

**INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NATURAL AND ‘ARTIFICIAL’ ENVIRONMENTS: A STUDY OF HOUSEHOLD AESTHETICS IN GHANA****Kquofi, Steve (PhD)** (Corresponding Author)

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**ABSTRACT**

Although there is substantial objectivity in art, the aesthetic appreciation of nature is either thoroughly relative or much less constrained than the aesthetic appreciation of art. There are varied opinions as to whether the environment should be aesthetically judged on the grounds of the expressive features of the natural objects or the aesthetic properties of nature. This exploratory study, however, discusses the tenets of aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment and human-constructed environment as an art using Ghana as a study area. Secondly, the study offers an understanding of the contribution of indoor as well as outdoor decorations to the aesthetic consideration and appreciation of the environment. It is, therefore, appropriate to suppose that the *aesthetic* value of an item increases with its aesthetic *quality*. Also, nature art inspires appreciation of nature as it reflects the aesthetics of nature as environmental aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, artificial environment, biodiversity, household, nature art.

**INTRODUCTION**

The laws of nature indicate that the environment and its constituents are created things that have numerous qualities embedded in them for appreciation. The complex nature of the environment, however, renders it somehow difficult for one to fathom its aesthetic characteristics. Nevertheless, aesthetics abounds in every animate and inanimate objects found in our surrounding, and the environment is no exception. Nature is regarded not as an adversary or resource to be subdued and exploited, but as something with an autonomous and worthy of existence in itself (Hettinger, 2005; Budd, 2000; Crumley, 2001; Carlson, 2002; Bharucha, 1999), and the wilderness is not regarded as “ugly or as a blemish on existence, but as something not only admirable but admirable aesthetically” (Bharucha, 1999).

In the realm of philosophical disposition, aesthetics is defined as the science of the law-governed aesthetical assimilation of the world by man, of the essence and forms of creative work according to laws of beauty (Frolov, 1984; Crumley, 2001; Adorno, 2001). It is the ways in which human beings experience the world through their senses (Carlson, 2002; Dutton, 2005; Kennick, 1979), especially linking it to the recognition and appreciation of particular objects when they strike the senses in a pleasing manner. Aesthetics mostly focuses on works of art and other similar objects that are purposefully designed for humans to enjoy (Crumley, 2001; Richards, 2001). However, aesthetic appreciation is not limited to art but it is frequently directed to the world at large.

Frolov (1984), as many other writers outline the main aesthetic categories: *the beautiful and the ugly, the sublime and the base, the dramatic, the tragic and the comic, the heroic*, appear

as specific manifestations of the aesthetic assimilation of the world in every field of social being, human life – in production, public and political activity, in attitude to nature, in culture, in everyday life, etc. The arts and the process of artistic creation are part of aesthetics and its most essential aspect (Shapshay, 2013; Carlson, 2010). In analyzing the essence of art and its laws, aesthetics is intimately connected with all the special, theoretical and historical sciences, and sciences of the arts.

Environmental aesthetics focuses on philosophical questions concerning appreciation of the world at large (Carlson, 2002; Berleant, 1997; Wohlwill. 1976). The world is constituted not simply by some particular objects but by environments (organic and inorganic) themselves. Environmental aesthetics goes beyond the appreciation of works of art to the aesthetic appreciation of human-influenced and human-constructed as well as natural environments. Porteous (1996); Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) indicate that environmental aesthetics is concerned with the aesthetic of natural environment, cultural landscapes, and (non-art) objects in general that make up our everyday environment.

Although there is substantial objectivity in art, the aesthetic appreciation of nature is either thoroughly relative or much less constrained than the aesthetic appreciation of art. There are varied opinions as to whether the environment should be aesthetically judged on the grounds of the expressive features of the natural objects or the aesthetic properties of nature. Also, there is a growing awareness of floral diversity which has enhanced our admiration of biodiversity. But one wonders how the aesthetic consciousness of Ghanaians has shaped this admiration as regards their local culture and surrounding wild nature. In this study, an attempt is made to discuss the interrelationships of aesthetic appreciation between the natural environment and human-constructed environment as an art using Ghana as a study area. Secondly, the study offers an understanding of the contribution of indoor as well as outdoor decorations to the aesthetic consideration and appreciation of the environment.

### **Ghanaian concept of aesthetics in relation to the environment**

Indigenous Ghanaians, and for that matter Africans, see beauty in everything around them. This notion is portrayed in their philosophy of life. The life of the traditional Ghanaian is controlled by the principles underlying these philosophies, and aesthetics is considered to be one of the basic aspects of their daily endeavours. In Ghanaian culture, as in all African cultures, aesthetics generally has a moral basis, as indicated by the fact that in many of the people's languages the same word means "*beautiful*" and "*good*" (Glover & Kquofi, 2012). "Beautiful" refers to the total outlook of a particular animate or inanimate object; and "good" is mostly used to describe the inner qualities inherent in an object including human beings (Gyekye, 2003; Rattray, 1959), not losing sight of the natural environment that surrounds those objects and human beings. Intrinsically, Ghanaians are aware of the aesthetic values of the natural environment and as a result they advertently refer to it as "beautiful" and "good"

The goodness of an object or phenomenon is seen in its totality in the Ghanaian concept of beauty. That includes the tangible and the intangible forms. The goodness of the tangible is experienced physically; something one can see and touch, which is satisfying and gives pleasure. The intangible aesthetic perception deals with the purpose and functional qualities of the object or phenomenon, which may not have the physical appropriations. The Ghanaian sees in the natural and 'artificial' environment the physical and the spiritual. The people see beauty in terms of the splendour, creativity, sensitivity, elegance, decorativeness of the content of a phenomenon as well as its appearance, functionality and human activities

including a beautiful deed. It is a considered opinion that everything created, produced by man can be a vehicle of aesthetic appreciation. The human-constructed (*artificial*) environment appears to be the most suitable for this purpose since one of their functions is to be beautiful. It seems therefore; right to say that aesthetics deals with art and its objects. But aesthetic qualities cannot be perceived only from the constructed environment but also from the natural environment (Carlson, 2002; Berleant & Carlson (1998); Wohlwill, 1976), which is in the purview of Ghanaian concept of aesthetics.

### **The Synergy of Aesthetic Judgments of the natural environment**

Comprehensively, societal development in this time and age, aimed at promoting the continual existence of the human race as far as the environment is concerned, cannot materialize without the conscious effort to integrate aesthetics into the developmental policies of all nations. In other words, human activities that aim at development cannot be separated from artistic activities imagined, created, executed or used by humans through diverse, conscious and unconscious ways (Iredell, 1958). Judging from the environmental point of view, Iredell thinks that when the myriad of benefits that society can gain from the environment are considered, it is very paramount to attach aesthetic considerations that are of immense value to mankind.

It is therefore indicative of the fact that aesthetic judgment of environmental works of art is challenging, because the natural environment offers a broader perspective for philosophy of aesthetics than standard works of art (i.e. objects created by man). Certain types of environment are particularly valuable because of the view they offer, but some because of fragrance, tactile qualities, etc. Some are poor in view, but rich in “whispers” of nature (sounds of water, wind, birds, frogs, or other animals). In buttressing this view on the range of perception in the natural environment, Johnston relates this to Chinese gardens by saying:

Chinese gardens are...making a direct appeal to the emotions and devoted exclusively to serving all the senses: visually unfolding a succession of pleasing surprises introducing textures which seek to be touched; mingling the perfumes of blossoms and bark; capturing whispers of moving leaves and water; exploiting the ever changing character of the trees whose varying beauties enhance each season (Johnston, 1991).

It is therefore suggestive in our opinion that aesthetic contemplation of the environment can be either general, or related to particular (visual, tactile, or olfactory) aspects of the environment. Listening to various sounds (of water, rain, wind, birds), or watching particular objects, or sight, sometimes develops as a separate ability in relation to the overall contemplation of the environment. For example, bird-watching developed as a particular pastime can be very rewarding as a result of the ability of the environment evoking the emotional responses in man responsible for aesthetic appreciation. Maybe the tactile qualities of the environment are less understood or recognized than other precepts. Some people have tactile experience, whether they touch the texture, or just watch it. They, perhaps, “translate” part of the visual experience into tactile – sometimes just because it is not possible to touch it.

### **Aesthetic judgement of natural and ‘artificial’ environments**

Judging the aesthetic quality (value) of the natural environment and marry it with the ‘artificial’ environment, it is very important to consider the philosophical principles

underlying environmental aesthetics. Aside from this, in appreciating the beauty of the environments one is often confronted with positions and problems. Carlson (2002); Gibson (1979); Sardon (1988) indicate that the central philosophical issue of environmental aesthetics is determined in large measure by the contrast between the nature of its objects of appreciation and the nature of works of art.

Paradigm works of art are more or less discrete, stable and self-conditioned objects of appreciation typically meant to be appreciated with specific senses and from particular distances and positions (Cupchik, 2009; Danto, 1974). Carefully analyzing the natural environment, each of these features is in marked contrast with those objects for appreciation in environmental aesthetics. Since these objects are everyday environments, appreciators are immersed within the objects of their appreciation.

Distinctively, 'artificial' environments are the creations of 'artists' who intentionally and typically create them by working within artistic traditions and by embodying their intended designs in objects. This implies that the 'artificial' environments belong to some particular artists, conforming to some conceptual dictates. By contrast, however, the objects of appreciation of environmental aesthetics are not typically the creations of artists. They come about 'naturally'; they change, grow and develop by means of natural processes. Even when environments are human-influenced or human-constructed and thus involve human agency, only rarely are they primarily the products of designers working within traditions and embodying designs.

The upshot is that household aesthetic experiences of Ghana at large, thus the environment, are seemingly very different from the aesthetic experiences of art. In the former case, unlike the latter, appreciators are confronted by, if not intimately and totally immersed in, objects of appreciation that impinge upon all their senses, are constantly in motion, are limited in neither time nor space and are of a non-predetermined nature and meaning. Appreciators are within and among objects of appreciation and their task is to achieve aesthetic appreciation of those objects. Moreover, appreciation must seemingly be achieved without the aid of frames, the guidance of artistic traditions or the direction of artists and their designs.

A common view among environmental thinkers about environmental aesthetics which is dubbed "positive aesthetic" holds the strongest position that all virgin nature is beautiful. A weaker formulation is that the "natural environment in so far as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive intense, unified, and orderly, rather than bland, dull, insipid, incoherent, and chaotic" (Carlson, 1984). The weaker version clearly does not entail that all parts of nature are equally beautiful, and so it may leave undefended the claim implied by the stronger version, namely, that we cannot maintain that one part of nature is aesthetically better than another part. The proponent of positive aesthetics rejects conventional aesthetic hierarchies concerning nature---e.g., majestic mountain versus bland savannah versus dank swamp. Although the aesthetic evaluation of artworks may vary from great to mediocre to poor, and their qualities from beautiful to boring to ugly, this is exactly what is different about nature, according to positive aesthetics. Positive aesthetics can be understood as the result of two intuitions. First, that aesthetic assessment of art involves criticism, judgment and ultimately *comparison*. But such comparative judgments are appropriate only for artefacts, which are intended to be a certain way or to accomplish certain goals, not for nature. Second, our tendency to find some parts of nature bland, boring, or even distasteful is all based on projecting inappropriate ideas or comparisons onto the objects of our experience, e.g., looking for a view that is similar to a beautifully framed and balanced art representation or

looking at a dark forest as full as evil spirits (Brady, 2009). Nature properly understood--- e.g., against a background of biology, geology, ecology---is, as a matter of fact beautiful (or at least aesthetically good) in many ways.

### Philosophical positions within environmental aesthetics

Carlson (2002) views some philosophical positions in two distinct perspectives (i) *the engagement approach*; and (ii) *the cognitive approach*.

***The engagement approach:*** This approach analyses the large natural environments, which most literally and completely surround appreciators, impinging on all their senses and engaging them as integral parts of the environments themselves. In the researcher's view, this approach, perhaps considers this kind of engaged experience of environments to be the essence of aesthetic appreciation. Carlson infers that "...appreciators must transcend traditional dichotomies, such as subject/object, and diminish the distance between themselves and objects of appreciation, aiming at total, multi-sensory immersion of the former within the latter". Invariably, this engagement approach to the appreciation of the aesthetic aspects of the environments is, moreover, not restricted to large natural environments, but is advocated as a model for the appreciation of all kinds of environments and objects, including even some works of art. It is in this view that this study deems it fit to make allusions to 'artificial' household environments as a complement to enhancing the aesthetics of the environments at large.

Nevertheless, it is a major factor in broadening the scope of environmental aesthetics beyond that of landscape aesthetic and shaping it into a field not simply focusing on nature, but encompassing the aesthetic aspects of the Ghanaian household environment at large. Of course, every object, whether natural or created by man, found in homes, offices, shops, compounds, etc. has aesthetic elements such as line, colour, texture, shape, etc. inherent in them which deserve to be duly appreciated.

Engagement approach centres on immediate sensory involvement with any object of aesthetic appreciation. However, related approaches emphasize similar dimensions of the appreciation of both natural and human environment, arguing that these dimensions, although perhaps not exhaustive, are nonetheless essential (Carlson, 2002). In reviewing this thoroughly, it is suggestive that some kinds of emotional and feeling-related states and responses, such as *arousal, affection, reverence, awe, wonder, ineffability, aloofness* and *mystery* need to be considered in aesthetic judgment of the environment of households in Ghana. It is clear that these responses present subjective answers to the questions of what and how to aesthetically appreciate the environments. To be more elaborate, these emotional and feeling-related states clearly point out that since appreciators (humans) appear to lack resources such as frames, artists' traditions and designs, as well as the guidance these provide, questions concerning the appreciation of everyday environment cannot be adequately answered. The implication is that for viewers there is no such thing as correct or appropriate aesthetics appreciation; rather, it is simply a matter of appreciators opening themselves to being immersed, responding as they will and enjoying what they can.

***The cognitive approach:*** Unlike the engagement approach of appreciating our environments, the basic idea of the cognitive approach is recognized by the fact that appreciating is guided by the nature of objects of appreciation and thus that knowledge about their origins, types and properties is necessary for serious, appropriate aesthetic appreciation.



Invariably, this position can address the questions of what and how to appreciate the Ghanaian household and natural environments. It therefore suggests that the roles played in appreciation of works of art by frames, artists, traditions and designs may be viewed in these two directions as far as appreciating of the environments is concerned. Judging this critically from my jurisprudential orbit, one may come to the realization that in such approach, the roles of *frames* and *artists* are typically taken up by appreciators, and those of *traditions* and *designs* by objects of appreciation. Thus, when encountering objects of appreciation, protectors set frames that limit them in time and space and select senses relevant to their protection. This renders the protection of artist's works very rigid, stiff-necked and unappealing to the senses over a period of time. On the contrary, appreciation of the environments as a whole becomes much more interesting and enlivens or invigorates the senses due to its fluidity, change, growth and dynamism. Each moment, day, season or time has different sets of emotional responses the environments evoke.

Moreover, as artists work with their creations, so too, in setting and selecting, appreciators must work with the nature of objects of appreciation. In this way, environments themselves provide the analogies of traditions and designs, determining their own natures and meanings for appreciators to discover. These may, probably, offer guidance in light of which appreciators, by setting, selecting and discovering, can reach answers to the questions of 'what' and 'how' to appreciate it.

For individuals to be able to internalize the inherent qualities of aesthetics there is the need to consciously train the senses to naturally capture or be responsive to the Ghanaian environment at large (natural and 'artificial' environments). This exercise of training the requisite senses can be successfully achieved when one constantly develops positive passion and attitude towards the environments as a good source of lifting the 'spirits' of appreciators. In this vein, it is very important to indicate that when the environment is duly appreciated as a source of promoting satisfaction and joy, its aesthetic values may, probably, compel humans to develop its different zones into interesting places for recreation.

### **Enhancing aesthetics of the natural environment**

Increasingly, making the conscious effort to enhance the aesthetics of the environment is probably the least expensive type of management programme to implement, if no obvious damage has been done in the past. With proper planning, the Ghanaian society can conduct a variety of management practices and still maintain aesthetic values if the people are always conscious of what makes the environment visually pleasant.

Making aesthetics an important factor in household environment enhancement, the Ghanaian society should consider the following goals in their visual resource analysis:

- The character of the landscape, which is defined as the overall impression created by its unique combination of visual features such as land, water, vegetation, geologic formation, and structures.
- Macro-landscapes to be distinguished from micro-landscapes. The latter may be feature or focal landscapes such as forest meadows, lakes, streams, or geologic features, or those influenced by such natural phenomenon as cloud patterns or sunsets. In Ghana, some parts of the environment that give aesthetic responses may be micro-feature or focal landscape; however, in some areas panoramic vistas may be prevalent.

- Areas of highest scenic beauty should be identified, as these are the most desirable areas for recreation facilities such as forest drives, trails, picnic areas and campgrounds
- Consideration should be given to such factors as motion, light, atmospheric conditions, season, distance of the viewer from the scene, location where the observer will view the scene, and the time of exposure.

In effect, the nexus of aesthetics and recreational management (enhancements) creates the opportunity for players in environmental issues to effectively protect the natural environment from further degradation as well as restore the damage that might have been caused to it in the past. With these pragmatic efforts, the visual quality of the environments (both natural and man-made) would be greatly boosted to promote tourism and other outdoor recreational activities.

### Awareness of Household Environmental Aesthetics

In Ghana today, there is a growing awareness of floral diversity which has enhanced our admiration of biodiversity. But one wonders how the aesthetic consciousness of the people has shaped this admiration as regards their local culture and surrounding wild nature. This study offers an understanding of the contribution of indoor as well as outdoor decorations to the aesthetic consideration and appreciation of the environment. Three distinct household decorations that stand as regards environmental awareness in household and public places are: *natural flowers and plants; artificial flowers and plants; and dried flowers and plants.*

As stated earlier on, it is interesting to explore how Ghanaians' environmental awareness seen in households is shaped by, and is interrelated with, their sense of beauty as well as plentiful wild nature surrounding their daily life. This is a relatively new tradition in the Ghanaian society. Traditionally, indigenous communities in Ghana did not have household floral decorations whether artificial or natural. The present day appreciation and usage of household floral decoration is a result of foreign influence. However, indigenous people, probably would leave aesthetically pleasing plants and flowers in the compounds when planning and constructing their settlement areas. Other natural plants were purposely planted in their compounds to serve medicinal purposes. Environmental awareness and appreciation of beauty have promoted this practice to be in vogue in perhaps every modern house, school premises, offices, churches, restaurants, hotels, etc. Temporarily, different kinds of potted natural or artificial plants and flowers are used to decorate celebration and ritual grounds such as festivals, durbars, parties, weddings, etc. (Fig. 1 - 5).



Fig. 1: Potted natural flowers used as decoration at the entrance of a shop



Fig. 2: Potted dried plant



Fig. 3: Potted dried and artificial plant



Fig. 4: Artificial flowers in a vase in one of the researchers' living room, Kumasi

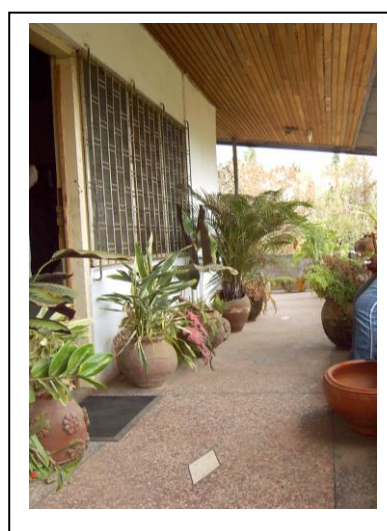


Fig. 5: Potted natural flowers used to decorate a porch in one of the researchers' house, Kumasi

As a result of the mass patronage of these decorative features much attention is focused on the artificial ones more than the natural ones. The reason most people prefer to use more artificial flowers and plants is the easiness of their maintenance and storage. They are usually washed with detergent and water and dried outside. Compared to natural flower and plants, people do not have to water, give fertilizer, remove insects or dead leaves and flowers, and even prune artificial flowers. It is no exaggeration to say that artificial flowers are the most popular as well as dominant household decoration enhancing the aesthetics of the environment. Nowadays in Ghana, it is rare to enter a house, an office or shop without finding artificial flowers and plants. They come in many different varieties of flowers, plants, sizes, colours and forms, and people also decorate them in different ways. They are generally put in miniature rattan baskets, ceramics or glass vases. It is very important to indicate that these artificial flowers are made of different materials, such as plastic, silk, satin, taffeta



paper, wood, and the designers like to blend different textured artificial flowers as well as combine flowers with green leaves.

Nevertheless, natural flowers and plants remain the outstanding choice in the compound of most homes, hotels, institutions, churches, etc., whereas the dried and artificial plant and flowers are limited to the indoor spaces. However, all depend on the different aesthetic tastes of the people. Some like fruit trees in their compounds whereas others like to get indoor as well as outdoor ornamental natural plants. Examples of some of the various fruit trees are dark green, green and yellow coconut trees, mango trees, avocado trees, orange trees, etc. In addition to the fruit trees, most Ghanaians also like a kind of lawn-type natural flowers, which are artistically shaped to the desired taste of the owner of the house in which it is planted. This increasing appreciation of natural artificial and dried flowers and plants has provided a pragmatic avenue for florists and horticulturists to increase the awareness of the aesthetic aspects of these biodiversities and the need to appreciate and protect them.

## CONCLUSION

It is appropriate to suppose that the *aesthetic* value of an item increases with its aesthetic *quality*.

The study has shown that there is a growing awareness of floral diversity which has enhanced our admiration of biodiversity. But one wonders how the aesthetic consciousness of the people has shaped this admiration as regards their local culture and surrounding wild nature. Within the generic category of 'artificial' environment, it is obvious that the familiar genre of "nature art" as representations of environmental aesthetics has nature, not humans, as their foregrounded subject. In addition, nature art is usually thought of as exhibiting the same favourable regard as positive aesthetics; even fierce, barren or threatening landscapes are presented as being admirable or as having positive aesthetic features. It is obvious that nature art inspires appreciation of nature and it reflects the aesthetics of nature as environmental aesthetics. This fosters deeper equilibrium between the 'natural' and 'artificial' environments for a much more deeper appreciation.

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