

# Beauty between Space, Place, and Landscape

## Recovering the Substantive and Normative Character of Beauty

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Notions of space and place are often used interchangeably in everyday speech, but they are distinguished both conceptually and historically. When put in relation to space and place, beauty reveals all its vitality and ties to socio-political issues, like: why do we consider a place beautiful and another place ugly? How do taste judgments about places influence planning, tourism, heritage policies, urban, and landscape architecture? I will develop my argument in four points. First, I will shortly pin down the main tenets of a concept of beauty that is inherently spatial, by rephrasing Roger Scruton's insights on the beautiful and Ed Casey's notion of 'implacement'. Second, I will address the interconnection between the modern emergence of a quantitative and objectivist concept of space and a non-relational idea of beauty. Third, I will expose the relationship between the concept of place, idiographic and qualitative, and the emergence of a site-specific, phenomenologically based concept of beauty. In conclusion, I will show how non-relational conceptions of beauty risk to colonize aesthetic experience and I will take a stand for a relational conception of beauty against the risk of standardization of both landscape appreciation and planning. | *Keywords: Beauty, Place, Space, Landscape, Standardization*

### 1. Introduction

In this essay, my claim is that the geographical concepts of space and place are the locus of a possible recuperation of the relationships between the beautiful and the good. Notions of space and place are often used interchangeably in everyday speech, but they are distinguished both conceptually and historically. For the sake of my argument, I will not deal with all possible meanings that the words space and place have had in their complex and fascinating history. Rather, I will adopt a space-place opposition quite classic in both philosophy and human geography debates: on the one hand, there is Cartesian space,

which is objective, quantitative, infinite, and isotropic; on the other hand, there is place, which is symbolic, historical, idiographic. In both cases, the issue of beauty is relevant: when put in relation to space and place, beauty reveals all its vitality and ties to socio-political issues, such as why we consider a place beautiful and another place ugly, and how taste judgments about places influence planning, tourism, heritage policies, and urban and landscape architecture. Nonetheless, given the distinction between concepts of space and place, the notion of beauty assumes different nuances of meaning when put in relation to one or the other. I will develop my argument in four points. First, I will shortly pin down the main tenets of a concept of beauty that is inherently spatial, by rephrasing Roger Scruton's insights on the beautiful and Ed Casey's notion of 'implacement'. Second, I will address the interconnection between the modern emergence of a quantitative and objectivist concept of space and a non-relational idea of beauty. Third, I will expose the relationship between the concept of place, idiographic and qualitative, and the emergence of a site-specific, phenomenologically based concept of beauty. In conclusion, I will show how non-relational conceptions of beauty risk colonising aesthetic experience, and I will take a stand for a relational conception of beauty against the risk of standardization of both landscape appreciation and planning.

## 2. Space, place, and beauty: an aesthetic-geographical issue

My claim aligns with Roger Scruton's statement that beauty reveals that "we are at home in the world; the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place fit for the lives of beings like us" (Scruton, 2009, p. 145). I take Scruton's geographical metaphors very seriously. Philosopher of geography Ed Casey (1997) uses the word 'implacement' to signify the act of attaching emotional and symbolic value to a portion of space to turn it into the home of a person or community, that is, a place.<sup>1</sup> Paul Vidal de la Blache, one of the forefathers of contemporary geography, defined geography as the "science of places" (1913, p. 289). As qualitative and meaningful, place is also "the horizon that determines our perceptions and preferences" (Haapala, 1999, p. 260), which makes place relevant for aesthetics as well. Place establishes a connection between aesthetics and geography; a connection often overlooked in current literature and research (Furia, 2020). Every place bears the mark of humans, who are "constituted by being-in-the-aesthetic-world" (Haapala, 1999, p. 257). If all this holds, Scruton's claim takes on a geographic and aesthetic meaning at the same time: beauty, far from being an abstract aesthetic value, emerges in the human effort to turn terrestrial space into the common home of humankind.

Following this path means adopting a relational, substantive, and normative account of beauty. First, beauty is relational, for it does not consist in an objective property of an object, but emerges in the relationship between

<sup>1</sup> The difference between space and place has been thoroughly addressed by the phenomenological strand in human geography (see Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977 and Seamon, 1979). Phenomenological geography opposed the quantitative, neutral, and isotropic notion of space (based on a Cartesian understanding of extension) to the meaningful, qualitative, and aesthetically relevant concept of place, suited for human life. To retrieve this conceptually important debate, see also Agnew (2011).

a subject and an object. Commenting on Kant's theory of beauty, Shaviro claims that "the flower is not beautiful in itself; rather, beauty happens when I encounter the flower" (Shaviro, 2009, p. 6). However, the subject-object relation always *takes place* somewhere; the local character of such relation renders beauty a situated relation, that is, a relation in which not only a subject and an object are involved, but also the spatial conditions of their encounter. To follow and rephrase Shaviro's quote: beauty happens when, but also *where* I encounter the flower.

Second: beauty is substantive because the place of the encounter between the perceiving subject and the perceived object can be considered as the 'substance' that gives rise to both the poles of the relation. The place of the encounter is certainly the medium that makes such an encounter possible. This means that place, properly understood, does not result from the subjective projection of human values on external reality, but comes before the poles it instantiates and gives shape to our ways to feel, perceive, and make sense of the objects that surround us. The relational character of beauty is not in contradiction with its substantive nature. Here I take the word 'substantive' without assuming metaphysical stances, just as the geographer Kenneth Olwig does when posing himself the objective of "recovering the substantive nature of landscape."<sup>2</sup> Olwig sees landscape as "as a nexus of community, justice, nature, and environmental equity" (Olwig, 1996, p. 630–631). Such a nexus is still a relation, but a relation in which the subjective pole participates to a greater socio-spatial whole. That whole cannot be properly grasped as a mere object: rather, it can be seen as the lifeworld itself, geographically understood as the circumambient reality in which the subject finds itself immersed.<sup>3</sup> Beauty, therefore, is not only the measure of the quality of the communication between a subject and an object, but also accounts for the overall quality of the place in which such communication takes place. Moreover, when I say that a place is beautiful, I surely mean that I feel good in appraising it with my senses, but I also mean that it is beautiful *per se* and that such beauty attracts, affects, and implicates my body and mind. Given what is at stake in the concept of beauty, namely the possibility for humankind to feel at home in the world, it is clear that the beauty of a place is not just a specific application of the general concept of beauty, but an eminent case of what beauty as such is actually about. Indeed, a beautiful place is "a place fit for the lives of beings like us" (Scruton, 2009, p. 145).

Third, the idea of beauty implies a normative dimension. If we take such a dimension seriously, we need to adjust Scruton's claim a little bit: instead of stating that beauty reveals that "we are at home in the world" (Scruton, 2009, p. 145), we shall affirm that we *can be* at home in the world thanks to beauty. Moreover, instead of claiming that "the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place", we shall claim that the world *can be* ordered in our

<sup>2</sup> This is the title of an essay published by Olwig in 1996 in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.

<sup>3</sup> Similar ideas have been developed on Heideggerian basis by the French geographer Eric Dardel in his 1952 book *L'homme et la terre*.

perception as a place. As the remarkable analyses of Arnold Berleant (2010) and Yuriko Saito (2017) on negative aesthetics have shown, the spatial world is far from being already ordered in our perception as a full-fledged place, where humans can effectively feel at home. On the contrary, we are surrounded by spatial hideousness, in various shapes: irrational land use (and abuse) produces floods and desertification, soil degradation and loss of biodiversity (Spaid, 2020), suburban junk spaces,<sup>4</sup> non-places<sup>5</sup> and anti-places.<sup>6</sup> In all these cases, spatial ugliness is the sign of a deeper crisis that affects and challenges both ecological and socio-political equilibriums. Beauty seems to reveal its ancient kinship with the good when it is missing: thus, it can be considered as a task to be accomplished in space, rather than an objective property of places: indeed, places are themselves the results of multiple and complex processes of ‘implacement’ fostered by humans to feel at home in the world.

I will return to the relational, substantive, and normative account of beauty by the end of this essay. Before, it is necessary to take a step back and provide a conceptual elucidation of the concepts of place, space, and landscape, in order to appreciate their inherent wealth of meaning and to address how they interact differently with the issue of beauty.

### 3. Space and beauty

The term ‘space’ historically put less emphasis on phenomenological attachment to place. With Descartes and Newton, it assumed the meaning of a boundless, infinite, absolute extension, suited for the exact measuring of distances and positions of the objects that are inside it. Such a concept of space was particularly important for the transformation of human geography, traditionally based on the qualitative description of regions, into a positivist and nomothetic science, a transformation that mainly occurred during the 1950s and 1960s in the Anglo-American context. Cartesian space played a pivotal role in a new “cartography of objectivism, which claimed to disclose

<sup>4</sup> ‘Junkspace’ is the neologism adopted by the architect Rem Koolhaas to indicate the kind of territorial remains of the modern era “after modernization has run its course” (Koolhaas, 2002, p. 175): inhospitable cities, inhabitable neighbourhoods haunted by socio-spatial clashes and unequal distribution of resources. In other words, the negation of beauty, “according to a new gospel of ugliness” (*Ibidem*).

<sup>5</sup> The expression ‘non-place’ comes from the famous inquiry of the anthropologist Marc Augé on the spatiality of late capitalism (1992). According to Augé, *fin de siècle* modernity (rebranded as ‘supermodernity’) is completed with the realization of standardized sites throughout the entire globe, which lack a real link to regional architectural styles and landscape characteristics and can be replicated everywhere in order to perform a specific socio-economic function. Airports, gas stations, malls are examples of non-places, characterized by a certain indifference to aesthetic appraisal or, very interestingly, by a sharp fracture between aesthetic appraisal and integration within the broader context in which they are placed.

<sup>6</sup> A remarkable example of anti-place is offered by the philosopher Caterina Resta in her book *Geofilosofia del Mediterraneo* (2012), in which the deformities of Messina’s urban landscape caught arriving from the sea become the symbol of a denial of place and its aesthetic-phenomenological values: “Since Messina is not simply de-localized space, pure desert or flat oceanic expanse, it is not simply the matter on which one hopes to imprint new orders, but it is the deformed that leads back to the formless, to chaos, to anarchy, which is absence of Principle and Measure, Babel, city of total confusion. Suffice it to come from the sea to realize, at a glance, in a single startling view, not to be confronted with a built-up area, but with a haphazard concrete jumble, rained down nobody knows from where or how, that havocs what, by sheer effort of retrospective imagination, one can guess was the beauty of the natural site, now irreparably lost. Rarely, I think, much disharmony can appear more clearly or be more stridently” (Resta, 2012, p. 140 [My translation.]).

a fundamental and enduring geometry underlying the apparent diversity and heterogeneity of the world” (Gregory, 1994, p. 70). From the standpoint of spatial theory,<sup>7</sup> places are mere sites on a cartographic map and regional differences lose their importance. The fitness of place is assessed in relation to abstract models based on prior mathematization of space. The identity value, historicity, and narrative features of a place are not taken into account:<sup>8</sup> the equivalence of place and home is not considered relevant. Aesthetics has also lost its relevance: in spatial theory, a sharp divide is drawn between the objectivity of spatial distances and distributions and the subjectivity and place attachment, affection, and taste judgments, deemed too subjectivistic and relativistic for scientific discourse.

If space is regarded as devoid of intrinsic qualitative value or aesthetic significance, then it can be molded according to the intentions and orientations of cultures. Another assumption of such an approach is that humans, conceived as rational actors, have the power to purify real, terrestrial space, characterized by impurities and unevenness, by applying ideal models of spatial organization onto it. In this argumentative framework, real space is just the background for human action, or, in other words, the raw material to be reworked according to the spiritual needs and aims of humans. This an-aesthetic view of space does not necessarily exclude the question of beauty from the scope of spatial planning (both landscape and urban). However, the idea of beauty implied in spatial objectivist approaches is fundamentally non-relational, for in this case the ideal of beauty results from the artist’s or designer’s elaboration or adherence to aprioristic models, indifferent to the relationship with the environmental and spatial context in which the artist or designer is immersed. As non-relational, this kind of spatial beauty is defined by Paolo D’Angelo as an “extra-aesthetic value” (D’Angelo, 2021, p. 64) due to the prevalence of categorical elements in the evaluation, such as adherence to a universalistic paradigm of beauty like the one labelled by Tatarkiewicz “the Great Theory.”<sup>9</sup> A non-relational conception of beauty aligns with a sharp separation of nature (as the realm of necessity) and spirit (as the realm of freedom) and, when applied to space, emphasises first and foremost the active role of the human subject on space seen as passive, deprived of life and quality. The distance between human and space is also a gap between ideal and real, bridged precisely through the transformation of real places according to criteria of efficiency and rationality.

<sup>7</sup> Spatial theory can be deemed as an evolution of the “economic theories of location” (Olsson and Dale, 1968, p. 229) already in vogue during the first half of the XX century. In these approaches, the distances and the distribution of various elements on space, and even the very shape of the towns, are considered factors that impact the efficiency of market exchange, trade, and transportation of both commodities and people.

<sup>8</sup> Identity, history, and narration are the three criteria singled out by Marc Augé (1992) to define the concept of ‘place’ from the vantage point of anthropology.

<sup>9</sup> In this case, according to D’Angelo, beauty is still defined “by those criteria of proportion, order, and measure that, when transferred to art, prove to be insubstantial, but have their privileged field of application in beauty considered in an extra-aesthetic sense, for example in the beauty of the human body, for which there are ‘rules’ that are those followed in beauty contests, where, incidentally, the winners always tend to look alike” (D’Angelo, 2021, p. 66 [my translation]).

The objectivistic and non-qualitative notion of space, the reduction of living places to the raw material of human paligenetic intervention, the conception of nature as a mere resource and the affirmation of a disembodied and non-relational ideal of beauty inherited from the Great Theory form a unique constellation of the galaxy of modernity. Certainly, there has been no shortage of demiurgic interventions on space from the 18th century to today, qualified by the effort to make space conform to the interests, goals, and ideals of beauty of planners and their clients. Moreover, every demiurgical intervention aimed at realising an ideal of beauty on space has precise externalities in terms of producing ugliness, debasement and alienation. The demolition of historic centres to create grands boulevards,<sup>10</sup> the building of identical dormitory neighbourhoods, the invention of new State capitals out of thin air, and the transformation of villages and reserves into museums reproducing exotic experiences are productions of an appalling spatial rationality that reflects the interests of the privileged in the system.<sup>11</sup>

A radical example of non-relational beauty associated with radical spatialism is Walter Christaller's Central Place model formulated in the 1930s. In 1933, the German geographer presented the dissertation *The Central Localities of Southern Germany*, in which he introduced a rationalistic model of spatial hierarchisation of cities. The model is based on the principle that, as the distance of a household from access to a certain type of good or service increases, the demanded quantity of such good or service decreases. Where the distance between the good and the consumer is minimal, demand increases because transport costs are lower. Different demand thresholds for each type of product exist, concentrating the less necessary and therefore rarer goods or services in places with a large population; the greater the concentration of inhabitants, the higher the probability that those goods or services will meet demand. Cities not reaching the threshold of ancillary or rare goods and services revolve around the central location that produces and disposes of them. The model replicates in geography the physical argument that mass crystallises around a core in an orderly fashion. The circle is the geometrical figure for an ideal geographic region, appearing uniform from a physical point of view. However, since in real space circles do not touch each other except at a point, there would be wasted space and peripheral areas positioned at non-optimal distances from the centres. The model, therefore, is corrected by replacing circles with hexagons that share adjacent sides, thus avoiding the inconvenience of wasted space. Knowledge of simple spatial laws common to both physical nature and human settlements would thus provide the key to judging existing settlements and constructing new ones, arranged in strictly functional hierarchies. At this level, the cognitive and aesthetic spheres converge in the perfect adequacy of forms consistent with logic.

<sup>10</sup> A historical critique to the 'grands boulevards' top-down urban planning has been formulated by Henri Lefebvre (cf. Lefebvre, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> The subscription to an aprioristic model of beauty separated from the lifeworld is not only evident in the activity of building, where it is quite frequent that functional and instrumental motives override aesthetic ones (this is the case with the construction of dormitory districts that are all the same in various cities of the world), but also in the activity of cultural heritage protection. On the also political contradictions of this process cf. Olmo (2018).

The organisation of geographic space according to criteria of efficiency, functionality and simplicity, elicits a pure and disinterested aesthetic pleasure, detached from the cultural deposits of an old humanity attached to its own aesthetic habits:

The more strongly and purely the location, shape and size express the centralised character of community spaces, the greater our aesthetic pleasure will be, because we recognise that the congruence of purpose and meaning with the external form is logically correct and therefore can be appreciated as clearly (Christaller, 1966, p. 14).

Geographer Tim Cresswell (2013), in presenting Christaller's work, reminds us that the author worked as a planner in the Third Reich's working group dedicated to territorial investigation.

It is worth noticing that Christaller gives the term 'place' the meaning of mere location, a geometrical form placed in a geometrical space. In general, according to geographer John Agnew, abstract spatial analysis "tends to view places as nodes in space simply reflective of the spatial imprint of universal physical, social or economic processes" (Agnew, 2011, p. 317). The non-relational model of beauty that informs Christaller's approach emerges from a peculiar convergence of classicism, rationalism, and positivism. While this approach surely interconnects the cognitive, the moral, and the aesthetic spheres, its anti-phenomenological attitude excludes aesthetic spatial experiences and practices and affective place-attachments from its scopes. To fight aesthetic subjectivism or culturalism, radical spatialism subscribes to a version of the Great Theory that ends up denying its own assumptions. In the manifold accounts of the Great Theory of beauty described by Tatarkiewicz, the universal and moral nature of beauty is always also phenomenological. According to the Great Theory, the beauty of the cosmos is not the result of a disenchanted, disembodied rationality imposing itself on an otherwise irrational nature from the outside. On the contrary, it consists of the intelligible order of nature itself (*physis*), which unfolds organically and dynamically, shying away from rigid schematism and fixity (Vercellone, 2008). This order is ontological, moral, and aesthetic-phenomenological at the same time, as long as humans take part in it with the unity of their being. The question arises whether it is possible to retrieve such a unity of the ontological, the moral, and the aesthetic-phenomenological dimensions without succumbing to intellectualistic metaphysics or controversial and reactionary nostalgias. One possible approach is to shift the focus from the concept of space and the concept of place and examine how notion of beauty resonates with respect to this latter.

#### 4. Place and beauty

If it were possible to distil the difference between the concepts of space and place into a single word, that word would be 'home'. This is already clear at the level of everyday speech, at least in the Romance and Anglo-Saxon languages. The word 'place',<sup>12</sup> just like the Italian '*luogo*', the Spanish '*lugar*', the French

<sup>12</sup> See the definition and meaning in Britannica Dictionary (Place, no date).

'lieu', and the German 'Ort', despite their different shades of meaning, all refer to a "specific area or region of the world: a particular city, country." The idiographic character of places is what renders them unique also in the experience of people. We all know at the precategorical level of everyday experience that inhabiting one place is not the same thing as inhabiting another. According to Ed Casey, places are those "in which we orient ourselves and feel at home" (Casey, 2001, p. 685). Of course, each individual feels at home in one place and does not feel at home in another one: in general, we feel at home only very few places on earth. But, in general, a portion of terrestrial space can be called "place" when it is enlivened by everyday spatial practices (Seamon, 1979; De Certeau, 1980) and aesthetic habits (Bertinetto, 2022; Portera, 2022) that qualify it as unique and irreplaceable. That does not mean that every spatial practice is place-based and results in the sense of home. Many spatial practices are based on movement, escape, and even displacement: consider, for instance, tourism, exile, migration, pilgrimage, and so on. However, recursive patterns of spatial movements, such as going from home to school or workplace on a daily basis, produce a sense of place (Relph, 1976) that makes the practitioner feel at home within a portion of space that is wider than her physical house.

This also explains a certain degree of interchangeability between the terms "place" and "home". According to phenomenological accounts of the concept of home, pioneered by Gaston Bachelard in his seminal book *The Poetics of Space* (1957), our native home can be considered the quintessentially first place (literally, the birthplace) because of the exceptional bond that ties us to it. In turn, as we grow up, we learn to feel at home in multiple contexts, starting from the spatial surroundings of our physical house. Just as home is the first place by definition, the place (the street, the village or city, to some extent even the country) in which our home is settled can be seen as home by metonymy. By following our everyday paths, we weave our identity with our spatial surroundings, turning them into places in every moment.

Of course, this account of both place and home is more normative than descriptive.<sup>13</sup> Spatial practices are not the same for everyone and are not equally accessible to everyone. Actual experiences of places can be very far from the concept and include displacement and negative feelings; but even in such negativity of actual experience, there is a lesson. We can appreciate the ideal association of the concepts of place and home even more strongly when we do not feel at home in a place. Experiences of displacement throughout history reveal in the most powerful, and sometimes tragic way, how much we need to feel at home somewhere.<sup>14</sup> However, the ideal connection of place and home is also confirmed in average experiences fed by everyday spatial

<sup>13</sup> This is why I prefer to speak of a conceptual or ideal connection between home and place.

<sup>14</sup> This was the argument of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, who has investigated various experiences of spatial displacement in different cultures and ages: from the territorial angst of the Aranda to the estrangement felt by peasant of Marcellinara (IT) when he was temporarily taken away from his living place. It is worth noting that De Martino chose the term 'angst' with explicit reference to the Heideggerian concept in an article published in 1952.

practices. In our everyday spatial experiences, we are confronted with a kind of pre-categorical, everyday aesthetics that is mostly non-topical and non-explicit.<sup>15</sup> The experience of inhabiting refers to the ontological sphere of the being-in-an-aesthetic-world. By considering the experience of inhabiting, and the spatial practices tied to such experience, we realize that everyday aesthetics does not only accomplish the task of expanding the scope of traditional aesthetics but also represents a way to reconnect aesthetics to the profundity of ourselves, “constituted by being-in-an-aesthetic-world”, to use Haapala’s expression once again.

According to a phenomenological stance, inhabiting is not merely about possessing a house; rather, it involves repeating complex sets of situated practices and movements, through which a sense of belonging and place-attachment can arise. Inhabiting is about everyday habits and practices of orientation, territorialization, and care: our place-attachment and sense of belonging with a place develops mostly subconsciously, through the repetition of our spatial routines. Authors like Michel De Certeau (1980) and Henri Lefebvre (1974) distanced themselves from the concept of place precisely because of its association with the automatisms of everyday practices, which they saw as mechanical and filled with ideological motives and top-down impositions. Indeed, the act of inhabiting also involves the interiorization of predominant social values through everyday practices and habits. However, this interiorization encompasses not only the negative, alienating side of ideology but also the very condition of belonging to a social community that mirrors itself in its living spaces. In this regard, Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of the three layers of meaning of the notion of ideology, as presented in his *Conferences on Ideology and Utopia* (1986), is still relevant. According to Ricoeur, the first layer of meaning of ideology is distortion and manipulation: it is in this sense that the word has been used most during the XX century, especially from the part of critical theory. The second layer is the process of legitimation of authority through a set of ideas about society, morality, politics, and so on. Ricoeur draws this idea from Max Weber’s understanding of institutional authority as a kind of power that not only needs violence but also persuasion to be exerted with true effectiveness. The third layer is more horizontal and has to do with the social integration of a community, made possible by the sharing of symbols, myths, and images between people. If the first meaning of ideology is negative, the second is rather neutral, and the third is even beneficial, for no community can stay together out of a common framework of symbols and values. These ideas, which Ricoeur develops in the framework of a general theory of culture, can easily be applied to space. The symbolic heritage of a culture crystallizes itself in spatial configurations: the very possibility to feel at home in a portion of space, that is, to turn it into a place, depends on such crystallization. This insight points to the definition of a genetic phenomenology of place which transcends the narrow limits of subjectivism. A place is a place for us, as individuals, when we feel it as home;

<sup>15</sup> Everyday aesthetics has always been interested in spatial practices and experiences. However, everyday aesthetics has undergone its explicit ‘spatial turn’ only quite recently, thanks to contributions like the last book of Elisabetta Di Stefano, *Estetica urbana* (2023).

but a place is a place when a culture, a community, or an intersubjective entity settles in a portion of space, transforming it substantially, giving it a name with a capital letter. Such intersubjective, collective ‘implacement’ is at the basis of any subjective experience of place. This also means that places reflect the patterns of thought, beliefs, customs, but also power balances and ideological connotations of a culture. Consequently, the process by which a portion of space is turned into or preserved as a place is far from irenic: ideological motives usually lie behind our place-attachments, including how we appraise them aesthetically. This does not render our feeling-at-home in a place less real. Instead, often, the fact of not-feeling-at-home in a place reveals precisely that place’s ideological constitution, embodied in physical, cognitive, and moral boundaries, and criteria of inclusion or exclusion concerning certain categories of people.

The same place may be home for some categories of people and a prison for others. In this ambiguous nature of places, however, their inherent vocation for change is found. Places are not the result of the mechanical replication of cultural biases and power dynamics onto space. Places are inherently animated by virtual possibilities that it is up to people to actualize. A place takes on different meanings for those who inhabit it across countless generations – new residents, migrants, pilgrims, students, business travellers, scientists, artists, tourists; the multilayered identity of a place consists in the open and delicate interplay of the representations and practices they host, enable, and preserve. A place is the dynamic whole constituted by the complex interplay between different spatial practices and practitioners; it exists as long as they coexist despite (but even by virtue of) their differences. The complex homeostasis in which a place exists is not static; on the contrary, it changes gradually but continually through unexpected encounters, displacements, clashes and conflicts, mash-ups and hybridisations.

The American geographer David Seamon coined the expression ‘place-ballet’ (1979) to outline the non-mechanical, non-automatic entanglement that weaves together places and people. Our place-based spatial practices do not only result from the blind application of social codes and rules. Rather, as we move along our everyday paths, we take on a sort of interpretative attitude, adding to the social use of spaces our personal and socio-cultural styles and preferences, which in themselves hinge on our social conditions, origins, genders, generations, etc. Spatial practices and ‘space-time routines’ (Seamon, 1979) are analogous to ballets, where personal interpretation and style is at least as important as having memorized the script. The place-ballet serves as a powerful metaphor which brings attention to the creative conditions of belonging with our living spaces and to the virtualities of places themselves: only by recovering such relational and processual dimension it is possible to retrieve the importance of places for the development of personal and collective identities, without falling into geographical determinism, nationalism, or political hyper-conservatism.

There is another, more subtle reason why the metaphor of the place-ballet is interesting to the researcher in aesthetics. Ballet, as an artistic practice, is

somehow concerned with beauty. Given the inherently local nature of places, place-ballets are particularly suited to reveal the site-specific, relational character of beauty itself. There is no general rule or parameter of beauty that can be applied uniformly to all places. This may sound quite obvious, but, at the same time, it is highly consequential at the level of place and landscape planning, where beautification often proceeds according to extrinsic stylemes, perhaps borrowed from the compositional values of picturesque art.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the metaphor of the place-ballet emphasizes the practical dimension of beauty, which is attained in action, interaction, and engagement, rather than mere contemplation (Berleant, 1991). The fact that it is not possible to subscribe to an abstract and disembodied paradigm of beauty for appraising different places and place-ballets implies that all place-ballets and places may be beautiful (and must be beautified) in their own terms. Yet, at least one normative element for defining this practical kind of spatial beauty can be found by reflecting on the artistic metaphor of the ballet itself. However personal and differentiated ballet styles can be, it is hard to consider sprawling, disordered, confused and clumsy movements, disrespectful of the movements of the other dancers, as dance. Moreover, Seamon does not generally speak of dance, but of ballet, which is a formal kind of dance concerned with harmony and grace.<sup>17</sup> The aesthetic quality of a ballet interpretation, its beauty, resides in the realization of an embodied and practical kind of harmony, which is visual and performative at the same time. The metaphor of the place-ballet introduces the question of harmony from the artistic field, as if our being-in-the-aesthetic-world could be more or less successful in accordance with the ability of the self to live in harmony with others in a place. The metaphor of the ballet should not be taken literally, of course: the point is not about the artistic quality of our spatial practices, such as driving all the way to work on daily basis, having a stroll in the public garden next door, sitting on the steps of the central square of the neighbourhood. While such routine actions and tasks cannot be evaluated according to artistic criteria, they are habits endowed with significance that is, at the same time, aesthetic, cognitive, and moral. A harmonious place-ballet is one performed in harmony with the place-ballet of the others. In this way, place results in a dynamic composition of ballets in harmony with each other. It is, of course, a regulative ideal; but this ideal, which is both moral and aesthetic, prevents the issue of socio-spatial order from falling into the sterile problematic of formalistic public decor.

When speaking of places, beauty cannot be simply reduced to an artistic parameter applicable to different idiographic contexts; but beauty should not be dismissed as if it were nothing more than a caprice or even a vice. An institutional report from the English Parks Alliance delivered in 2015 is devoted to the formulation of a “community right to beauty” (Harvey and

<sup>16</sup> To the improper attribution of general patterns of aesthetic beauty based on figurative arts to nature are directed the criticisms raised by Allen Carlson (2009) towards the very notion of landscape. In the conclusion of this paper, I will propose a variation on the theme.

<sup>17</sup> On this subject, cf. the doctoral thesis of Serena Massimo: *Dance as Emergence. Lived Experience of Dancing between spontaneity and 'making sense'* (2023, [non-published, title translated by me]).

Julian, 2015). Among the key findings of the report, there is the fact that “Overall only 54% of people felt they had access to beautiful places, dropping to just 45% among those in social rented property.” It is clear that, in this report, beauty is not considered only as an aesthetic quality detached from the other spheres of human life; it fully concerns people’s quality of life. The statistical difference between people living in social rented properties and others tells a lot about differences in the experience of dwelling – that is, of place – between different social groups. Beauty is properly considered as a measure of people’s quality of life.

Reflecting on the crisis of the concept of beauty after the fall of the Great Theory, according to which beauty, good and truth were different faces of the same coin, Tatarkiewicz writes that:

The word and concept ‘beauty’ have been retained in colloquial speech, however; they are used in practice rather than in theory. One of the central concepts in the history of European culture and philosophy has thus been reduced to the status of a mere colloquialism (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 146).

Nevertheless, the “communitarian right to beauty” sought by the abovementioned report and similar ones should not be simply dismissed as mere colloquialism. I think that the assumptions of that report offer much to be philosophically reconsidered even if, as Tatarkiewicz argues: “the concept of beauty, however, is not easy to improve” (*Ibidem*). When applied to the issue of place, beauty has already overcome the sharp boundaries of aesthetic consciousness (Gadamer, 1960), to reconnect with the ontological and phenomenological sphere of human dwelling in a spatial world.

##### **5. Places and landscapes: between standardisation and uniqueness**

The concept of modern space is either indifferent to beauty or connected to a non-related conception of beauty, whereas the concept of place refers to a relational, site-specific notion of beauty. In both cases, we are confronted with a substantive and normative conception of beauty due to the inherent links beauty entails with other spheres of human life. It is substantive because, when discussed with reference to space and place, beauty exits the perimeter of arts to become a qualitative indicator of our relationship to the world. It is normative because spatial beauty represents an objective to be attained, a goal to be achieved. In the case of the modern conception of space, however, the normativity of beauty is essentially cognitive and anti-phenomenological: we must know what constitutes a beautiful place (the central place of Christaller’s theory, for instance) in order to realize it. In the case of place, on the other hand, the normativity of beauty is phenomenological, which means that it essentially depends on people’s feelings about the beautiful and the ugly in space.

At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge that the abovementioned model is only ideal-typical. In the history of culture and aesthetic taste, as much as at the phenomenological level of everyday experience, the two well-distinguished concepts of space entailing non-relational beauty and place entailing relational beauty often overlap. In particular, one cannot ignore the fact that

non-relational ideals of beauty do not operate only at the strategic level of top-down planning, as if there were, on one side, the imposition of such ideals operated by the most powerful, and, on the other side, relational, local, idiographic ways to see beauty in places from the part of oppressed inhabitants. As a matter of fact, non-relational ideals of beauty affect habitual mental pathways all the time. Consider what is happening to landscapes today. From the conceptual point of view, the view according to which “the spirit of place resides in its landscape” (Relph, 1976, p. 30) is to be welcomed.<sup>18</sup> Landscapes, which can be defined as the material, bodily skin of places which lend themselves to representation,<sup>19</sup> are often judged beautiful according to picturesque stylemes that have very little to do with embodied experience of historical, narrative, and identity places. People often beautify their landscapes according to an ‘acting-on’ attitude (Besse, 2017), according to which several elements considered to be beautiful in the abstract are simply introduced in historical landscapes to make them look like the images of successful landscapes. Consider, for example, the various processes of ‘tuscanization’ that are taking place in several rural landscapes around the world. As has been noted in some specialised journals: ‘tuscanization’ has exported itself into the increasingly competitive southern region of Apulia, and the more austere (compared with sunny Tuscany) Umbria (see also Pellegrini, 2022). But the Tuscan landscape model has even reached Texas (Michalski, 2015). According to Carlson, the standardization of taste in the appreciation of nature hinges on the improper application of judgements parameters coming from the sphere of art. When speaking of landscape, it is pointless to argue against the confusion between art and nature, since, as Berleant has noted consistently with a thorough tradition of human geography dating back to Paul Vidal de la Blache (1913) and Carl Sauer (1925), in landscapes nature and art find themselves confused in principle. Rather, at stake there is the risk that a non-relational conception of beauty, extra-aesthetic in itself, is invading and influencing the aesthetic taste of planners, inhabitants, tourists, and travellers, to the point that the idiographic character of place (and its inherent beauty) is being sacrificed on the high altar of non-relational (often business-oriented) model of beauty.

Conceptions of beauty applied to space and place owe their power to their substantiality and their normativity. However, such power can be dangerous, as the extreme case of the palingenetic geographer in Nazi Germany proves. Engaging with spatial beauty almost unavoidably demands taking a stance.

<sup>18</sup> Relph’s account of the relationship between place and landscape is the geographical equivalent of the aesthetic theory elaborated by Berleant. According to Berleant, landscape is “an individual environment, its peculiar features embodying in a distinctive way the factors that constitute any environment and emphasizing the human presence as the perceptual activator of that environment” (Berleant, 1997, p. 12). Even if Berleant does not explicitly address the conceptual relation between place and landscape (he rather discusses the relationship between landscape and environment), it is possible to draw a connection between place and landscape because of their shared focus on local specificity and quality. Moreover, with landscape, Berleant identifies a concrete portion of territory, not its representation: this also puts Berleant’s approach in opposition to Carlson’s, at least on this point.

<sup>19</sup> This has been expressly argued by Ed Casey (2002). On the complex relationships between materiality and representation in landscapes, cf. Wylie (2007).

A relational concept of beauty, despite its difficulties, proves more respectful to the history of places and the experiences of local communities, in spite of the threats posed by standardization and alienation. In conclusion, the substantive and normative traits of relational beauty cannot be substantiated in any rigid definition or pattern. A beautiful place is one in which I can feel at home.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10496140