



*Routledge Studies in Urbanism and the City*

# AESTHETICS AND THE CITY

Edited by  
Joe Blakey and Amy Barron



*Aesthetics and the City* provides an insightful and rich set of contributions into how to make sense of urban worlds. Through its eleven chapters, the edited book makes the case for a sensory approach to the studying of the production of cities. It is a lovely addition to the field of urban studies.

**Professor Kevin Ward**, *The University of Manchester, UK*

*Aesthetics and the City* teaches us that making sense of and reimagining cities requires understanding their aesthetic dimension. It is highly recommended for all urban scholars and professionals who want to explore how aesthetics intersects with urban life, influencing design visions, everyday experiences, and the broader conceptualisation of cities.

**Andrea Borsari PhD**, *Professor of Aesthetics,  
The University of Bologna, Italy*



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# Aesthetics and the City

*Aesthetics and the City* engages aesthetics to explore the role of the city in urban experience. Drawing on diverse theories and global case studies, this edited collection examines how aesthetics relates to how cities and urban spaces are perceived, organised, and transformed.

This book celebrates and ponders the wide diversity of aesthetic approaches within urban studies, noting that the way aesthetics is understood impacts what can be understood about cities and the urban order more generally. In its most general sense, aesthetics refers to our sensuous relation to the world. It invariably figures in how we make sense of the city and ourselves—bound to how urban life is experienced imaginatively, materially, socially, culturally, and politically. In an era where scholars have expressed concern at epistemological city-centrism, aesthetics is proposed as a versatile concept through which the centrality of the city to urban thought can be assessed. The book also explores how aesthetics intersects with a range of tangential concepts including power, the political, art, and affect. Ultimately, it makes the case that this diverse ensemble of approaches to aesthetics can enable scholars to understand the city and its enduring relevance to urban thought.

This book focuses on the concepts of “aesthetics” and “the city” and will appeal to scholars and students in urban studies, human geography, planning, politics, and sociology.

**Joe Blakey** is a Political Geographer at the University of Manchester, UK, interested in conceptualising and understanding political change, aesthetics, and environmental knowledge politics. His research is driven by the need to understand the depoliticisation of marginalised voices and perspectives, and how knowledge about the environment is produced, contested, and mobilised in response to the global climate and ecological crises.

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# **Aesthetics and the City**

**Edited by Joe Blakey and Amy Barron**

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# Preface

This volume explores how aesthetics shapes our understanding and experience of the city. Drawing upon thought and empirical cases from diverse global contexts, the book proposes aesthetics as a reflexive concept through which we can consider how cities are understood, contested, and transformed, whilst also heeding warnings around the perils of city-centric thinking.

The book originated in two paper sessions we organised for the 2021 Research Committee 21 (RC21) Conference in Antwerp, which ultimately took place online amidst the unfolding global pandemic. These sessions emerged from a growing recognition of a turn towards aesthetics in urban studies and geography, alongside our desire to identify a shared conceptual ground. This was no small task, given that one of us is guided by non-representational theory's focus on liveliness and life-as-it-happens, and the other by post-foundational political theory's attention to contingency and radical difference. Yet aesthetics provided common ground—a testament to its conceptual richness and untapped potential.

This sense was reinforced as session abstracts arrived from scholars across Philosophy, Sociology, Architecture, and Geography. The decision to use aesthetics as a critical lens for thinking about the city was shaped by multiple influences: the *Sensing the City* theme of the RC21 conference, debates on city-centrism in Urban Studies, and similar discussions in Human Geography around scale. At the same time, our respective backgrounds—one rooted more in aesthetics, the other in urban thought—steered us towards the topic of aesthetics and the city.

Finally, this edited volume is a testament to the collaborative efforts of many scholars writing together under often challenging circumstances. We are deeply grateful to all contributors for their patience, generosity, and spirit of collaboration throughout this process.

Joe Blakey and Amy Barron,  
Manchester, December 2024

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# 1 Introduction

## Making Sense of the City

*Joe Blakey and Amy Barron*

### Introduction

How do we make sense of the city? This question is deceptively simple. If you ask an everyday person on the street what a city *is*, they might circle an area on a map, point to a formalised administrative boundary, or suggest that a city is an urban centre of greater extent, population, or significance than a town or village. Given that its etymological roots are in the Latin *civitas* (as a social body of the *cives*, or citizens), one might even expect a remark that a city is simply “where many people live”. There are myriad possible responses, and the longer one dwells on this question, the more David Harvey’s claim that the “city is manifestly a complicated thing” rings true (1973: 22).

Cities mean different things to different people, and different cities take different shapes and forms and play different roles in individuals’ lives. At the same time, for urban scholars, the city is increasingly seen to occupy an awkward conceptual space. The conceptual notion of the city has arguably fallen out of favour or, at the very least, is being decentred from much urban scholarship (Davidson and Iveson, 2015). The city, once the cornerstone of urban thought, is now often seen as a presupposition—a predetermination—an assumption about the world rather than something that *is*. It is seen as distracting or contorting our understandings of the social, political, and economic processes that happen “on the ground” and often exceed the conventional boundaries of “the city”.

How, then, might the city be approached in a manner sympathetic to the many ways in which it is understood and urban studies’ more recent hesitation around the concept, which is seen as at risk of dampening our appreciation for urban life as it unfolds? This question is crucial given the current impasse in urban studies regarding the city’s epistemological status. Despite critiques of the concept, the city remains prominent in the popular imagination, shaping—and being shaped by—everyday lived experiences. We talk about cities, envision them differently, and make demands related to them. These dynamics factor into urban experience, despite important epistemological questions about the nature of “the city” persisting. In this edited volume, and by way of response, we propose aesthetics as a fruitful line of inquiry, as a means to

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balance presuming too much about the city in advance and acknowledging the city's role in shaping collective imaginations and individual lives.

Indeed, the concepts of aesthetics and the city find themselves on somewhat opposing trajectories. Whilst the concept of the city is being decentred from analyses, there has been somewhat of an uptick of interest in the concept of aesthetics, particularly in urban studies and geography. For instance, scholars have considered how aesthetics lends legitimacy to planning visions (Ghertner, 2015), but also how it becomes a cornerstone for disruption and disagreement around what form the city ought to take (Gassner, 2023). At the same time, scholars have considered the everyday experience of aesthetics, be this in focusing on more phenomenological accounts, or those accounts that consider how aesthetics is encountered, thereby offering a relational understanding between subjects and objects (Hawkins and Straughan, 2016a; Wilson, 2016; Cooper, Cook, and Bilby, 2018). The field of geohumanities, bridging geography with arts and humanities scholarship, further highlights this trend. Yet, as Tursić (2019: 3) notes, aesthetics in urban studies remains “fragmented” and is often tied to sensory pleasure. In our discipline of geography, Hawkins and Straughan (2016a) sought to reaffirm the value of aesthetics, which was considered omnipresent yet under-explored.

We are certainly not alone in pondering the value of aesthetics to thinking, and potentially rethinking, the city. Tursić (2019) notes that only a handful of urban scholars have considered aesthetics in relation to urban conditions and the city. For Tursić (2019), the value of aesthetics is that it compels researchers to consider what and when the city is, a sentiment this book embraces. Also notable is the work of Virmani (2021: 3), whose edited volume on the aesthetics of urban environments has drawn attention to the “everyday aesthetic experience of the city” as an essential element of the public sphere. Amidst this aesthetic scholarship, there has been a trickle of literature considering—often implicitly—the role of aesthetics in how we experience, order, and remake the city (Cooper et al., 2018; Degen and Rose, 2024; Gassner, 2023; Ghertner, 2010; Degen, 2008).

Aesthetics is therefore a lens through which cities can be apprehended and even possibly remade; whether it be discussing what distinguishes a city's particular sensory experience, what constitutes a beautiful city, the role of “common-sense” in (re)ordering cities, the artistic and aesthetic practices in cities, or ultimately in deciphering what a city “is”. As such, in an era where scholars have expressed concern at epistemological city-centrism, we ask what it means to think through an aesthetics of the city. Through a range of detailed empirical cases spanning the globe, this volume will consider how approaches to aesthetics impact understandings of the city and the issues that define them; demonstrate the role aesthetics plays in how we experience, order, and remake the city; and utilise aesthetics to make the case for the continued importance of the city to urban thought.

In the remainder of this chapter, we make the case for considering aesthetics to “make sense of the city”. First, we retrace the debates across urban studies

that have drawn the city into conceptual question. Second, we provide a brief genealogy of the concept of aesthetics and its use in urban thought. Finally, we outline the chapters that follow.

### **Questioning the City**

Across the interdisciplinary field of urban studies, the question of the very concept of the city, and its role in our theoretical and political writings, is being repeatedly drawn into question. There has been an assortment of competing claims around the nature of cities and how exactly they should be studied and conceptualised (Scott and Storper, 2015). As Davidson and Iveson (2015) state, this debate—which has been simmering since the 1980s—has “reached boiling point” (Davidson and Iveson, 2015: 647). Moreover, the backdrop to all of this is that there has been a deep change to urban experience in the last few decades, where around 55% of the world’s population now reside in these things we call “cities” (UN Habitat, 2022). But this is also a change that is rewriting the qualitative nature of urban life which is “unsettling many of the foundational assumptions of urban studies” (Angelo, 2017: 159). At the same time, urban thought has been charged with taking into account the vastly diverse empirical phenomena that work to compose cities (Scott and Storper, 2015).

In a 2008 editorial in *Urban Geography*, Kevin Ward writes that “there is a systemic weakness in much past work in the manner it has conceived of cities [...] as discrete, self-enclosed, and analytically separate objects” (2008: 407). Indeed, across numerous fields, there has been an effort to incorporate those things traditionally thought of as “outside” a city into urban research (Angelo, 2017). Take, for instance, urban political ecology, in its emphasis on “metabolic” flows of capital, people, and things beyond the traditional bounds of the city (Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, 2006; Kaika, 2004), or post-colonial thinkers, who critique how urban theory is projected and universalised from a Western developmentalist vantage point, creating a binary between the city and the “not-yet” city (c.f. Robinson, 2011; Sheppard, Leitner, and Malignant, 2013; Hentschel, 2015). The point is that the pervasive “city lens” in urban thought, where cities are seen against a non-urban outside, is increasingly understood as unsuitable for the study of urban environments (Angelo, 2017: 160).

It is common to trace a genealogy of the city in urban thought to the work of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology in the early to mid-1990s (Scott and Storper, 2015). However, it is important to note that this enduring genealogy is an origin story of largely Anglophone cities, against which non-Anglophone cities were often assessed and analysed. The Chicago School understood the city as evolving in predictable patterns of expansion and succession, where specific social environments and spatial arrangements fostered particular social relationships and norms. Castells (1968), however, critiqued this, arguing that the Chicago School’s questions about the city lacked an urban focus. There was little, in Castells’ opinion, that was being written that could not be said of

#### 4 *Aesthetics and the City*

society more generally. In the 1970s, Marxist thought became the dominant way of considering the city, with the likes of Castells (1972) arguing that the Chicago School obstructed capitalism's role in organising society. For many Marxist scholars, the city was an arena for class struggle around resources and rights (Lefebvre, 1970; Harvey, 1973).

The 1980s also ushered in two further trends in thinking about and around the city, as observed by Scott and Storper (2015). First, feminist thought was influential in ushering in a consideration for the gendered aspects of cities (c.f. Massey, 1991; England, 1994; Pain, 2001; Bondi and Rose, 2003) whilst others sought to rejuvenate a focus on the role of class, race, and ethnicity in making and remaking the city (Amin, 2002; Watt, 2006). Following the millennium, they would be joined by post-colonial thinkers who, for instance, brought a shift towards thinking not just *about*, but *from*, cities in the Global South rather than the Global North (Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Roy, 2009; Simone, 2020). Second, was a turn towards considering the city in relation to the wider processes of the global urban system (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; Sassen, 1991), an antecedent to a later turn to thinking about cities in terms of flows, processes, and networks through the likes of Deleuze and Guattari (1987[1980]) and DeLanda (2006).

In their various ways, these shifts contributed to a fragmentation of how the city was conceptualised in urban studies. One such fragment might be termed new particularism, where a strong emphasis was placed on the individual distinguishing traits of cities (Amin and Graham, 1997). This arose out of a feeling that it was futile to say anything on an abstract level about cities, because they are “so big, so complicated and so lacking in easily identifiable boundaries that any attempt to define their essential characteristics is doomed to failure” (Scott and Storper, 2015:1). Many scholars have drawn upon Actor Network Theory (ANT) and assemblage thinking to this end, focusing on the relations and practices that compose cities and the phenomena they are entwined with, giving rise to singular and situated understandings of phenomena occurring in these things we call cities (McFarlane, 2011; Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth, 2011).

This move towards relational, networked understandings, and the problematisation of what lies “in” and “outside” of cities and the processes they constitute and are constituted by, has ultimately led to the city falling out of favour in some quarters. Consider, for instance, the critique of methodological cityism: scholarship that assumes the “city” as a self-evident unit of analysis while automatically categorising all non-city areas as an external “rural” or not-city space (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). Perhaps the greatest expression of this is the work of Brenner and Schmid (2015) who argued that we are now in an era of planetary urbanisation, where notions of both the city and the urban, which exist seemingly in relation to some non-urban hinterland (Cronon, 1991), are problematic. Here, the city and its counterpart of the urban, stand in the way of fully comprehending urban processes, and so the scholars called for a “new epistemology of the urban”. The planetary urbanisation thesis is

widely critiqued and debated, but is arguably symptomatic of a more widespread acceptance that much discourse is naïve in how it discusses and reifies cities (Walker, 2015).

Of course, it is important not to overdraw this as a conclusion. Scholars less concerned with these conceptual battle lines do utilise the city in more of an “anything goes” way, akin to how it is used in everyday conversation (c.f. Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper, 2023; Macrorie, Marvin, and While, 2021). This observation underlines our main point: regardless of the conceptual arguments and important epistemological cautions against assuming qualities of urban phenomena based on preconceived notions of the city, the city nonetheless occupies a significant place in academic and popular individual and collective imaginations. It remains an integral part of our discourse, our popular imaginaries, and of our political systems and visions. We propose aesthetics, then, as a way to walk the tightrope between the risks of presuming something about real-world phenomena and also taking seriously the fact that scholars and everyday folk talk about the city in a way which makes it meaningful. Aesthetics is suggested as a way to take seriously the warnings around the epistemological effects of city-centric thinking, whilst acknowledging how we nonetheless individually and collectively make sense of the city.

### Aesthetics

The term “aesthetics” was coined in 1735 by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in the final pages of his master’s thesis, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Philosophical meditations on poetry), written in Halle, Germany (Reiss, 1994). Unlike its popular association with beauty, Baumgarten’s concept of aesthetics pertained to the nature of poetry and our experience of it. He deliberately introduced the term to bring *epistémê* (knowledge or understanding) and *aïsthetikê* (which has roots in the Greek term *aisthēsis*, what is sensed or perceived) into relation. Baumgarten’s aesthetics can therefore be understood as the science of what is sensed, perceived, and known (Aschenbrenner and Holther, 1954). Over the following 15 years, he further developed these ideas, culminating in the first two volumes of *Aesthetica* (1750–1758), which are widely regarded as having instigated the study of aesthetics across philosophy. At the outset of the book, he gives the following definition:

Aesthetics (as theory of liberal arts, as lower theory of knowledge, as art of beautiful thinking, as art of thinking analogous to reason) is the science of sensitive knowing.

(Baumgarten in Euron, 2019: 59)

In *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten made the case for recognising the value of perception to cognition. He positioned aesthetics as a younger sibling to logic, with the latter seen as unable to cover all forms of cognition. This was a radical step,

as it coined a whole new discipline by bridging the mind-body distinction that had become commonplace in philosophy. The intellectual pursuit of logical reasoning was often viewed in contrast to the sort of rabble received by the senses, traditionally seen as a more chaotic and disorderly faculty. Baumgarten, then, was attempting to render *aisthēsis* scientific, with a set of associated rules and truths comparable to logic. In short, it was an attempt to tackle how philosophy fetishised reason over perceptual experience to create a cohesive theory of knowledge that he termed “gnoseology” (Shusterman, 1999). This was not an argument for equality between the senses and reason—for Baumgarten referred to perception as a “lower faculty”—but rather to integrate it into the study of logic.

Baumgarten’s premature death in 1762 meant he never completed the final third of *Aesthetica*. Nonetheless, the term gained significant traction, with Jean Paul Richter observing in 1804 that “[t]here is nothing more abundant in our time than aestheticians” (Richter in Herder, 2006: 2). Baumgarten’s legacy, though, was overshadowed by Kant’s first (*The Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781) and third (*The Critique of Judgement*, Kant, 1790) critiques, both of which addressed aesthetics. While Baumgarten is widely credited with founding the field, it is Kant who is seen as establishing the foundation for subsequent work on aesthetics. Kant’s work is also highly indebted to Baumgarten’s. Aside from using Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* in his moral philosophy lectures (Fugate and Hymers, 2018), Kant borrowed much of Baumgarten’s terminology, including aesthetics (Kannisto, 2016).

Perhaps the greatest legacy of Kant’s thought is the “wrenching duality” at the heart of aesthetics, as Deleuze later described it (Deleuze, 1990: 297). This duality, which may explain why aesthetics is such a broad and varied field today, can be understood through comparing Kant’s *First* and *Third Critiques*. In his *First Critique*, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1998[1781]), Kant develops a theory of sensibility. Kant remarks that all knowledge ultimately stems from experience (Kant, 1998[1781]). For Kant, “experience” is complex, for it relates to an interaction between mental concepts and sensibility, which he defines as “the capacity of producing representations through the way in which our senses are affected by objects” (Nuzzo, 2006: 582). A key focus of the *First Critique* is on *a priori* conditions that enable experience (Dikeç, 2012). Kant caveats that there is a “transcendental aesthetic”, where space and time are only “pure” concepts built into our minds that provide “form to our experience of the world” yet do not arise themselves from experience (Dikeç, 2012, p. 269). Alongside other concepts from the “empirical aesthetic” of encountered sensations, we derive a spatio-temporal system of relations that give conceptual form to the perceptions of our senses (Dixon, Hawkins, and Straughan, 2012; Dikeç, 2015).

In his *Third Critique*, *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant shifts his focus to aesthetic *judgements*, considering declarations of beauty, taste, and awe-inspiring experiences of “the sublime” (Shaviro, 2007). Central to this discussion is the idea of *sensus communis*, or “common-sense”. For Kant, aesthetic judgements

always involve a presupposition that they can be universally communicated and that universal agreement is possible (Dikeç, 2012). For example, when one declares something to be “beautiful”, there is an implicit assumption that everyone should share the same feeling:

Whenever we make a judgement declaring something to be beautiful, we permit no one to hold a different opinion [...] we regard this underlying feeling as a common rather than as a private feeling. But if we are to use this common sense in such a way, [...] it does not say that everyone will agree with my judgement, but that he [sic] ought to. [Common sense...] is a mere ideal standard. With this standard presupposed, we could rightly turn a judgement that agreed with it, as well as the liking that is expressed in it for some object, into a rule for everyone.

(Kant, 1790: 89 emphasis added)

*Sensus communis*, then, is the expectation that aesthetic judgements, like declaring something beautiful, appeal to a *shared* sensibility (Kant, 1790). Between his *First* and *Third Critiques*, Kant explores aesthetics from two perspectives: an empiricist perspective, where aesthetics is closely tied to subjective feelings and affections beyond cognition (*aisthēsis*), and a more rationalist perspective, where aesthetics involves cognitive mediation of an object in a manner that is universalisable (*sensus communis*) (Dixon et al., 2012). This dual approach has led to a division in how aesthetics is understood: between the socially constructed norms by which we judge things (what has artistic merit, what is beautiful, sublime, and so forth) and “the sensuous exploration of subjects, bodies and spaces through a focus on experiences that are in excess of rational thought” (Hawkins and Straughan, 2016a: 8; Deleuze, 1990). This duality is also why Eagleton (1990: 28) would describe aesthetics as a “contradictory, double-edged concept”.

### **Aesthetics in Urban Thought**

In urban studies, as in geography, aesthetics has been present but often overlooked (Hawkins and Straughan, 2016a). While geography has increasingly embraced aesthetics, the concept has had less traction in urban studies. For this reason, Tursić has called for a more serious engagement with aesthetics from urban studies, observing that “aesthetics seems present in urban studies, but only in fragments [...] and [it] is usually equated with sensuous pleasures, which amputates the critical element from aesthetic theory” (Tursić, 2019: 206). Whilst we disagree that more sensory forms of exploration (*aisthēsis*) necessarily remove critique, Tursić rightly highlights aesthetics as an underexplored aspect of urban thought.

Perhaps one explanation for the historical oversight of aesthetics in urban studies is that, as Engelmann and McCormack suggest, aesthetics is often viewed as “some kind of superficial veneer layered over more important or

substantive issues”, neglecting how, “as a domain of sense making, the aesthetic is critical to how material dynamics of the world are sensed and take shape as matters of concern” (Engelmann and McCormack, 2018: 242). Aesthetics in urban studies, then, has been too often “regarded as a rather abstract, esoteric enquiry” (Taylor, 2003: 1610). One might speculate that this is fuelled by the popular, siloed imaginaries of aesthetics as relating to beauty, art, representation, and appearance, rather than on the broader social, cultural, and political implications of the term.

However, this lack of engagement with aesthetics should not be overstated, and this chapter now turns to explore how it has nonetheless been addressed in urban thought. What is notable across these studies is the variety of ways aesthetics is understood and deployed, revealing different aspects of cities and urban processes more generally (Murakami Wood and Abe, 2011: 3242). For instance, the millennium saw a “renewed focus on people’s sensory experience” of cities, such as Taylor’s (Taylor, 2003: 1610) work on the aesthetic experience of car traffic and how it has become synonymous with the experience of cities more generally. A more recent example is Edensor’s (2015) study on the aesthetics and atmospherics of darkness and shadow, emphasising how light and dark shape the nocturnal city experience, affecting spaces, atmospheres, movement, and activities, from shopping to stargazing.

Alternatively, one might consider how the early 2000s saw a focus on the aesthetics of urban regeneration. Ley (2003) examined the role of artists in gentrification, while Leszczynski and Kong (2023: 773) described gentrification as “a process of aesthetic change”, critiquing how images of decay fuel gentrification. Julier (2005), meanwhile, considered how design-led urban regeneration goes beyond buildings and brochures, wherein a network of different signifiers contribute towards creating a “designscape”. A recurring theme amongst such literature is the branding and lived experience of gentrification projects, such as in the work of Degen and Rose (2024), who explore how aesthetics is mediated by digital branding and the differential ways this affects bodies.

In recent years, there has been a growing exploration of politics and political change through the lens of aesthetics. In other words, an aesthetic turn in political thinking has emerged, which has spread to urban studies (Kompridis, 2014). As Yusoff (2010: 77) argues, “aesthetics must be considered as part of the practice of politics; a space where things are made, both materially and semiotically (to paraphrase Haraway) and a space that configures the realm of what is possible in that politics”.

Scholars have frequently built upon the work of Jacques Rancière, who insists “politics is aesthetic in principle” (Rancière, 1999: 58). Rancière, offering a twist on both components of Kant’s aesthetics, suggests that we are governed by aesthetics as a form of common-sense—a normalised way of making sense of things. This, he refers to as “the police order” or “the distribution of the sensible”, which determines the places, roles, and entitlements within society (Dikeç, 2012). Rancière, however, maintains that this ordering is always imperfect, leading to inequalities and exclusions. These “parts of no part” can