

## Urban Aesthetics as a Trading Zone

The conditions for deliberative planning and cooperation in the context of urban infill development

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### Abstract

Due to a multitude of reasons, the prevailing conceptions regarding the aesthetic values and the principles of aesthetic evaluation of different urban environments are significantly varying, and there may not be a wide-spread consensus even about the general meaning of aesthetic issues in urban environments. That is to say, when discussing the aesthetics and aesthetic values of urban environments, the aesthetic concepts may refer to a variety of phenomena, and, further, the relationship between the aesthetic dimension and other key aspects constituting the urban experience is rather ambiguous. Moreover, aesthetic issues comprise a considerable part of urban planning, and yet it is not evident, how and on what grounds the diverse questions involving aesthetics are or should be solved in practice. If aesthetic questions are to be resolved collectively and by the means of rational argumentation, it is reasonable to ask for the necessary preconditions of such “aesthetic cooperation” and its coordination.

The question regarding the preconditions may be addressed using the concept of *trading zone*. Such an approach highlights the importance of defining the relevant actors taking part in the cooperation (i.e. the “trade”) and their motivation to work cooperatively. The basis for motivation lies in recognizing achievable benefits and pursuing them by the means of trade. There may, however, be a lack of motivation if there are more straightforward and effortless alternatives available, or if the possibilities for achieving the benefits appear negligible or nonexistent. For example, if the outcomes of the official participatory planning process are continuously considered inappropriate and unjust from the viewpoint of certain stakeholders, the process may eventually lose its status as a genuine trading zone. This, in turn, may result in purposeless objections and appeals aiming at merely paralyzing the entire process.

Present-day planning processes ignore experiential and thus qualitative arguments rather easily, which is a major source of experienced injustice. Hence, there is a demand for certain “thin interpretations” summarizing the most essential values and meanings of different stakeholders without requiring a thorough explication of related lifeworlds. Experiential and qualitative arguments are essential also with regard to aesthetics, and the notion of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone” refers to thin interpretations of aesthetic issues, implying that though there could be some kind of consensus about the general and large-scale meaning of urban aesthetics despite significant and wide-spread disagreements about particular aesthetic values.

Aesthetic issues are of particular weight in the context of urban infill development – mainly due to the fact that infill development plans usually aim at changing an environment in which many locally bound networks of experiential meanings and values already exist – and empirical studies suggest that the questions of aesthetics may even be decisive when it comes to approving and disapproving potential infill plans. “Urban aesthetics as a trading zone” clarifies 1) why the infill plans are so often contested, 2) which are the fundamental values that the stakeholders eventually defend or oppose, and 3) why the encountered resistance may convert into a complete denial of cooperation so easily.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, consensus, infill development, urban environment, urban planning, trading zone

## Introduction

In present-day collaborative urban planning processes the status of experiential and locally based qualitative arguments is somewhat controversial and problematic: from the viewpoint of residents and other local stakeholders preserving the concrete values and meanings of nearby environment is crucial, whereas the planning officials and commercial actors often regard such local interests as a mere hindrance to common-good land use projects and to achieving important strategical goals and large-scale benefits. In the context of urban infill development, the situation is particularly challenging, as the fierce opposition and numerous appeals by locals are seriously hindering and even paralyzing various infill projects. Thus in many cases there seems to be a dead-end ahead, resulting both from the incompatible interests and the apparent shortcomings in the means of conflict management.

In this article, I ask whether the described tangled confrontations could be managed via an alternative or complementary way to comprehend the complex and conflict sensitive circumstances of planning projects. The proposed approach is based the concept of “*trading zone*” by Peter Galison. Taking certain potential deficiencies and limitations of Galison’s view into account, I proceed by developing further applications of the concept in the field of urban planning, particularly with regard to a distinct branch of experiential arguments – the questions of environmental and urban aesthetics. My proposal concerning the possibility of specific planning-related “aesthetic trading zone” aims at outlining the necessary prerequisites for mutually meaningful collaboration that would enable the handling of controversial yet significant aesthetic issues without the demand for a deep consensus about every particular environmental aesthetic value and meaning.

Such idea of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone” refers to the possibility of a thin consensus, which can be interpreted as a common agreement about the general or large-scale meaning of aesthetic issues. As such, the thin consensus means acknowledging the disagreements and a certain value pluralism, while at the same time paying respect to the viewpoints of the others and, above all, treating them as legitimate trading partners. The act of acknowledgement is in itself likely to be of remarkable significance, not least because it is precisely the experience of injustice that has been identified as a major reason for people to object plans by appealing. I conclude my examination with a further scrutinization of urban infill related problematics (see Figure 1), aiming at concretizing and making comprehensible the role that the idea of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone” might have from the broader perspective of collaborative urban planning and related conflict management.



**Figure 1. The struggle between abstract strategic goals and concrete local values.** Promoting urban infill often means densifying the relatively loose urban structure, which may result in losses of open space or natural-state recreational areas in the urban neighborhood.

## Trading zones and the conditions for collaboration

The concept of “trading zone” originates in the work of Peter Galison (1997), who had studied the possibility of meaningful interaction between different groups of scientists – theorists, experimentalists and instrumentalists in particle physics – whose practices and conceptual schemes seemed to form more or less autonomous subcultures. Despite their divergent conceptions, methodologies and aims, the subcultures were still able to promote a certain common goal: taking part in and further developing “the story of physics”<sup>1</sup>. The story of physics is not, however, written in a single uniform language of science that everyone would understand equally and comprehensively; there was thus an evident mismatch between the observed locality of action and the presumed globality of scientific language (Galison 2010).

Galison’s groundbreaking conclusion was that the communication between scientific subcultures takes place piecemeal and locally, implying that both the ideal of fixed global scientific language and the presumed necessity of thorough and full translation between subcultures’ idiosyncratic languages are misleading. More precisely, the coordination of action between different subcultures occurs via intentionally created contact languages or interlanguages that serve the practical purposes at hand. (Galison 1997.)

It is crucial to notice that the interlanguages are characterized by their change over time and by their locality (Galison 2010). Indeed, it is the relative stability – or in Galison’s terms quasi-stability – that marks not only the interlanguages but also the subcultures themselves. In general, it is clear that no culture or subculture remains exactly the same over time, but yet it is possible and entirely sensible to speak about cultural and subcultural identities, whereas quasi-stability means that “the changes in a given period are small relative to that which stays roughly the same” (Galison 2010, 29). Thus the essential question is, how “quasi-stable scientific subcultures (roughly shared ways of handling practices with their attendant values, symbols, and meanings) [...] connect to each other, to the surrounding world, and to change” (Galison 2010, 30) – that is, how the quasi-stable, yet distinct subcultures eventually manage to collaborate.

According to Galison’s view, the possibility of collaboration does not entail the merging of subcultural identities into a homogenous entity: the different groups do maintain their distinctness (Galison 1997). Thus the idea of trading zone lies exactly in the *thinness of consensus* between the collaborating parties: there has to be merely just enough consensus to establish the trade – that is, consensus

<sup>1</sup> Galison himself does not explicitly speak about “the story of physics”, but the idea of such story is not entirely unfamiliar to him; cf. Galison (1997, 815–816): “There was a *physically based story* to be told (...), and everyone involved wanted, however partially, to contribute to it” (emphasis altered).

“about the procedure of exchange, about the mechanisms to determine when goods are ‘equal’ to one another” (Galison 1997, 803).

## The cultural aspects of trade: trade as a form of cultural activity

Despite the relative independence of collaborating groups, they do in a way interact more deeply than on the mere level of “exchanged goods”, as the trade cannot after all actualize in a “cultural vacuum”. However, Galison himself is not very explicit – or consistent – when discussing the interconnections and relations between the subcultures and the “larger culture”<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, he acknowledges the existence of larger cultural context and the potential meaning it may have on the trade between subcultures: for example, securing the existence of one’s culture is a very powerful and compelling incentive to trade (Galison 1997).

On the other hand, Galison treats the trade as a quite self-sufficient and autonomous form of action, which has practically no connotations or other connections to larger cultural practices. Consider, for example, the following:

*The key concept here is incomplete coordination. I hand you a salt shaker and in exchange you pass to me a statuette. We may agree to the trade – we do not in any sense have to agree to the ultimate use, signification, or even further exchange value of the objects given. The only thing we have to come to accord about is their exchangeability. While for me the statuette may be a religious object, for you it could be a purely aesthetic or functional one – on this we do not have to agree. We strip away meaning and memory when we pass the object to a trading zone. (Galison 2010, 32.)*

Incompleteness may be a key concept with regard to the concrete trade action itself – the traders do not know, or do not need to know, what the other one thinks about the exact value and meaning of the particular traded object – but the situation is not the same concerning the prerequisites of the trade as a form of cultural encounter. Surely one has to know *something* about the trading companion and his/hers preferences in order to facilitate the exchange – to make relevant offers, to bring forth meaningful bargain, etc. (see Mäntysalo et al. 2011).

There is always a cultural setting for the trade, but if one concentrates merely on the concrete action of trade – “the exchange of this and that object” – such settings may remain unnoticed. However, it is indeed *easier* and often *more profitable* to trade with someone whose principles of valuation one knows, even on a very coarse level. For example, if I know that someone values old and worn-out, some might say shabby, decorative sculptures aesthetically – perhaps due to a certain patina – I definitively would not try to sell a modest bronze statue to this person as a bulk of recyclable metal. In this particular case, my knowledge would most likely affect the trading situation notably, and thus be very valuable to me.

<sup>2</sup> The larger culture is – like the subcultures – quasi-stable, but the time span of change is understandably much longer.



*The knowledge of the larger cultural settings may not, strictly speaking, be a necessary condition for the trade and the establishment of trading zone, but it certainly does matter in the real world of trade.*

It is true that such knowledge of the larger cultural settings may not, strictly speaking, be a necessary condition for the trade and the establishment of trading zone, but it certainly does matter in the real world of trade. Therefore, it might be said that Galison presents an abstract and rather strongly idealized model of trade, which cannot address many of the concrete issues related to the cultural context of trade – such as the culture-specific incentives or obstacles for trade, the overall meaning of collaboration for the emergence and evolution of subcultural identities, and the apparent yet complex interconnections between distinct subcultural identities and larger cultural ideals (e.g. common values and goals).

### **The idiosyncrasies of aesthetics and the possibility of “aesthetic trading zone”**

In the preceding section I have postulated a rather compact account of the idea of trading zone, while trying to remain faithful to the exact formulations that Galison himself has originally used. The formulations are in many ways ingenious, but they also give rise to certain criticism and further questions. For example, there is a temptation to ask, what might be the eventual role of aesthetics in the trade and in the establishment of trading zones? It seems that the answer is two-fold, mainly due to the wide scope of aesthetics and the fact that various phenomena are aesthetically relevant – at least to some extent.

On the one hand, in the light of previously mentioned examples, it is clear that certain objects of trade may have specific aesthetic value – that is, they may be valued aesthetically by one or more participants of the trade. On the other hand, the trade itself – as a form of cultural activity – may involve certain aesthetic aspects: in other words, different forms and dimensions of trade can be experienced and valued aesthetically, and the realization of trade (i.e. the establishment of a trading zone) may even be aesthetically conditioned.

Due to the limited space, the more general aesthetic aspects of the trade as cultural activity cannot be examined here more thoroughly, and the focus will be on such forms of trade that concern objects with prominent aesthetics qualities. As mentioned above, the Galisonian account of trade concentrates on the mere exchangeability, leaving the other possible dimensions of traded items aside. Could it be, still, possible to widen or redefine the theoretical framework of trading zone, so that it would allow addressing separately specific and more precisely limited kinds of trade – for example, the trade in aesthetics or, to be more precise, trade in aesthetically valued objects and entities?

Such an “aesthetic trading zone” could be, then, regarded as a subsection or even as a component of the more general trade and the corresponding general trading zone. To be more exact, though the aesthetic trade may follow a specific internal logic that differentiates it from other forms of trade, there are obvious and inevitable connections and interplay between the aesthetic trade and other forms of trade, and the aesthetic trade does not have to – and usually cannot – exist entirely autonomously.<sup>3</sup>

The trading of aesthetics would, undoubtedly, involve certain idiosyncrasies and restrictions, since aesthetic valuation is generally regarded as a very exceptional and also rather problematic case of valuation.<sup>4</sup> Though aesthetic values and the

<sup>3</sup> The potential and alleged primacies and hierarchies between different forms of trade (and the corresponding types of values – for example, ecological or aesthetic values) cannot be addressed here, as the focus is on the possibility of trade *within* the sphere of aesthetic phenomena.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, the notion of “aesthetics” is in itself very disputed, as the examined phenomenon seems to be very multifaceted and diverse, thus escaping the scope of any strictly limited definitions.

*As the presence of aesthetic values or qualities cannot often be purely rationally and conceptually justified, they have to be proved ostensibly – by showing and pointing out the relevant aspects.*

ability to value different phenomena aesthetically have traditionally been associated with a claim of certain universality – endorsing the idea of aesthetic consensus – more recent theoretical approaches recognize the inevitable and profound impact of both intra- and intersubjective experiential history on aesthetic matters (see e.g. Berleant 1992; von Bonsdorff 1998; Forss 2010; Haapala 2000; Mattila 2007). In short, personal memories and shared cultural traditions influence essentially the experiencing and valuing different aspects of reality aesthetically, implying that the idea of some kind of “universal aesthetics” is rather implausible and somewhat dubious. Despite this, there are more or less shared aesthetic values, particularly among socio-culturally closely related individuals and groups of people.

Certain particularity and case-specificity are essential features with regard to aesthetic valuations and judgments; especially, in the context of environmental aesthetics, the significance of place-related issues – *genius loci*, attachment to place, etc. – appears to be rather remarkable. This might have something to do with the bearing that aesthetics has on the questions of identity: the uniqueness and authenticity of both people and places are, not solely but notably, aesthetic phenomena (see von Bonsdorff 1998; Forss 2010; Forss & Rannisto 2013; Haapala 1998; 2000; 2003 & 2005). As the presence of aesthetic values or qualities cannot often be purely rationally and conceptually justified, they have to be proved ostensibly – by showing and pointing out the relevant aspects. For example, the aesthetic experience of a place cannot be comprehensively and exhaustively described by any means of conceptual explanation or story-telling, even though some pieces of literature may, undeniably, capture the essence of a place rather vividly.

Due to these characteristic features of aesthetic valuation, the conditions for large-scale and systematic trade in aesthetics appear rather limited. The main obstacle for such trade would seem to be the fact that the grounds for aesthetic valuation are simply too fragmentary, and thus there is not enough consensus about the basis of aesthetic values. However, when examining the prerequisites for a trading zone, Galison has emphasized that there does not need to be any kind of universal currency of rationality or value; what is needed is a narrow or thin consensus about the exchangeability and the exchange value, not a wide consensus about the full signification of the traded object.

When applied to the particular form of trade – namely the trade in aesthetics – this could mean that there should still be a thin consensus about the mere existence of aesthetic value of the object in question, not a wide consensus about the details concerning the basis of the possible values.<sup>5</sup> The thin consensus about the aesthetic value corresponds well to the idea of “interpretive thinness” that Galison (2010) regards as a decisive feature of traded items; in short, the “thin interpretations” summarize the most essential values and meanings of different parties from the communicative and trading point of view, without requiring a thorough explication of related lifeworlds.

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Regardless of this, there *does exist* a rather vague and coarse culture-specific conception of aesthetics, which allows us to discuss aesthetic issues in the first place (see e.g. von Bonsdorff 1998).  
<sup>5</sup> In other words, the traders may have to agree on the fact that certain objects most likely do have some aesthetic value to most participants of trade, whereas they do not have to agree on the exact reasons why or how the particular objects actually gain their aesthetic value.

*The trading zone approach to aesthetics treats the “first-hand” and “second-hand” aesthetic experience separately, implying that it is possible to recognize and appreciate certain aesthetic phenomena and their meaning to other people, even though one may not comprehensively understand the phenomena and their full aesthetic signification.*

The thin consensus can also be interpreted as an agreement about the general or large-scale meaning of aesthetic issues: it is possible to acknowledge the disagreements and a certain value pluralism, while at the same time paying respect to the viewpoints of the others and, above all, treating them as legitimate trading partners. The trading zone approach to aesthetics thus treats the “first-hand” and “second-hand” aesthetic experience separately, implying that it is possible to recognize and appreciate certain aesthetic phenomena and their meaning to other people, even though one may not comprehensively understand the phenomena and their full aesthetic signification.

From the practical point of view, establishing an aesthetic trading zone might benefit from recognizing certain *boundary objects* – a concept originally developed by Star and Griesemer (1989) – that typically have a notable role as facilitators of the exchange in the trading zone (see Kanninen et al. 2013). In general, boundary objects “are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites, [and] they have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable” (Star & Griesemer 1989, 393).<sup>6</sup>

Without getting too deeply involved in the discussion about the relationship between boundary objects and trading zones (see Galison 2010; Mäntysalo & Kanninen 2013), it is possible to further develop the idea of specific kinds of boundary objects which facilitate the trade in aesthetics. Generally acknowledged aesthetically relevant entities can thus be treated as *aesthetic boundary objects* – that is, as items that adapt to the local and varying interpretations about the basis and the details of the aesthetic value, but yet maintain a common-level identity as mere aesthetically valued objects.<sup>7</sup> In short, the aesthetic boundary objects facilitate the aesthetic trade by structuring and clarifying the aesthetic discourse, and the related – often tacit – preconditions and preconceptions.

## **Aesthetic trading zones in the context of urban planning**

The idea of trading zones has quite recently been applied also in the context of urban planning (e.g. Balducci & Mäntysalo 2013, Fuller 2006, Mäntysalo et al. 2011), where the concept is approached mainly as a tool in organizing local platforms and support systems for planning participation, knowledge production, decision making and local conflict management. The trading zone approach to urban planning and collaborative planning processes highlights the importance of defining the relevant actors and stakeholders taking part in the cooperation (i.e. the “trade”) and their motivation to work cooperatively. In general, the basis for motivation lies in recognizing achievable benefits and pursuing them by the means of trade; there may, however, be a lack of motivation if there are more straightforward and effortless alternatives available, or if the possibilities for achieving the benefits via the trade are perceived negligible or nonexistent (Kanninen et al. 2013).

In addition to such general accounts of collaborative urban planning and its prerequisites, the concept of trading zone may be useful also when assessing certain sub-topics or dimensions of urban planning, with a narrower and further specialized scope of interest. For example, the examination of aesthetic issues in the field of urban planning is a rather complex and sometimes controversial project, to which the introduction of such a general level concept might bring

<sup>6</sup> As such, the boundary objects “allow the use and exchange of information between different communities despite the fact that these communities do not share the same systems of meaning, values or strategies” (Mäntysalo et al. 2011, 263).

<sup>7</sup> In other words, the information about the “general” aesthetic value is shared across the boundaries of different parties, even though the exact “system” of aesthetic valuation is not shared.

certain clarity. Let us thus consider further the idea of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone”.

To be sure, aesthetic issues comprise a considerable part of urban planning, and yet it is not evident, how and on what grounds the diverse questions involving aesthetics are or should be solved in practice. If the aesthetic questions are to be resolved collectively and by the means of rational argumentation, it is reasonable to ask for the necessary preconditions of such “aesthetic cooperation” and its coordination.<sup>8</sup>

Planning related aesthetic issues can be viewed from a practice-oriented standpoint, highlighting the wholeness of human experience and the interconnections between experiential values and meanings and more broad ethico-existential aims and conditions. The focus of the proposed stance is thus on the entirety of *urban aesthetics*<sup>9</sup>, which is regarded as a constitutive part of urban life-form (see e.g. Berleant 2007 & 2012). As such, urban aesthetics comprise a continuum, covering the aesthetic values both in the urban environments and in the socio-cultural practices related to urban life-worlds.

Consequently, urban aesthetics is inherent in urban planning in multiple ways. For example, urban planning as a socio-cultural activity certainly deals with the aesthetic values and features of urban environment, but, furthermore, it can also be seen as an aesthetic or aesthetically oriented practice, following particular aesthetic principles or aesthetically defined guidelines in itself – thus being a part of certain urban life-form. Urban aesthetics does not, hereby, involve merely the issues related to architectural form-giving and design, though the questions of design do have a remarkable aesthetic undertone.

Urban aesthetics is, indeed, embedded in all *urban design*, which often overlaps with urban planning, having yet somewhat different emphasis compared to the entirety of planning. Urban design is best understood as a part of the contemporary “culture of design”, which basically means a holistic design-based approach to post-industrial urban development, binding together the cultural, social and economic perspectives (see, e.g. Bell & Jayne 2003). Such multidimensionality of urban design highlights the prevailing interconnections between aesthetic and other issues, thus potentially endorsing the suggested trading zone approach that treats the aesthetic trade as an integral subsection or component of the more general trade.

The meaning of aesthetics may, however, sometimes be understood in an overly narrow sense in the framework of urban design, and in design-based approaches altogether. For example, when examining the rather diverse undertakings of “design-led urban regeneration”, David Bell and Mark Jayne (2003) point out that with regard to developing urban environments by design, it is the flagship buildings, high-quality residential and commercial developments, as well as polishing the public spaces that seem to have the priority.

Even though the questions related to social and environmental sustainability have admittedly gained some attention, it appears that the “design-led urbanism” treats aesthetics primarily as a means to control the image of the city and to improve its

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<sup>8</sup> However, due to the idiosyncrasy of aesthetics – experiential and qualitative arguments are essential with regard to aesthetics – it is not entirely clear what the “rationality of argumentation” means in this case, and what kind of limitations to the “rationality” of pursued solution there might be (see Mattila 2003 & 2007). At least the particular conception of rationality which identifies rationality with pursuing and achieving large-scale consensus about matters (see Rescher 1993) appears rather problematic, as the relevant valuation principles seem to alter remarkably, undermining the plausibility of the aesthetic consensus.

<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the term “urban aesthetics” may be used to denote a particular *branch of philosophical aesthetics*, concentrating on the questions of aesthetic values and meanings in urban environments (see e.g. the introduction in Berleant & Carlson 2007). However, this is *not* my intended use.





**Figure 2. The confrontation of nature and culture is often vivid in urban environments.** Urban parks can be considered as hybrids, where elements of the planned and intentionally built as well as the unplanned and naturally developed are both prominently present.

attractiveness to “mobile post-industrial employers, middle-class citizens and tourists” (Bell & Jayne 2003, 124) – thus practically ignoring the prominent pluralism of aesthetic valuation, and the related questions justness and equality. Due to such emphasis inherent in many design-based approaches, the idea of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone” has to be founded on a more comprehensive conception of aesthetics – a conception that does justice to the diversity and the complexity of the aesthetic phenomena.

Despite the apparent demand for a holistic view, certain distinctions still have to be made in order to gain relevant and applicable information about the issue. From the viewpoint of philosophical aesthetics, for instance, the intertwined dimensions of urban aesthetics do involve somewhat divergent structures of values and meanings; hence, the practice-related and the environmental questions may be addressed separately and by using different concepts and methods. Providing a stipulative definition for the purposes of this article, the notion “urban aesthetics” is, from now on, used to refer primarily to the aesthetics of urban *environments*.

Many of the features and characteristics of “general level” aesthetic trading zones apply rather directly also to the urban aesthetics and the field of urban planning, but certain peculiarities demand further scrutinization. Above all, the planning institution as a whole is regulated by the law: the most important objectives and the formal definitions of the planning procedures and methods are thus given “from above”. This goes for the aesthetic dimension as well, even though the formulations are very abstract and ambiguous, leaving plenty of room for interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to this, there is the question about the aesthetic boundary objects<sup>11</sup> in urban environments: what exactly are or could be such objects, and how to define and pick the most relevant ones? As a starting point, it must be understood that there is not – or cannot be – a universal definition of relevant boundary objects: certain entities gain their identity as boundary objects via the *practices* of different local social worlds and their interactions, and the concept is indeed very practice-oriented (Star & Griesemer 1989; Star 2010; see also Leino 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The complexity of urban aesthetic issues is inherent also in the Finnish planning legislation and the national planning system, as the aesthetically relevant regulations rarely address aesthetic matters directly, but rather have numerous interconnections to other and usually larger structures of values and meanings – such as those related to culture, cultural and art history, as well as artistic values (Vihanninjoki 2015).

<sup>11</sup> The “objectness” of aesthetic boundary objects is, though, a rather vague and even dubious feature particularly with regard to urban environmental aesthetics, since the aesthetically experienced and valued environment may not always be divided into sharp and definite object-like entities, but the aesthetically valued entity is often something rather abstract and even implicit in the experience as a whole (see e.g. Berleant 1992; von Bonsdorff 1998). This is not, however, a real problem, as the original definition of boundary objects is fairly loose and pragmatic, allowing them to be either “abstract or concrete” (Star & Griesemer 1989, 393).

The boundary objects may thus be of rather diverse scales: for example, the structure and the layout of the city itself can be aesthetically valued, whereas also a single tree may carry a remarkable amount of locally bound aesthetic meanings and values. The entities can also be representatives of either the planned and intentionally built or the unplanned and naturally developed – or the hybrids of these two, as it seems to be in rather many cases: consider, for instance, urban parks or ruins, which combine the natural and the cultural and thus manifest their character as deeply and necessarily but also forcedly and violently intertwined counterparts (von Bonsdorff 1998; Kummala 2013, see Figure 2).

Analogously to the “general” aesthetic trade, the boundary objects in urban environments aim at pointing out such environmental entities that are central to the *discourse of urban aesthetics*, providing some clarity and certain points of reference to the pluralistic and often ambiguous “aesthetic communication” between different groupings and subcultures. Indeed, the subcultures of environmental aesthetics – that is, those related to the aesthetic appreciation and valuation of diverse environments – have themselves remained rather unstructured and undeveloped; this has in part led to a situation, in which certain established approaches to environmental aesthetics have gained unquestionable and nearly hegemonic status (see Sepänmaa 2002). For instance, an art-theory inspired and objectivistic architectural discourse has largely defined the framework for assessing aesthetics of built and urban environments, whereas a stance highlighting the value of untouched and “pure” nature has typically set the standard with regard to unbuilt and natural environments.

The present situation poses a major challenge for further elaborating the discourse of urban aesthetics, but only by acknowledging the pluralism and dispute about aesthetic valuation and by letting the different subcultures of urban aesthetics coexist, it is possible to promote long-term social sustainability in urban environments.<sup>12</sup> Thus there is a genuine demand for mediating conceptual frameworks – the Galisonian *interlanguages* – that allow the subcultures interact and cooperate constructively; this is the proper scope of the presented trading zone approach to urban aesthetics.

### **Real-life aesthetic boundary object: case Koivusaari**

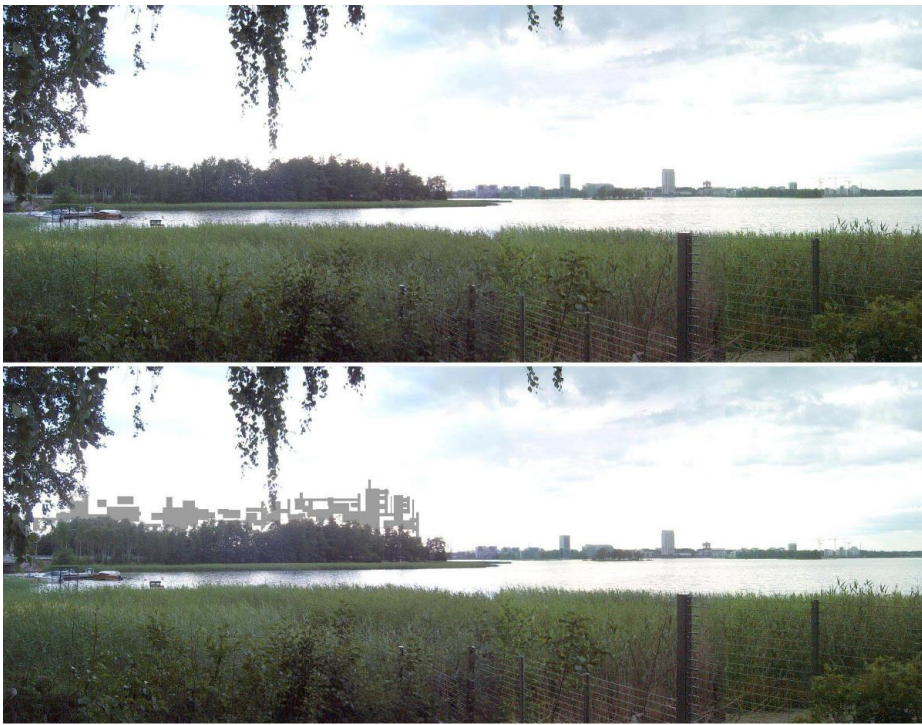
As the interlanguages of urban aesthetics are, typically, in a close relation to the aesthetic boundary objects, the overall problematics regarding the aesthetic discourse may be easier to conceive by briefly examining a concrete case. The coastline of Helsinki and its characteristics serve as a practical level example of aesthetic boundary objects in urban environments. The coastline and its future development has been very topical issue for some time, and major controversies are involved: the proximity of the sea attracts builders and developers, whereas the same areas are essential to certain restorative and leisure activities.

However, it is not this particular function-related disagreement – whether or not the coasts may be built and to what extent – that forms the core of the aesthetic debate, but the arguments used for and against each alternative, and especially their relation and relevance to the urban aesthetic discourse. For example, in the case of Koivusaari, in addition to economic and traffic-related arguments, numerous relevant points with aesthetic basis have been presented: particularly the potential effects of large-scale building on the coastal landscape and its uniqueness seem to worry local people.

<sup>12</sup> For example, when assessing the “environmental culture” of aesthetics and the related aesthetic discourse, Yrjö Sepänmaa (2002, 44) writes: “A culture of discussion, which exists in the areas of art, is only just beginning in environmental culture, except for architecture and industrial design. Discussion provides the justification for bringing *dispute* into environmental culture.” (Emphasis added.)

*The subcultures of environmental aesthetics have remained rather unstructured and undeveloped; this has in part led to a situation, in which certain established approaches have gained unquestionable and nearly hegemonic status.*





**Figure 3. “The landscape can tolerate new elements without losing its characteristic features.”** The original caption of this illustrative picture – provided by the City Planning Department – involves a rather bold and straightforward statement about the characteristics of the coastal landscape; the statement relies primarily on a viewpoint of particular landscape analysis, thus maintaining the hegemony of expertise-based and very abstract argumentation. Photo source: Rodriguez 2007.

The question about the coastal landscape and the related controversies are, in this case, central to the overall structure of the environmental aesthetic discourse. The local stakeholders claim rather uniformly that the proposed alterations would ruin the existing landscape, whereas the City Planning Department officials seem to have a two-fold stance: on the one hand, they have stated that despite major changes, the characteristic features of the landscape may remain unaltered (see Figure 3); on the other hand, they see the building project as an opportunity to further develop the values and the meanings of coastal landscapes in Helsinki.<sup>13</sup> In short, the locals seem to have a preservation-oriented view – highlighting the *existent* aesthetic features of the current, near natural-state landscape – while the planning officials perhaps somewhat understate the local significance of the forthcoming transformation by treating the landscape primarily as a stage of *processual changes* that naturally occur in urban environments.

The situation is thus rather polarized, and achieving a mutually satisfactory agreement about the future development of coastal landscape in the case of Koivusaari appears unlikely. To provide some insight into the seemingly unresolvable debate, let us take a closer look on certain particularly puzzling themes that have notable aesthetic relevance. First, the demand of preservation based on the inherent natural values is fairly problematic – at least regarding the landscape – since the visible environment is currently far from stagnant natural-state landscape: marinas and related courts largely dominate the view, and human interest and intentions are very distinct. Hence it is clear that here we have a cultural and primarily urban landscape, which has to be evaluated as such.

Second, it is not obvious at all that the proposed alterations would not influence the characteristics of the landscape. Such a conclusion may, at best, be justified from the viewpoint of particular landscape analysis – focusing on rather abstract features of the landscape, such as visual patterns and structures. This is not, however, the only truth about the issue, as there is always a variety of experiential factors affecting the evaluation and the interpretation of a landscape. The planning officials have, indeed, already revised their view on this matter: in the impact assessment of the local master plan, the starting point is that coastal cityscape would change rather significantly; but, again, this does not seem to cause any hindrance to the implementation of the plans, as also the characteristic visual features are regarded as subjects to transformations and renewals.

Summarizing the lesson of the case study, the coastal landscape clearly awakens diverse and conflicting aesthetic affections and aspirations; it is thus a real-life functioning aesthetic boundary object that 1) has a *common identity* as an aesthetically significant entity, and 2) adapts simultaneously to the *various*

<sup>13</sup> Due to limited space, merely rough outlines of the particular case may be examined here. However, the setting involves confrontation of local stakeholders – represented by community association – and the planning officials, during the preparation of a local master plan. For more details, see Helsingin kaupunkisuunnitteluviraston yleissuunnitteluosasto 2014, Lauttasaari-Seura 2014 and Rodriguez 2007.



**Figure 4. The presence of urban nature enhances possibilities for recreation and a variety of activities, such as small-scale community gardening.** Even rather small areas of unplanned and unbuilt urban environment may be remarkably rich sources of local values and meanings, which is why people are often very keen to protect and preserve them.

*interpretations* about the essence of aesthetic value in different social worlds or subcultures. The communication – or the common ground that enables the communication – between the subcultures, in turn, is apparently deficient, as they conceive the status of urban landscape’s aesthetic characteristics somewhat differently. The locals emphasize stability as a basis for local-level identity, while the planning officials promote enabling and creating new values that, in part, will be forming the identity of urban Helsinki. The case thus illustrates that the coastal landscape has become an “object” of *aesthetic* evaluation on various bases; the proposed trading zone approach, in turn, provides a way to understand and further analyze these differing and typically tacit aesthetically-relevant presuppositions concerning urban environments.

## The challenge of urban infill

The notion of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone” refers to the possibility of a pragmatic-level consensus about the general and large-scale meaning of urban aesthetics – about its significance to people and the quality of their everyday life. Achieving such a consensus would, however, require paying further attention to the discourse of urban aesthetics and the communicative connections between the relevant aesthetic subcultures. The following example, concerning the context of urban infill, aims at concretizing the role that the trading zone based approach to urban aesthetics might have from the broader perspective of collaborative urban planning and the related conflict management.

On a very general and abstract level, urban infill refers to a set of policies and practices in urban areas, aiming for more sustainable and more economically efficient urban structure. Urban infill can, however, be defined in various ways, and the exact meaning of the concept depends widely on the context and the scale in question. For example, infill is often regarded as a building process leaning on existing urban structure and infrastructure, but it can also be seen as a small-scale process including mainly single buildings or blocks. Despite these ambiguities, infill projects typically involve more actors and stakeholders with divergent and often conflicting motives and goals compared to usual greenfield building projects, and, in particular, there are more residents around to participate the planning process. (Puustinen 2015 & 2016.)

Indeed, the large number of different actors and stakeholders is of notable significance with regard to the infill planning process and its manageability, and, due to the remarkable possibility of conflicting values, the situation can easily become very challenging, sometimes resulting in overreactions and frustration. Though the confrontations of interests and values may be manifest and undisputed, the overall setting is yet rather complicated, so let us take a closer look at the structure and logic of such conflictual circumstances.

In general, promoting urban infill seems to be an irrefutably worthwhile and virtuous enterprise on a theoretical and abstract level, fulfilling the ideals of sustainability and resource efficiency (see e.g. Hartiala 2012; Santaoja 2004). However, a noteworthy problem with such abstract concepts is that their meanings are equivocal and to a great degree context-dependent, and thus the concepts remain rather vague until operationalized via concrete applications and practices (see e.g. Williams et al. 2000). Indeed, when trying to discover and develop practical and concrete applications of large-scale urban infill within the controversial realm of land use planning, severe difficulties and conflicts are inevitable.

The encountered difficulties and conflicts do not, anyhow, necessarily indicate shortcomings or flaws in the highly abstract theoretical frame, but they primarily manifest the divergence of possible points of view: when examined on a highly abstract level, urban infill is almost solely beneficial – that is, producing benefits



to nearly all participants – whereas on the concrete level the situation is not so ideal, as there are both winners and losers. For the local residents the realization of the infill project could, for example, mean a loss of an open space or natural-state recreational area in the neighborhood (see Figure 4), while the same outcome simultaneously represents both ecologically and economically smart growth for the planning officials. In other words, there is an obvious confrontation of abstract benefits and concrete costs, and as the concrete costs are typically very local by nature, it is usually the residents of certain restricted area that have to bear the burden (McConnell & Wiley 2010).

Now, it might seem questionable to force the local stakeholders to accept the infill plans and the related costs without some kind of compensation, and, above all, without a right to challenge the justness of the proposal and the underlying arguments. Notwithstanding, the validity and weight of concrete and locally based environmental values is quite easily questioned by both planning officials and commercial actors, and advocating such values is often deemed even as undesirable and detrimental to the sustainable development of urban community as a whole. This applies particularly well to the context of urban infill.

For example, according to a survey (Uudenmaan liitto 2015) addressing the views of a number of representatives from real estate and building sectors (mainly consultants, developers and construction companies), fierce opposition and numerous appeals are seriously hindering and even paralyzing various infill projects – and this is mainly because the current residents and other locals are acting selfishly and thinking narrow-mindedly. Accusations of selfishness and narrow-mindedness indicate that the locals are rather generally thought to represent a NIMBY (*not in my back yard*) attitude; however, labeling the residents' and other locals' activities as a mere form of NIMBYism is not fruitful or recommendable, since it polarizes the conflict by disregarding the real, case-specific and more general or structural reasons and arguments behind the issue (see e.g. Peltonen 2008).

In order to enable and enhance the realization of urban infill projects in a large scale, there are basically two alternative paths to proceed. The first option is to reduce or limit the local actors' possibilities to influence the infill planning process by narrowing down the amount of relevant stakeholders (*interested parties* in legal terms) and by questioning their right to appeal. The second option is to further improve the quality of communication and interaction between different parties by developing new and open-minded methods of cooperation and collaboration.

Promoting the first alternative would, at least in the case of Finland, demand a revision of legislation – i.e. the Land Use and Building Act (1999/132) – and it quite straightforwardly opposes the prevailing spirit of communicative planning ideals, which have remarkably influenced the current Finnish planning legislation. The main problem with this view is that it does not, at least primarily, take into account the undisputed and urgent need for positive motivators to promote infill processes. Such motivators are, however, essential for the emergence of spontaneous infill projects, initiated and advocated by local actors – such as private housing companies – without external pressure.

The second alternative would, more or less, mean following the footprints of communicative planning tradition. This does not, however, necessarily imply any kind of naïve trust in the force of collaboration; rather, the task at hand is all about developing new frameworks, methods and conceptualizations in order to understand more comprehensively the stakeholders' idiosyncratic points of view and the underlying structures of meanings and values, so that the potential shortcomings and sheer misconceptions in current policies and procedures could be identified and acknowledged. For example, the experience of injustice has

already been identified as a major reason for people to appeal (Peltonen et al. 2008), and if the currently latent sources of such experiences were tracked down and eliminated, the conditions for collaboration could improve significantly.

## Unwinding the tangled confrontations: urban aesthetics as a trading zone

Most of the current research and especially more practically oriented investigations have focused on economic and infrastructure-related incentives to promote infill projects (e.g. Nykänen et al. 2013; RAKLI 2015; Uudenmaan liitto 2014), whereas the questions concerning the concrete environmental issues – such as the quality of nearby environment, local identity, aesthetic affairs, etc. – have thus far escaped more detailed examination. They surely have been recognized as a relevant factor affecting the willingness to accept infill, but no thorough accounts of people’s manifold relation to their nearby environment in potential infill areas are available.<sup>14</sup>

This is perhaps a little surprising, especially since empirics (Arvola 2014; Arvola & Pennanen 2014; see also Arvola et al. 2010) imply that it is exactly the *locality-related* and *aesthetic* issues<sup>15</sup> that seem to have most weight when it comes to approving or disapproving infill: “the results suggest that one of the key factors explaining residents’ resistance to infill relate to their beliefs and values concerning the unique character and identity of their neighborhood; they believed that it will not remain the same after infill and they would feel less at home there than previously” (Arvola & Pennanen 2014, 8).

Thus there seems to be a certain discrepancy between the goals of the planning strategies and policies promoting infill, and the features that people actually value in their nearby environment. In short, locally bound identity-related issues really matter to people – people are usually willing to use considerable amounts of money and other resources to cherish and protect their habitat – whereas the official strategies and policies focus on the technical and economic rationality of the infill plans.

Such distortion has naturally implications also for the discussion about the obstacles and incentives to infill projects; for example, the confrontation of the potential costs and benefits for locals is usually formulated like this: “Local inhabitants often feel that they lose something when infill happens – they might lose their view or their piece of forest etc.; [i]t would make infill processes more acceptable if inhabitants would also gain something concrete: for instance better services, a new bus stop or children’s playground.” (Puustinen 2015). These are, of course, relevant remarks, but in the light of the above-mentioned empirical studies the most important question seems to remain unasked. That question could be something like: “How could the realization of an infill project leave unaltered – or perhaps enhance – the matters of local values and identity, the feelings of home and belonging, and the general experiential quality of environment?”

This is undeniably a very tricky question, not least because of the vague and equivocal nature of certain central concepts. What are, for example, the values and meanings behind the local identity in a particular case, and who eventually has the right and the ability to define them? Moreover, what does “the feeling of

*Empirics imply that it is exactly the locality-related and aesthetic issues that seem to have most weight when it comes to approving or disapproving infill.*

<sup>14</sup> Academic studies have, though, provided some exceptions; see e.g. Heininen-Blomstedt 2013 and Koponen 2006.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. unique identity of the neighborhood, pleasantness of the architecture, preservation of historical features, and the extent to which residents can feel the area as their own.

*How could the realization of an infill project leave unaltered – or perhaps enhance – the matters of local values and identity, the feelings of home and belonging, and the general experiential quality of environment?*

home and belonging” actually mean, and, above all, how the planner could grasp such an abstract idea so comprehensively that (s)he could include it in a concrete design? The experiential quality of environment, in turn, has been addressed in recent planning research (see e.g. Kytä et al. 2011 & 2013), but the concept – and the phenomenon itself – is far from clear, so that the potential applications in the realm of land use planning are still rather rare and case-specific.

Though the above mentioned problems are not solely aesthetic by nature, it is noteworthy that environmental aesthetics is a very valuable tool in understanding such experiential dimensions of people’s relation to their environment. Moreover, from the perspective of present-day environmental aesthetics, the phenomena related to locality and local identity have significant interconnections to the aesthetic experiencing and valuation of the environment. Thus the concepts and methods of environmental aesthetics might be helpful in unwinding the tangled situation concerning the obstacles and incentives to urban infill.

Above all, taking the idea of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone” seriously might have a favorable impact on the conditions for deliberative planning and cooperation in the context of urban infill development. As the idea is all about acknowledging the general and large-scale meaning of urban aesthetic issues by further elaborating the discourse or urban aesthetics, there is no need for a thick consensus about the *basis* and the *details* of aesthetic meanings and values – merely a thin consensus about the *existence* of aesthetically valuable urban environments and certain environmental entities is required.

Such an acknowledgement would at least bring visibility and also certain justification the people’s concerns about their nearby environment: though the concerns and their detailed backgrounds are not always generalizable, they still are real for the people and thus do affect people’s behavior and decisions – also their willingness to attend to cooperate. After all, it is this simple: if people perceive their possibilities to gain something from cooperation negligible or nonexistent, they will not cooperate – if the current “standard form” of cooperation systematically ignores certain values that are important to people, they will not cooperate, but merely question the legitimation of such cooperation by numerous objections and appeals. And *vice versa*, if the cooperative process allows people to state their idiosyncratic concerns in a recognizable way, there is at least a slight possibility to settle the issues together, in the spirit of meaningful and mutually satisfying collaboration – but yet without the overshadowing demand for a comprehensive and all-inclusive consensus.

## Conclusions

It is clear that promoting urban infill development has undeniable large-scale advantages – primarily related to sustainability and resource efficiency – and that it is a very common strategic goal for a good reason. It is, though, equally clear that people are often rather deeply attached to their nearby environments, and that people are willing preserve and protect the valued features of their habitat. The discrepancy between the goals of the official planning strategies and policies, and the *de facto* values of residents and other local stakeholders has led to a clash that remarkably hinders various infill projects, eventually making the realization of extensive infill development quite impossible.

What is most important, the evident confrontation cannot most likely be overcome by the means of mere technical and economic rationality, because the lay stakeholders’ arguments are usually experiential and qualitative by nature – concerning the questions of locality, identity, and aesthetics. Thus there seems to be a genuine need for a planning procedure or framework that acknowledges the existence of experiential values and meanings, and hence at least on a theoretical level allows participants to settle and resolve related disagreements

and confrontations relatively efficiently and, above all, in a civilized manner – not by the means of frustrated and aimless appeals or by refusing to act cooperatively in the first place.

In this article I have introduced the idea of “urban aesthetics as a trading zone”, which underlines the possibility to prefer a pragmatic thin consensus about the general and large scale-meaning of urban aesthetic issues by elaborating the discourse on urban aesthetics. Such a thin consensus seems particularly useful in the context of urban planning, where time and other resources are often very limited, and where the numerous aesthetics-related issues still have to be resolved adequately enough.

Yet it must be emphasized that the presented idea is not meant to be any kind of ready-made solution. Rather, it is more like a proposal for a conceptual framework that aims at pointing out the most salient problematics and shortcomings within the current course of action – and at indicating a potential direction for further development of both planning theory and practice.

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