Integral Sustainable Design

Transformative Perspectives

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with Susanne Bennett, editor
Aesthetic Levels for Sustainable Design

Housen notes that the sequencing of stages continues though adulthood and is correlated with age and degree of previous aesthetic exposure. There is a progression from egocentric understanding to a rule-based ‘ethnocentric’ perspective to multi-levelled and multi-perspectival aesthetics. We cannot now say with certainty from an empirical perspective that the succession of more inclusive aesthetic views proposed earlier in this chapter (Visual Aesthetics to Phenomenological Aesthetics to Process Aesthetics to Ecological Aesthetics to Evolutionary Aesthetics) is in fact developmental. Housen’s evidence does suggest, however, that artistic production communicates to different levels of seeing, aesthetic response and meaning making. A child at Housen’s Stage 1 and an educated landscape architect at stage 5 experience the aesthetics of a sustainable landscape in very different ways. The implication for the Integral Sustainable Designer is found in the question:

**How can we design for a variety of different aesthetic experiences for an audience interested in or capable of vastly different aesthetic perceptions?**

In Part II of this book, we will look deeper into the ideas of levels and lines in human development and how development of our worldview impacts our design perspective, including aesthetics and perception. For now, I offer the following propositional framework of four levels of Sustainable Design aesthetics, based on four levels of contemporary worldview/values/cognitive structures that we will explain in greater detail later. From many years of observation, experience and contemplation, it appears to me that as other self-related lines develop, an individual also shifts from one way of appreciating design to another.

**Level 1: Traditional aesthetics of Sustainable Design**

- rule, tradition and code-based systems manifesting long-term experiments of a culture;
- visual and phenomenological aesthetics;
- vernacular and regional form languages;
- experiencing ‘Nature as tangible transactions’;
- visible responses to natural force;
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• evidence of tools shaping designed elements in response to natural forces;
• design for primal, archetypal and emotional responses to natural forces;
• experiencing Sustainable Design and natural beauty as mysterious and wonderful.

Level 2: Mental aesthetics of Sustainable Design

• transcending and including the TRADITIONAL LEVEL;
• uses abstractions of the Modern mind as aesthetic principles and formal language;
• designing for force/process appreciation and experience;
• eco-minimalism as the expression of essentialness and efficiency;
• experiencing visible patterns of process; form-active structures;
• the beauty of design as built mental abstractions of Nature;
• conscious experience of multi-sensory, multi-variable designed environments, microclimates, gardens, etc.;
• transfer of form languages and responses from one region to a similar bioclimatic region;
• experiencing Sustainable Design and natural beauty as full of design order.

Figure 5.16 Traditional aesthetics of Sustainable Design: Solar Farmhouse, Fox, Arkansas, designed and built by Gary Coates and Kansas State Architecture Students

Vernacular dogtrot meets atrium and solar greenhouse in a Traditional farmhouse language. Ventilation via windows, shading via overhangs, etc. For more information, see Dowden et al, 1987
Level 3: Pluralist aesthetics of Sustainable Design

- transcending and including the mental level;
- informed by multiple aesthetic theories from multiple cultural traditions;
- appreciating ecological process;
- the beauty of design as multiple readings of Nature, including once again the emotional;
- high tolerance for formal ambiguity and paradox;
- translation of ecological technology to artistic expression;
- emphasis on aesthetic fitness to ecological context;
- attention to offering the perception of the design’s interaction with natural process and to perceiving the patterns of context;

*Figure 5.17* Mental aesthetics of Sustainable Design: Loblolly House, Taylors Island, Maryland; KieranTimberlake Associates, architects

‘The west wall is an adjustable glazed system with two layers: interior accordion-style folding glass doors and exterior polycarbonate-clad hangar doors that provide an adjustable awning as well as weather and storm protection.’
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- unafraid of making visible the tensions between beauty and non-beauty, between a beautiful healthfully designed process and a process at odds with Nature;
- experiencing Sustainable Design and natural beauty as the result of optional constructed perspectives.

Level 4: Integral aesthetics of Sustainable Design

- transcending and including the pluralist level;
- aware of multiple levels of aesthetics;
- uses different aesthetic ideas and compositions as appropriate to the situation;
- appreciating ecological and evolutionary patterns;
- reveals holarchic structure;
- the beauty of design as the integration of multiple aesthetic levels of perceiving Nature;
- the beauty of a multi-perspective, integrated, ‘polyphonic’ perception of design;
- more life-affirming and fuller of life is more beautiful;

Figure 5.18 Pluralist aesthetics of Sustainable Design: Blue Ridge Parkway Destination Center, Asheville, North Carolina; Lord, Aeck & Sargent, architects

‘Nestled into a hill, the building evokes a ‘tree-house’ atmosphere that allows the visitor to experience the majestic views …’ Wood, steel and concrete elements; Modernist eco-facade and more Traditional, vernacular-related, pitched, wooden, exposed beam ceilings with green roof
Figure 5.19 Integral aesthetics of Sustainable Design: Rudolph Steiner Seminariet, Järna, Sweden; Erik Asmussen, architect

A large building complex whose aesthetic cannot be comprehended from single images. ‘A functional and organically expressive form language, which evokes an experience of aliveness and a sense of participation in the forms and processes of the natural world’ (Coates, 1997). Integral aesthetics expresses perceptions from multiple quadrants and is intended to create healing or high-state experiences. For an exquisite exploration of Asmussen’s work, see Erik Asmussen, Architect (Coates, 1997).
• Sustainable Design aesthetic experience as an entry point to the sublime and for potential individual Transpersonal experiences of Nature;
• aesthetic perceptions as self-aware states of consciousness;
• beauty of Sustainable Design as a transformational opportunity;
• experiencing Sustainable Design and natural beauty as an expression of the maker’s embedded consciousness in the work.

None of these aesthetic levels is inherently better or worse than the others. Each one has its appropriateness. LEVEL 1 is foundational and is included in all other aesthetic levels. LEVEL 2 is included in LEVEL 3 and so on. Unfortunately, sustainable designers operating at LEVELS 1–3 are not often aware of levels above their centres of perception. Mental level (think Modernist) aesthetic practitioners can usually not understand or appreciate the Pluralist Level aesthetics. Pluralists (which goes along with Postmodern thinking) also typically reject the abstraction of the Modern mentalists and their tendency to rational reductionism. Most often, until we get to LEVEL 4, a higher level rejects a lower level’s claims to authenticity and value while a lower level cannot see or imagine a higher level. Only from LEVEL 4 INTEGRAL awareness of aesthetics can the developmental process be seen and appreciated and the dignities of each aesthetic level be included. For Integral Sustainable Design there are many ways to express and to construct experiences of ‘design with Nature’.

Summary for Experiences Perspective

In summary, in thinking about the EXPERIENCES PERSPECTIVE, we are concerned with the interior experiences and intentions of designers and with the experiences of the occupants of a sustainable design. We are interested in how Sustainable Design occurs from the experiential perspective.

To return to an earlier theme, Sustainable Design as a UR BEHAVIOURS PERSPECTIVE, and even as a ‘holistic’ LR SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE, so far tend to leave out the left-hand perspectives of EXPERIENCES and CULTURES. If we want Sustainable Design to be more effective, sustainable designers might want to intentionally address the fundamental reality and richness of our human interior experiences. Essentially, if the public is to love sustainably designed environments, by necessity we as designers will have to create loveable places! This means we may choose to design rich full-person experiences, including a range of aesthetic experiences of the Sustainable Design itself. I believe that it is a universal principle that responsible environmental action flows most freely from affection, which of itself requires an engaged relationship.
The design disciplines are Integral fields by their nature, so I am not saying that design, as an entire discipline, does not cover the four perspectives; it obviously does. There are particular projects (Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater, MLTW’s Sea Ranch, the Anton Albert’s NMB Bank), particular architects (James Wines, Charles Correa, Ken Yeang) and particular movements (Peter Calthorpe’s version of New Urbanism, Lake/Flato’s neo-vernacular regionalism) which have made great progress in integrating them. I am saying that, in general, Sustainable Design as we generally think of it suffers and, indeed, is held back from achieving its full potential because of its tendency to ignore human interiors. It is time for a mature Integral Sustainable Design to fully engage:

- the human experience of Nature;
- the subtleties and richness of human feeling in space and place;
- the intelligent and informed ordering of spatial patterns to engender experiential patterns;
- the inclusion in subjective aesthetic response of both individual variation and the deep structures of collective response.

Finally, it is also time for the cultivation of a highly developed theory and practice of Integral Sustainable Design aesthetics that is developmental and multi-perspectival.

References

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