precipitate something more than incremental. If only. Affect as promise” (2010, 12). A landscape architecture of affects cannot be substantiated through metrics known in advance; it cannot guarantee changes in what people think about the environment, or do in the landscape. A landscape architecture of affects, and the experiments in living that occur as the public adapts to, and adapts, the designed landscape will be provisional and speculative. What if?

After visiting designed landscapes such as the Australia Garden, I believe new sustainable landscape aesthetics and practices might best emerge from what Highmore calls “experiments in living” (2010, 135) and making, from explorations of the lived experience of place created within a network of enigmatic materials, strange objects, and multiple bodies interacting and pulsating over time. We need more slow landscapes, wherein aesthetic experience occurs over time and is shaped by a new “materialism where a body would be understood as a nexus of finely interlaced force fields” (Highmore 2010, 119). We need to find ways to explore and document the affects and entanglements, the “dense weave of aesthetic propensities” that occur in designed encounters over time (Highmore 2010, 135). This might require ways of considering, through the lens of neuroscience, how the sight of gardeners tending a landscape throughout the seasons might prompt a somatic response in the visitor and alter her appreciation for the bonds of care, manifest in the movements of a shoulder, an arm, and a shovel or rake, that connect the human and nonhuman world. Or it might require us to develop different genres of landscape criticism that more intricately enmesh a designed landscape in its milieu, or logistics landscape.20

This revelation, that aesthetic intuition is a form of cognition connecting bodies, experiences, feelings, places, networks, and actions, intrigues me from a sustainable-design perspective. Many authors have identified the gap between what we know about large systems and long processes, and what we actually do in our daily lives, as one of the biggest obstacles to sustainable life changes (Gertner 2009). Recently, I heard that Taylor Cullity Lethlean has designed prototypical vernacular residential gardens based on the native species and planted form experiments they undertook at Cranbourne.21 I am intrigued with the complex web of connections that center on this botanical garden, from the scale of the residential garden to the continent's geomorphology, from the rockpool waterway to the region's scarce rainwater, from Williams's stroke of
paint on a canvas to a gardener’s cultivation of a native plant, formerly considered a weed.

Aesthetics, Affects, Sustainability, and Public Policy

It might be easy to discount my explorations as academic speculations that are not urgent in this period of economic retrenchment and living within our means. Instead, one might argue, we should focus on landscape infrastructure because it is necessary and may be less expensive than traditional centralized engineering approaches—except for one thing. The 2005 United Nations’ Millennium Ecosystem Assessment described aesthetics as one of the four types of ecosystem services that support human life: provisioning services, regulating services, supporting services, and cultural services, such as aesthetic, recreational, spiritual (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). While this august group of scientists from around the world included aesthetic experience as a critical function of ecosystems, there has been little research published in the last decade on how to evaluate the cultural services provided by ecosystems. Some recent scholars have suggested that the category of cultural services should be jettisoned because there are not enough metrics to substantiate their inclusion. Others have suggested that cultural services should be downgraded to benefits, not services, for the same reason (Boyd and Banzhaf 2007; Kramer 2007; Layke 2009).

In what has been written, there is little recognition that there are several kinds of ecosystems to consider—from the remote and relatively undisturbed to the made, the novel, the urban, and the designed—and that their aesthetic effects and affects might vary. I hope that some readers will agree that the answer is more research, now. I trust that other landscape architects agree that the aesthetic affects of constructed and found ecologies are different. Surely, constructed ecosystems that function as public spaces perform differently aesthetically and create affects different from those found in the wild, in a nature reserve, or a national park (Nassauer 1997; Parsons and Carlson 2008).

Shouldn’t we argue that the aesthetics of constructed ecosystems are ecosystem services because of the effects and affects they may have on the communities that live near them and frequent them? In Design for Ecological Democracy, Randy Hester made a similar argument with his concept of “Impelling Form” (2006). These are not just individual emotional or psychological affects in an Olmstedian mode. They are collective affects that simultaneously tap into “already existing structures of feeling” but intensify them through prolonged, vivid, and strange encounters with constructed nature.
These affects suspend us between here (event, place) and there (watershed, territory, logistics landscape), between the place and the network. Bateson and Highmore suggest that ethos, the “dense weave of aesthetic propensities shared by a group” or social aesthetics, can be changed through “experiments in living” (Highmore 2010, 135). Kate Soper, the philosopher, urges us to seek the “already existing structures of feeling” that are changing how everyday life is practiced and how everyday space is conceived (2008, 576). Felix Guattari, the philosopher, calls for a political approach to aesthetics, calling for the development of a “creative responsibility for modes of being as they come into being” (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010, 141). From their varied points of view, these scholars suggest that changes in practices are felt and lived into being through the life and work of sentient beings.

Landscape architecture is the discipline that designs the spaces where these conditions and relationships are perceived, studied, and celebrated by scholars in anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and the sciences. We are designing these “experiments in living” in the entanglement of social practices and living systems. We need to be reflective about them, claim them, and try to measure their qualitative contributions to a sustainable future. This will require us to find bridges between existing scholarly pursuits—between the body, landscape tectonics/materials research, ecological landscape performance standards, and urban design. We can extract some of the sensibilities from affect theory, but must invent ways to ground this intellectual position in the design process, in more complex understandings, and representations of spatial practices and program, and in our post-construction evaluation of projects. If we do, new forms and practices of social aesthetics might emerge from these endeavors.22

As I write this, I am more modest in my hopes for sustaining beauties, aesthetic performance, and landscape architecture than I was in 2007. At the very least, I am less ardent, and content with exploring the connections between aesthetics and ethos, instead of ethics.23 I now consider aesthetics as an entanglement that implicates the social and embraces the drive to movement as a promise, but not necessarily an outcome. Social aesthetics and ethos are unhinged from morality and certainty. Perhaps this reflects the broader zeitgeist, political as well as professional. Regardless, this qualified optimism is a quality that serves designers well. Through our words, images, and built works, we set the world in motion. We chart out propensities without controlling outcomes. We design socio-ecological experiments in living with no promises. Something. Perhaps. It might.
Who knows? Insisting on the imperative to experiment and to work without certainty, in the face of increasing pressure to adopt best management practices and to establish ecosystem service metrics, may be the most pressing challenge for the next generation of landscape architects who care to design places that matter culturally as well as ecologically.

NOTES


2. Delivering the manifesto opened up many avenues of research. I came to appreciate the pervasive critiques of sustainability discourse that existed in other disciplines—across the humanities and sciences. I confess I was naive about the debates, especially given the singular and limited discussion of sustainability within the design fields. I learned of some of these critical positions at the second 2007 venue for “Sustaining Beauty,” the Royal Geographical Society annual meeting in London. Upon returning from that event, I immersed myself in the sustainability discourse in the humanities and sciences with the assistance of UVA graduate students in my “Situating Sustainability” seminars, several of whom developed thesis projects on related topics. These UVA students, now alumni, include Kate Boles, Aja Bulla-Richards, Alexa Bush, Toshi Karato, Shanti Levy, Jen Lynch, David Malda, Andrea Parker, Julia Price, and Kurt Petschke.

3. Editor William Thompson asked if “Sustaining Beauty” could be republished in Landscape Architecture Magazine. That issue was distributed at the 2008 ASLA meeting in Philadelphia, where I also participated in a session on landscape architecture, metrics for sustainable aesthetics, and ecosystem services.

4. The current essay is an intellectual and political work in progress, some of which was developed in a shorter piece, “Slow Landscapes: A New Erotics of Sustainability” (2009–10), some for a book on Taylor Cullity Lethlean, an Australian landscape architecture firm (Lee and Ware 2014), and some of which is still brewing. For younger scholars, I offer these musings to underscore the importance of writing about topics that matter to nonacademics, and of finding links between academic discourse and the profession.

5. For more on this issue, see Meyer (1998), “The Expanded Field of Landscape Architecture.”


7. My position here is based in Olmsted’s 1868 writing about landscape aesthetics and role of public parks: “A park is a work of art designed to produce certain effects upon the mind of men” (147–57), and on philosopher Elaine Scarry’s 1999 account of the power of beauty to de-center ourselves, to prompt us to want, and to care.

8. For divergent positions on the relationship between place, process, fitness, and beauty, see Eaton (1997) and Berrizbeitia (2007).

9. The authors I drew upon for these tenets, such as John Dewey (1934), Anne Whiston Spiri (1988), and Elaine Scarry (1999), focus on individual aesthetic and environmental experiences, but not on social aesthetics. So, although my prior work
speculated upon the broader, collective impact of many environmental/aesthetic experiences, I did not yet have a framework for social aesthetics, such as theories of affect.

10. See Carlson and Lintott’s anthology (2008) for several excellent articles on natural beauty, natural aesthetics, and its distinction from artistic beauty.

11. This was introduced to me by Peter Connolly, an Australian colleague now teaching in New Zealand.

12. Maria Hellstrom Reimer’s “Unsettling Ecoscapes” was the most insightful and influential of those responses.

13. Those unfamiliar with aesthetic theory may be interested in Mark Foster Gage, Aesthetic Theory: Essential Texts for Architecture and Design (2011) for his short critical essay and excerpts of twenty key texts, including Kant’s Critique of Judgment.

14. John Beardsley, the art and landscape historian, reminded me of this in his extremely thoughtful response to hearing my lecture “Sustaining Beauty” at the 2008 European Landscape Biennale in Barcelona.

15. Gage introduces Bergson’s 1903 writing as follows. Bergson “combines the accepted observation-based tactics of scientific rationalism with the possibility of additional information being gathered by less tangible aesthetic forms of perception… . . . For Bergson, intuition, an aesthetically tinged and disinterested refinement of raw human instinct, exists as the equally contributing counterpoint to raw scientific intelligence—both of which are required for one to possess true knowledge” (Bergson 1903, excerpt in Gage 2011, 154–55).

16. For this reason, I think that theories of affects could benefit nicely from the logistic landscape thinking and mapping of Pierre Belanger and Charles Waldheim, but that particular inquiry is outside the scope of this paper.

17. For an account of propensity, or shi, which “oscillates between the static and dynamic point of view” and can be found in “any given configuration” in “the inherent propensity for the unfolding of events,” see Fung (1999, 144–45).

18. A year after I visited the Australian Garden, Perry Lethlean lectured at the American Society of Landscape Architects’ (ASLA) annual meeting in Washington, DC, and at the University of Virginia School of Architecture. I gained additional insights into the dense entanglement of Australian design aesthetics, environmental attitudes, and cultural conceptions of sustainability from these lectures and several informal conversations with Lethlean and others who know the garden.

19. This passage is from an essay I wrote for Gini Lee and Sue Anne Ware (2014).

20. Anita Berrizbeitia’s 2005 book, Roberto Burle Marx in Caracas, is a rare example of a recent piece of landscape architectural history and criticism that covers this subject well.

21. Jen Lynch worked as a summer intern at Taylor Cullity Lethlean while a University of Virginia graduate landscape architecture student. She relayed this development to me upon her return to studies in fall 2011.

22. Jane Hutton’s recent scholarship, presented at the CELA 2012 conference, and her 2013 article “Reciprocal Landscapes: Material Portraits in New York City and Beyond,” is a promising examples of this type of intellectual enterprise.

23. My thanks to Dilip da Cunha for several conversations in Philadelphia and Melbourne about the unexamined moral implications of the manifesto. These allowed me to see the distinction between morality and ethos as one that is key to an open, creative exploration of the connection between environmentalism and aesthetics.

REFERENCES


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