DWEA Briefing Paper: Aesthetics and Visual Impact

Summary
Disagreement about aesthetics is widespread. Evaluation of a distributed-wind installation should balance the benefits of an installation with an open discussion of a community's sense of aesthetics.

Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder
Aesthetic judgments are inherently subjective; there is no absolute right or wrong. In the case of distributed wind systems, many people not only like the way wind turbines look, but also appreciate what they represent. Most people do not have strong feelings either way. For those who do however, aesthetics can become a divisive issue.

Windmills and Wind Turbines are Positive Symbols
While we respect the opinion of those who find wind turbines unsightly, history points to a different societal consensus. Windmills have been used on farms in America since the 1860's. The American farm water-pumping windmill is an iconic symbol of our western heritage that commonly appears in art, publications, and governmental logos. To this day, this icon conveys independence, self-reliance, and initiative. To the Dutch, windmills are an integral and cherished symbol of their cultural heritage. Modern wind turbines appear in commercials, movies, and print ads to reinforce environmental themes. A national study[i] showed that housing values actually improved near wind energy projects. Polls[1] show overwhelming support for wind power development, as wind energy systems are so strongly associated with environmental stewardship.

Other Man-made Structures Abound
Power poles, transmission lines, cell phone towers and countless other structures dot our working landscape. They are such an integral part of our environment that they have become visually insignificant we just don't "see" them anymore. Similarly, when a new wind turbine is installed, the visual novelty typically wears off within a few months and it blends into the landscape like other man-made structures in the area.

Unlike large utility scale wind turbines that are clustered into wind farms, smaller distributed wind turbines are similar in height to other structures that are already a part of our landscape—church steeples, cell towers and water towers for instance. While not everyone may be enthusiastic about the appearance of the town water tower, most recognize the benefits and therefore consider it an acceptable part of the landscape. Distributed wind turbines also serve the common good and should be accepted as well.

[1] "The Effect of Wind Development on Local Property Values", REPP, 2003, available at www.repp.org

Putting it all in Perspective

Often, the loudest critics of the appearance of a distributed wind system have never actually seen one; they imagine the much larger utility scale turbines. DWEA recommends visiting a distributed-scale wind turbine in order to gain firsthand perspective on size and appearance. There will never be a tall man-made structure that does not generate some aesthetic criticism. This was the case with the Eiffel Tower, the Brooklyn Bridge, and even the Statue of Liberty. However, minority complaints should be balanced against the overwhelming societal good of wind energy. **DWEA recommends that distributed wind systems not be denied permitting solely on the grounds of visual impact. Wind turbines serve the common good and there will never be consensus on aesthetics.**