Wendy Earle

Five Critical Essays on Beauty

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CRITICAL SUBJECTS

Five Critical Essays on Beauty

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will explore the general discussions affecting, inter alia, design, architecture, culture and politics. The ideological premise of the journal is to facilitate a critical engagement with ideas, and to interrogate established topics objectively. Taking a leaf out of EP Thompson's review of New Society, the 1960s cultural review magazine, we aim to offer "hospitality to a dissenting view (as) evidence that the closure of our democratic traditions is not yet complete." Our purpose is to re-open civic debate.

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will introduce a theme for each issue and recruit five writers to comment freely and openly on the subjects to generate space for a conversation and further enquiry. The conclusion of each journal will not necessarily mean a resolution. Indeed, it is intended that there will be five robust views on display and that their interventions will be a spark to further discussion.

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Foreword

Austin Williams

Seventy years ago, in an article in *The New York Times*, renowned urban planner Lewis Mumford wrote: 'The living architecture of a city is a mixture of the beautiful and the beloved.'[1] Sadly, of late it has become fashionable to dismiss beauty as an elite preoccupation, and those who profess an attachment to it are often besmirched rather than beloved. One heritage consultant recently labelled the concentration on beauty as 'a dangerous fantasy.'[2] Another contemporary article suggested that a love of Western-centric notions of Classical beauty invoked a sense of 'subjugation' and 'white power.'[3] If you defend traditional forms of beauty, one journalist hinted that you should not be surprised to be targeted by 'blunt and racist far-right messaging' of fellow-travellers.[4]

Of course, 'beauty' does have its supporters amongst those who are prepared to suffer the onslaught of journalistic slings and arrows. But while defenders of Classical notions of beauty are regularly harangued, they themselves often parody their detractors, pointing to: Modernist architecture's failures in comparison to the refinement of classical proportions. The philosopher Alain de Botton complained that it was because of 'the horrors' of modern architecture that beauty has become 'taboo.'[5] Leading political figures, from President Trump to Michael Gove MP, have been more strident and insisted that new architectural developments must 'promote' beauty. Jordan Peterson says that there is 'almost nothing more valuable than beauty.'[6]

Admittedly, this short introduction is more critical of the so-called 'progressive' critics – those philistine commentators whose disapproval of beauty flares up because the person advocating it is someone they dislike, or because they have decided that beauty is a right-wing pursuit. As a consequence of a renewed intolerance of political opinions with which one disagrees, 'beauty' has fallen victim to the culture wars.

In this pamphlet, we try not to shoot the messenger and instead seek to reclaim the centrality of 'beauty' in the architectural lexicon. Or at least, several of the authors in this collection try to champion its appeal.

Beauty, says Ike Ijeh in his contribution, is in the eye of the beholder and thus certain types of beauty are more acceptable to some than others. For many people, for example, Brutalist architecture (the name derives from its unfinished concrete appearance) is an insult to good taste; others will find it a delight, and yet more will change their minds as they learn more about it.

Barnabas Calder, author of Raw Concrete says of Brutalism that 'of course it looks lovely,' but then he appends a mea culpa: 'I don't think we should be using concrete at all' – his aesthetic sensibilities seemingly disrupted by the realisation of the carbon-intensive essence of concrete, Brutalism's core material.

Nowadays, concrete, one of the fundamental elements that built the 20th century, is frowned upon. At a stroke, Brutalism's essence has, for the new guardians of eco-morality, become environmentally irresponsible and its endorsement and appreciation almost untenable. 'Stop it with the concrete,' says the architect formerly known as Maria Smith.[7] The *Financial Times* demanded the end to 'the tyranny of concrete'[8] while Christine Murray, ex-editor of *The Architects' Journal* wrote: 'It's time for architects to choose ethics [by which she means environmentalism] over aesthetics.' Concrete is now a material to be reminisced over but not used – unless you are unethical, unaware, or old-fashioned, of course. Beauty may indeed be in the eye of the beholder, but it seems that some beholders are more acceptable than others.

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Round up the usual suspects

Increasingly, the critics of beauty tend to condemn its advocates by imposing on them connotations of elitism, pastiche traditionalism or right-wing populism. According to one report, '"beauty" is just a euphemism for European imperialist art.'[9] A Canadian journalist was apparently horrified to learn that 'Adolf Hitler notoriously held a fascination with classical architecture.'[10] As a result of this de-legitimising onslaught, defending 'traditional' architecture today feels tantamount to befriending Albert Speer.[11]

As a left-wing Modernist, I find it galling to see some architectural commentators becoming Johnny-come-lately defenders of modern

architecture merely in order to signpost their political distance from these parodies of classical beauty. Was it not Marx who recognised that the ancient Greeks exerted 'an eternal charm' and regarded their achievements as 'unsurpassed' (admittedly, writing in the mid-19th century).[12] Terry Eagleton recognised that Trotsky implored socialists to 'absorb the finest products of bourgeois art.' [13]

Actually, in America and Britain, traditionalist architecture or classicism remain popular with the public. What's changed is that we now live in an era where such popular opinion is often openly denounced. Populist delight is all too frequently condemned as a signal of an ill-educated, ill-informed majority whose views really ought not to be trusted. Often their aesthetic judgement is assumed to be a reflection of their naivete. Get with the programme or leave it to those who know, say the right-on architects. Ironically, many of these modernisers reveal an increasingly illiberal tendency to look down upon the so-called petty concerns and desires of the demos.

This disdain for the oiks who 'just don't get it' runs in parallel with so-called progressive architects pontificating about how much they understand the mood of the public. Too many architects and right-on commentators prefer to talk (amongst themselves) about abstraction, asymmetry, virtuous cosmopolitanism, and their global saviour complex while constantly being misunderstood by an illiterate public. In reality, much of the public fully appreciates meritorious architecture of all stripes, as well as appreciating the simple pleasures of beauty, proportion, relatability, and continuity with the past, even though these often fail to comply with the received wisdom.

One architect claims that the defenders of beauty – the classical variety, that is – can be 'dictatorial' and that fetishising aesthetics tends to distract from 'more pressing concerns.'[14] These other concerns tend to be, inter alia, environmentalist, inclusivity, and anti-populism pushing the aesthetics of beauty onto the back seat. Mainstream architectural criticism prefers to endorse the (alleged) higher order objectives of cultural engagement, behavioural change and social policy initiatives.

Firmness and commodity are still key aspects of the Vitruvian triumvirate, but the third element, 'delight', has been downgraded to a measurable. Some commentators are prepared to endorse a poor architectural design – as long as it has a suitably bankable 'well-being', diversity or ESG rating. Never mind how it looks, does it align with my corporate values? This default reliance on tick-boxes sadly affects the classical aesthetes as much as it does the modernist technocrats these days. One self-styled defender of the traditional norms of beauty is content because

beauty is protected in legislation.[15] Clearly, aspirations have been lowered on all sides.

The deviation from the language of 'beauty' per se as an expression, say, of the ethereality and divinity of an object, and one's reverence towards it, coincides with the erosion of the joy and humanity in architectural appreciation and in aesthetic criticism. I suggest that we need a more considered engagement with the topic. Hopefully this series of essays, while not all in agreement, might give pause for a more appreciative realisation that 'beauty' is simply a civilisational necessity.

Austin Williams series editor, *Five Critical Essays'*

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Lifting the Spirits

Wendy Earle

'Beauty appears to be one of the most clearly known of human phenomena. Unobscured by any aura of secrecy and mystery, its character and nature stand in no need of subtle and complicated metaphysical theories for their explanation. Beauty is part and parcel of human experience; it is palpable and unmistakable.' [1]

'Without the beauty, that is, the radiant glory in which potential immortality is made manifest in the human world, all human life would be futile.' [2]

These quotes were expressed by two mid-20th century thinkers, Ernst Cassirer and Hannah Arendt, but now seem outdated. The humanist urge underlying the development of the arts since the Renaissance, to put the human at the centre of artistic creation, is now seriously in abeyance. Beauty is one of life's necessities, making a profound difference to our sense of being in the world, of the meaning of life. Our contemporary society, however, no longer seems to share the universalist belief that the arts should be devoted to the discovery and revelation of beauty. Influential sections of the art world and the intelligentsia now see the arts in narrow utilitarian terms, as important for what they say and do more than for their beauty.

The arts are now dominated by political preoccupations and social policy agendas. Beautiful works of art which cross newly fashionable ideological lines can be condemned as offensive and withdrawn from exhibitions, or 'contextualised' and apologised for. Artists, living or dead, are cancelled for views and behaviours that transgress current morality, it seems. Activists' attacks on artistic masterpieces meet with only muted

condemnation, or even praise.[3] The study of beauty is rarely considered relevant enough to inform young people's education, leading to a significant decline in Arts education in schools and History of Art and Music courses in universities.[4] The idea that the arts express beauty and add to the beauty of our culture is often regarded with thinly disguised cynicism; this has potentially disastrous consequences because it undermines an essential sphere of human activity where creativity and imagination enable us to transcend the everyday.

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Thoughtful reflection

All human beings have an instinct for beauty and naturally gravitate towards beautiful things. In beautiful art we recognise our inheritance and feel a sense of joy at being a member of the human-centric world. Visiting a magnificent Renaissance cathedral, viewing an exquisite painting, or hearing an angelic choir often draws us towards a deeper contemplation of what we find beautiful and why, and this process of thoughtful reflection can lead to a more profound sense of satisfaction and pleasure at being human and alive.

Beauty is hard to define: a sensation, a feeling – involving instincts, intuitions, and emotions, stimulating reflection, thought and judgement. Art does not deal in concepts and facts, but in intuitions. There is art and Art. We can enjoy the decorative beauty of art with a small 'a.' It improves our quality of life by surrounding us with attractive things. But Art creates something deeper. Leonardo da Vinci believed the gift of the artist to be *saper vedere*, a kind of intuition through which the artist knows how to see. Great artists are gifted with intuitive genius to create new forms, giving shape, order and balance to the chaos and randomness of existence, making sense of inchoate feelings. Works of art reveal nuances and complexities of human existence: a beautiful sonnet epitomises what it feels like to be in love; a grand symphony expresses the sweep of emotions between grief and joy; a sculpture encapsulates the sinuous muscular form of a hero. A work of art 'conveys an awareness of human things and human destinies, of human greatness and misery, in comparison to which our ordinary existence appears poor and trivial.'[5]

Masterpieces of art penetrate the deeper recesses of our lives and create forms that in the beauty of their construction allow us to reflect on the ineffable complexity of the human condition. Nabokov's *Lolita* is a

beautifully written, almost poetic novel that evokes a degenerate, amoral, charming monster of a man. It forces us to confront the possibility of such degeneracy, but also to think more deeply about the nature of beauty and morality and much else besides. In his depiction of a steam train, blurred by speed, bearing down on a fleeing rabbit, Turner simultaneously expresses a sense of awe and foreboding at the power of the machine. In Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, we recognise human capacity for brutality and violence and potential for redemption. We love Van Gogh's sunflowers because they epitomise the (transient) joys of summer. Magnificent cathedrals fill us with awe of human mastery of complex structures and unwieldy materials. Beautiful art gives us a sense of satisfaction and completion as we gain insight into life's deeper meanings.

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Human agency

The striving for beauty in art is an expression of human agency, and an affirmation of our existence as free-thinking, free-acting beings. Art is rooted in the natality and plurality of human agency. Natality is the fundamental human capacity to free ourselves by making new beginnings. In every era, great artists provide new ways of perceiving and creating beauty in the world. Plurality exists in the fact that one is born in a world full of people with whom we have to engage, at one level or another. In this way, art is a medium through which we can develop our common taste for beauty.

The Renaissance was a rebirth of interest in human learning and knowledge, and the flowering of the arts. Recognising the masterpieces of antiquity and seeking to create perfect forms that imitated and exceeded nature, artists – from Dante to Da Vinci, Shakespeare to Vermeer – developed transcendent powers of expression. In doing so they created beautiful art that transformed how we perceive the world.

Art forms culture by exposing the spirit of beauty, and joy in beauty is not just individual but shared. Since the 18th century, the philosophy of aesthetics has conceptualised beauty as a human construct, something we recognise and create through judgement. We judge the work of artists, debating whether something is beautiful and worthy of our love. Innovation is part of artistic development, and each art form demonstrates in its history and in its masterpieces the imaginative and inventive capacity of artists to reshape and renew the way we perceive and understand

the world. Over the centuries, some artworks have been judged worthy of immortality and taken into the heart of society and have helped shape our culture. Our tastes evolve but beauty in art transcends time and place – you don't have to believe in God to appreciate choral music or soulful Gospel songs, or to have experienced tragedy to recognise it in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

At the centre of the natality-plurality dynamic in art is freedom, because 'art turns [our …] pains and outrages, cruelties and atrocities into a means of self-liberation, thus giving us an inner freedom, which cannot be attained in any other way.'[6] The artistic imagination requires a leap beyond social norms, constraints, and the drudgery of material existence. We choose freely to create and engage with art, which – beyond compunction or coercion – gives us the freedom to imagine and reflect within ourselves, but also to share the experience with others. Professor of Philosophy, Paul Crowther says that 'Human freedom is centrally concerned with breaking out from those patterns of inevitability and discursive rigidity which constantly surround us.'[7] The arts exist outside of the operations of society, giving scope for considerations of other possibilities, and experimentation without harmful consequences.

Freedom in the public sphere is more existentially significant than freedom in private, and as a result society is often more ambivalent about true freedom for the arts. The nude is a case in point, particularly the female nude. Nakedness is a social taboo, but painting and sculpting the nude became acceptable during the Renaissance because it embodied the humanist ideal of beauty. When Rubens and Rembrandt broke free of the Renaissance ideal in their depictions of the nude, they expressed the artistic freedom to transcend tradition to discover new ways of capturing the essence of beauty. Viewing the nude implies the same freedom: in art the gaze is disinterested because the nudes are not real. We are looking at a painting, not a naked person. Nevertheless, the nude remains subject to uneasy acceptance, reflecting the tension between the arts, which should be free, and society, which is variously conservative and restrictive.

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Creative innovation

The huge variety of art forms invented over the course of history provide diverse ways of penetrating and unravelling the contradictions and

paradoxes of the human condition. The charm of art is exemplified in architecture, where the demands of mere functionality – to create stable forms that suit their purpose as operational spaces – are frequently transcended by architectural innovation in order to create buildings that somehow meet the inexhaustible demands of one's imagination.

From Alberti to Gaudi to I M Pei, our built environment would not be the same without the structural and artistic inventions of architects who have repeatedly innovated to create buildings that simultaneously amaze and delight us in their reflection of the human spirit to transcend human and natural limitations. The early 20th century architectural historian, Geoffrey Scott noted that 'within the world of concrete forms indifferent to man, they amongst others, constructed a world as man desired it, responsive to his instinct and his stature.'[8]

In every era, great artists develop new ways of representing the world to us, giving us new masterpieces to challenge and inspire us, to make us look again at how we perceive beauty. The advent of Modernism at the beginning of the 20th century uncovered new possibilities of artistic freedom, and at the same time initiated a dynamic of era-quaking questioning about the nature and centrality of beauty in art. Modernism, in its burgeoning imagination and innovative creativity, challenged artistic tradition and disrupted assumptions, inspiring more open, freer ways of seeing.

However, with post-modernism the art world lost its compass: its commitment to beauty, the one thing that gives art its unique place in society. Roger Scruton bitterly and wittily remarked: 'Art picked up the torch of beauty, ran with it for a while, then dropped it in the pissoirs of Paris.'[9] He was referencing Marcel Duchamp's infamous presentation, poking fun at the pretensions of the art world in the early 20th century, of a urinal as a work of art. Since the 1960s, Duchamp's joke has become a key reference point for contemporary art and seemed to legitimate post-modernism's removal of beauty from art's raison d'être. While beauty remains important to many artists, our major arts institutions have set their priorities elsewhere, turning towards social and environmental goals to justify their existence. Underpinning this shift is a deep-rooted and narrow-minded detatchment within society, a negation of the life of the mind and spirit.

In their major interventions, artists have shown us that our minds and spirits do not have to be bound by nature or tradition, fear or constraint. Our ideas of beauty can change, but through the pursuit of beauty we can reflect on – and even free ourselves of – our limitations and confusions, imagining new ways of beautifying the world we live in. I think, I hope,

that most artists and architects remain wedded to the search for beauty, but to be successful we need to challenge the tropes that are trying to stymie this humanistic yearning.

Wendy Earle convenor, Academy of Ideas Arts & Society Forum

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For the Many, not the Few

Ike Ijeh

Famously John Keats wrote that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever'. Few would disagree. But is it a joy for *everyone*? After all, as another iconic aphorism goes, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder', and from prince to pauper every human being has the ability to behold the beauty of their choice.

And there's the rub. Beauty itself is a famously contested term but until relatively recently, the beholder was not. In general, the beholder was taken for granted as a passive sensuous observer whose opinions on beauty might well have been defined (as most opinions are) by his or her character or experience.

Alarmingly, this no longer appears to be the case and in recent years beauty, like so much else in liberal Western society, has been relentlessly weaponised by both sides of the political divide in service of the other canon that, in many ways, has replaced beauty as contemporary civilisation's primary idolatrous cultural pursuit: identity. Nowadays, the beholder is likely judged, and expected to judge, based on his or her class, income, politics, sexuality, age, ethnicity, gender or religion. And as with most activist politicisation exercises, the process began firmly in the United States.

Because modern America is a much younger country than Britain, history is always perceived as an endowment rather than – as is sometimes the case in an ancient Britain keen to imbibe the glamour of the new – an embarrassment. Consequently, the US has been far prouder and less self-conscious about interweaving its contemporary cultural identity around the idea of traditional, usually classical, architecture. This propensity spawned America's voracious adoption of the Beaux-Arts and City Beautiful movements of the late 19th centuries; both explicit cultural vehicles for beauty.

But America, I would argue, was also the birthplace of modernism. At first, both movements, classical and modern, could lay equal claim to

beauty. And crucially they could both lay equal claim to something else too: egalitarianism. In the early 20th century, classical detailing, styling and ornamentation could just as easily be applied to a skyscraper, a Vanderbilt mansion or midtown slum tenement in New York's Hell's Kitchen. Beauty was, quite literally, for everyone.

Inevitably, the truce frayed. Modernism's growing preoccupation with functional clarity and structural purity left little room for decoration (though, crucially, not beauty) and as its buildings began to look markedly different from their traditionalist forebears, so too did their inhabitants. As in Britain, this social morphosis was most powerfully exemplified in public housing.

The rich elites never abandoned modernism in its entirety: the stunning houses of mid-century architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and John Lautner radically updated the American ideal of ostentatious domesticity. Even in England in the 1970s, the 5th Duke of Westminster, scion of aristocratic gentry, transformed his Cheshire country estate from Gothic pile to Bauhaus villa (subsequently remodelled as a faux chateau deemed more in keeping with its setting on the River Dee). In reality though, Modernist mass housing became most closely associated with the working-classes.

In America, the massive expansion of welfare in the 1960s and 70s, primarily pursued by the Democratic party and disproportionately targeted at urban ethnic minorities, further entrenched the association between privilege and tradition on one side, and poverty and modernism on the other. Beauty, with its inevitable though ill-founded conflation with affluence, retreated helplessly into the former camp. Meanwhile, the latter was vociferously defended by a liberal elite more naturally prevalent in the public sector, and an architectural elite determined to protect its modernist heritage and keen to redeem its elitist roots by cultivating an image of advanced social altruism.

This awkward cultural pact could essentially be summarised as this: if you were poor and most likely black or Hispanic, beauty is for the privileged and not for you… but here's a state-funded alternative.

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The democratic right

By the start of the 21st century these cultural battle lines had become firmly entrenched. Into this perfect storm of aesthetic attrition waded the Duke of Disruption himself, President Donald Trump. In an explosive

final executive order issued just weeks before he left office in 2020 and provocatively entitled 'Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture', Trump savaged modern styles like Brutalism and Deconstructivism and called for Classicism to be reflected in federal architecture since, like the architecture of Ancient Greece and Rome, Trump argued that this best reflected the democratic ideals of the Founding Fathers.

'Federal architecture sometimes impresses the architectural elite, but not the American people who the buildings are meant to serve', he thundered, insisting instead that 'federal public buildings should uplift and beautify public spaces, inspire the human spirit, ennoble the United States, and command respect from the general public.' [1]

While this salvo naturally prompted apoplexy among liberals and was promptly reversed within weeks of Biden taking office, it still marked the most extraordinary political intervention into architecture on either side of the Atlantic in modern times. Trump was essentially arguing that beauty had been squandered by a hegemonic leftist agenda ideologically invested in modernism and that it was the democratic duty of the conservative right to restore it to its traditional roots on behalf of the people they serve.

While inevitably couched in Trump's trademark tribalism and hysteria, in reframing beauty as a democratic right and resoundingly claiming that it exists for everyone but has been denied to the public by an authoritarian elite, Trump not only tapped into the same latent proletarian outrage that propelled him into the White House in the first place, but also controversially claimed beauty as integral to conservative political ideology. It ruthlessly weaponised beauty as a function of political identity as well as aesthetic choice. This was an audacious, populist gambit at the time that fed the mood of profound discomfort with American aspirations of universal democratic representation. How can beauty be 'for the people' if it tended to be denied to so many of them?

But the right has not been the only end of the political spectrum to weaponise beauty. In Britain in recent years, the rapid adoption of 'beauty' as a political ideal, particularly within housing policy, has forced a sometimes vehement reaction from the political left.

Britain's post-war and late 20th century history does not share the overt politicisation of modernism (and by extension beauty) that transpired in the USA. The modernist rebuilding of areas of Blitzed cities like London, Plymouth, Coventry and Birmingham was in marked contrast to the more

restorative reconstruction that typically took place in much of mainland Europe and also demonstrates how modernism was enthusiastically embraced by both Conservatives and Labour. It was a Conservative prime minister, Sir Harold Macmillan, who in 1963 insisted that state-owned British Rail's scandalous demolition of the neoclassical glories that were London's old Euston Station and Arch should proceed.

However, the clumsy adoption of American identitarian cultural warfare into British public life appears to be a sadly accelerating phenomenon curiously unhindered by the fact that both countries possess markedly different histories and societies. Accordingly, over much of the past decade the ownership of beauty has become a fierce political debate.

In 2018, the think tank Policy Exchange published a paper that was to have massive political reverberations. *Building More, Building Beautiful* was a political paean to traditional architecture, claiming, amongst other things, that it was popular, intrinsically beautiful, and that its adoption could help ease the housing crisis by diluting local opposition.

The report, as well as the subsequent eponymous government commission chaired by the late philosopher and writer, Sir Roger Scruton, went on to have huge influence on government policy and has enabled the word 'beauty' to be seamlessly inserted into political parlance in a way that was unthinkable even a decade ago.

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Knee-jerk response

Britain is not like France; beauty cannot exist for its own sake but must serve a practical purpose. In the 1980s, Terence Conran appealed for a London equivalent of President Mitterrand's *grands projets* in Paris. Margaret Thatcher was not joking when she replied that maybe he could design a new table for the Cabinet. Whatever you think of them, to hear British politicians regularly opining on beauty is surely no bad thing.

But for some on the left, the connection between beauty and traditionalism was a venial sin for which the government could not be forgiven. In some of the more fanciful minds, beauty was essentially being hijacked – explicitly – to exclude ethnic minorities and hark back to the pre-mass immigration days of classical ethnonationalist purity.[2]

'It's plastic jingoism, hollow nostalgia and pathetic Empire 2.0 rhetoric', cried Sam Jacobs, professor of architecture at University of Illinois at Chicago when the government's Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission was

formed, helpfully importing American architectural activism to a British audience. He added that 'pseudo-olden times cloaks a dark form of nationalism'.[3]

Homegrown opprobrium could be equally rambunctious and was usually manufactured from the same identitarian pique. The *Guardian*'s Hettie O'Brien argued that 'classical architecture had become a weapon for the far right' by attempting to redefine who is '"authentically" European'. Writer Robert Bevan, one of the more reliably excitable exponents of this theme, has repeatedly and loquaciously denounced an 'ugly pursuit of beauty'.

Ironically, in the US, traditional beauty is seen by the right as a left-wing tool to exclude the majority and in the UK, it is seen by the left as a right-wing tool to exclude minorities. Both extremist viewpoints are perfectly symptomatic of the intellectual hopelessness that views beauty through an identitarian lens.

Yes, there is no doubt that in both countries, architectural, academic and (until only recently in Britain) political elites have sought to marginalise and suppress traditional ideas of beauty in an often arrogant defiance of public opinion. Polling found that 85% of the public were in favour of traditional architecture and that support was highest amongst working-class groups, particularly in the so-called Red Wall constituencies, Britain's post-Brexit (and formerly post-Labour) cultural touchstone locations of political disenfranchisement.[4]

But equally, while suggestions that classical architecture denotes ideological extremism are obviously absurd (Gothic & Islamic architecture, with their overt historic links to religion, glory and empire presumably get off scot-free), the right could perhaps have done more to disentangle ideas of beauty from traditionalism. If a stronger political argument could have been made that beauty transcends style, its support base may have been broader.

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E pluribus unum

But the identitarian polarisation of our cultural and political age must not be allowed to obscure what we must unflinchingly proclaim as a universal truth: that beauty is for everyone, regardless of race, creed, class or politics. But how, when beauty finds itself caught in a cultural tug-of-war between diametrically opposing forces that wish to win it for their tribe, can we prove this to be true?

We can prove it by doing two things. First, we must acknowledge that beauty is both subjective and objective. Yes, it is ruled by instinct, but it is also determined by input and there are conscious design choices and decisions that architecture can make to either diminish or nurture it. Two thousand years ago, Vitruvius described what that 'nurture' might look like, and crucially extricated beauty from any predetermined predisposition to style.

In Scruton's own words 'styles may change, details may come and go, but the broad demands of aesthetic judgement are permanent.' Acknowledging that beauty can be based on universal, inalienable and observable truths does not limit its emotional power to affect us uniquely or hobble our instinctive agency to judge it individually. Like the first revolutionary 16th century translations of the Bible from Latin to English, it merely wrenches beauty free from the clutches of those groups or elites who claim that their status or identity affords them special dominion over it. Instead, it makes it accessible to all.

The second thing we must do to ensure that beauty truly is for everyone is to break the corrosive insinuation that beauty is a function of identity. Again, Scruton describes the inverse relationship between a more individualistic society and one where beauty becomes devalued. 'Our language, our music and our manners are increasingly raucous, self-centred, and offensive, as though beauty and good taste have no real place in our lives. One word is written large on all these ugly things, and that word is ''me''.'

Throughout the ages, countless gifted artists and architects have done terrible things yet we can still appreciate the beauty they leave us. Claire Dederer's new book *Monsters* insinuates that we ought to be able to separate a masterpiece from its flawed creator. The great Bernini, for example, the Baroque genius of Rome, not only had his married mistress' face mutilated when he discovered she was sleeping with his brother but later recruited no less a personality than his patron the Queen of Sweden to testify that sodomy was a mere trifle in his native Naples when that same brother later raped a boy.

Shocking. But does this make the tremendous masonry embrace of his mighty St. Peter's Square colonnades any less sublime? Or does it render his scandalised Ecstasy of St Teresa, where he miraculously sculpts marble into an expression of pure human rapture, any less divine? If hideous actors can create beautiful things, then why can't every man (and woman) enjoy them too? Yes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But it is not our identity that gives us the ability to behold it, it is our humanity.

Ike Ijeh head of housing, architecture and urban space, Policy Exchange

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A dialectical relationship

Kevin Rhowbotham

That neurotically preened sensibility which attempts to procure prestige, position and a contrived posture of pre-eminence – certainly entitlement – from a disingenuous command of the notion of beauty, not to say of the sublime, is surely a hagiographical fraud. What is it in the mind, what is it in the body of we foppish moderns, which wants to make an object out of an emotion, out of a passion? Must all the complexities of the human corpus be formed into a metric, into a measure?

What confounds in the passions is precisely this, that no matter how they are enchained, bound up and manacled, they will invariably lose all bonds and frustrate their captors. When the purpose of a nomination, specifically termed *the beautiful*, is the petrification of values at a higher level, when it is the incarceration of the sublime, by a vague and downright phantasmal act of naming, then it is certain that the motive of such a naming is to reduce all such values beneath a single term, to a level of equivalency in order to make them tradable. And is there really more substance to these contrived Platonisms than can be produced by an intellectual sleight of hand that we might call reification? If there is indeed 'beauty' as the ancients have urged us to believe, then what form does it take and what matter does it form?

Let us consider a very modern issue by broaching a roguish query: is beauty to be conceived of as a wave or a particle? The apparent absurdity of this question belies the power of the underlying ideology which has wrought the wastelands of our present time and made them fit to ask such an inane question. Was it not Leucippus of Miletus, Democritus of Abdera, and Epicurus of Samos who revealed *the essence of the world* as an irreducible point of matter suspended in a void? If beauty is not located within the particulate atom, then where is it? The evident problem with atomism is that it fails to address the enigma at the foundation

of a contingent physical cosmos. Adherents to this view have assumed, in accordance with Rosicrucian alchemy and the Hermetic mystery schools that objects and events arise in time through a causal chain.

Alas 'nothing can come from nothing',[1] so the savant has declared. The absence of everything; every event, every idea, every object in time and space which might claim itself to be a nothingness, is an irreducible paradox that cannot assert a beginning since the origin of such a chain must be uncaused. There can be no void, no nullity, no non-existence which can be conceived of from a state of becoming in the world and which can avoid this enigma. Beauty befits the atomistic void as a notion of non-material relations, as does justice and truth. Is it the Good then, as we receive it from the transfigured musings of Plato, we convalescent materialists, that inhabits the atomistic void and conjures up an incorporeal space between corporeal divisions?

There is, in this world of duplicitous ethical pandemonium, at least amongst those who would be Caesar, a dejected and bewailing self-pitying, masquerading as self-control, insidious to a point at which, the consequential events of a life well lived and lived modestly, are willingly disregarded as fatuous, insufficient and inadequate. This neurotic and fomenting lament, seeking completeness, envisions the ego-self as somehow bereft, as lacking, as wanting, and as disabled, even deformed. To this Caesarian ego-self there is always and already something else, something beyond, something which craves a fulfilment; an appeasement which must demand continual restoration in chase of a bogus lack; a constant longing, ever returning to the same by means of an act of Sisyphean futility. The well cannot satisfy a life's thirsting with a single visit; and is this not so with the notion beauty? Has it not become the well which must be replenished?

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Scylla and Charybdis

To such a bereft imposture, to this pursuance of a lacking, beauty readily presents itself in myriad forms, along with other ludic ideals of the perfect; of wholeness, of fullness, of goodness, as the completed *ding an sich selbst*,[2] as the true, the just, the immaculate object of interest. It does so however, always at a vague distance, just a way off, almost out of sight, beckoning but never in hand; remaining ever a matter of conjecture, a matter of dispute, notwithstanding the tireless efforts of so many

scholarly Caesars who stamp their bigoted feet in order to establish ever more compressed definitions. Soothing absolutes beguile the culpable as a siren might, in order to appease this witless lacking, conjured from an inability to slough off genial equipoise and decorous self-censure in favour of something much less measured, something altogether more salacious and intoxicating, something altogether more iniquitous.

But alas, we nautical mutineers, are we not cast adrift upon a mendacious sea of our own fashioning? A sea contrived from human *all too human* obsessions of the moment. And has this deluge not submerged the complex ambiguities of the aesthetic category, of the sublime, of the beautiful, below torrential righteous allegations? Is it not the decorously pious who have repositioned themselves above the flood, on the higher ground of a 'good in itself' in order to redirect an instrumental line of command, but from an arid vantage; and is this not always the fate of the celebrated tyrant? Much as the cultured mob would like to force beauty and the sublime into the dank undertow, both are stubbornly buoyant, impervious to murderous ethical attempts to drown them. What is beautiful is not good, and certainly not good in itself. There is much in those sultry passions, raised by the deliriously beautiful, which will have no truck with desiccated virtue, or sterile popularity and which will, without conscience, avoid taboo and prosecute murder to achieve its desires.

Plato's 'Form of the Good' comes to us, we mannered moderns, through the distorting monocle of Neoplatonism, specifically through Plotinus and the subsequent deformities wrought by Mediaeval Christianity, principally Aquinas et al. All subsequent rational scrubbing by Enlightenment zealots failed to wash out the persistent maculate of Plato's ineffable Good; explicitly a good unto itself, necessarily general and thereby ubiquitous, monist and omnipotent. Notwithstanding Aristotle's objections to the transcendent and to the monist aspects of Plato's Good,[3] which he attempted to absolve of its ineffability by requiring the Good to be *good for something*, by requiring of it instrumental consequences in the material world, there remains an abiding moral overtone to the beautiful, which resonates in that very Greek notion of *Agape*. Translatable as 'divine love', it is a term which names an experience of adoration and astonishment in the presence of the divine. An experience impossible to replicate in the modern day, since any notion of completeness and animation (both of which the Greeks held to be in the nature of the divine, not to say in the divinity of nature), can find no hard purchase on the glassy surfaces of metrical empiricism. What is beautiful is also indubitably good, for we Greco-metropolitans, and for we elegant Platonists.

Shape without form

The carceral ideals of Plato's Republic set out the custodial terms for the 'Good': the just, the true and the beautiful; categories which are sublimated to supernatural levels by conjuring from collective nouns a divine prefiguration, constructive of a perfect world, ideal and beyond the deformities of vulgar embodiment; a notion reiterated through the early confections of the Christian world view. Have caution here, because this is merely a patterning of stars fabricating, from a perceptual process of distinction, determination and recognition, some naming, some definition, and some acquisition of values purposively universalized. Alas, categories do not an essence make. Although the beautiful may be named as such, no effort of mind can screw it to the sticking place. What dominates the Habitus,[4] being most persuasive to vulgate notions of the beautiful, resides in the remaining fragments of Kantian dualism, which linger still in general inference, lacerating language, slashing intuition, and disfiguring flights of creative escape, as unyielding object and sentimental subject clash in an ostentatious battle for definitive control. *Sub specie aeternitatis* (From the viewpoint of eternity), no effort of mind can hold these categories to consistent measure, *ipso facto* they cannot be permanent, unchanging, and still. Whatever the Kantian noumenal may be, it looks for all the world like a psyche, a state contained within mind and body marking an inner life which could only be made empirically tangible if it could ever reveal itself. It looks for all the world like a personification, which takes the projected essence of the object for a soul. Essence does not precede life since the noumenal essence is mere fable, mere superstition, and remains a common opinion amongst those who would reject life in favour of perfect worlds.

Where then are the conversations and disputes concerning the beautiful and the sublime these days? Well, they are precisely nowhere, having long since departed the wastelands of the machine; 'we are the stuffed men', *sans doute*, 'leaning together'.[5] Certainly, disputes of this kind cannot be found in the creative dissimulations and mechanical impostures of contemporary architecture, nor within the enfeebled arts in general, since they have bequeathed to us – we children of anomie – a savage metropolis of brutish abjection and imprisoned degeneracy. There can be no discussion of issues so altogether incorporeal, so immaterial, nay so intangible as beauty, from those contrived and hollow perspectives wrought by a creed of pragmatic impersonators. Whatever still calls forth this naming, whatever is still referred to as *beautiful*, remains so, only by a desperate

comparison to all that is hideous, abominable and indifferent (and of course, there is much of this).

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The Rapture

Ecstatic *Rausch*,[6] that amoral and self-transcendent state of being, forged by the passions in pursuit of self-actualization, is all but absent in our desiccated world of cold mechanics, abject metrics, tautological calculation and recursive abstraction. To be sure, such a world propitiates but one idol, covetous instrumentality. There can be no passion in measurement, no affection in worldly goods and social decorousness; they are, all of them, valued by means of wretched comparison. For far too long the Arts, however they may be crudely limited by human definitions, have suffocated in a culture choked by instrumental rule. Surely it is already far too late to expect the Arts, as they are currently prosecuted, to engender a letting go of inhibitions. Far too late to expect them to break the shackles of a packaged and received platonic ontology. Is it not altogether disingenuous to expect them to engender activities and experiences which might bring joy and fulfilment, rather than social or material gain?

There can be no pushing past comfort and fear to reach an elevated and exhilarating state of mind in a context of this nature. To enter a state of *Rausch* in the presence of a prehended event, in the presence of the revered object, to stand astonished in the presence of the divine, requires a venting of ordinary social conventions and values. It concerns a state of mind and body that is liberated from the binding restrictions of a decorous life and its habitual returning to the same. The human capacity to adore is responsible for atrocities both deplorable and abominable. In adoration there is an ecstasy of loving sufficient to stupefy the unwary and to make insensible those who would love for itself; those who would love the necessity of adoration against all restrictions, and thereby become criminal.

In the stormy ethical seas of this present time, is there not some lingering and deathly pollutant, flushed to us, we swamped moderns, by the pre-Socratic Greeks no less, specifically by Heraclitus of Ephesus and by Parmenides of Elea? Was it not these two defilers, these poisoners of the unsullied torrent, who set out the implausible polarities of metaphysical wonder, calling them respectively *Panta rhei* (nothing abides) and *ex nihilo nihil fit* (nothing can come from nothing), *ergo*, for Parmenides all is permanent and immutable? There is much to reproach the post-Socratic

Greeks for, but chief amongst these reproaches must be those earned for an arbitrary taste for the totalising view, for some *prospectus universalis*. When one perspective must always take precedence over every other, becoming warrior, becoming champion, even if, and counterintuitively, the proverbial Achilles cannot defeat the tortoise nor the arrow ever reach its target, dominion appears more appetising than veracity. Beauty, like motion, in the arguments of Parmenides, is never a system of virtual relations; it is forever substance and never cartography.

Is beauty perfect then? Is it unmoving, absolute, immutable, unyielding; a thing, an object determinable and determining? Or is it a changeling, mercurial, shifting, subject to the contingencies of context? The Greeks would have it one way or the other, and yet it may be both, diachronically mutable yet synchronically fixed; a map perhaps, or even a plan, a fleeting sketch of subterranean emotions.

Kevin Rhowbotham academic

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The Truth about Ugliness

Rachel Jordan

'Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth.'
Pablo Picasso

A recent academic paper stated that, in the twentieth century, 'a specific kind of beauty emerged from art: the increased value of the mundane.' Somewhat surprisingly, the researcher seemed to suggest that this was not a negative trend. Indeed, mundanity was portrayed as a celebratory representation of the 'sensibility in ordinary'[1] and she explicitly recommended that other areas of the creative arts, specifically architecture, ought to learn from these mundane commonplaces; these moments *sans* pretension.

Even though many have come to realise that it is all pretension, the trend to celebrate the boring, the everyday, the unreconstructed self, has matured into a tedious commonplace in both art and architecture. Way back in 1988, American artist Jeff Koons initiated his 'Banality' series revelling in the ordinariness of popular culture with kitsch ceramic and porcelain trinkets, drawing on Baroque architectural chic.

While the celebration of the banal has long been a signature expression of Koons' work, and of a small number of fans equally enamoured with such stylistic expressions of mundanity, this kind of decadence has not been a particularly popular artistic form. Koons may rate his work objectively higher than Warhol's celebration of consumer trivia[2] – apparently exemplified by one of Koons' stainless steel rabbits selling at Christie's for a record US$91.1 million – but his oeuvre has not been universally loved. Indeed, much of it is often deemed to be cynical and seems to have remained a marginal – albeit elite – stylistic form. One early review of Koons' work in *The New York Times* (including other Pop Artists of the day), says that he is to art 'as Vanilla Ice is to rap… a stale joke.' [3]

Fast forward to today, however, and it now appears that all art must be mundane if it is to succeed in the rich pickings of the marketplace. Nothing too contentious, thank you. No radical ideas please, nothing challenging, nothing too controversial, nothing too classically beautiful. Play it safe. Banksy, the ultimate expression of kitsch mundanity, is revered for his clichéd murals, the predominant effect of which is one of massively increasing the value of gable walls in unremarkable terraced streets. What's more, his anti-consumerist works are ironic statements that earn fortunes via a Sotheby's shredder.[4]

Advocates of this gritty approach to art imply that art and architecture must be 'real' in the same way that a reality TV show is real. The criteria is that art must use everyday objects: it must be literal. But I say that art without craft is ugly. Art that has not transformed materials is ugly. Art that simply re-presents everyday objects in another context, usually in an art gallery, is ugly.

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Artless mess

Take *My Bed* by Tracey Emin, her recreation of her untidy, unsanitary bedroom created ten years after Koon's banality series. This crude, unimaginative work is ugly not for its content, but for the fact that no transformation of materials took place. There was no craft. Nothing was transformed by the artist's hand or even that of an assistant. People who found the content shocking were missing the point. It was shocking because it was ugly. It wasn't even art but, of course, it was given this precious title and that is really ugly: an insult to the viewer, the public, the *demos*.

Of course, Tracey Emin's *My Bed* is just one of her many works, and many of her other paintings and drawings demonstrate that she's quite a good artist at times. However, it was her messy bed that captured the attention of the gullible and desperate-to-be-relevant Turner Prize judges at Tate Britain. That was 1999, and the rest is history. It was subsequently bought by Charles Saatchi in 2000 for £150,000 and Tony Blair's *Cool Britannia* endorsement meant that the ensuing media coverage of similarly ugly works encouraged the general public to accept the idea that art can be anything the art world declares it to be. It feels like a case of the Emperor's New Artwork where the public are patronised/belittled/browbeaten into accepting the pretence that this is Art and no-one dares to say otherwise.

That's where the Stuckists came in on the topic of found art and conceptual art. They bravely voiced the opinion that this literal re-presentation of lived experience was not art; their original manifesto stated:

'True art is not the exhibition of existing objects but the transcendence of them through interpretation in another medium. This is the difference between life and art. Some people say that life and art are the same, in which case art is redundant as we already have life. This position is patently absurd. No one would sensibly suggest that Van Gogh's bed is of equal value to, or greater value than, his painting of it. This clearly illustrates the lie to the found object as art.' [5]

Today, art is categorized as either morally good or morally bad. It is no longer about how it looks. Content over form is what matters, and we live in a topsy-turvy world where a simple rule of thumb seems to be that if the artist has the 'right' identity or 'right' behaviour, the artwork they make is therefore morally worthy of being displayed in a gallery. All too often, moral judgements override more artistically appropriate value judgements, such as how well executed the piece is.

We all know the flaws that many artists have. Picasso's personal proclivities, for instance, are well documented, but more important than his personal failings is his incredible art. Whatever Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington revealed in her book *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer*, his personal foibles are an irrelevant component part of his universal gift. Most people have minor flaws often accompanied by mediocre accomplishments. Most people are beige; Picasso was technicolour.

Whether it's a painting, a drawing or a sculpture, beautiful art, meaningful art, resolved art is fixed. An artwork is an object that doesn't change over time. It was created and there it stands for all to see. Art can last for centuries or even millennia, and while the morality of societies change, the object stands separate from the human that produced it.

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Contrary opinions

Admittedly, beauty needs ugliness and ugliness needs beauty. They are bundled together as light and dark, yin and yang. As William Roche argues in his recent book, *Beautiful Ugliness: Christianity, Modernity, and the Arts*, despite ugliness being recognised as the flipside of beauty,

it contributes to the beauty of many artworks. The stronger the light, the stronger the darkness. But increasingly, we are only allowed to see one side.

Art exhibition visitors are often encouraged to view artwork through morally loaded lenses. If that morality is one's own, so be it, but if it is a forced morality, a compelled appreciation of a work of art or architecture based on a curated vision of 'right-think', then we are in troubling territory. Nowadays, the moral worthiness of a work of art is something that tends to be announced, not discovered; so those who criticise beauty as an elitist concept are oblivious to the fact that it is the elite who are determining how we should 'read' a work of art. My contention is that this trend is morally ugly. It prevents us from experiencing art whilst reinforcing ugly propaganda.

Oftentimes when visiting an art exhibition in public galleries such as The Tate, to be able truly to see the art, we have proactively to decide not to read the text on the wall or any of the official blurb in the accompanying exhibition leaflets lest we be infected by the ugly propaganda that will ultimately deprive us of an experience of the work. It has happened to me on numerous occasions. Sometimes you cannot help but read the label if you want to know the artist's name, or the medium used, the title of the work, or the date it was created, but instead you are hit by some virtuous art-worm message that enters your brain and you cannot rid yourself of it. It sullies the possibility of any open-ended response you may have to the work before you. Can we as viewers not just look at the work and enjoy it, or indeed be repulsed or shocked or have any other sentiment aroused? It seems not.

From our public cultural institutions there seems to be a diminishing appeal to, or concern for, our very human desire for an aesthetic experience, to witness artworks of great beauty and be lifted up from our everyday existence. Indeed, art allows us to escape the ugliness of our daily lives. A book written by a former New York Metropolitan Museum of Art guard, Patrick Bringley, called *All the Beauty in the World* demonstrates how wide the divide is between the cultural gatekeepers and the ordinary, art gallery-going public. Through his sensitive descriptions of how various types of people enter the Met's hallowed halls to see its treasures, he seems to understand the culturally-appreciative silent majority who still know instinctively that art is something uplifting, mesmerising, beautiful, transcendent. The visitors he observed day-by-day were sometimes moved to tears, struck dumb by the artworks before them. They were not told how to think about the art. They were allowed to have an aesthetic experience. They felt it.

So not all art institutions are messaging, lecturing, hectoring. That's a relief. However, the trend is strong and has infected the general discourse on art so that we are being denied our feelings, even our humanity. So often our opportunities to experience art are ugly and patronising indoctrination. This is anti-art and yet we are told that we should appreciate it, despite it being the destruction of all that is good about art. Art – and, in some ways, architecture also – is not meant to be understood like a slickly designed product advertisement with an artfully communicated message. It should be experienced in a viscerally emotional way. For this, no prior knowledge is needed. No guidance from curators is desirable or necessary and that is especially the case when it is ideologically loaded.

Like many people who grew up in Britain in the 1980s, it seems to me that the social and political rot set in from Thatcher onwards. Of course, the foundations for this will surely have been laid earlier, but this trend – which exemplifies ugliness within the art world – seems to stem from that place. Once the liberal opponents of Thatcher were unable to defend art for art's sake, the inevitable happened: they made the instrumentalist case for art and thereby destroyed it. In their attempts to defend art, they justified it by saying that art was:

- Socially useful – good for social harmony and the promotion of understanding differences,
- Politically useful – good for raising awareness of issues,
- Economically useful – a valuable contribution to the local and national economy.

Before long, the term Creative Industries replaced The Arts. After that, public galleries had to justify their existence on the basis of these social, political and economic benefits and essentially turn themselves into creative community centres for social cohesion rather than cultural hubs where locals can escape their everyday lives and be uplifted by beauty and higher truths. Culture and its artefacts are increasingly regarded for their quantifiable impact, rather than containing value in themselves.

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Diverse opinions

Firstsite in Colchester is East Anglia's newest public gallery, designed by Rafael Viñoly. In early 2023 the show, *Big Women* curated by Young British Artist and former Emin collaborator Sarah Lucas, explored

'questions and themes relating to womanhood, of societal expectations surrounding age, beauty, fashion and identity'. It was a mishmash of randomly assembled work by an arbitrary group of women artists with no coherent curatorial thread running through it, just a few vaginas here, some tits there, and a distinct lack of beauty. Admittedly, there was occasionally a happy find but I found most of the art ugly. If that is the outcome of socially useful art that raises awareness of women's issues, then it belongs on a political demonstration – not in a gallery.

That said, there is now much more social acceptance of previously marginalised groups than ever before. But the initial openness and freedom that this embrace of diversity engendered has metamorphosed into its antithesis – a culture where everyone now has to think along the same lines, and which promotes a singular view without any latitude for multiple interpretations or subtleties. The trend is for every issue to be judged as either black or white: there is no grey, there is only right or wrong.

Actually, there is only 'right' because the predetermined 'wrong' – the impermissible – is seldom allowed into the public arena. In relation to art and creative expression, predominantly facilitating what is deemed to be solely acceptable without its antithesis negates the exercise. Without wrong there is no right; there are only exhibitions that proclaim their virtue over degenerate art. In relation to how we live, this is socially and politically dangerous. Bland. Repetitive. Boring. Ugly.

Rachel Jordan artist, linguist and previous collaborator with The Stuckists.

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The Beautiful Game

Simon Allford

In 1982, when I was a young student, my father, David Allford, a post-war Modernist, challenged the Post-Modernist Charles Jencks to a debate at the RIBA. (I was not in attendance as I was in Sheffield playing 'the beautiful game'.) His words were relayed to me afterwards by my peers, and many years later I was presented with a transcript of his speech. I was struck then, as I am today, that he referenced the floorplans of Le Corbusier's Pavilion Suisse in order to challenge those that he thought were playing at architecture 'to produce a plan anything like as beautiful'.

Then, as now, I reflected on how a plan – a diagram – could be beautiful? And if it could, did its line and shape encapsulate those qualities. Could a drawing ensure that the resultant building would possess those same qualities. Indeed, if it was beautiful, what made it so?

As my love of architecture and football intertwine, I also ask myself, how can a game be beautiful? And if it can, is the game itself beautiful or is the result beautiful? This is particularly pertinent to me at the moment given that my beloved Sheffield Wednesday who have delivered so much pain over the years have just ended a long, hard season with three last gasp winning goals to win the play-off at Wembley. The games were good but not beautiful, but the three moments involved extraordinary outpourings of emotion for all of those who share a passion for and an obsession with the beautiful game.

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But what of architecture – 'the beautiful art'?

Actually, I will shy away from the use of the word 'beauty' as I prefer to speak of elegance, pattern, rhythm, detail, reveal, and material quality.

I tend to speak of light, shade, form, of ideas, of delight, because in all things I prefer words that have an objective quality. When I think and speak of architecture, I look for a rationale that relates to both ideas and facts. And incidentally, I prefer to deal in words that describe architecture in a different way to the inelegant and opaque architectural lexicon employed by many in the profession. This is because I am of the firm belief that the high art of architecture is most likely to be realised when simple ideas about enclosure, promenade, construction, and structure come together in a certain way in a particular place.

Context informs this process too. Context refers to the site but also the specific client, the particular commission, the various consultants and constructors, as well as the particular moment in time. It is for these reasons that, in practice, I talk of architecture as a product of the process of constructing the idea.

My process is not driven by dry, theoretical thinking. (I refused to read Christopher Alexander, for example, even though that might not necessarily be a sensible omission). But I am always searching for the tools that might generate a better architecture. Perhaps even a beautiful architecture? I continuously reference the indisputable beauty of Ray and Charles Eames' work. Whether it is their plywood splint for wounded US servicemen in World War II, a chair inspired by that splint, a film, a house, or interior designs created out of an assemblage of found objects.

That is why, for over 40 years, I have pursued the everyday project – the house, the school, the office, the hospital, the factory, the transport terminal, etc. These are buildings that have very real commercial economic and functional constraints. And all have a civic responsibility.

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Simple truths

When AHMM was founded in 1989, there were two competitions in that most unlikely hotbed of architectural patronage, Walsall in the West Midlands. One was for an Art Gallery, won by Caruso St John, whose concept revealed itself in its detailing and its execution. The other was for a series of canopies that we at AHMM designed as a competition-winning idea for a bus station and a new public square. We had an idea about a roof and two public spaces – one open, one sheltered – and we had a belief in the potential of that idea to make the bus terminus a proper place from which to arrive and depart.

It was a supremely difficult process, not least because our client retreated into bus deregulation and transport authority integration, and the ensuing project was a little rough around the edges. Nevertheless, that experience defined our idea of beauty as the product of a simple, legible architectural form combined with a bigger idea that the building should serve the wider society. It was an attempt to make architecture from a fierce commitment to the pursuit of pragmatics in construction, efficient structure and a fair contract. Such an approach was worth pursuing we thought, but only if the end result was the beautiful art of architecture.

Mies van der Rohe once gave a two-hour lecture on the importance of the technology, structure, construction and expression in the Seagram building and then concluded with the 'truth' that he'd primarily designed it because he liked the way it looked. For me, 'liking the way it looks' is one definition of beauty. It's a clear, pragmatic definition that I find compelling. Of course, beholding beauty is a subjective response to a visual stimulus which, when applied to architecture also includes the physical, tactile and functional experience. Architecture is 'the beautiful art' that offers and requires physical engagement.

But liking the way it looks is not enough. Architecture might achieve beauty but only when the way it looks, the purposes it serves (now and into the future), and how it is built are somehow aligned in a way that makes good sense, i.e. when it is satisfying to construct, behold and use. Understanding these processes can further enrich the beholder's appreciation but such understanding is, like the art curator's catalogue, an optional extra. I am comfortable with the idea that design is the alignment of a need with a purpose via a product. The fact that this might then, with some serendipitous good fortune achieve beauty, is a bonus.

Once, on a tour of Northern Italy, I was reassured by Palladio's story of his Villa Emo. Palladio himself explained that the design was about connecting the farmer to his horses so that, when woken on a stormy night he might walk to the stables via the colonnade to calm his horses and console them with dry hay – all under the shelter of the building form. The result of these pragmatic requirements is a beautiful plan that generates an architecture of purpose. Beauty emerges from the architectural resolution of a pragmatic need in plan, in section, in perspective, in construction, and in use.

Better Scarpa

That is why I argue that architecture is not 'frozen music' but the enclosure of the dynamics of use. It is the real and imagined movement of people or animals, resolved as a three-dimensional promenade enclosed by something known as 'elevations'. Villa Emo offered a delightful and beautiful contrast to what we saw the next day, Carlo Scarpa's BrionVega Cemetery. To me, Scarpa's vision was an overwrought conceit defined by an excess of craft; a pared back Baroque but with none of the spatial generosity and all of the theatrical frippery. It is the final resting place for Giuseppe Brion, the founder of the Italian electronics company Brionvega; but a tomb for architecture too. It has none of the elegance or economy of its commissioners, Cubo radio: the sophisticated simplicity of an Italian cult brand designed by Richard Sapper and Marco Zanuso.

To some on that trip my view was a heresy. For them it was Scarpa's masterwork; an eloquent study in the poetics of detail forming the architecture of the afterlife. We argued long into the night. I concluded that all great architecture is beautiful but maybe not to all of us. I appreciated what others admired in Scarpa, I understood their views, but I did not share that perception.

I enjoy the fact that others have a very different view to mine. That is why, while it is still allowed, we have debate and discourse. Undoubtedly, we might share similar views on the beautiful art when discussing the subject if we all share a common cultural and social context. Conversely, maybe the idea that beauty is defined by personal experiences makes it different for all of us?

As I become ever more trained in mind and eye, my views have changed. When I first read Adolf Loos' essay on *Ornament and Crime* and his exaggerated opposition to decorative architecture comparing it with tattooists and prostitution, I was confused. To my untrained eye his Kartner Bar and the Goldman Salatsch Store in Vienna both seemed opulent if not decadent and not the epitome of restraint that the accepted history presented them to be. I was similarly baffled that Sir John Soane and Louis Sullivan seemed to me very much engaged in an architecture of orders and ornament. How, I wondered, could architect and historian, William Lethaby, who was appointed Professor of Design and Ornament at the Royal College of Art, declare that 'beauty often ends when ornament begins.'[1]

In 1983, while studying Berthold Lubetkin, the scales fell away from my eyes when I read that he was 'interested in cultural problems

– considerably more than in football results' which, of course, suggests football also mattered to him! Lubetkin's plans, sections and constructions sat well with me. He was well read but also a recognisable member of the human race and I began to enjoy his caryatids as a successful joke at the expense of the pious, hairshirt view of Modernism.

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Nothing guaranteed

I took against the self-appointed critic and miserabilist (later Sir) Anthony Cox, who condemned Lubetkin's Highpoint Two in London. Oh, how I enjoyed Lubetkin's belated riposte in his Royal Gold Medal speech in 1982 in which he described the trends in contemporary architectural as:

'...a mumbo-jumbo art of a hit and miss society. I suppose that in due course they will be demolished because of metal fatigue or public fatigue. As will undoubtedly my own concrete shoe boxes.' (He concluded that much was still to learned from) '...the International Style which I think is the greatest invention since humanity discovered the roulette wheel.'

This speech was also referenced by my father in his article for AA Files – titled 'A La Recherche Du Temps Corbu'. It captured the lectures my father had given in a series organised with his travelling companions Frank Newby and Cedric Price. These were lectures about architecture, life and my father's commitment to Modernism based on a belief in the potential of a brave new world in art and architecture to serve wider society. It had the potential to offer 'delight'. And as he was the son of a skilled fitter foreman working in the steel industry in gritty, industrial Sheffield, these lectures conveyed the importance of humour, cricket and football, all of which infused his philosophy of life and of the 'beautiful art' of architecture:

'Although the Modern Movement has run its course, it is stupid to sneer at it as if it were an aberration... Some of the "new wave" critics write of current architectural jokes as if these were good enough to invalidate some of the old architectural achievements. This is cultural vandalism. The flashy superficiality of some "post-modern" work is a product of despair. Understandable, perhaps, but unfortunate. Without rational analysis at the root of your approach to design the work will be wilful, confused and meaningless. Beware of "high camp".' [2]

Architecture can only emerge as a beautiful art in response to a use and a need (except of course when, as in so many recent and pointless vanity projects the only need identified is for 'architecture' in and for itself). Of course, the emergence of useful and enjoyable architecture is not at all inevitable. Nothing is guaranteed. It requires constant review and iteration and the use of a good eye, trained in the history of architecture. Yet no amount of training will make beauty where there is no substance nor purpose. I say this not because I hold a strong view on morality in architecture. Indeed, I dislike the justification of architecture on moral grounds not least because it is all too often a smokescreen for various misdoings. As Oscar Wilde observed:

'No object is so beautiful that, under certain conditions, it will not look ugly. I have found that all ugly things are made by those who strive to make something beautiful, and that all beautiful things are made by those who strive to make something useful'

The fact that many of us are so conflicted by the idea of beauty is quite possibly a necessary thing. We are only likely to make beautiful things if we do not directly pursue beauty as the desired design outcome. Just as in football the result is all that matters. Pursue that and you might participate in the creation of a beautiful game. It follows (that is, if you see the link between my examples) that in the game of architecture beauty is only likely to be achieved by focusing on the need, and on the idea that most usefully addresses that need, through the collaborative process of designing and making. For it is process that turns style into substance and building into architecture.

This accords with John Kay's *Theory of Obliquity*. In the case of architecture, those of us trained in ideas of 'beauty' often cannot see it, at least initially. If that is the case, we cannot seek that which we cannot see. Of course, the passer by (and remember most people never enter most buildings) only sees the outside, the elevation, the face of architecture. They know not of the idea that has been constructed and see only its expression. Architecture is a public art that must serve them too while accepting that it will disappoint many. And that is OK, for to quote E.M. Forster (as quoted by Lubetkin):

'The man who believes a thing is true because he feels it in his bones, is not really very far removed from the man who believes in the authority of a policeman's truncheon.'[3]

All of which confirms my conviction that building can only become the beautiful art of architecture when the architect seeks to make something without ever thinking of it, nor designing it, nor willing it to be beautiful.

Simon Allford PRIBA, founder AHMM.

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Afterword

Patrik Schumacher

Beauty as the manifestation of aesthetic responses and valuations is a human universal. We all navigate the world aesthetically. Therefore beauty should be an indispensable category of all design discourses, including architectural discourse. However, beauty, seen as irrational, is an increasingly embattled and by now nearly extinct category within a conscientious discourse that is rightly aspiring to rational accountability and evidence-based propositions. Beauty has been eliminated from the discipline's discourse despite the fact that beauty is clearly not being abandoned by the end-users of design. Nor are aesthetic choices absent from actual contemporary design practice. It's just no longer talked about. This bashful muting of beauty, as I shall explain below, impoverishes our discourse and compromises our discipline's effectiveness. To counter this loss across a range of topics is our motivation in the *Five Critical Essays* series.

Contemporary discourse is abandoning beauty as an embarrassment because it seems to resist rational accountability. In his contribution to this book Kevin Rhowbotham defends beauty by posing the rhetorical question: 'Must all the complexities of the human corpus be formed into a metric, into a measure?' In my view this is no defence at all, because rational-functional probing, explanation and justification should, in the final analysis, indeed be the condition for accepting or rejecting categories and their related human practices. If beauty were indeed inherently ineffable, rationally indefensible, or irrational, then it would have to be cast aside. However, we must be wary of rationalist hubris, and give long-standing practices the benefit of the doubt. The pervasive fact of relying on aesthetic evaluations, both by end-users and by designers, should have alerted our contemporary conscientious architects that they might be missing something. In a different context Rem Koolhaas formulated

this heuristically useful reminder: the persistent pervasiveness of a phenomenon implies that it must mean something. Hegel used the memorable dictum 'the real is the rational' to express the same insight. The intellectual aspiration should be to query and then, if possible, rationally reconstruct and explain the hidden function and benefit of pervasive practices that are not self-transparent and seem *prima facie* inexplicable.

Aesthetic responses are, more often than not, (unconsciously) rational, i.e. beneficial, life-enhancing responses. By demonstrating this, and by identifying the conditions of this functional rationality of beauty, this essay hopes to rehabilitate the category of beauty and integrate it into our conscientious contemporary discourse.

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Cultural evolution

Beauty seems to be wholly subjective. Ike Ijeh starts his contribution to this book with the truism that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' Indeed beauty has no inherent quality that resides in the object itself. We must start with the acknowledgement that beauty is not a substance but a relation between object and subject. This relation consists, first of all, in individual responses or acts of appreciation and selection. However, this, in itself, does not make beauty something merely subjective or arbitrary. Neither is it merely an intersubjective convention. Rather – and this is my core argument – shared aesthetic responses, criteria and ideals of beauty have the function (not conscious purpose) to discriminate the beneficial from the detrimental.

How is this achieved? There are often systematic, though not failsafe, external clues of an entity's functionally relevant capacities, and there are processes of cultural evolution as well as individual learning mechanisms that form well-adapted aesthetic sensibilities. The function of aesthetic sensibilities is latent rather than manifest. (In evolutionary theory the concept of function is applied to a feature, mechanism or behaviour if its effect contributes to its reproduction. This 'selected effects' definition of 'function' is also pertinent with respect to cultural evolution). In its most basic form aesthetic sensibilities involve attraction and repulsion as conditioned reflexes. Although not reducible to these, the appreciation of beauty in aesthetic judgement is connected with such conditioned gut reactions, delivering an instant, intuitive discrimination of the beneficial.

The essay in this book that comes closest to sharing my understanding of beauty is Simon Allford's 'The Beautiful Game.' Here we read that 'architecture can only emerge as a beautiful art in response to a use and a need.' The idea of beauty's dependence on utility has been a staple theorem of the modern movement and can also be found in earlier figures like Semper and Pugin. The understanding of beauty's crucial connection to performance is not new but has rather ancient precursors. We find the central insight in David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* where he quotes a paragraph from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* that already clearly expresses the core insight: 'An athlete whose muscles have been developed by training presents a handsome appearance; he is also better prepared for the contest. Attractive appearance is invariably associated with efficient functioning.'[1] The crucial element missing here is the necessity of recurrent historical updating.

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Rhetorical values

Here is how I explained beauty in an article from 2001, in the context of architecture/urban design: 'The aesthetic judgement of cities and buildings is rational in as much as it operates as an immediate intuitive appreciation of performativity, short-circuiting first hand comparative experience or extended analysis. Aesthetic judgement thus represents an economical substitute for experience. It depends on a tradition that disseminates accumulated experience via dogmatic rules. This dogmatism is the virtue as well as the limit of aesthetically condensed experience.'[2]

The virtue of this reduction to dogma is its cognitive economy, stability and easy transmissibility. Its limitation is its inertia in the face of rapid transformations in the conditions of life. The condition of beauty's proper functioning is thus a certain stability of life conditions so that there is enough time for well-adapted morphologies to evolve and enough time moreover, for respectively well-attuned aesthetic sensibilities to stabilize.

When technological and social life-conditions, then high-performance urban morphologies change, aesthetic responses should (and will) change too. 'With the development of society what once was an accumulated wisdom becomes an irrational prejudice that has to be battled on the ideological plane of aesthetic value. Such a battle was waged and won by the heroes of ''modern functionalism''.' The technological and social

revolutions called forth an aesthetic revolution',[3] establishing and aestheticizing non-classical proportions, asymmetry and seriality.

The anthropological and historical evidence that ideals of beauty are malleable and culturally evolve, is clear. Thus, while the category of beauty is a human universal, no particular ideals or aesthetic sensibilities are universal. Like good versus bad, beauty versus ugly, is a highly abstract evaluative distinction that can be implemented or concretised by diverse sets of criteria.

To become operational beauty requires historically evolving specifications, not every year or every decade, but in times of rapid historical transformation. As rational, self-critical, self-determining agents we should not indulge in our aesthetic predilections as something unchangeably given, as something to satisfy without question. We cannot blindly trust our aesthetic sensibilities. Instead, we should probe and query our aesthetic values, and if found maladapted, update them. Thereafter we can go back to rely on them as needed. Without the cognitive shortcuts afforded by aesthetic sensibilities we would not be able to navigate or cope with the world.

Beauty is a very abstract, empty, but historically programmable and re-programmable category. This allows the category itself to be resilient. Ultra stable. The programs that in each socio-economic epoch specify the particular operational criteria of beauty are the epochal styles. Architecture responded to and participated in the transformation from 19th century laissez-faire capitalism to 20th century Fordism via the transition from 19th Century historicism to 20th Century modernism. Currently architecture is, or rather should be, responding and participating in the transformation from 20th Century Fordism to our 21st Century Network Society, via the paradigm shift from modernism to the new epochal style of parametricism.

This, once more, implies a revolution in the discipline's and society's aesthetic values and ideal of architectural beauty. I have specified these new aesthetic values of parametricism in Volume 2 of my book *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*. A more elaborate presentation of my theory of beauty can be found in Volume 1: 3.8 'The Rationality of Aesthetic Values'.

The thesis heading this chapter reads: 'Aesthetic values encapsulate condensed, collective experiences within useful dogmas. Their inherent inertia implies that they progress via revolution rather than evolution.'[4] The theme of beauty is picked up again in Volume 2: 'Beauty and the Evolution of Concepts of Order'.[5]

Rationalisation

There is, at the moment, no substitute for the aesthetic navigation of the world which thus should not and indeed cannot be eradicated, at least not until continuously updatable AI systems substitute for our fast operating but only slowly updating aesthetic sensibilities. The same applies to design practice. Here too, at the moment, is no substitute for well-adapted aesthetic sensibilities as guides to make rapid intuitive design decisions or choices when confronted with the increasing abundance of (AI generated) design options.

While more and more computational analysis and optimisation tools become available that empower and further rationalise the design process, these tools each address only a single partial aspect of the overall, increasingly complex, multi-objective task. Even if the designer (the wet-computing neural network) can reduce or eventually eliminate his/her reliance on aesthetic (intuitive, non-discursive, non-analytic) choices – a big 'if' – then architects will still have to anticipate, reckon with, and steer the ineliminable aesthetic discriminations of their end-users. Therefore, architectural discourse is, on more than one count, deficient if it ignores the operation and function of our sense of beauty and of aesthetic values.

How then should architectural discourse engage with beauty? By trying to make the aesthetic values underlying our operational sensibilities explicit, subject them to critical comparative evaluation, if necessary posit new values, and explain their functional rationality in connection with general salient aspects of the contemporary life-process. In my writings this has taken the form of concisely formulating the formal heuristics – both positive and negative – of parametricism. This style and its formal heuristics (as well as its explicit functional heuristics) is not my invention. I have rather been naming and formalising a sustained and widespread architectural movement. It is the epochal styles of architecture that – in each socio-economic epoch – concretize the abstract concept of beauty via specific aesthetic regimes.

Within each epochal style further progress might take the form of subsidiary styles, further refining and adapting the prevalent architectural ideal of beauty. More recently, I have been naming and explicating the latest ideal of beauty that I am promoting: Tectonism,[6] the current phase of parametricism. A full book-length, illustrated account of this (subsidiary) style and movement, will be published this summer.[7]

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