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Publisher: Routledge

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## Ethics, Policy & Environment

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cepe21>

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Available online: 29 Jun 2011

**To cite this article:** Katherine W. Robinson & Kevin C. Elliott (2011): Environmental Aesthetics and Public Environmental Philosophy, *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 14:2, 175-191

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2011.578379>

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# Environmental Aesthetics and Public Environmental Philosophy†

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[T]he essential difficulties in social policy have more to do with *problem setting* than with problem solving, more to do with ways in which we frame the purposes to be achieved than with the selection of optimal means for achieving them. (Schön 1979, 255, italics in original)

“Failure of communication about environmental goals and values is ultimately the most important intellectual problem in the search for more acceptable environmental policies” (Norton 2005, 197)

**ABSTRACT** *We argue that environmental aesthetics, and specifically the concept of aesthetic integrity, should play a central role in a public environmental philosophy designed to communicate about environmental problems in an effective manner. After developing the concept of the “aesthetic integrity” of the environment, we appeal to empirical research to show that it contributes significantly to people’s sense of place, which is, in turn, central to their well-being and motivational state. As a result, appealing to aesthetic integrity in policy contexts is both strategically and morally advisable. To provide a concrete illustration of the ways in which such appeals can play a role in policy making, we examine a specific case study in which attention to aesthetic integrity contributed to blocking a proposed development. The case yields at least four lessons: (1) aesthetic integrity can be a practically effective framing device; (2) local deliberative settings are particularly conducive for addressing it; (3) it can serve as an umbrella under which multiple other issues can be brought to the fore; and (4) judgments about aesthetic integrity need not be entirely objective in order for them to play a productive role in the policy sphere.*

## 1. Introduction

As we began to write this paper, a story about a lily pond appeared on the front page of the Columbia, South Carolina, statewide newspaper (Fretwell 2009a). A developer had announced plans to build a 204-unit apartment complex in a small residential town of high-end single-family homes, in the process dredging the lily pond so that it could be used for storm water discharges from the apartment buildings. The dredging and subsequent drainage would kill the lilies in the pond, diminish the

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†We thank two referees for very helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper.

clarity of the water, and likely contaminate one of the connecting lakes downstream. The town council and several local residents were taking the developer to court, attempting to block the project.

This case illustrates many of the central claims of our paper. First, aesthetic considerations were central to motivating local residents to take action against the developer. As one motivated citizen leader put it, "When you . . . see that lily pond, it just makes you feel good. It is very soothing" (Fretwell 2009a, A5). Second, the aesthetic factors at play included much more than narrow appeals to the beauty of the scenery. The pond and the other lakes connected with it have long been meaningful and cherished facets of the identity of this town—which is named Arcadia Lakes. The community's "sense of place" is intertwined with the lakes that the developer was threatening to disturb. Finally, the aesthetic concerns of the residents served as a rallying point for addressing additional concerns with the proposed project. For example, the newspaper article reported that the town is also concerned about increased congestion on an already busy road that runs by the proposed apartment complex. The loss of the lily pond, however, provided an ideal "wedge" for attracting attention to the project.

In keeping with these observations, the main claim of our paper is that aesthetic considerations should play a central role in the development of a "public environmental philosophy." Andrew Light has argued in a number of recent papers that environmental ethicists should devote more attention to serving as a bridge between the environmental community and the broader public (see e.g., Light 2002; Light 2009). He suggests, "This work requires a form of 'moral translation', whereby the interests of the smaller community of environmentalists is translated into a range of appeals corresponding to the various moral intuitions that are represented in the broader public arena" (Light 2009, 205). As we have seen in the case of the lily pond, and as most environmental ethicists recognize, aesthetic considerations are often central to the environmental concerns of the public.

There has in fact been growing interest among philosophers in the topic of environmental aesthetics, building especially on Ronald Hepburn's seminal essay "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty" (1966). Much of the recent work has addressed the questions of what to appreciate in nature and how best to appreciate it. Several schools of thought have developed, including what are often termed the cognitive approach (e.g., Carlson 2004; Saito 2008), the engagement approach (e.g., Berleant 1997; Foster 2004), and the non-cognitivist approach (e.g., Brady 2003). In addition, figures as diverse as Eugene Hargrove (1989), Holmes Rolston (1988; 2008), and Bryan Norton (2005) have all argued that aesthetic considerations are very important to environmental ethics. As Christopher Preston notes, "One would be hard pressed to find any environmentalist who doubted that beauty was an important part of the reason for protecting nature" (Preston 2009, 144). Nevertheless, most previous work has not specifically addressed the ways in which attention to environmental aesthetics can assist ethicists in making a more effective contribution to the policy-making sphere.

Our goal in this paper is to strengthen the case for making environmental aesthetics a central part of public environmental philosophy. With this in mind, we develop the concept of "aesthetic integrity," we appeal to interdisciplinary research in order to defend its practical resonance in the policy sphere, and we

examine its significance in a specific case study. Section 2 provides our account of aesthetic integrity as well as an overview of the empirical research that supports the moral and strategic importance of this concept. Our argument in this section rests on the claim that aesthetic integrity is central to people's sense of place, which, in turn, is central to their well-being and to their motivational state. In Section 3, we follow up this general argument by examining the role of environmental aesthetics in a case study of environmental activism in Columbia, South Carolina. This analysis is helpful for responding to a number of concerns that one might have about appealing to aesthetic considerations, such as that they are not sufficiently objective or that they are not "weighty" enough to stand up against economic concerns. Because this paper covers so much ground, we acknowledge that some of the topics that we address merit more discussion than we can provide here. Our hope is to motivate more detailed analyses of the concept of aesthetic integrity, its moral significance, and the practical roles that it can play in interdisciplinary environmental philosophy and policy.

## **2. The Strategic and Moral Importance of Aesthetic Integrity**

### *Defining Aesthetic Integrity*

If aesthetic considerations are to play a central role in a public environmental philosophy, they need to be interpreted broadly enough to capture their multi-faceted character. Most philosophers would argue that the aesthetic experience of an environment cannot be confined to the purely sensual awareness of the formal qualities of a place. The experience may include all the senses, but it is not limited only to sensual perceptions. Emily Brady claims that aesthetic experience may involve affective, cognitive, and imaginative mental states (Brady 2003, 10). Arnold Berleant, too, notes that "we rarely if ever have pure sensation," and so our aesthetic experience calls on background factors of social and cultural experience, habits and belief systems, traditions of behavior and judgment, even styles of living (Berleant 1992, 18).

In order to do justice to the complexity of environmental aesthetics, we suggest that a public environmental philosophy would do well to focus on the concept of *aesthetic integrity*. This notion was developed by Emily Brady as "a kind of aesthetic principle for strategy and planning" (Brady 2003, 239). As she explains, "To provide insight into how to manage proposed changes to aesthetic character [of the environment], I develop the concept of 'aesthetic integrity' as a guiding principle for the decision-making process" (Brady 2002, 75). References to environmental or ecological integrity typically focus on features such as air quality, water quality, and biodiversity. In our view, aesthetic integrity often encompasses those features insofar as they contribute, along with sensual components, to the aesthetic evaluation of a place.<sup>1</sup> It also incorporates what Alan Holland and John O'Neill (1996) call "diachronic integrity." In other words, it takes into account not only the landscape elements of an environment at a particular time but also the relationships that have developed over time between these elements and the historical and cultural features of the location.

Thus, while it is difficult to pin down precisely, we employ the concept of aesthetic integrity to refer to a coherence or harmony over time among positive sensual

qualities and the cultural, historical, and biological features that contribute to the aesthetic evaluation of a place.<sup>2</sup> While relatively objective features like biodiversity and ecosystem health may contribute to this harmony, judgments about the aesthetic integrity of a particular place also depend on somewhat subjective individual and communal responses. As a result, we acknowledge that it is sometimes difficult to evaluate the extent to which a particular environment or location displays aesthetic integrity. Nevertheless, we think that it is often possible to identify when a proposed activity is *detrimental* to aesthetic integrity. This is important, because our primary goal in employing the concept of aesthetic integrity is to facilitate a public environmental philosophy, and it is generally sufficient for these purposes if we can recognize threats to aesthetic integrity.

For example, to locate an asphalt parking lot in the midst of a tree-shaded neighborhood, or to remove the trees from a public thoroughfare to make billboards more visible, would generally be detrimental to aesthetic integrity. After all, few observers would disagree that trees contribute significantly to the aesthetic quality of our surroundings, and even more so in neighborhoods that are known for their tree cover. To locate a landfill adjacent to a public park would also generally compromise aesthetic integrity. Landfills are rarely regarded as aesthetically pleasing, and they fit especially poorly in an area designed for recreation. To eliminate or pollute the waterways in a small town that is known for its chain of lakes would generally be to damage the town's aesthetic integrity. Like tree cover, water is often central to our aesthetic experiences, especially in areas that have developed their history and culture around important waterways. Finally, to build a tall "big-box" chain store in a historic neighborhood with distinctive architecture would generally be to degrade its aesthetic integrity. This last example illustrates that the concept of aesthetic integrity can help us think about not only "natural" features of the environment (e.g., geological formations, plants, and animals) but also "cultural" features of the environment such as architecture.

We readily acknowledge that there can also be difficult cases in which various stakeholders have differences of opinion about what promotes or harms the aesthetic integrity of an environment. For example, citizens who especially value the landscape features of closely cropped grass might think that aesthetic integrity is promoted by converting wetlands into a golf course, whereas those who incorporate ecological complexity into their aesthetic evaluations are likely to disagree. Perhaps further analysis of the concept of aesthetic integrity would assist in settling these disagreements; the concept undoubtedly merits much more careful analysis than we can provide here. At any rate, we are counting on the fact that, in policy making contexts, sharp disagreements about how to promote aesthetic integrity are not as common as they might seem. The more likely scenario is that various stakeholders differ about how to weigh the importance of aesthetic integrity against competing values, such as economic development (see e.g., Brady 2003, 239). A classic example would be a group of citizens that wants a chemical refinery or a factory to move into the community, despite its negative effect on aesthetic integrity, for the sake of jobs and tax revenues. We will address these concerns about the objectivity of aesthetic integrity and its importance relative to other values in Section 3, when we consider a specific case study.

*The Strategic Importance of Aesthetic Integrity*

Our fundamental reason for thinking that environmental aesthetics, and specifically the concept of aesthetic integrity, would serve well as a foundational component of public environmental philosophy is that it appears to have significant power for motivating citizen action and concern. It is well known from survey data that people care deeply about the aesthetic character of their surroundings. For example, Ben Minter and Robert Manning used a mail survey to determine various factors that influenced how the residents of Vermont wanted to manage the Green Mountain National Forest (Minter and Manning 2000). One of their questions was designed to determine the types of values associated with the environment that the respondents regarded as most valuable. Minter and Manning provided a list of 11 different values, including ecological, recreational, educational, therapeutic, spiritual, and economic ones. Significantly, the most highly rated value was the aesthetic opportunity “to enjoy the beauty of nature.”

For the purposes of this paper, however, we would like to emphasize a less widely discussed reason for thinking that the aesthetic integrity of the environment is a particularly powerful force for motivating citizens to act on environmental issues. Our claim is that aesthetic integrity is one of the most important factors involved in developing and maintaining a sense of place, which social scientists have identified as a highly important factor in people’s lives. By paying better attention to this connection, we think that philosophers can gain an increased appreciation for the potential significance of environmental aesthetics as a factor in public environmental philosophy. Sense of place is a very fertile concept with relevance to a host of disciplines, including literature, philosophy, geography, and anthropology. Understandably, the concept varies in its application, but it has some widely recognized features. Environmental psychologists Bradley Jorgensen and Richard Stedman claim that sense of place, in a general sense, is the meaning attached to a particular spatial setting by a person or group of people (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001, 233). It also usually incorporates elements of care and concern for a place, grounded in human emotions and relationships (Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000, 423). As Christopher Preston emphasizes, “statements about sense of place should be regarded as not just romantic yearnings but as statements that accurately reflect the fact that people craft some of their very cognitive identity in communion with a landscape” (Preston 2003, 100).

From our perspective, sense of place begins with the perception of the salient features of a specific setting, incorporates personal and collective meanings, progresses toward an affective bond between an individual or community and a particular place, and results in “an appreciation for the land that goes beyond its use value” (Cantrill and Senecah 2001, 187; Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000, 423). Based on this description, it is obvious that sense-of-place experience is very closely related to the concept of aesthetic integrity. Both involve a perceptual element as well as cognitive, cultural, and imaginative overlays. As Emily Brady says, “It isn’t easy to say where aesthetic appreciation ends and sense of place begins” (Brady 2003, 81).

Despite these similarities, we do not think that it is helpful to equate the two concepts. Even though similar elements play a role in each, sense of place need not be

as deeply grounded in perceptual experience as aesthetic integrity is. For example, the sense of place that one feels for the scenes of one's childhood may be based primarily on significant memories, although perceptual and aesthetic considerations could still play some role. In fact, given our definition of aesthetic integrity, it could come into direct conflict with sense of place in some cases. Consider a town built around a paper mill or a coal mine. While the mill or the mine could be central to the residents' sense of place, it would arguably be harmful to aesthetic integrity.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there also appear to be many cases (especially those in which the environment incorporates distinctive landscape features or architecture) when sense of place is determined largely by aesthetic factors. We think that the role of aesthetic integrity in developing and maintaining sense of place is an important empirical issue that has been addressed in a fascinating body of work.

Some thinkers have suggested that the sorts of meanings that influence sense of place are not intrinsic to particular locations but are instead cultural overlays brought to the experience by the perceiver. For example, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) has argued that the meanings assigned to particular environments are social constructs that have little dependence on the perceptual features of specific landscapes. If this were correct, then aesthetic integrity would be merely incidental to sense-of-place experience. Interestingly, however, recent empirical research challenges this position. For example, Richard Stedman (2003) has obtained evidence that characteristics of the physical landscape itself, and the responses generated by that landscape, are integral to sense of place. In a study that analyzed people's responses to a region in north central Wisconsin with numerous lakes, he found that "landscape characteristics matter; they underpin both place attachment and satisfaction" (Stedman 2003, 682).

As part of the study, Stedman considered three specific models of how the features of the physical landscape might influence sense of place. The first was the *genius loci*, or direct effects model, according to which the physical characteristics of landscapes directly affect the sense of place that people feel. On this account, sense of place is "grounded in those aspects of the environment which we appreciate through the senses and through movement, color, texture, slope, quality of light, the feel of wind, the sounds and scents carried by that wind" (Stedman 2003, 673). Clearly, the *genius loci* model captures the essence of what we would call the aesthetic experience of the landscape.

The meaning-mediated model, by contrast, does not attribute sense of place as arising directly from the environment, but claims that the physical features of a place influence symbolic meaning, which in turn determines sense of place. For example, relatively uninhabited places with jagged or foreboding landscapes might take on the symbolic meaning of wilderness, which would lead to a particular sense-of-place experience. The third, experiential, model posits that the physical features of a landscape encourage certain types of experiences and behaviors, which shape the meanings that influence sense of place. The behaviors or experiences serve as "lenses" through which humans attribute meanings to a place. Both of these last two models clearly echo the sorts of cognitive and imaginative overlays that featured in our earlier account of aesthetic integrity.

Stedman does not discount any of the three models for describing the strong relationship between sense of place and the physical environment, but he argues that

the second model, which connects characteristics of the landscape with meanings, best fits his results. Other studies support this connection between aesthetic experience and sense of place. One set of researchers argues that “the ‘environmental features/characteristics’ of a place are one of the primary reasons underlying emotional attachments with special places” (Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000, 423). Another study concludes that “an abundance of aesthetic and wilderness/natural landscape features... help create the conditions that lead to place attachment” (Brown and Raymond 2007, 108). Thus, recent evidence suggests that aesthetic integrity (incorporating both the perceptual features of a landscape as well as the cultural and historical meanings associated with it) plays a central role in developing a sense of place.

This leads us to the main “take-home lesson” of our paper. Aesthetic integrity is central to sense of place, which is in turn a significant motivating force for most people. Social scientists tell us that sense of place manifests itself in “emotionally charged” feelings of attachment to or satisfaction with particular places. Place attachment usually includes some sort of identification between the individual and the place, perhaps captured in the feeling of being “at home” there. For example, people who live in mountainous regions grow quite attached to their mountains, and those who become attached to a particular neighborhood often care deeply about it. Usually both place attachment and place satisfaction are accompanied by a “desire to maintain closeness” to the particular place or community (Hildago and Hernandez 2001, 274). This sense of place “incorporates emotive elements and intense caring for the locale” (Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000, 423).

As a result of these emotional ties and commitments, a close connection exists between sense of place and the willingness of individuals or groups to take actions on behalf of the environment. A number of scholars have looked closely at the sort of care and concern that arises from sense of place and have considered how those sentiments affect environmental policy and decision making. Not surprisingly, many studies draw the conclusion that environmental decision making, whether in the form of ecosystem management, local landscape development, or other forms of policy making, would benefit significantly by drawing on the sense-of-place values held by stakeholders (see e.g., Cantrill and Senecah 2001; Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000). As Richard Stedman points out, people with higher attachment to a place but less satisfaction with its current state are more motivated to counter threats to their environment (Stedman 2002, 567).

### *The Moral Importance of Aesthetic Integrity*

One potential worry about the project of developing a public environmental philosophy is that it might sound a great deal like propaganda. In other words, if philosophers merely strive to make whatever claims are most likely to inspire environmental activism, one might worry that they will quit doing real philosophy altogether and end up playing the role of public relations specialists. In response to this concern, Andrew Light has emphasized that a public environmental philosophy should appeal only to justifications that meet standard criteria for good philosophical argumentation (2002, 563). In keeping with this stricture, we want to emphasize



that appeals to the aesthetic integrity of the environment are not only motivationally efficacious but also morally legitimate.

Our argument is based on the fact that sense of place, which we have seen to be deeply grounded in aesthetic integrity, is not only motivationally efficacious but also central to human well-being. As James R. Miller says, “scientists recognize the synergies that exist between biodiversity, environmental degradation, human well-being, social cohesion, and sense of place” (Miller 2005, 433). In fact, Gustavo Mesch and Orit Manor state flat-out that place attachment is “a state of psychological well-being” (1998,1). An extensive study of the relationships between human well-being and ecosystem change was undertaken over the course of several years by the United Nations’ Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Capistrano *et al.* 2005). Unsurprisingly, the study concluded that “Well-being depends substantially, but not exclusively, on ecosystem services,” and it specifically included “realization of aesthetic values” as one of the components of well-being (Capistrano 2005, 49).

Its role in human well-being clearly gives aesthetic integrity some level of moral significance, but one might wonder precisely what the ramifications might be. For example, to claim that people have rights to live in a beautiful environment would raise a host of difficult questions, including the issue of what a minimally aesthetically acceptable environment would look like. We think that the following principle provides a much less controversial way to characterize many of our ethical responsibilities with respect to aesthetic integrity.

Aesthetic Integrity Principle (AIP): All people have at least two moral rights with respect to the aesthetic integrity of their environment: first, the right not to have it degraded significantly without due process; second, where the first right has been violated, people have rights to due recourse.

We think that these fairly minimal rights would be defensible from a wide range of ethical and political perspectives. For example, from a Kantian perspective, one could argue that the significant degradation of an environment’s aesthetic integrity without due process would violate the categorical imperative. Because aesthetic integrity is part of human well-being, treating people as ends rather than mere means would necessitate engaging in due process before significantly damaging it. Moreover, a Kantian ethical framework would call for a system of retribution to provide some avenue of due recourse when this obligation to engage in due process is violated.

Many utilitarians could also endorse these rights. For example, John Stuart Mill famously argued that utilitarianism supports a system of “political liberties or rights” designed to protect people from interference with their well-being (Mill 1939, 950). Moreover, Mill thought that if someone does perpetrate harm to others, he or she has obligations to right that wrong. Given that causing significant harm to the aesthetic integrity of someone’s environment constitutes a blow to that person’s well-being, the rights of the AIP would arguably be justified under Mill’s framework.<sup>4</sup>

One could also defend the rights under the AIP as a subset of the rights that are necessary for the functioning of a democracy. For example, Tim Hayward claims

that some rights are democratic “. . . in a strong sense: these are rights that are necessary to the very functioning of a democracy—of any democratic regime at all—and thus can be considered constitutive for democracy” (Hayward 2002, 244). Among the rights that are likely to fall under this category, Hayward cites the three environmental procedural rights found in the 1998 Aarhus Convention: access to information, public participation in decision making, and access to justice in environmental matters. These are precisely the rights affirmed under the AIP. The first right, to due process, consists in appropriate access to information and public participation in decision making about aesthetic integrity. The second right, to due recourse, involves access to environmental justice when due process has been violated. Therefore, whatever one’s substantive moral or political commitments, the AIP can be defended as a precondition for a democracy to function effectively in addressing important environmental matters.

It seems clear, therefore, that environmental philosophers are on strong moral ground if they attract the public’s attention to activities or policies that could significantly damage the aesthetic integrity of the environments in which they live. Citizens arguably have rights to due process when environmental degradation could significantly or unnecessarily affect their well-being. Moreover, when such harms have occurred without appropriate deliberation, they have rights to seek some form of redress. We acknowledge, of course, that it is sometimes difficult to develop precise criteria for what counts as appropriate due process and due recourse. It is unrealistic, for example, to give individual citizens “veto power” over all projects that they regard as damaging to the aesthetic integrity of their environments. Preserving aesthetic integrity is not an easy matter, because many of the projects that degrade it involve activities that people perform on their own property (e.g., cutting down trees, building new structures or tearing down old ones, and engaging in “development” efforts). Thus, preserving aesthetic integrity often comes into apparent conflict with private property rights.

These are difficult issues that merit further discussion. For now, we emphasize that local communities already have systems in place to navigate conflicts between private property rights and the good of the community as a whole. Local zoning restrictions and city council meetings constitute examples of procedures and institutions that can promote due process when communities need to evaluate potentially damaging proposals. In the next section of the paper, we suggest that these local institutions provide a good starting point for addressing the demands of the AIP. We also note that, while debates about the nature of due process and due recourse could affect the precise ways in which aesthetic integrity is taken into account in policy contexts, they do not challenge the basic principle that the significant degradation of aesthetic integrity is a legitimate moral issue. Thus, environmental ethicists need not worry that they are stooping to the level of mere propaganda if they frame environmental problems in terms of their impact on aesthetic integrity. We think that more pressing problems for our argument, which are probably in the back of numerous readers’ minds, concern the possibility that aesthetic arguments could degenerate into a subjective mess of disagreements that cannot compete against countervailing economic considerations. To address these sorts of objections, it is helpful to consider the dynamics of a concrete case study.

### 3. A Case Study: Green Diamond

Columbia, South Carolina, is a city adjacent to several rivers, and though it has been growing outward for a number of years, there is still a good deal of undeveloped land within a relatively small distance of the downtown area. Several years ago, a real estate development group bought up a very large tract near the city along one of the rivers in a mostly agricultural area. The group announced expansive plans to turn the land into a development named Green Diamond, which would include golf courses, residential areas, retail areas, and a technology-based office park. Many business leaders and members of the city government were delighted, as this would add substantially to the city tax income and serve as a beneficial addition to the city's overall development plan. Nevertheless, much of the land in this part of the county near the river had been in the families of the owners for generations. These citizens protested that the development would completely change the nature of the land adjacent to them and that a substantial resource of undeveloped nature would be at risk. (For an overview of these development plans and the subsequent debate concerning them, see e.g., Bolton 2001; Hill 2001a; Hill 2001b; Smith 2001; Wilkinson 2001).

The historic landowners organized a group to protest the development and hired lawyers and environmental professionals to represent their interests. Their efforts were focused on the City Planning Commission, the City and County Councils, and the Mayor, as well as other people interested in preserving the land as it was. A fierce public battle followed. During the course of this conflict, the landowners realized that a large percentage of the Green Diamond land was in what had at one time been the 100-year flood plain area along the river. The maps had been redrawn at some point, allowing the private school and the city waste water plant to locate in the area. The argument over Green Diamond then became one of economic interest – who would pay to live in a flood plain and how much it would cost the developer to raise the levees along the river to protect the property. Under pressure from those protesting the development, the Corps of Engineers resurveyed the area and returned the flood plain markers to their original points, grandfathering in the private school and waste water plant. This meant that the plans for Green Diamond were no longer viable, and the project was scrapped.

This case study highlights at least four valuable lessons about aesthetic integrity and public environmental philosophy that are applicable to many other instances of environmental decision making as well. We will call these the effectiveness, deliberation, umbrella, and objectivity lessons. First, the effectiveness lesson is that threats to aesthetic integrity can indeed provide significant motivation for citizens to take action on environmental issues. In this case, the initial impetus for challenging the proposed development was clearly the concern that it would harm the unique character of the surrounding land. Two of the principal organizers of the anti-development task force claimed explicitly that their “attachment to the land” prompted their actions (Hill 2001b, B1). It is also noteworthy that many people who did not have a direct stake in the property surrounding the development (but who were aware of the issue because of the extensive media coverage) expressed support for the historic landowners through various channels. When hearings were held at County Council, many people turned up to challenge the proposed development,

and sentiment ran high. We saw the same phenomenon at the beginning of this paper in the case of the lily pond that was threatened by development. In both these specific cases and in more general research by environmental psychologists and sociologists, the evidence indicates that citizens care deeply about the aesthetic integrity of their environment and are motivated to take actions that protect it.

A second, deliberation, lesson can also be gleaned from this case study. Namely, in the current policy context, the most natural way to incorporate attention to aesthetic integrity in the policy sphere is often through local deliberative settings such as county council and town planning meetings. While it might be fun to imagine a national Office for Aesthetic Integrity within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), it does not seem realistic in the near future. Instead, the development and enforcement of local zoning requirements often provide the most ideal opportunities to challenge actions that could damage aesthetic integrity. An additional benefit of addressing these issues in local deliberative settings is that it provides opportunities for communities to reflect on the aesthetic values that are most important to them.

In this respect, Bryan Norton's book on *Sustainability* (2005) provides an excellent model for thinking about how aesthetic values can play a role in the policy sphere. He argues that aesthetic concerns, like other "communal values," cannot be reduced to the sorts of individual preferences that can be assigned dollar values and inserted into a cost-benefit analysis. Instead, he argues that local communities need to meet together to determine the shared environmental goals that flow from their commitments to a particular location (i.e., their sense of place!). They can then identify "indicator measures" that reflect the extent to which they succeed in meeting those goals. For example, Norton notes that many residents of Atlanta, Georgia, think of their location as a "city in a forest" or a "city of trees." On the basis of this aesthetic concern, he notes that "most municipalities in the area have ordinances regulating and limiting the removal of trees" (2005, 290). Moreover, he suggests that these aesthetic values could serve as a basis for choosing indicator measures, such as the amount of land in the metropolitan area that is permeable to water, that would constrain future development plans. This is precisely the sort of communal reflection about the aesthetic integrity of a community that we are advocating in the present paper.

By focusing on the value of local deliberation, however, we do not mean to deny that the concept of aesthetic integrity can also be a powerful force in national or global environmental policy making. For example, the concern that climate change could severely damage the character of specific communities (e.g., by destroying local agricultural practices or wildlife or tourist destinations) undoubtedly plays a very important role in motivating people to advocate for national and international policies in response to it. Thus, even if decisions about aesthetic integrity are not debated or legislated at a local level, they can still play a crucial role in environmental policy making as long as the aesthetic dimensions of a problem are appropriately highlighted.

One might object, however, that even if aesthetic considerations can play some role in addressing global environmental problems like climate change, they are not "weighty" enough to stand up against powerful opposing considerations, such as economic concerns. For example, one might think that only appeals to the economic and human-health effects of climate change will be sufficient to push effective

mitigation policies into effect. Our third, umbrella, lesson is a response to this worry. According to the umbrella lesson, concerns about aesthetic integrity can provide an effective starting framework that can ultimately encompass and stimulate other concerns. In other words, aesthetic considerations can provide the initial impetus to investigate an environmental issue further, thereby identifying other important considerations in the process. We readily acknowledge that some of these subsequently identified concerns, such as threats to human health, may ultimately be more effective at settling policy debates in favor of environmental concerns. After all, Donald Brown (2009) has emphasized that environmental-policy decisions generally revolve around fairly technical scientific, legal, or economic questions. Our point is that a public environmental philosophy that highlights threats to aesthetic integrity is likely to generate the energy and enthusiasm necessary for developing subsequent scientific, legal, and economic arguments.

The Green Diamond case provides a perfect example of what the umbrella lesson describes. The local residents had significant concerns about how the proposed development would affect the aesthetic integrity of their environment. Therefore, they engaged in a concerted effort to oppose the project. In the course of their efforts to derail the development, they discovered that the land for the development had originally been mapped within the 100-year flood plain of the river. This is precisely the sort of technical detail that can prove decisive in environmental policy making. Thus, in accordance with the umbrella lesson, aesthetic considerations provided the motivation to uncover and investigate technical issues that ultimately won the day for the environmentalists.

The lily pond case that we summarized at the beginning of this paper illustrates the same dynamics as the Green Diamond case. Aesthetic concerns for the pond provided the motivation for citizens and the town council to hire a lawyer and sue the developers. Nevertheless, the lawyer's legal arguments focused on technical questions about whether the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) had adequately evaluated the effects of the developer's activity on local wildlife and water quality (Fretwell 2009b). Common sense tells us, too, that aesthetic problems are often more easily and quickly identifiable than other sorts of environmental problems. People tend to react when they notice a neighborhood creek beginning to foam and change color or a smoke stack regularly belching nasty and noxious fumes. Showing that such problems cause cancer is much more difficult to achieve, but aesthetic concerns can create the impetus to begin investigating these complex scientific issues.

It should be clear now why we think that environmental aesthetics should be an important element of a public environmental philosophy. We are not claiming that aesthetic integrity generally has to be the deciding factor in settling policy disputes; we are suggesting only that it provides an effective starting point or frame. As one of us has previously argued, the framing of an environmental issue can have at least four significant effects: (1) influencing the future course of research on the topic; (2) affecting public awareness and attention to it; (3) influencing the attitudes or behavior of key decision makers; and (4) altering the burden of proof required for taking action in response to the problem (Elliott 2009; Elliott 2011). We have argued here that framing environmental problems in terms of threats to aesthetic integrity is a strategic way to generate future research and to attract public interest.

Moreover, we should emphasize that environmental aesthetics need not be the *only* frame that philosophers emphasize; we merely note that it can be a particularly valuable way to generate interest in an environmental problem.

One remaining worry about using aesthetic integrity as a frame for environmental problems is that aesthetic judgments might prove too subjective to play a role in policy making. We have already partially addressed this concern when we analyzed the concept of aesthetic integrity. We noted that there is usually (albeit not always) a good deal of agreement among stakeholders about what constitutes damage to aesthetic integrity. Both the Green Diamond and the lily pond cases support this observation. The real question in these cases is whether these aesthetic concerns should be given serious attention in environmental decision making.

Many philosophers who study environmental aesthetics seem to have assumed that aesthetic judgments need to be objective in order to have a legitimate role in the policy sphere. For instance, Ned Hettinger, in making a case for aesthetic protectionism, worries that “if judgments of environmental beauty lack objective grounding, they would seem to be a poor basis for justifying environmental protection” (Hettinger 2008, 414). Allen Carlson developed his “natural environmental model” to demonstrate that a science-based environmental aesthetic generates science-based, and hence epistemologically objective, aesthetic values (Carlson 2004, 73). Emily Brady claims, “If aesthetic value is to be taken seriously in the practical context of environmental planning and policy-making, objectivity, of some degree at least, is essential” (Brady 2004, 191).

Our final, objectivity, lesson is a response to this concern. We claim that judgments about aesthetic integrity, *even if* both subjective and contextual, can nonetheless be valuable and effective in decision making. Admittedly, the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are somewhat difficult to pin down, especially with respect to aesthetic judgments. As Hettinger notes, objectivity is a “super-charged concept” (Hettinger 2008, 433) that allows philosophers a delicious choice of meanings. If objectivity is merely taken to refer to intersubjective agreement among stakeholders (see Brady 2004, 194), then we agree that such agreement is both common and helpful in developing public policy. However, we think that the search for objectivity can all too easily become a red herring in the policy domain.

Consider the Green Diamond case. The objectivity of the environmentalists’ aesthetic judgments was never a significant concern. The fact that a number of people considered the proposed development to be a serious threat to their sense of place constituted adequate justification for taking their perspective seriously in the county council’s deliberative proceedings.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the environmentalists’ concerns about sense of place (whether regarded as objective or subjective) were just one among many sorts of individual and communal values that entered into the city’s deliberations. For example, other stakeholders promoted the development as a source of new tax revenues and economic development. The nature of local policy deliberations about land-use issues is such that all these values constitute significant but not decisive factors in negotiating a solution to the issue. Crucially, the relative importance of the environmentalists’ aesthetic judgments would not be significantly increased even if it could be shown that they were objective. As we argued under the umbrella lesson, the real power of aesthetic judgments often lies in their ability to

motivate further investigation of technical legal or scientific issues that can ultimately prove decisive.

The lily pond case supports the objectivity lesson as well. For the purposes of blocking the proposed development, nobody cared whether the public's aesthetic judgments about the pond were objective or not. Even if they were subjective, they constituted a serious consideration to be addressed in planning meetings for the town of Arcadia Lakes. Nevertheless, given the current legal and zoning framework in place, the aesthetic judgments themselves (whether objective or subjective) could not stop the construction of the apartment buildings. Instead, concerns about aesthetic integrity generated the impetus to uncover irregularities in the permits that DHEC previously provided to the developers. Thus, the cases considered in this paper suggest that doubts about the objectivity of aesthetic judgments should not keep environmental aesthetics from playing an important role in a public environmental philosophy.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to Andrew Light, "If philosophers could help to articulate moral foundations for environmental policies in a way that is translatable to the general public, they will have made a contribution to the resolution of environmental problems commensurate with their talents and in a fashion compatible with the work of other environmental professionals" (2002, 559). We have argued that philosophers who want to follow Light's advice would do well to make the concept of aesthetic integrity an important element in their appeals to the public. Because aesthetic integrity is a central component in people's sense of place, it provides a strategically and morally advisable way to frame environmental issues. We attempted to strengthen our argument by illustrating how this sort of an appeal played a role in resolving the Green Diamond case. We saw that aesthetic integrity is an *effective* frame, that it is addressed particularly well in local *deliberative* settings, that it serves as an *umbrella* under which multiple issues can be brought to the fore, and that the *objectivity* of aesthetic judgments is not particularly important in the policy sphere.

As we mentioned earlier, our claims in this paper do not imply that philosophers should emphasize aesthetic framings to the exclusion of all other frames. For example, concerns for future generations are another powerful source of motivation for many people (Minteer and Manning 2000). Moreover, these concerns can have a synergistic relationship with the values of aesthetic integrity and sense of place, because local communities frequently have a particular vision of the kind of place that they want to pass on to their descendants (Norton 2005). Thus, our claim is that ethicists would do well to make aesthetic integrity an important element, among other potentially strategic components, of a public environmental philosophy.

Much of our argument has focused on describing ways in which people *already* respond positively to aesthetic appeals in the policy sphere. Although the focus of this paper has been on taking advantage of these existing features of society, one could also develop our arguments in ways that challenge existing social institutions. For example, we argued in Section 2 that people have moral rights not to have the aesthetic integrity of their environment significantly degraded without due process. It is obvious that, apart from local planning and zoning restrictions, our current legal

and political system is not well designed for protecting these rights. This is a case where, following John Dewey, we arguably need to engage in a process of social learning. According to Bryan Norton (2005), social learning is a type of cultural and social adaptation to the salient forces impacting people's environments at a given point in time. The goal is to develop practices and institutions that answer the needs of individuals and society. We think that, even though aesthetic integrity is already very important to people, we still need to adapt existing practices and institutions in a manner that more adequately reflects this importance. Perhaps the incorporation of aesthetic concerns in a public environmental philosophy can also contribute to that goal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While aesthetic integrity often encompasses some of the same natural features that are often associated with ecological integrity (e.g., biodiversity), we think it is important to distinguish these two concepts. A number of authors have raised concerns about the coherence of the concept of ecological integrity (see, e.g., the discussions in Callicott 1996 and Shrader-Frechette 1996). However, even if the concept of ecological integrity were determined to be problematic (e.g., because ecosystems were found to be in a state of flux rather than constancy over time), some features of an ecosystem (such as tree cover or the interactions among a group of species) might still remain relatively constant on a human time scale. Therefore, it could still make sense to talk about a sort of harmony—i.e., aesthetic integrity—between some features of an ecosystem and other perceptual, historical, and cultural features of the location.

<sup>2</sup> We emphasize that our definition of aesthetic integrity refers to *positive* sensual features of a landscape. Thus, while there may be a sort of historical or cultural integrity associated with the Las Vegas strip or a slum, this does not automatically qualify as aesthetic integrity according to our definition. Insofar as the sensual features of a location such as the Las Vegas strip are negative, these locations arguably have very limited aesthetic integrity. Of course, as we discuss further in this paper, individuals can disagree in their aesthetic judgments; some people may find the “loud commercialism” of the Las Vegas strip to be aesthetically pleasing. Nevertheless, it is worth distinguishing cases where people disagree in their judgments about aesthetic integrity (say, because they disagree about the aesthetic value of loud commercialism) from cases in which people agree that a place has very limited aesthetic integrity but think that there may be other (historical or cultural or economic) reasons for preserving it. We thank a referee for helping us to think through these sorts of examples.

<sup>3</sup> We thank a referee for highlighting these sorts of cases for us, and we emphasize that the mill or the mine could contribute to a sort of historical or cultural integrity (which in turn contributes to sense of place) while being detrimental to aesthetic integrity (because aesthetic integrity incorporates not only historical-cultural factors but also positive sensual qualities and ecological features).

<sup>4</sup> One might object that a utilitarian framework is unpromising for defending the rights described in the AIP, because there might very well be cases in which the degradation of aesthetic integrity produces greater overall utility than preserving it. However, it is important to keep in mind that the AIP does not completely block the degradation of aesthetic integrity; rather, it requires *due process* when one plans to cause *significant* degradation of aesthetic integrity. It seems very implausible that utility would be better served by allowing people to destroy the aesthetic integrity of the community at will.

<sup>5</sup> We emphasize that the people's concerns about aesthetic integrity and sense of place in the Green Diamond case arguably would have had weight in policy discussions even if there were significant disagreement about the relevant aesthetic issues. For example, even if a group of citizens in the Green Diamond case had regarded the land along the river as an aesthetically unappealing swamp, this by itself would not have invalidated the perspective of those who did value the undeveloped land. The aesthetic concerns of those who valued the traditional character of the land would have still merited serious consideration (along with consideration of opposing aesthetic or economic



perspectives) in the planning process, and those concerns would have still provided motivation to find additional economic or scientific arguments for protecting the land.

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