
Aesthetics

Definition

Webster's Dictionary defines aesthetics as the study or theory of beauty and the psychological responses to it.



Views, vistas and the arrangement of places can enhance the attractiveness of an area and encourage people to utilise the space, Darwin, Northern Territory
Source: SGS Economics and Planning

Overview

In the context of urban environments, public spaces and streetscapes, aesthetics relates to the attractiveness of an area and in particular the combined effects of various elements such as the quality of the architectural and landscape design, the quality of views and vistas, and the arrangement of elements such as furniture in the public realm.

Good aesthetics requires a connection between architectural and landscape quality, the experiencing of attractions, and the use of the city (Sitte in Gehl, 1986). However, as people move through urban environments the experiencing of attractions in the physical environment is more a question of the design and the quality of overall experiences than the beauty or otherwise of the place (Gehl, 1986).

Why?

Attractiveness of an urban environment is associated with overall experience and use of the area, including how pleasant it is to sit, walk, cycle, view and converse. If a neighbourhood is attractive, it invites people to use and enjoy its public spaces and also feel safe in that place (Western Australia Planning Commission, 2004).

When people use community spaces and facilities they feel part of a community and develop a sense of place. These two elements are important in promoting wellbeing as they can form part of an individual's identity, increase an individual's perceived quality of life and motivate people to be even more active and to participate in the community.

In a study of European urban adults, residents of areas with the highest levels of greenery were more than three times as likely to be physically active and 40 per cent less likely to be overweight or obese than those living in less attractive areas (Ellaway, 2005). In Perth, adults who had access to large attractive public open space, were 50 per cent more likely to undertake high levels of walking (Giles-Corti et al, 2005). There is growing evidence that attractive public open space is restorative, reducing mental fatigue and stress (Maller et al, 2002).



Public artwork in new residential development
– aesthetically pleasing public space for residents
New suburb of Lyons in Darwin, Northern Territory
Source: SGS Economics and Planning

Encourage

The relationship between people, their spatial setting and increased physical activity can be achieved by the following design considerations.

Create attractive and welcoming streets with:

- attractive, active, interesting and welcoming street frontages with contiguous development
- buildings that frame public places and form a distinct street frontage that creates a pleasing pedestrian edge and human scale
- attractive streets which reinforce the function yet enhance the amenity of the street and create points of interest and community spaces along the street where people may gather and meet
- broad canopy trees along the streets to provide shade, improve the visual amenity of the street and create a pleasant environment for pedestrians and cyclists with tree foliage trimmed to an overhead clearance of 2400 mm above ground level (refer AS1428.1) to enable clear paths of travel (National Heart Foundation, 2004, p13).



Combining street furniture and public artwork, Paddington
Brisbane, Queensland

Source: SGS Economics and Planning

Create stimulating and attractive routes:

- design walking and cycling routes to and around local landmarks and points of interest
- use art and signage to tell the history of the place and its people

- use public art along the route to encourage interest
- line paths and rest areas with trees for aesthetics and shade (National Heart Foundation, 2004, p10)

Create pleasing public places:

- design parks and open space to incorporate and reinforce distinctive landscape features such as hills, ridges, views and vistas as these elements contribute to a sense of place, community identity and assist with legibility
- create public open space that is legible, attractive, and provides a 'sense of surprise' (Maller et al, 2002)
- create public open spaces that provide users with cues about how to use the space, such as walking paths lined with trees
- plant tall trunk, broad leaf, broad-canopy trees and/or provide structured shelters to provide useful shade, protection from weather extremes and create an aesthetically pleasing environment
- maintain public spaces to a high standard to ensure pedestrian spaces are clean and useable (National Heart Foundation, 2004, p16).



Interaction between private and public space combine to make an interesting and attractive streetscape - Hastings Street, Noosa, Queensland
Source: SGS Economics and Planning

Rule of thumb

There is a connection between people and their spatial setting. Attractive public spaces and good building siting and design help create a sense of place and improve an individual's wellbeing. Attractive open space is restorative, providing users with a sense of surprise and reducing stress and mental fatigue.

Avoid

- Development that fails to reinforce the understanding of the place by blocking views and/or removing topography.
- Development that uses mass produced components in a way that does not reinforce the sense of place.
- Development that has minimal people activity such as carparks, service areas, and blank facades fronting streets and pedestrian and cycling routes.
- Spaces with no seating or other elements for sitting.
- Street verges with insufficient space for street tree planting and public furniture.
- Poorly maintained parks and open space.



Source: Planning Institute of Australia

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