

Creative Engagement in Everyday Life – Learning from Aesthetic Experience

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the concept of aesthetics has become broader and more focused on the aesthetic experience resulting from the interaction between the person and the environment. A lot has been written about the way people experience settings that are explicitly designed as sites for aesthetic engagement, such as museums and art galleries, but very little attention has been given to ordinary people and how they make sense of such experiences in their everyday lives. This research study explores the everyday aesthetic experiences that lay people find meaningful in their daily encounters through a phenomenological approach. The findings indicate that everyday aesthetic experiences result from being open to creatively engage, are a blend of serendipitous events and planned encounters and a significant dimension of lived experience.

The study of aesthetic experience has been the focus of many disciplines and has its roots both in art and nature appreciation. Since Baumgarten (1714-1762) coined the term aesthetics as a separate area of enquiry, aesthetics has grown into a rich and varied discipline. Even though it takes many forms in the spectrum of cultures, the aesthetic force and experience are not confined to any class of individuals. A review of the literature suggests that the need to engage aesthetically is a universal human quality and we find evidence of it in many areas of human life (e.g. the rich history of garden design both in the western and eastern traditions). Aesthetic experience has been described as an “extremely ambiguous notion” and there is no universal agreement on what it constitutes (Shusterman, 2004). Philosophers dating back to Plato and Aristotle, have argued about this for millennia.

Recently, some have argued that it is impossible to identify the core characteristics of aesthetic experience (Dickie, 1997) while others have given the event a different name, such as Taylor’s “illuminated experience” (Taylor, 1986), Csikszentmihalyi’s concept

of “flow experience” or Maslow’s “peak experience” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1971). One reason for the lack of agreement is that different thinkers have different interests. Also, Smith argues: “The difficulty facing all these attempts at definition and theorizing [aesthetic experience] is, of course, the diversity of our experience of things...” (Smith, 1989, p. 190). Like Smith, I believe that aesthetic experience resides in the subjective domain of our lives where we seek personal and societal gratification in our experience of the world. In this view one interpretation does not rule out the existence of others, and alternative interpretations and the source of experience can range from shared experiences of sunsets to personal pleasures of dipping one’s hand in a basket of dried beans. I also strongly suggest that there is a rich private world of creative aesthetic activity that people engage in, and that everyone has a potential to be creative in this way. Thus, creative engagement is not reserved for artists, but a trait found in everyone. This form of everyday creative behaviour is a source of meaning that fosters and reflects psychological health. It is beneficial - it makes us more alive, healthier, helps us grow and connect with the world. The theory of everyday creativity encourages us to be on a creative path and appreciate creativity in everyday endeavours (Richards, 2007). Historically, the study of the aesthetic experience has been mostly associated with formal art theories and carried with it an elite connotation. The focus of study of such experiences has only recently shifted from indoor settings to include outdoor environments. Instead of focusing on large, public environments, the aesthetics of everyday life focuses on the cumulative power of aesthetic experience and how its meaning becomes relevant to peoples’ individual existence. It not only investigates the aesthetic qualities of smaller, more personal environments, such as individual living spaces (Melchionne, 2002), but also the aesthetic dimensions of normal, day-to-day experiences, (Haapala 2005; Leddy, 1995, 2005; Saito 2001, 2007) everyday activities (e.g. dining, Korsmeyer, 1977; and playing sports, Welsch, 2005). This study is in line with the field of everyday aesthetics because it concentrates on individuals rather than on particular settings or activities. It addresses the full range of types of settings and experiences. I am more “grounded” in the person and how people differently select and combine these experiences. My data suggest that these experiences do just happen, but people also set the stage for opportunities for vivid moments to occur and seek strategies to be in the path of beauty. One of the discoveries of my research is the role of spontaneity vs. planned aesthetic experience. I have shown that it is common for people to develop strategies and plan for aesthetic happenings that set the conditions for “planned spontaneity”.

Everyday life and aesthetics are worthy topics for scholarly endeavours, and it is necessary to focus on the lives of lay people and to discern how, through aesthetic engage-

ment, they make their everyday life meaningful. If such experiences are not to be appreciated by more scholars then their value will be considered as unnecessary or superfluous. Furthermore, if we were to investigate the strategies that people sometimes use to create the conditions for aesthetic experiences, we might be able to help one another expand our own aesthetic opportunities in everyday life.

I learned from prior exploratory research that some people use the words “aesthetic” or “beautiful” interchangeably in everyday conversation about various experiences. As such a concept and a word of everyday use, “beauty” orients us “to concentrate on the desirable in our lives at present evaluating it in light of the past, and replication and protecting it for the future” (Scarry, 1999, p. 6-9).

The research approach and questions

The research approach used in this study drew both from phenomenology and narrative enquiry. I believe both frameworks were a perfect match for the purpose of this enquiry as they allowed the researcher to find out more about the structure of everyday aesthetic experiences, the perspective of the participants, and the interplay between participants and the environment. I chose phenomenology in an attempt to understand the meaning and significance of everyday aesthetic experience in people’s lives. I think the strength of this method lies in the openness it allows for new and surprising insights to emerge from participants’ accounts. It is up to the researcher to stay true to the phenomenon, even if it conceptually appears not to make sense; it might be experientially valid and real. My goal was to bring into the foreground that which is shared among the participants without losing what is unique to individual experience. I chose narrative enquiry as the methodology for this study because of its potential to gain insights into both rich subjective contexts of research, as well as understanding how the participants constructed the experiences in stories.

The specific questions that guided this research were:

- What are the varieties of everyday aesthetic experiences and in what ways are these notable in one’s everyday life?
- Does a person plan/develop strategies/ arrange for aesthetic experiences in any way? If so, how do they become aware of these experiences in the course of their everyday lives?
- How do they make sense/meaning of these experiences?

Participants and the setting

I decided to explore the multisensory nature of everyday aesthetic experience, through in-depth interviews with a small, diverse sample of adults who work at the Queens Botanical

Garden (QBG) in New York City. The choice of a botanical garden as a field research location was not related to any desire to link people's personal accounts of aesthetic experiences to dominant notions of aesthetics; it was simply because a base for the research was needed that would be likely to offer a population available for interviews in a relaxed setting. Even though botanic gardens are self-consciously designed to fulfill formal understandings of beauty, my participants were not asked to limit or focus their comments on this setting. Participants were recruited via contacts at the QBG, as well as flyers distributed and posted in the garden. There were six women and four men of diverse backgrounds and ages. Interviews with the informants elicited personal narratives about their everyday aesthetic experiences. Participants were encouraged to reflect on specific experiences they found notable, and relate them to their personal values and relationship to other experiences in their lives. I have changed their names and distinguished each with a pseudonym.

Table 1
The interview process

<i>Name</i>	<i>Department at Botanical Garden</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Years at the garden</i>
Ania		30-35	
Adam The Gardner	Visitors Center	30-35	3
Sophia The Educator	Education	50-55	8
Sylvia The Rock Climber	Education	35-40	4
Farah The Grad Student	Administration	25-30	1
Jena The Landscape Architect	Planning	35-40	4
Sean The Fisherman	Security	40-45	10
Jeff The Awe Seeker	Education	35-40	2
Natalie The Traveller	Planning	30-35	1
Mary The Giver	Administration	60-65	8
Bob The Botanist	Education- Emeritus	65-70	15

Before the interview, I briefed each participant about the nature of the study. In order to elicit accounts of personal aesthetic experiences I asked them a couple of general questions about the topic. In their narratives, some participants described as beautiful, the different meaningful relations they had formed over time. As participants narrated, they were able to draw from a reservoir of past aesthetic experiences and paint a scene

that represented the most meaningful elements. While reflecting during the interview and by actively contextualizing, they made connections that initially seemed irrelevant, so that at the end of their thought processes, the narrative came together. In the process of telling stories they sometimes “filled in the blanks” to make the story more interesting and exciting. Some stories were organized and built around one meaningful idea; others were less organized and spread among many thematic pathways. However, the stories were always based on the ability of the teller to convey a convincing story while reflecting on past aesthetic experiences. Metaphors occasionally played a role in their narrative descriptions of aesthetic experiences. Through them they were able to communicate sensuous ideas, sometimes cutting across sensory boundaries and uniting feelings in a sympathetic way to convey felt experience.

After each interview and throughout this research I kept field notes of my experiences and thoughts over the course of collecting and reflecting on the process. There were times when I became so absorbed in data collection that I failed to reflect on what was happening. However, I tried to maintain a balance between descriptive and reflective notes. At this point, it is important to mention that field notes are already a step towards data analysis.

Analysis process

The objective of data analysis in phenomenological research is to make sense of the information obtained from the interviews. This process involves identifying categories of information, which are labelled as recurring themes among the data sets. The use of this analysis method challenges the researcher to construct themes that “capture some recurring pattern that cut across the preponderance of evidence” (Merriam, 2002, p.18). However, my goal was not just to assemble a list of reoccurring themes but, with the use of narrative analysis, to gain a better understanding of what the aesthetic experience is like for each individual and how they reconstructed this experience during our conversation.

The analysis process is not a fixed stage of the research process, but a fluid interpretation that is continued throughout the research. Before the interview process, I reflected about my own aesthetic experiences. Before and after each interview I made notes of anything that struck me as interesting about the place where the interview took place and my initial feelings about the interview process. Two strategies guided the analysis of the interview data. First, drawing on the more inductive strategy, I read the transcripts and listened to the interviews a number of times. During this process I attempted to dwell in the world my participants had created by actively absorbing the way they felt and understood the world and by attempting to illuminate themes that emerged both within

and across interviews. At this stage, my interpretation was data driven and I remained open to themes not originally anticipated. Within the interview and across interviews, I identified excerpts that fitted within these analytical categories. At this stage of the research, I examined the phenomenological aspects of participants' experience; that is, I paid attention to the existential relationship between the person and their surroundings. A second strategy involved a more deductive, theoretically oriented approach guided by pre-existing themes. For example, I wanted to learn if lay people construct their stories according to a hierarchy of the senses and thus, I read through the narrative and extracted particular instances that were supported by the existing literature. Even though my approach utilized both strategies, there were times when my analysis cut across both. The writing process became important in that it helped bridge the gap between my reflections on the research and reading and writing. It is difficult for me to articulate precisely how this process worked for me. It is not just a way to make internal knowledge external, but also a way of making contact with things in the world. Also, the writing process is based on the idea that no text is ever "perfect, no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, and no insight is beyond challenge. It behooves us to remain as attentive as possible to the ways that all of us experience the world and to the infinite variety of possible human experiences and possible explications of those experiences" (van Manen, 2002).

Results

Based on my interpretation of participants' stories I concluded that everyday aesthetic experiences:

1. Result from being open to engage creatively. There were simple contacts that remained relatively passive and carried no further meaning beyond the situation. The simple contacts cut across the past, present and possible future. Simple contacts are "the matter of fact" types of sensory situations that we know exist and do not usually reflect on or question. They are part of the taken-for-granted world.

But what must happen to move beyond the simple contact? According to some participants, one has to be receptive to the environment. Receptivity is a mode of being open to the environment. It is a way of being open to different possibilities and situations that might be unveiled. Receptivity is a way of letting the world know about one's readiness for engagement. At times, the world extends its hand to catch our wandering attention and sometimes we have to reach out. Jena - the Landscape Architect embraces her receptivity. From a very young age, she was attracted to the outdoors and as she grew older, she trained herself to see beyond the surface. Mary - the Giver said that: "You have

to be receptive to it. If you are not receptive to it ...there are a lot of beautiful things, but you have to be receptive.” Adam – the Gardener shares both Jena’s and Mary’s perspective that a certain mastery and learning are involved over time: “Once you have had the experience you know it will happen again. I’m more open to the environment and more likely to see something beautiful”. Sean - the Fisherman shares his perspective in the sense that, over time you learn what aspects of the environment you find more or less beautiful. Sean pointed out that there is a certain kind of discrimination involved and you become more receptive to the environment and then this yields familiarity and the understanding that some objects/situations are more beautiful than others, but you always have to leave the door ajar. Throughout the interview Bob - the Botanist stressed that exploration of one’s surroundings is important. Creating opportunities for aesthetic experiences has to be a mindful process. In response to my question regarding meaningful sound experiences he said:

“...being out makes you aware of different things ... there are also the sounds of being quiet like walking in the park. Trees create their own world; even a small group of trees, when you get in there, it is noticeably quiet. You are less aware of the street. So, even a small number of plants can create a different sensory environment.” But just being in an environment does not necessarily afford meaningful sensory experiences as “It takes a little more time than just walking through ... it's harder than going to the library and getting a book, you have to sort of know where to look, and you have to take the time to go there and share.” Understanding the ways in which plants reveal themselves to us means that we have to intentionally engage with their “itness“ with our whole sensory apparatus, we need to get close “... and by getting close to them and experiencing their different ways they almost become like friends ... there are some that have been with me for years. I have some plants that belonged to my friends who have passed away and I inherited the plants... by going to this sensory aspect, noticing how they smell, how they feel, touching them it's a way of getting close... I think it's that, that is ??? closeness. It's like a friend that you know really well and when you see them you want to hug them or hold their hand.” Closeness, being able to appreciate the relationship he has with plants, is like a bridge between the past, present and possible future. Just as close relationships develop over time, learning to appreciate nature happens over time. It is a special type of relationship that goes beyond the here and now, it has a pervasive quality.

To explore nature on its own terms requires active engagement. I agree with Berleant’s notion of engagement and its role in the aesthetic experience. Aesthetic engagement refers to all the factors and features of environmental experience, including those that hu-

mans contribute that are bound together in continuity. As I listened to the participant's stories, it became clear to me that what they find aesthetically pleasing is not necessarily dependent on the objects, sights and so on. A pear tree is not beautiful to Sylvia - The Rock Climber because she like trees, it is beautiful because on that particular day she walked out of the garden and decided to spend her day a little differently. Everyday aesthetic experiences result in engagement with one's surroundings. The act of exploring objects makes it possible to become open to the environment. Here we are not looking in, but looking through, the different layers. Once we explore a situation (in terms of introspection or we focus our attention on the object) meaning arises not from isolated contacts, but from a stream of relations and interrelations. As Berleant pointed out, we are in a state of 'complete perceptual interaction' with all features of the environment. Such exploration produces a special kind of delight and joy in discovering the world. Surprise is seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling anew (Berleant, 2010).

I would agree to some extent that not all engagement has to be aesthetic, but that it has the potential to become aesthetic. I believe the focus should not be on the predictability and strict categorization of aesthetic experiences. The goal is not to capture or control the experience, but to become familiar with the variety of experiences and give voice to their ever-changing patterns. According to the participants, being receptive is a viable dimension. Looking at particular, instead of general, examples of aesthetic engagement and participating in its presence supports the argument for the engagement model. What we find aesthetically pleasing changes as we change the ways in which we engage with our surroundings. The idea of engagement rests on the reciprocity between the perceiver and the object. Our lives and the world are deeply intertwined. Our bodies play an important role as we constantly improvise and adjust to the shifting world we live in. Our actions are not fully determined because if they were, we could not experience anything new or be surprised by it. This ongoing adjustment of oneself is a dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity by "which every animate organism necessarily orients itself to the world (and orients the world around itself), that we speak of by the term perception" (Abrams, 1996, p. 50). Perception seen in this way is not unidirectional, but a continuous interplay that goes on. It is a form of engagement where we actively keep ourselves in a state of receptivity for what may happen to us.

The lived experiences of this type of receptivity reveal that people are not just passively registering what is around them, but instead are actively engaged in the constitution of the personal, interpersonal and cultural worlds within which they find themselves.

2. A blend of serendipitous events and planned encounters. To better understand

the role aesthetic experiences play in people's everyday lives I asked the participants to tell me whether their experiences were facilitated by any strategy, if they occurred spontaneously, or if there were any barriers that might have prevented them from aesthetically engaging with their surroundings. Some of the participants noted a balance between purposely seeking out particular settings that afforded aesthetic engagement and spontaneous experiences. Each of them had a different strategy and a particular degree of planning. Arranging the experience involved more manipulation of one's immediate surroundings, such as knitting, gardening and ironing. Developing strategies involved picking a different route home or staying later at work to see the sunset. Planning usually involved a destination, such as apple picking, going fishing, or rock climbing.

Household chores are not usually viewed as a source of aesthetic pleasure because they relate to the practical, the opposite of the aesthetic. Natalie - the Traveller enjoys ironing. She enjoys moving her hand smoothly across the fabric, harvesting the trace of warmth left by the iron. Folding each piece carefully, transforming a *mélange* of wrinkled clothes into a neatly organized collection of ready to wear garments. This is a solitary experience just for her enjoyment. When spring is just around the corner Adam - the Gardener begins to work in his garden. Once the plants and flowers are in their places, Adam and his wife enjoy their accomplishment. During the day, he enjoys looking at the different shapes and colours of the plants and towards dusk he likes to sit on the porch and watch the sunset while breathing in their fragrances. It is a private moment for him, a time when he feels a part of something bigger than himself. The feeling is also sustained by his satisfaction that something constructive has come to life. It is an unspoken feeling he shares with his wife. Once the garden is in full bloom they invite friends to share and give them a "piece" of their garden as well. The garden he created is a place where he can engage his whole body, focus on the different sensory channels, be actively engaged, and have a place to reflect. In the aura of calmness, he contemplates his existence and is more in touch with himself. When the garden is transformed by winter, Adam finds other ways to find beauty in it. He finds the stems and branches of trees, sometimes covered by ice or snow, to be quite delightful. He purposely leaves the perennials to get that effect. It is his strategy to keep a part of the garden alive. In winter, the garden does not withhold sensory aesthetic experiences, as he says, it disguises them.

Mary's annual apple picking with the family is a planned activity: "We go apple picking every year...this my mother started; it's not good apples, you can do better at any fruit store in Queens on the apples, but it's that sense of being together in such a natural environment. The smell of it, the taste of it the whole thing... I feel my parents' presence look-

ing down and I always had this big feeling that I want to wrap my arms around everybody and not let it change.” In this particular context, it is a way of self-checking and an affirmation that everything is all right. In that moment, she was able to rediscover that everything is in its place. To her it is an ideal state of things. While apple picking, there were instances where she felt like she was in the audience, where nature took centre stage. On the one hand, the planned activity affords opportunities to reconnect with family through nature, on the other, since it can’t be fully controlled, it opens up possibilities for surprises to unfold. The spontaneity or surprise that I have described is similar to the concept of serendipity as defined by Amia Lieblich, where it is not just luck; serendipity is a coincidence that Mary uses for her benefit. According to Lieblich, the accounts of serendipity in the telling of one’s experience, manifest openness to experience (Lieblich, 2008). In her story of apple-picking, Mary is looking for something that will surprise her and when it does happen, it is beautiful to her. The context of apple picking becomes a space where she encounters serendipitous beauty, which she uses to reflect on her life. In this context, beauty can be seen as having a place in steering her life.

The existential dimension of the experience gives Mary - The Giver an opportunity to sense her own aliveness. It is a way to remind oneself about the bigger picture and what’s important in life: “happiness in life comes back to feeling in control of your environment.” Not in a narcissistic way, but a realization that we do not belong to the world, but the world also needs us to belong to it, since it is only when we inhabit a place that we care for it, that we assume responsibility for it. This was especially surprising to me. This type of vulnerability is not something that we come across too often. I would argue the opposite; at times we go to great lengths to become oblivious to the world and such realizations about human nature are deeply frightening.

Jena’s strategies similarly support the concept of serendipity. On a daily basis, she purposely finds beauty around her and it is important to her both personally and professionally. She seems to be open for something to surprise her. However, what her story reveals is that she finds beauty not in the things that happen spontaneously, but in things that appear to be happening spontaneously because they feel right. Jena said it happens instantaneously. When she pays attention, she realizes that she is very much in tune with her surroundings, always noticing the change in temperature, light and season. At the end of summer she said, “with the changing of temperature, light and season are moments where I find beauty...I also even here actually, I notice the sunset a lot, because my window faces west and it's very dramatic and some nights I just go outside because it's, you know, all of a sudden my office would be red and then I would go outside and the sun is just hanging over and it's pleasant.”

In this example there is a bond already established between the perceiver and the perceived, as if they had an ongoing conversation. The sunset invites, literally comes into the office and she goes outside to meet it halfway and to more fully engage its presence. In Jena's story there is "the willingness continually to revise one's own location in order to place oneself in the path of beauty" (Scarry, 1999). This impulse and the search for beauty is the need for education and growth (Scarry, 1999). I see this willingness connected to the little explored concept of conation. There are a variety of ways to describe the concept of conation. Merriam Webster's (2014) online dictionary defines conation as "an inclination (as an instinct or drive) to act purposefully". It comes from the Latin word *conari* (to try) and *conatio* (an attempt). Atman (1987) defines conation as "vectored energy", e.g. personal energy having both direction and magnitude. Kolbe (2014) describes conation as action derived from instinct; a purposeful mode of striving, volition. It is a conscious effort to carry out self-determined acts. Conation is the link between knowing (cognition) and feeling (affection), which manifests itself as the action. The stories of my participants reveal that people are motivated to be in the presence of beauty, are eager to actively engage, and improve the quality of their life. But the way in which they do so is dissimilar. I believe, it is because of conative differences. Conation is a way of developing aesthetic strategies, freedom to engage in pleasing behavior of one's choice.

The stories of the participants revealed that everyday aesthetic experiences are both those small surprises that seem to emerge from nowhere, as well as engagements that are more elaborate, that are planned. When woven together aesthetic experiences are not an addition to one's life, but a way of life. Aesthetic experience is a quality of being in the world.

3. A significant dimension of lived experience. All of the participants said that the aesthetics of everyday promise a richer life and if they could not have aesthetic experiences, it would affect all areas of their existence, their mood, work, relationships and overall happiness. In addition, even if the texture of everyday life results in subtle aesthetic satisfaction, continual awareness of the satisfaction offers a valuable payoff in the quality of life. A search for meaning is not a solipsistic act. It is a search for experiencing connection with others in our world, as well as with our physical and social environment. This connectedness carries with it an experience of wholeness (however temporary this experience may be). The other day I went for a walk and was struck by the afternoon light. I decided not to hurry, but slow down so I knew where I was. I listened to the cars in the distance and gazed at the clouds low in the sky. I felt relaxed and connected. First, the experience was embodied and it was through this agency that the wholeness

of the experience was mediated. Second, in this aesthetic state of wholeness, connections were made between particularities of my situation as these became apparent to me, such as my thinking about all the people driving their cars to somewhere (probably instrumentally) and contrasting this with my own situation. Through this aesthetic experience (conscious embodiment of meaning) understandings became available. This is everyday creativity. Mary - the Giver enjoys passing along her skills and sharing her experiences with others “because it plants the seed in another person.” She remembers her mother and her mother’s sister’s lives during the war without their husbands and how important their craft of knitting became. How their knitting, which she did not understand until she became older, was an attempt to stop the negative feelings while making something you had control over. The aesthetic experience of knitting gives Mary, and now her daughter, “freedom to express ourselves in a non-verbal way and it is crucial to our existence. These activities are avenues through which we deal with things and help us grow, making tomorrow a better day.”

Engaging in creative pursuits allows people to explore their identities, form new relationships, cultivate competence and reflect critically on the world. In turn, new knowledge, self-insight and relationships serve as sources of strength and resilience. Personal knowledge brings depth to meaning and reflects the uniqueness of our own experiences. The connotation we bring to words, the commitments we give to certain ideas, or the perceptual selections we make from among relevant alternatives are all predicated upon and integrated through the unique being of each individual.

Conclusion and future directions for research

The purpose of this study was to explore, discuss and elaborate upon what constitutes everyday aesthetic experience. This was accomplished through a phenomenological and narrative investigation with ten participants. I was interested in exploring aesthetics in the familiar world of everyday life (lifeworld), and specifically, in how aesthetics make a difference to each of the participants. Each of the participants had their own way of describing objects, situations and the processes involved, and their meanings, and the array of experiences revealed many worthy discoveries. As seen within the framework of everyday life, aesthetic engagement involves the creative play between one’s actions and the world and includes the creation of occasions in one’s life for aesthetic experiences. These actions become reorganized upon reflection and further refine a part of who we are.

I would argue that everyday aesthetics is about the ordinary, even if some argue that the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary makes the experience aestheticized (a term that has a negative connotation because it “adds value”). Mandoki (2007)

encourages us to not think of aesthetization in negative terms, by acknowledging that it refers to aesthetic as a label that adds value. Based on my interpretation, participants sought aesthetic experiences and aestheticized their surroundings and narrations when they wanted to add value to their experiences. This is a fundamental difference between the lived experience of people and their everyday lives and elite theories of aesthetics. Making things look “pretty” and “beautiful” in their homes and gardens for others to enjoy adds value to their lives.

Everyday aesthetic experience is a dynamic relationship between varying perceptions, open to change with further experience. It is not merely passive absorption or active response but a creative act -- a reworking of the experience to make sense of it. My participants revealed that outdoor environments generated affective responses that caused them to grow and feel better about themselves and others around them. Everyday aesthetic experiences reveal the essence of the fusion between the person and the world. Features of the environment are a stirring source of affect and as Jung (1965) pointed out, “It is not storms, not thunder and lightning, not rain and cloud that remain as images in the psyche, but the fantasies caused by the affect they arouse. I once experienced a violent earthquake, and my first, immediate feeling was that I no longer stood on a solid and familiar earth” (Jung, 1965, p.154-155). Thus, features of the environment not only give rise to certain emotions, but those emotions can guide a person into images, thoughts and actions that fundamentally affect one’s development.

Through the process of this research I have learned a great deal about the difficult, yet fascinating phenomenon of everyday aesthetic experience, as well as different possibilities for further research in this vein. One important possible direction for development of everyday aesthetic experience as a subject of study is to design interactive workshops that simultaneously offer learning opportunities for participants and lead to increasing insight about the phenomenon. In these experiential workshops, participants would have the opportunity to share their creative strategies with one another. Group discussion would produce different kinds of data and insights from those provided by the interviews conducted for this research. In the present study, I began to see that by sharing their experiences people had a more complete perspective on themselves as engaged individuals. Even though I did not ask participants whether their participation in the research changed them in any way, some mentioned that it had a positive effect. It strengthened their confidence in nurturing their creativity. A more systematic investigation of how people’s engagement with environments changes over time would be of educational importance.

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