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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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European  
Society for  
Aesthetics

*A First Approach to Intergenerational Aesthetics:  
Theoretical Stakes, Practical Examples, and  
Future Research Avenues*

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ABSTRACT. Intergenerational aesthetics centers on the study of aesthetic values and aesthetic choices taking into account the aesthetic appreciation of future generations. Acknowledging a temporal dependency between the present and the future in aesthetics offers a new perspective to explore aesthetic values, perception, and judgments as well as practical aesthetic decisions. This essay discusses the main concerns of intergenerational aesthetics, including its theoretical stakes, its disciplinary and interdisciplinary influences, its normative aspect, and the role of intergenerational thinking in theory and practice. It focuses on aesthetic issues of our surroundings, as they relate to current concerns regarding sustainability and the environment. Through a specific example, it illustrates the importance of introducing intergenerational considerations to our current aesthetic practices. It ends by proposing a series of potential avenues of research in the field.

## **1. Introduction**

Intergenerational aesthetics is a relatively new sub-specialty in the academic field of philosophical aesthetics. It centers on the study and examination of aesthetic values and

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aesthetic decisions bearing in mind not just the present, but taking into account future generations, thus being concerned with diachronic issues. Acknowledging a temporal dependency between the present and the future in aesthetics offers a new perspective to explore aesthetic values, perception, and judgments as well as practical aesthetic decisions. Including intergenerational concerns to the aesthetic discussion entails re-examining central issues raised in traditional aesthetics, such as the universality of aesthetic values and the conditions of both aesthetic judgment and aesthetic perception. These theoretical questions have practical consequences: whether aesthetic values are permanent or, on the contrary, change over time, affects the way in which we currently conceive and make our aesthetic choices, as these do not only have an impact on our current aesthetic perception but also on the range of aesthetic evaluation of future generations. Intergenerational aesthetics, thus, has a normative component both in theory and in practice, as it is concerned with aesthetic obligations towards future generations. Intergenerational aesthetics also aims at overcoming traditional separations between art and nature, lived and non-lived environments, temporal and atemporal, and theory and practice. To do so, it takes a highly intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach and aims at contributing to current debates in aesthetics as well as in discussions on sustainability, preservation, the environment, and urban development.

The study of aesthetic issues of our surroundings from an intergenerational point of view stems from a pressing concern regarding our present situation in terms of environment and sustainability, as our current exploitation, building, and living practices seem clearly unsustainable in the long run. Most recent data show that the construction sector is “responsible for almost 40% of energy- and process-related emissions” (IEA 2019, p. 3), and reducing them is crucial to achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement. All these processes of construction, including destruction and preservation, have aesthetic consequences, as they determine the appearance of our surroundings and our subsequent aesthetic appreciation. Even more, aesthetic issues may be the main cause for demolition: Palacios-Munoz et al. state that 44% of buildings surveyed in their study were demolished because of “subjective perception” (2019, p. 2). If the possibility of changes in taste is not accounted for, then some structures that would have been appreciated in the future may be demolished, as happens with numerous cases of brutalist architecture. Intergenerational aesthetics aims at including aesthetic aspects to the debate and at influencing actual practice by considering also those aspects that have yet to be articulated since it is unknown how future generations will aesthetically appreciate their

environment. Taking into account the potential future appearance and aesthetic perception of what is currently built, restored, and planned opens the door to or, at the very least, does not foreclose from the get-go aesthetic appreciation and judgment in the future.

This essay first introduces the main theoretical stakes of intergenerational aesthetics, discusses its object of study, its intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary connections, and proposes a set of basic principles with a normative character that should be considered in current aesthetic practices illustrated with examples. Second, it discusses intergenerational thinking as it relates to aesthetic values and aesthetic practices, drawing upon intergenerationality in other fields, specifically intergenerational ethics. Third, it discusses the process of preservation of the Finlandia Hall, showing how intergenerational aesthetics engages in practice. It finally offers a series of possible paths for further research.<sup>23</sup>

## **2. The Theoretical Stakes of Intergenerational Aesthetics**

### **2.1. General Context and Disciplinary Genealogy**

The fundamental tenet of intergenerational aesthetics is that of including the potential aesthetic appreciations, experiences, and judgments of future generations to the current aesthetic reflection and practice. The emphasis is primarily on future aesthetic appreciators, which prompts us to rethink the present role and status of aesthetic objects and creators. Focusing on future appreciators and their potential conditions of appreciation includes temporality and shift the aesthetic discussion from issues of intentionality and creation to aesthetic reception, experience, and interpretation. It also brings us to consider the features of aesthetic objects from the perspective of future appreciators, which may entail rethinking their perdurance and include sustainability aspects. Additionally, the role of creators may be altered if their task is seen as shaping future aesthetic appreciation.

The object of study of intergenerational aesthetics includes aesthetic aspects of our surroundings. Following the recent approaches of environmental and everyday aesthetics, intergenerational aesthetics discusses aesthetic aspects within this larger framework and examines arts that have been generally disregarded in the traditional philosophy of art because

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<sup>23</sup> See Capdevila-Werning and Lehtinen (2021) for an extensive discussion on intergenerational aesthetics.

of their practical functions, such as architecture, urbanism, and public art, and design. Like environmental and everyday aesthetics, intergenerational aesthetics includes everybody in the aesthetic discussion and considers everyday interactions and the way we live and experience our surroundings to be central.

From a disciplinary perspective, intergenerational aesthetics builds upon several branches of aesthetics and philosophy:

- Environmental aesthetics: the aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic features of natural environments, including those influenced by humans, with a current focus on environmentalism and sustainability (Berleant and Brady, 2014; Carlson, 2020).

- Aesthetics of everyday life: expansion of the scope of environmental aesthetics to examine any kind of objects and activities in everyday life that take place in non-artistic environments. (Saito, 2007; 2017).

- Applied aesthetics: Intergenerational aesthetics is considered an applied field as it is concerned with actual practice. It refers also to the study of aesthetic values that engages in interdisciplinary research or collaboration with professions outside academic philosophy that deal with practical aesthetic issues.

- Urban aesthetics and philosophy of the city: Urban aesthetics considers the aesthetic experience of the built environment as a whole and centers on the lived experience and appreciation (Berleant and Carlson, 2007; Lehtinen, 2020b). The philosophy of the city explores the city in all of its dimensions: political, social, cultural, environmental, epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic issues (Meagher *et al.*, 2020; Lehtinen, 2020e).

- Aesthetics of preservation practices: Includes questions of identity and authenticity, (Goodman, 1968, p. 99–123). It also addresses how preservationist interventions affect the artists' intentions, aesthetic experience, and the works' meanings and interpretations (Capdevila-Werning, 2013; 2014b; 2017; Capdevila-Werning and Spaid, 2019).



- Environmental ethics and intergenerational justice: Environmental ethics is interested in the future people in terms of intergenerationality and sustainability and focuses on ethical values in terms of the obligations to future generations (Brennan and Lo, 2020). Intergenerational justice focuses on justice concerns as applicable to relations between non-contemporaries (Meyer, 2020).

Intergenerational aesthetics also considers the research and concerns in the fields of sustainability studies, climate change ethics, heritage studies, historic preservation, and landscape preservation. The unique contribution of intergenerational aesthetics is that it puts aesthetic concerns at the center of theoretical and practical debates; it explores how these matter so that they may exert influence on decisions that go beyond the immediate aesthetic appearance and how such appearance is appreciated by current audiences.

## **2.2. Cognitive and Normative Aspects**

The claim of putting intergenerational aesthetic concerns at the center acquires a broader significance if we consider that aesthetics is mainly a cognitive endeavour. Following Goodman, we take the objects of aesthetic appreciation as symbols that convey meaning. These aesthetic features grant unique cognitive access to our surroundings, convey meaning, and are open to interpretation (Goodman, 1968; 1976; Goodman and Elgin, 1988; Elgin, 2017; Capdevila-Werning, 2014a). That aesthetic experience is cognitive does not mean that it cannot be pleasurable or unpleasurable or that it excludes feelings and emotions. Rather, it means that feelings and emotions are already cognitive. Together with our senses and any other prior knowledge, understanding, and experiences we have, we engage in a cognitive process of interpreting what surrounds us, creating meaning, and gaining an understanding of the world and of ourselves. From an intergenerational perspective, aesthetic decisions have epistemological consequences, as they determine not only the possibilities of perception, but also the cognitive access of future generations.

Given the importance of what is at stake, intergenerational aesthetics includes an essential normative component and proposes a set of general principles or guidelines:

- Aesthetic decisions made in the present should not foreclose future aesthetic

judgment, experience, and attribution of values, nor limit the possibilities of interpretation and meaning.

- Aesthetic decisions should maintain access to existing aesthetic values and taste, but not impose one's aesthetic worldview on future generations.

- Aesthetic decisions should also aim at non-deception and at seeking truthfulness whenever possible.

To do so, one should consider the potential future appearance of that which is currently decided upon. This may require an act of creative imagination and the acknowledgment that not everything can be controlled nor determined, as garden preservation (Salwa, 2019; 2020) or unintended results in rewilding projects (Prior and Brady, 2017) show. The passing of time and its effect on aesthetic features and from the appreciators' standpoint should be acknowledged since it seems evident that taste and what is aesthetically valued evolves, and making decisions considering that our current aesthetic taste and values are permanent or even universal affects the aesthetic perception of future generations. Theoretically, intergenerational aesthetics challenges established theories on the universality of aesthetic value and taste and opens the door to rethink traditional conceptions in aesthetics and reframe questions regarding relativism, especially considering pressing environmental and sustainability issues. To avoid imposing present aesthetic taste and preferences, intergenerational aesthetics considers all sorts of aesthetic values, positive and negative, since what is considered a positive value now may not be so in the future, as our current aesthetic judgments regarding some fashion and stylistic choices from the past illustrate. Intergenerational aesthetics takes into account the possibility of aesthetic obsolescence and the possibility of such obsolescence turning into desirability in the future.

All these normative claims have practical outcomes and the guidelines of intergenerational aesthetics provide us with criteria to assess aesthetic choices and decisions. Several design practices are introducing "aesthetic sustainability" to their productions and consider intergenerationality in the design. This may entail adaptability and modular constructions in architecture so that usage and aesthetic appearance can be modified according to future appreciators, consider how time will affect materials and appearance, or select more

lasting and sustainable materials considering their aesthetic features, not just functional ones. Aesthetic decisions made taking into account future generations do not need to generate identical aesthetic outcomes nor be equally appropriate: modularity as a design principle in architecture and adaptability projects contribute to designing structures that will last longer as they provide a response to the uncertainty of not knowing the needs or preferences of future generations. They also open the possibility of aesthetic choices and grant the freedom to choose, albeit from a relatively limited range of possibilities, and thus do not foreclose aesthetic appreciation nor the possibility of change in taste since a project's inception. In contrast, designs made considering that aesthetic values are universal do foreclose appreciation and, despite taking into account future generations, are not intergenerational. Such designs are created from the premise that aesthetically sustainable objects are those that fulfill a series of specific qualities (harmony, symmetry, minimalism, timelessness, made of lasting and timeless materials) (Harper, 2018) and hence do not account for the possibility of a change in taste.

Intergenerational considerations are also relevant in historic preservation, heritage studies, and geoheritage. While such disciplines certainly consider the passing of time, introducing intergenerational considerations provides a new temporal dimension, because, in addition to looking backward from the future to our time as heritage does, intergenerational aesthetics proposes to include the future in our present aesthetic reflection and practices. This is especially important in urban geosites, which are intrinsically intergenerational entities where liveability and aesthetic aspects converge (Capdevila-Werning, 2020).

Intergenerational guidelines offer criteria to decide upon preferable preservationist interventions. Preferability may also be assessed in terms of the symbolic functioning of preserved structures (Capdevila-Werning, 2014b), as it is argued that one of the main roles of restoration is to preserve symbolic functioning (Elgin, 1997) and, consequently, at an epistemological level, preserve cognitive access. In historic preservation, interventions can be assessed according to their role in fostering truthfulness and avoiding deception (Capdevila-Werning, 2013). Less invasive practices like cleaning and maintenance may seem straightforward means to grant access to aesthetic properties that had been obscured by dirt, but maintaining the status quo or bringing back the original appearance may not always be preferable, as it erases the patina of time and multiple aesthetic properties and subsequent appreciations, judgments, and potential interpretations as well. A clear case of this would be when the patina of certain materials is removed, which alters its aesthetic properties.

From an intergenerational perspective, making the interventions visible – as happens with archaeological restorations that show the non-original prosthetic additions – is preferable to integral restorations, which bring structures back to their original appearance without providing perceptible hints to point that, in fact, it is not an original. But in some cases, an integral restoration may be preferable, as the cultural and social significance of a structure may outdo the claims for non-deception: consider the rebuilding of cities, downtowns, or significant places in Europe after World War Two, where reconstruction to the state before the war helped heal the wounds and reunite the people. Other preservationist interventions create palimpsests: layers of matter that show the passing of time and the history of a place. This seems to be the most truthful intervention possible as deception is avoided and interpretative possibilities remain open. There are however exceptions, as happens in the intervention of the Neues Museum in Berlin, where layers of matter that had never been shown are visible, and simultaneously certain existing layers were erased so that parts of the site's history are left untold; instead of truthfulness, deception takes place (Capdevila-Werning, 2015).

Lastly, total reconstructions may entail not simply a faithful process but an act of creative imagination that brings back a building to a stage that had never existed in any given time, therefore altering future aesthetic perception irremediably, as is the case of some of Violet-le-Duc's interventions (Capdevila-Werning, 2012; 2013). A similar issue of altering future aesthetic perception and foreclosing interpretation happens with copies or reproductions that aim at complete faithfulness, but whose aesthetic features are not exactly identical to that of the original construction, as happens with the 1986 reproduction of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion. Here the reproduction is a built interpretation of a 1929 original structure that retrospectively determines the meanings of the original and has an impact on the history of the building and modern architecture in general (Capdevila-Werning, 2017).

Intergenerational aesthetics aims at maintaining aesthetic appreciation open to future generations, but the passing of time also entails that things may be lost forever. In such cases, a project of descriptive aesthetics is helpful (Berleant, 1992, pp. 25–39).

### **3. Intergenerational Thinking and Aesthetic Values**

Environmental ethics and social philosophy explicitly formulate intergenerational thinking through the concepts of intergenerational ethics and justice (Meyer, 2020). In aesthetics,

intergenerational thinking has not yet been fully articulated. Intergenerational aesthetics creates a new bridge between ethics and aesthetics, one that shares the same pressing concerns in terms of sustainability and the environment, allows the exploration of values and obligations towards future generations, and hopes to enact changes in practice. Four main topics of intergenerational thinking relate to aesthetics: environmental concerns, aesthetic values, and the perspective of ethics and aesthetics of care.

Intergenerational aesthetics draws upon the outcomes of environmental ethics, where intergenerationality is central to discussing sustainability, climate change, and justice; intergenerational justice, which focuses on the tenet that current generations have a responsibility or even obligations towards future generations; and social philosophy examines several approaches to the relationship between non-contemporaries including a distributive justice framework (Meyer, 2020).

Environmental aesthetics brings together intergenerational thinking with aesthetic values in the context of climate change (Brady, 2014). This research emphasizes the inevitable imbalance of power between generations because current changes have long-lasting effects on the future environment and its appearance. Intergenerational aesthetics is framed by “sustainable development” – the sustainability framework and its future-directed approach to intergenerational relations first formulated by the Brundtland Report in 1987. For aesthetics, the sustainability framework requires rethinking the role of aesthetic values in this process (Lehtinen, 2020a; 2021) and to think at the intersection of aesthetics and sustainability. Intergenerational thinking serves here to reflect upon how and in which ways aesthetic values change and to what extent can human activity take this change into consideration. Besides more pragmatic concerns related to design, aesthetic sustainability centers precisely in examining how well and in which ways aesthetic qualities are related to intergenerational fluctuations in taste (Lehtinen, 2020a). Introducing the test of time perspective recognizes and underlines the temporal reach of aesthetic qualities: not everything is aesthetically durable and what is valued also changes. Sometimes this change can be anticipated but is often unexpected. Aesthetic sustainability helps “to better understand how urban futures unfold experientially and how aesthetic values of urban environments develop with time” (Lehtinen, 2020a, p. 111). In architecture, the concept is a valuable tool for assessing the intergenerational relations between the users of the spaces and the overall change in aesthetic values (Lehtinen, 2020c; 2020d).

Regarding aesthetic values, intergenerational aesthetics assumes a more diverse,

decentralized, and equitable notion of what counts as an aesthetic value. The “right to beauty” is not easily defined and the objectivity of aesthetic values is still strongly implied in governments or authorities responsible for building regulation. Aesthetic preferences refer to those instances in which a choice between two or several options is possible. Aesthetic choices are present in our everyday life on an individual level (Naukkarinen, 1998; Melchionne, 2017) and they are also present also in intergenerational decision-making processes.

The intergenerational perspective allows us to grasp change in the appreciation of aesthetic values. These values change over time differently than “merely” ecological and environmental values, which can take a more sudden turn when, for example, a breakthrough in scientific knowledge is introduced to the wider public. Change in aesthetic values is not necessarily negative and the intergenerational approach explains the process of aesthetic habituation: it describes how we become accustomed to aesthetically entirely new things or how we react to changes in that which is already aesthetically familiar to us. An initially-considered aesthetic loss in a landscape might become aesthetically positive for future generations.

Intergenerational thinking in aesthetics may include the notion of care towards future people, which requires acknowledging different conditions and affirming the provisional independence of future generations (Groves, 2014). In aesthetics, care entails attending and respecting the singularity of an object, not imposing preconceived standards or ideals, and being respectful, considerate, and open-minded in one’s engagement with the object of attention. Paying close attention to nuances and competing narratives as well as suspending one’s judgment are also involved in the care approach. However, the direction of change in aesthetic values cannot be predetermined. Aesthetic deliberation is an important part of any design process, yet the futurity of aesthetic values cannot be entirely designed either. Aesthetic values take unexpected turns according to changes in politics, social movements, and other societally or personally important events.

#### **4. Intergenerational Aesthetics in Practice**

The discussion of the Finlandia Hall illustrates intergenerational aesthetics in practice, showing how a temporal change in values takes place and what type of factors play a part over the lifespan of an individual building. Architecture and the built environment constitute an

especially interesting field for developing and testing the idea of intergenerational aesthetics, as it combines functionality with the approaches of the philosophy of art, environmental and urban aesthetics, and heritage discourse. The value of architectural objects derives from their use and other values and meanings beyond their aesthetic appeal. This interplay of different values offers an opportunity to observe and assess the ensuing intergenerational changes and fluctuations in taste and appreciation. As brutalist architecture shows, change in aesthetic values can happen in the span of a few decades and something which lost its aesthetic value can regain it in the eyes of a new generation. The interlinked ecological, ethical, and social values might be different for the current-day admirers of brutalist architecture, but the aesthetic appreciation arises mostly by the same qualities present when the buildings were new. Thus, the perceptual qualities do not change, but fluctuation takes place in how these qualities are responded to, which reinforces our claim that aesthetics has an essential cognitive element.

Alvar Aalto's Finlandia Hall was designed in the 1960s and dedicated in 1971. It served as a concert hall until the early 2000s and is now a multifunctional space. Since the beginning, the white Carrara marble slates used in the main facade showed signs of wear: the marble slates curved, frayed, and crumbled five years after its dedication. The marble had to be replaced for the first time in 1998. Besides the massive expenses, the ecological consequences were significant, but the discussion then revolved around the costs of the operation and staying true to Aalto's original plans, not sustainability concerns. Some entirely new design ideas for replacing the facade material were presented in the 1990s, but the common ethos was still clearly against changing Aalto's original design. Resorting to aesthetic features as the main reason to choose an unsustainable material signals a specifically designer-oriented, intergenerationally insensitive, and tone-deaf understanding of aesthetics which reflects the overall ethos of the time.

The slates installed in 1998 deteriorated fairly quickly and their renovation will now take place in 2022–24. This time the choice of materials included alternatives, but the chosen material ended up being a new, more durable marble type similar to the original. Despite the similar material, the discussion and options presented were more open and took place from an intergenerational perspective. There had been a shift in the hierarchy of values: from Aalto's original intentions to concerns regarding sustainability and endurance and the discussion was public. The second renovation showed already more nuanced intergenerational deliberation, which was driven by sustainability principles and shows how change in aesthetic values can

take place.

## 5. Conclusions

The relationship between temporality and aesthetics is not a straightforward one. Intergenerational aesthetics proposes to engage with temporality leaving space for future appreciation and judgments and to intergenerationally think about change in aesthetic values, as our current ones may differ from the ones of upcoming generations. Thinking towards the future in the present, and not just in relation to the past, entails a shift in the theoretical as well as practical stakes of aesthetics.

Theoretically, intergenerational aesthetics brings about a shift in the discussion and emphasizes reception, experience, and interpretation by future generations. It also offers a normative component and proposes intergenerational criteria, such as not foreclosing nor limiting the range of aesthetic judgment and experience of future generations and aiming at non-deception. This requires acknowledging and maintaining access to present and past aesthetic values and tastes but not imposing one generation's aesthetic worldview to posterity, which becomes even more important if we consider that aesthetic experience is mainly a cognitive endeavour. Intergenerational thinking in aesthetics offers a way to explore change in aesthetic values and introduces new dimensions to aesthetics, such as care and sustainability.

In practice, intergenerational aesthetics aims at influencing actual practices and pushes for the inclusion of intergenerational thinking when making aesthetic choices. The discussion of cases, thus, goes beyond the mere illustration of theoretical points and shows how intergenerational concerns can contribute to solving the pressing issues of sustainability deficiency and environmental problems. Conversely, aesthetic practices contribute also to the formulation and theoretical discussion of questions in academic aesthetics.

Intergenerational aesthetics is a highly intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary field whose research aims at overcoming the traditional separations between art and nature, lived and non-lived environments, temporal and atemporal, theory and practice. Intergenerational concerns are actual and pressing; examining aesthetics from an intergenerational perspective aims at contributing to current debates in aesthetics as well as in discussions on sustainability, preservation, the environment, and urban development. It also aims at influencing actual practice. As a relatively new field, there are many avenues for further research, such as:



discussions on the universality and relativity of aesthetic values, aesthetic choices given our contemporary situation in terms of environment and sustainability, and specific case analyses of intergenerational interest, further interdisciplinary work. As a field intrinsically oriented to the future, intergenerational aesthetics is open to reflections that have yet to emerge.

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