Aesthetic Education: *What Are Learning Cities Learning in Order to Bring Peace & Human Flourishing?*

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> "Specialists without spirit,
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> sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that
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> it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved"
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> *Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, pp. 123-124*

Aesthetic education is the process of developing an appreciation for beauty and art in various forms. It involves teaching individuals to perceive, interpret, and value artistic expressions, whether in visual arts, music, literature, dance, or other creative fields. Moreover, it offers insights into and ways of understanding both the singularity and sociality of human beings that are not readily accessible through either reductive rationality or empirical data (Conroy, 1999). The educational goal is to simultaneously enhance one's ability to experience, enjoy, discriminate between and learn from the aesthetic qualities of the world around oneself.

This type of education often includes: (i) arts participation: introducing students to a wide range of artistic works and styles; (ii) critical thinking: encouraging analysis and interpretation of art, fostering deeper understanding; (iii) creative expression: providing opportunities for individuals to create their own art, enhancing their creative skills; and especially (iv) cultural awareness: promoting an understanding of different cultures through their artistic traditions

Aesthetic education can be a part of formal education systems or pursued informally through personal interest and exploration. It helps individuals develop a richer, more nuanced view of the world and can enhance their overall quality of life.

The historic roots of aesthetic education may be traced to ancient civilizations and the gradual production of surpluses that allowed human beings to escape the brute, elemental task of survival. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle emphasized the importance of beauty and art in education (see for instance Plato (370BC) Phaedrus, Socrates' Second Speech: Sections 250d-257b; Aristotle (322BC) Nicomachean Ethics, The Concept of the Kalon: Book I, Chapter 8, and Book IV, Chapter 2; Aristotle (350BC) Politics, Aesthetic Education: Book VIII)). They believed that exposure to the arts could cultivate moral and intellectual virtues. During the Renaissance, there was a renewed interest in classical art and literature. Humanists such as Leonardo da Vinci (see da Vinci 1906) and Michelangelo (1623, esp. Poem 151, ca. 1538-44) promoted the idea that art and beauty were essential to human development. In the 18th Century, during the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller explored the concept of aesthetics and its role in human experience. Schiller, in particular, argued that aesthetic education could lead to personal and societal improvement.

These ways of thinking have slowly seeped into policymaking. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the development of formal education systems included art education to foster creativity and critical thinking. John Dewey (1934), an influential educational reformer, advocated for the integration of art into the curriculum to enhance experiential learning. Today, aesthetic education is recognized as a vital component of holistic education, promoting not only artistic skills but also emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and personal growth. The latter, however, addresses mostly arts participation and at best the creative expression aspects of aesthetic education. Much can be done to further address the aspects of critical thinking (type (ii)) and cultural awareness (type (iv)) that aesthetic education can offer.

Serious big scale attempts to address aesthetic education in all its types, including type (ii) and (iv), through policymaking includes work undertaken in the late 20th century in Bulgaria. The *International Movement: Unity, Creativity, Beauty*, was initiated by Ludmila Zhivkov, the then President's daughter, who was in her own right an academic (historian and archaeologist) and policy maker in the field of art and culture. Zhivkova built her policy approaches on the ideas of Shiller regarding the building of individual and human development of creativity and human flourishing through stimulating the personal development of creativity and identity awareness about oneself and others as diverse elements of unity and togetherness. Her ambitious cultural programme included archaeological identity building combined with intensive international cultural exchange and peacebuilding initiatives through art and collaboration projects across countries. The *Monument of Peace,* which hosted the International Assembly of Peace closing ceremonies, was an integral part of this policy enactment of aesthetic education. It is represented by a collection of bells labelled for each country in the world which are being simultaneously rung in harmony by children from their respective country to symbolise unity and togetherness. The initiatives of Ludmila Zhivkova were widely supported by UNESCO and had resonance in many countries: India, USA, Mexico, Iran, among many others. Zhivkova worked with the world leaders and UNESCO itself, delivered many strategic speeches about her views on aesthetic education at UNESCO symposia and through various external visits, created cultural exchanges between Bulgaria and other Eastern, and Western countries. She also launched long term cooperation initiatives (such as the biennial *Assembly of Peace* which gathered children from around the world in Bulgaria to showcase their culture and enjoy and enrich themselves from exchange with the performances of the other participants), travelling archaeological and living culture exhibitions and put in place a systematic policy and implementation mechanism in the country with regional outreach and rich diverse content including all arts and sciences (see the posthumous collection Zhivkova (1982)). The political changes and historical circumstances, including the premature death of Ludmila Zhivkova interrupted this work. Yet, there is a sufficiently well documented legacy of her policy making activity that can be built on.

Why is aesthetic education relevant to the idea of learning cities? Because it expands, extends and clarifies what is the objective of learning cities – it clarifies what is to be learned. The humanistic ideals of learning about oneself and learning about others expressed through a creative ability to rediscover and redesign one's own identity is an essential fundament of the learning city idea (see Delores, 2013). The ideas about human development and human flourishing, to which learning cities are related, are synonyms of humanistic development and awareness. Learning includes basic literacy and technical skills, but this is only a stepping stone for those who have already acquired these faculties. From Maslow's pyramid of needs (Maslow, 1943) to Tibor Scitovsky (1976) with his

explanation about the different tiers of societal needs and their link to culture, most thinkers of old and new agree that once basic needs of people are guaranteed for physical survival, it is then it is psychological survival that is next with respect to need and importance. Survival of the spirit is related to the faculty of reading which is the entry point to the development of one's critical thinking, engagement with various viewpoints and building an awareness as an independent individual. The dignity of an individual requires both a physical and spiritual component for development to be ensured and enacted as basic capabilities and functioning's of an individual (see Sen, 2003)). The dignity of a society is sustained through its cultural objects and aesthetic experiences: in this the Arts provides a bridge between past and future; between our collective memories and our projected possibilities.

Learning cities aim to find the recipe for social cohesion through fostering appropriate policy making in localities. Cohesion and peacebuilding are essential parts of the outcomes that learning cities strive to ensure for local development in all territories around the world. Aesthetic education, with its ability to expand the awareness of the individual about oneself and their relation to others' identity, and the ability to enhance their critical thinking through developing creativity in expression provides a major tool for learning cities to identify what they collectively might learn. Aesthetic education can help people develop themselves to learn not only basic skills, but further may facilitate the development of self and personal identity and thereby become aware of their links to the identities of others. Consequently, this may enhance levels of awareness in communication and collaboration between people that allows for peace and human flourishing at optimal levels by employing the capabilities of all individuals in society at their best.

To achieve this learning cities can couple with aesthetic education in the following manner. What learning cities have to help their local policy makers and citizens to focus on learning is:

> Q1: **How might the enhancement of cultural capital** (''familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society and passed in objective, embodied and institutionalised means'' (Bourdieu 1984) see also Bourdieu 1986 and Tubadji 2025, esp. Chapter: Cultural Capital)) **combat social exclusion** and ensure that human dignity is guaranteed for all individuals in and across place?
> Q2: **How is aesthetic education related to the accumulation of cultural capital** on individual and local level?
> Q3: In what ways does the **cultural industries** sector aid the accumulation of cultural capital within and across localities?
> Q4: What is the interplay at **the individual leve**l between cultural capital **and local identity** formation, and how might aesthetic education be the tool that ensures this link?
> Q5: What is the degree of **economic dependence for cultural capital** accumulation in a locality?
> Q6: What is the relationship between **cultural capital and economic and socio-economic outcomes** in a locality?
> Q7: How **can we accurately and precisely measure** local inequalities with regard to access to cultural capital and how can we foster improved access to cultural capital? (see Tubadji, 2025, Conclusions)

The above are questions concerning addressing issues of inequality and ensuring equal rights, primarily related to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10, but also impacting the domains of SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 2 (hunger), SDG 3 (mental health and wellbeing), SDG 4 (education). The potential means through which aesthetic education addresses these challenges is by reducing discrimination at work related to both employment (SDG 8) and recognition of the creative potential of all individuals. This is strongly related to SDG 9 (Infrastructure and Industrialisation), as recent research for example of Mariana Mazzucato (2024) in the UK and Davide Audretsch (Audretsch & Fiedler, 2023) in the US have demonstrated. It is SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 16 (Peaceful and Inclusive Societies) that are the focus of the ultimate outcome of aesthetic education; development of learning cities as the outcome of aesthetic education is a clear step in the sustainable development of healthy and peaceful communities.

The PASCAL Observatory has made several contributions already in this regard on various levels, examples being:

- **Museums practice** – collaboration work with the European Museum Academy (EMA) - the EMA manages several museum awards, with the winning museums often serving as role models and sources of inspiration throughout the museum community. There are various award categories, but three, in particular, emphasize aesthetic education as a core criterion.

  - The International Children in Museums Award, co-managed with the International Hands On! organization, highlights offerings for children in museums, with a focus on enhancing aesthetic skills and confidence (see https://europeanmuseumacademy.eu/children-in-museums-award-2023/)
  - The European DASA Award, supported by the German government, is dedicated to education and has seen growing integration of aesthetic perspectives within the museum community, beyond just art museums. (see https://www.dasa.org/community/dasa-awards/)
  - Lastly, the Art Museum Award, supported by the A. G. Leventis Foundation, is dedicated to social justice activities and outreach from art museums. Although this award is relatively new, having existed for only four years, it already underscores the importance of stimulating and developing aesthetic competencies among diverse audiences (see https://europeanmuseumacademy.eu/ema-situation-for-museums-in-europe-report-2024/).
- **Arts and humanities** – the University of Glasgow has led Erasmus Mundus Masters programme in Education in Museums and Heritage, supported by the European Commission, which emerged from work within PASCAL's Learning Cities Networks (see https://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/educationinmuseumsandheritage/)
- **Creative Entrepreneurship and place-based projects** in South Africa led by PASCAL Africa – this includes Mentorship, Tourism, and Investment aspects. Namely, we promote activities in support of leveraging cultural entrepreneurship for economic growth, designing mentorship programs to bridge cultural knowledge and economic empowerment, integrating tourism into learning city policies, and attracting sustainable investment in the cultural sector while maintaining cultural integrity (see Baur & Venter, 2019; Venter et al. 2022).
- Peacebuilding seminars for practitioners – check our YouTube channel to be launched shortly with videos from the events.
- **Tools for quantification & assessment of the impacts** of Aesthetic Education on local socio-economic development and political voting using the Culture Based Development Paradigm (see Tubadji 2025 for the full methodology of quantification of cultural impact on socio-economic development through aesthetic education).

Future Actions

We have a series of undergoing actions aimed at current and future support for aesthetic education and its endorsement in policy making and implementation throughout localities. These actions include:

- To **cooperate with local schools** for designing of Aesthetic Education-inspired curricula for children and lifelong learning, STEM/STEAM & AI and beyond human development (including for example comparative projects between the UK and Taiwan)

- To **cooperate with local faith and spirituality entities** for inspiring the wider (especially disadvantaged) community collaboration and unity and togetherness (one example is the collaboration with the network of Toastmasters Society for integrating Aesthetic education in the philosophy and implementation of their activities).

- To **cooperate with local authorities** in organising festivals of learning cities that celebrate the ideals of Aesthetic Education which are aligned with the SDGs (an example is the year-long Swansea Learning City Festival 2025).

- To **advise local authorities in the quantification** of aesthetic education and cultural capital impact on local socio-economic development (examples include participation of our experts in the EU consultancy team to the Basque Country regarding tailoring Creative Industry Indicators and work with the Welsh Government's Public Service Boards for measuring forms of capital, including cultural capital as a factor for local wellbeing, in line with the Welsh Futures Generations Act).

- To **organize series of webinars and podcasts** on Aesthetic Education, available for free viewing at the YouTube Channel of the PASCAL Observatory.

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