

AESTHETIC SUSTAINABILITY

By Noora-Helena Korpelainen, Sanna Lehtinen

(First published May 31, 2024)

It. *Sostenibilità estetica*; Fr. *Durabilité esthétique*; Germ. *Ästhetische Nachhaltigkeit*; Span. *Sostenibilidad estética*; While relying on older ideas, the concept of aesthetic sustainability has gained traction as the developments in the discussions concerning aesthetics, on the one hand, and the discussions concerning sustainability, on the other hand, give rise to reconsideration of aesthetic theory and terminology. Human appreciations are subject to change. Yet, some works of art and artefacts, some landscapes, as well as many habits and practices maintain their aesthetic value over time, and we know from personal experience how intimidating it may at times be to acclimatize one's values with appreciations that are not considered one's own. However, for instance, in case of urban planning and experience, adjusting aesthetic appreciation to favour preservation over demolition could sometimes be an environmentally more sustainable option, for example, in terms of the use of natural resources. In some other cases, for example, in the case of those architectural constructions accepted as part of cultural heritage, their heavy maintenance requiring exploitation of nature sometimes conflicts with aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. These processes lead to reconsidering aesthetic value as part of a complex network of interlinked values.

In a very broad sense, the contemporary philosophical – and practical – relevance of the concept of aesthetic sustainability arises from the multidisciplinary consensus of humans' irreversible role in the diverse forms of environmental change. For this reason, the earlier discussion on the relationship between aesthetic value and ethical values as well as ecological values, for example, in terms of aesthetic appreciation of nature, has been important to the development of the concept of aesthetic sustainability. However, long before the scientific understanding of global warming, the temporality of aesthetic value was discussed as one important question of aesthetic experience and experiencing change in perception. In terms of early discussions concerning the idea of aesthetic sustainability, the Platonist approaches to defining beauty as self-sustaining are especially relevant. From the contemporary perspective, it is nonetheless interesting that already Vitruvius (c. 30-20 BC) aimed to describe the criteria for both successful design, construction, and critique through the *intertwinement* of the ideals concerning material durability and utility with that of the aesthetic. Based on this, our conception of the links between aesthetics and sustainability calls for reconsideration, focusing on the power of this concept to continue to

inspire thought and action both from the perspective of aesthetics and diverse sustainability-related fields of inquiry.

CURRENT DEBATE

The multidisciplinary developments in conceiving sustainability influence the novelty of the concept of aesthetic sustainability and set targets for clarification in the current debate on the topic. For example, the question whether aesthetic sustainability should be conceived as a concept of aesthetics or of sustainability science, remains open. As for the background, the contemporary concept of sustainability derives from economic debates and its current inter- and trans-generational connotation was launched in the Brundtland Commission's report in 1987, by which sustainability was conceived in relation to development as in "sustainable development". Reflecting this new perspective, the idea and concept of aesthetic sustainability has been evolving since the 1990s onward within design theory (Harper 2018; Lowe 2010), landscape ecology (through "cultural sustainability", Nassauer 1997), and philosophical and applied aesthetics, within which it has mostly been discussed from the perspectives of environmental and everyday aesthetics (Saito 2007; Lehtinen 2021). Supported by the discussion on environmental aesthetics, which, since the 1960s, has challenged the art-centered conception of aesthetic value, philosophical aesthetics has only recently taken an interest in the concept of aesthetic sustainability (Haapala 2014; Saito 2007; 2017; Lehtinen 2021; Capdevila-Werning, Lehtinen 2021; Korpelainen 2021; Mikkonen, Lehtinen 2022; Brady 2022; Haapala *et al.* ed. 2023).

The still sporadic philosophical discussion on this concept asks: How to conceive aesthetic value in aesthetic sustainability? The focus has been on defining key aesthetic categories and their role in terms of cultivating such design, production, and moral character that would support developing ecologically and socially sustainable human practices. For example, defending the view that aesthetic values cannot be subsumed under ecological values, some support the idea of aesthetic sustainability as a distinct category (e.g., Haapala 2014). Yet, others have denied the autonomy of aesthetic values from ethical values (Saito 2017; 2022; Lehtinen 2023).

As to the disciplinary field where the concept is explored, one particularly strong stance sees aesthetic sustainability as part of the domain of sustainable development (Lehtinen 2021). Within the aesthetics debate, however, the main contexts where the concept is mobilized are urban environments and urban experiences, which characteristically mix together questions on both environmental and everyday aesthetics. And although this should not be taken as diminishing the significance of the arts in the reflection about aesthetic sustainability, Saito (2017) has proposed the everyday as the fundamental aesthetic context in terms of aesthetic sustainability.

Early work arguing for the acknowledgment of aesthetic sustainability within the sustainability framework bases the rationalization on the conception of our affective and potentially transformative relationship with beautiful objects found in environmental experience (Leist, Holland 2000; Meyer 2008; Lowe 2010). On the contrary, the discussion in contemporary philosophical aesthetics on the topic often highlights the

notion of aesthetic diversity (Saito 2007, 2017; Haapala 2014; Lehtinen 2021; Brady 2022). Especially from the perspective of inter- and trans-generational thinking inbuilt in the concept of aesthetic sustainability, also negative aesthetic values are considered important as they highlight the intertwinement of aesthetic and ethical values (Lehtinen 2021; Capdevila-Werning, Lehtinen 2021; Brady 2022).

DISCUSSION AND ARTICULATION OF THE CONCEPT FROM DIFFERENT APPROACHES

In general, aesthetic sustainability implies a temporal prolongation of aesthetic value (Lehtinen 2021). However, the contemporary conception of aesthetic sustainability is not only a question of aesthetic value but also that of sustainability in general. Thus, depending on the approach to sustainability – for example, either as a preferred state of global or local affairs and systems or as a continuous and never-ending process in which the overall health of ecosystems is not compromised – aesthetic sustainability can be understood differently. One can refer with it to the perceived quality of such an imagined or testified state or process or to the enduring processes concerning aesthetic values, tastes, preferences, manifestations, or aesthetic practices and cultures within transforming societies. The latter is indicated, for example, when discussing aesthetic sustainability through the scope of “sustainable aesthetics” (see Haapala et al. ed. 2023). The former perspective, instead, is often discussed or assumed through the ideas of “the aesthetics of sustainability” (Kagan 2011; Saito 2017; Di Carlo 2014) and “sustainability aesthetics” (Shapshay, Tenen, Saito 2018; Daugelaite, Grazuleviciute-Vileniske 2020), which in turn concern ways or methods to achieve future-oriented aesthetic sustainability. In this regard, Yuriko Saito’s (2007) detailed discussion of the dimensions of Green Aesthetics is one of the preceding contributions. Both in Saito’s (2007; 2017; 2022) work and in Sacha Kagan’s (2011) approach, aesthetic sustainability comes close to discussions of style and taste, which are reconsidered through key categories of design, familiarity, and care, in Saito’s case, and of complexity in the cases of Kagan and Di Carlo (2014).

A very different approach is provided by Leist and Holland (2000), who conceive of aesthetic sustainability not as a sphere of aesthetics but of sustainability together with the other two spheres of biomedical and material sustainability. For them, aesthetic sustainability refers to the beauty of nature and its culturally acceptable valuation, leaving the moral claim of aesthetic sustainability to mean living “a naturally good life” (Leist and Holland 2000, 10). According to them, “aesthetic sustainability finds its most enduring expression in communal traditions of valuing natural things intrinsically” (Leist, Holland 2000, 15). Contrastingly, Lehtinen (2021) understands aesthetic sustainability as a conceptual tool, as a component of critique that could be brought to consider various cases and the related sustainability deliberation. It consists of five key components (fig. 1), the emphasis between which varies according to the case that it is applied to. These elements are 1) subjective experience as the core element of aesthetic experience based on perception, 2) aesthetic values as socially contested notions of experienced quality, 3) functionality as how well the case in question fulfils its purpose, 4) environmental/ecological sustainability which cannot be overlooked, and finally 5) the direct relation to time which in many cases is linked to the material dimension of the case in question. As such, Lehtinen considers aesthetic sustainability as a component of sustainability but, unlike Leist and Holland, by virtue of the dialogue with other similar sustainability-

related concepts, namely ecological/environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, social sustainability, and cultural sustainability. The concept of aesthetic sustainability thus functions to denote that dimension of the sought-after sustainability transformation to which discussion and research in philosophical aesthetics give meanings.

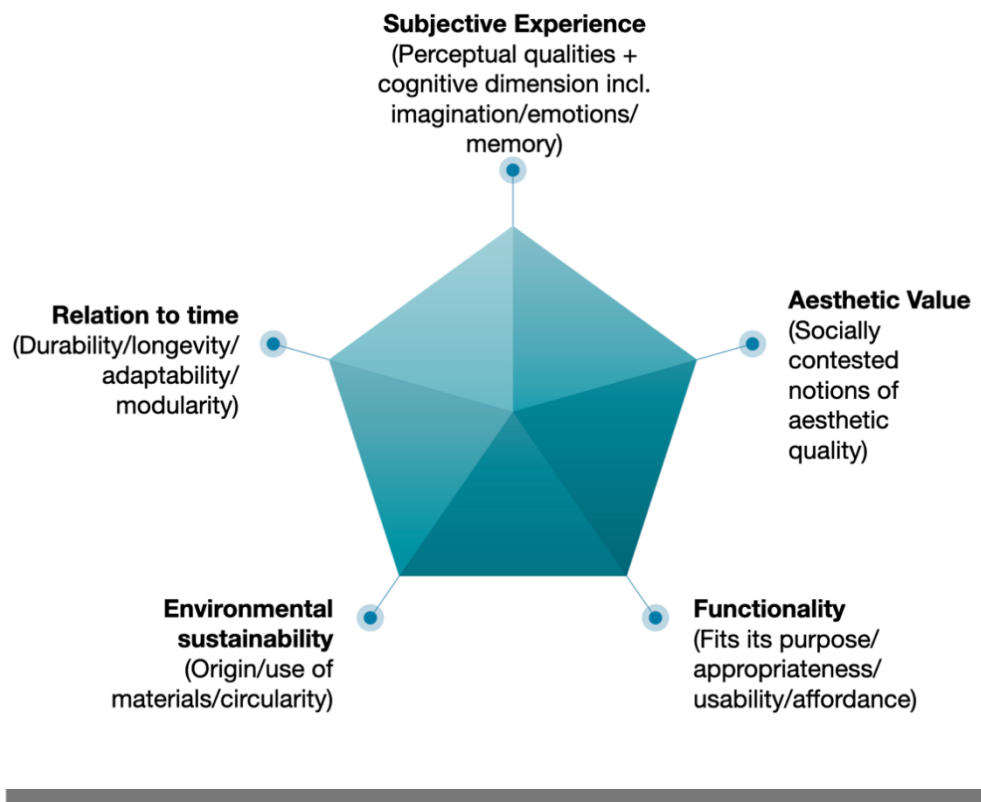


Fig. 1: The five elements of aesthetic sustainability.

DIALOGUE WITH OTHER FIELDS

The current debate on aesthetic sustainability draws its power from multidisciplinary discussion encompassing aesthetics, ethics, environmental ecology, sustainability studies, as well as design theory and practice. Already Leist and Holland (2000) held that the unavoidable dialogue of aesthetic discussions about sustainability with economic and ecological discussions is a starting point. Lehtinen's (2021) conception aligns with their view, yet understands aesthetic sustainability first and foremost as a concept of philosophical aesthetics and as one that could assist in discussing sustainability in a multidisciplinary context. In this regard, the concept of aesthetic sustainability is proposed for broadening perspectives and

enhancing reflexive practices in sustainability science, and it could be discussed from pedagogical perspectives, for example, when developing eco-social education and sustainability education.

The link to everyday life is emphasized by the already recognized links to well-being research in which aesthetic sustainability will probably be a more pronounced theme in the future (see e.g. Galvin ed. 2018; Lehtinen 2023). The concept has also importance in understanding contemporary consumer culture and changes in it as is visible from recent advances in sociology-based consumption studies (Loukianov 2023; Lehtinen 2023). The normative potential of the concept is present in how it is touched upon – even if not always directly used as such – in various fields of design theory and practice, for example, in landscape architecture (Meyer 2008), architecture (Lee 2011; Daugelaite, Grazuleviciute-Vileniske 2020) as well as studies on urban complexity (Di Carlo 2014), and product design (Harper 2018).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- E. Brady, *Global Climate Change and Aesthetics*, "Environmental Values" 31, 1 (2022): 27-46.
DOI :10.3197/096327121X16141642287683.
- Brundtland Commission. *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. United Nations, Oxford University Press, 1987,
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>.
- R. Capdevila-Werning, S. Lehtinen, *Intergenerational Aesthetics. A Future-oriented Approach to Aesthetic Theory and Practice*, "Philosophical Inquiries" 9, 2 (2021). DOI:10.4454/philing.v9i2.343.
- A. Daugelaite, I. Grazuleviciute-Vileniske, *Aesthetics of Sustainability and Architecture: An Overview*, "Architecture and Urban Planning" 16/1 (2020): 48-55. DOI: 10.2478/aup-2020-0008.
- I. Di Carlo, *The Aesthetic of Sustainability: Systemic Thinking in the Evolution of Cities*, in N. Marchettini, C.A. Brebbia, R. Pulselli, S. Bastianoni (eds.), *The Sustainable City IX: Urban Regeneration and Sustainability*, Ashurst, New Forest, WIT Press, 2014: 27-38. DOI: 10.2495/SC140031.
- T. Galvin, (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Well-Being*, New York, Routledge, 2018.
- A. Haapala, *Aesthetic Values and Ecological Facts: A Conflict, a Compromise, or What?*, in S. Bøe, C. Hege (eds.), *Raw: Architectural Engagements with Nature*, Farnham, Routledge, 2014.
- A. Haapala, V. Kaukio, N. Korpelainen, M. Salwa (eds.), *Aesthetics, Environment, and Sustainability*, "Polish Journal of Aesthetics" 2/3 (2023): 69-70.
<https://pjaesthetics.uj.edu.pl/documents/138618288/155109644/pja-69-70-full.pdf/d07e4c49-9ef5-4486-8868-d2e9d115bfde>.
- K.H. Harper, *Aesthetic Sustainability: Product Design and Sustainable Usage*, London, New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018.
- S. Kagan, *Aesthetics of Sustainability: A Transdisciplinary Sensibility for Transformative Practices*, "Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science", 2 (2011): 65-73. DOI: 10.22545/2011/00014.
- N. Korpelainen, *Cultivating Aesthetic Sensibility for Sustainability*, "ESPES. The Slovak Journal of Aesthetics" 10/2 (2021): 165-182. <https://espes.ff.unipo.sk/index.php/ESPES/article/view/226/246>.
- S. Lee, *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers 2011.

- S. Lehtinen, *Aesthetic Choice in the Age of Ecological Awareness*, in M. Poltrum, M. Musalek, K. Galvin, Y. Saito, H. Fox (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Mental Health and Contemporary Western Aesthetics* (C19S1–C19P77), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023.
- S. Lehtinen, *Aesthetic Sustainability*, in P. Krieg, R. Toivanen (eds.), *Situating Sustainability: A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts*, Helsinki, Helsinki University Press, 2021:255-267. DOI:10.33134/HUP-14-18.
- A. Leist, A. Holland, *Conceptualising Sustainability: EVE Policy Research Brief No. 5*, in C.L. Spash, C. Carter, *Cambridge Research for the Environment*, 2000.
- A. Loukianov, *To the Cultural Turn and Back Again: The Relevance of Aesthetics to the Possibility of Sustainable Futures*, "Consumption and Society" 2/1 (2023): 146-157. DOI: 10.1332/NHOW1883.
- N. Lowe, *Aesthetic Sustainability: The Fourth Bottom Line Orienting Sustainable Building and Development Empire*, Houston, Texas, Advertising and Design, 2010.
- E.K. Meyer, *Sustaining Beauty. The Performance of Appearance. A Manifesto in Three Parts*, "Journal of Landscape Architecture" 3, 1 (2008): 6-23. DOI: 10.1080/18626033.2008.9723392.
- J. Mikkonen, S. Lehtinen, *Philosophical Aesthetics and the Global Environmental Emergency*, "Environmental Values" 31, 1 (2022): 15-26. DOI: 10.3197/096327122X16386102423949.
- J.I. Nassauer, *Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology*, In Id., *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology*, Washington D.C., Island Press, 1997: 65-83.
- Y. Saito, *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
- Y. Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar, Everyday Life and World-Making*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Y. Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- S. Shapshay, L. Tenen, Y. Saito, *Consumer Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics: Problems and Possibilities*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 76, 4 (2018): 429-439. DOI: 10.1111/jaac.12594.
- Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture (De architectura libri decem, c. 30-20 BC)*. Produced by C. Greif, M. Er-Raqabi, T. Garvin and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

N.-H. Korpelainen, S. Lehtinen, *Aesthetic Sustainability*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2024 Edition, URL =

<https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2024/spring/aestheticsustainability.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630148.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAe's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the seventh volume of *ILAe's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects the *ILAe's* Spring and Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

N.-H. Korpelainen, S. Lehtinen, *Aesthetic Sustainability*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 7, Milano, Mimesis, 2025.