

People and places: essay four

Beauty: a short history

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Somerset House, London © David Coward

Introduction

The public values beauty and not only wants it in their homes, clothes and other personal belongings, but also in the great outdoors, the public realm and public life.

The story of our thinking about beauty could be seen as a single movement from certainty to doubt. This storyline reflects the growing complexity of the world and the loss of religious and philosophical conviction. Thomas Hardy described this in *Before life and after* as 'the disease of thinking' which causes the loss of an inner conviction that, visual evidence tells us, existed 'before the birth of consciousness'. In the same way that many people believe it is better to restrict religion to personal belief and action, rather than making it a public principle, so the idea of beauty retreated long ago to become a matter of personal preference and experience – not necessarily killed by consciousness but better left understated. Politicians, planners and even architects are shy about invoking it.

Here I suggest that there are some understandable pressures that led to our present reticence about beauty. At the same time, there is every reason to try to work with the idea again. As the MORI research commissioned by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) shows, the public values beauty and not only wants it in their homes, clothes and other personal belongings, but also in the great outdoors, the public realm and public life. New technologies offer opportunities for more participative and constructive conversations about planning and beauty – at a local and national level – resulting in a greater understanding about the importance of beauty to our mental and physical wellbeing.

There is a growing recognition among the public, and increasingly among politicians and policy makers, that there is more to life than economic growth and that non-material values matter too. True, the recession and public spending cuts are concentrating our minds once again on hard necessities, but my sense is that, especially in these difficult times, the public will respond to any attempt to rehabilitate beauty.

In 1916, during the First World War, when it seemed as if the world would change permanently, the architect W R Lethaby was a great believer in everyday beauty as a saving grace in difficult times:

‘For the earlier part of my life I was quieted by being told that ours was the richest country in the world, until I woke up to know that what I meant by riches was learning and beauty, and music and art, coffee and omelettes; perhaps in the coming days of poverty we may get more of these.’¹

The brief history of beauty that follows is a storyline with an arc. Every chapter has made beauty a more difficult subject for people at the time to discuss – although it is fascinating and important to understand how and why the subject became virtually off limits, at least for professionals in art and design who might be expected to care about it.

This storyline also has a repetitive oscillation between two polarities of beauty, which accounts for the subject’s complexity – the word means

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different things at different times. One extreme is the rational understanding of beauty and the search to boil down the essence into formulae and models for application. The other is the romantic understanding based on personal experience and insight that is not open to explanation or proof. Much of the history of architecture – or at least British architecture – can be written in terms of this oscillation between rational and romantic understandings of beauty.

¹ *Form in Civilisation*, Lethaby, 1922

The classical heritage

Our problem with beauty is that it was not so much suppressed as forcibly moved from the sacred to the secular.

The middle ages took their idea of beauty chiefly from Plato's philosophy which states that beauty is taken for granted as part of the divine order. John Keats' later assertion 'beauty is truth, truth beauty' essentially reinstates this belief. Even so, as Plato and the early Christian thinkers insisted, beauty was also a dangerous business in which the Devil could pervert the righteous with the lusts of the flesh and the eye.

The Reformation violently disrupted British people's relationship with the visual arts. Visiting any medieval country church today, we are likely to see empty statue niches, figures with defaced heads or windows of reassembled stained glass. Fragments of painted wall or woodwork have survived, if at all, by accident or stealth and revealed after centuries under coats of whitewash. Historians, such as Eamon Duffy, have recreated what it must have felt like to be an ordinary pious believer – bereft of the familiar comforts of a coherent system of idea and image and catapulted into a new world where God came in the sacred word but not in the sights and smells of the church². Other Protestant countries in northern Europe underwent similar iconoclastic transformations, but in few was it as extreme. The churches of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales were systematically devastated over the course of two centuries. Perhaps this is a sufficient explanation of our problem with beauty – visual beauty was not so much suppressed as forcibly moved from the sacred to the secular areas of society. In fact, the wealth unlocked by

the dissolution of the monasteries stimulated a rich period of creativity seen in Elizabethan prodigy houses such as Hardwick Hall, which stand on the cusp between old and new worlds.

We see the professional architect emerge as a member of the intelligentsia even more between the Tudor and Stuart periods. Inigo Jones began his career as a stage designer in the court of James I, but his journeys to Italy before 1620 were a turning point for the future of British taste. He reflected on the turmoil of his ideas in his Roman sketchbook as 'flying forth' from a designer's heated brain. But he recognised that, as with behaviour in public, architecture needed discipline and should be 'sollid, proporsionabl according to the rules, masculine and unaffected'.

Jones brought Palladio drawings back from Italy that have since helped to shape national style and taste. One outcome of his Covent Garden house elevations was the creation of a pattern of window sizes and floor heights conforming to the classical orders with a basement at ground level, two storeys over it, followed by a cornice and parapet. This pattern demonstrates what he meant by 'proporsionabl according to the rules' and became the basic component of English urban design.

2 *The Stripping of the Altars*, Eamon Duffy, 1992

Beauty and the birth of modern science

Renaissance designers and theorists used the 10 books of architecture by Vitruvius – the only substantial text on the subject from the ancient world and a formative influence on revived classicism. Vitruvius summarised architecture in three words: firmitas, utilitas and venustas. The last is often translated as beauty, implying a physical or sensual quality to the experience named after a goddess. Florentine architect Alberti substituted this word with 'amoenitas' – amenity, which does not have much strength in current usage but is associated with pleasure and delight. This meaning was conveyed in 1624 when Sir Henry Wotton translated the three original words as 'commoditie, firmeness and delight'.³

The Vitruvian man – a figure with outstretched arms in a circle – demonstrates the ancient belief that beauty resulted from following the proportions of the body. This remains a powerful idea, even if the actual measurements only approximate to the pure equations of the formula. The majority of older buildings have a naturally graceful scale in elements such as doors and windows, while timber and stone set limits on the absolute size of structures, giving them what is often called a human scale. These are elements of beauty that are not achieved so easily in an age of mechanised construction.

Sir Christopher Wren – designer of St Paul's Cathedral and the dominant design mind of the second half of the sixteenth century – was a mathematician and astronomer before an architect.

The idea that beauty is an expert business remains deeply rooted in western consciousness.

It is not surprising that he enjoyed the Renaissance belief that the higher forms of beauty were based on numbers, akin to the harmonies of music and the movements of the planets. He rendered the Vitruvian triad using the terms 'beauty, firmeness and convenience', explaining:

'There are two causes of beauty, natural and customary. Natural is from geometry, consisting in uniformity (that is equality) and proportion. Customary beauty is begotten by the use of our senses to those objects which are usually pleasing to us for other causes, as familiarity or a particular inclination breed a love to things not in themselves lovely.'⁴

The ideal of pure geometry remains deeply rooted in western consciousness as the basis of beauty. It sits well with the idea that beauty is an expert business, not accessible to the untrained mind. The dominance of this interpretation was soon challenged by new voices of common sense. In France in 1683 Claude Perrault wrote about the classical orders – the various columns observed in Roman ruins and listed with their correct proportions by Vitruvius. He questioned the idea that finite numerical relationships could be the defining cause of beauty, arguing that the ancients had no magic formula to connect architecture to the cosmos – an idea so shocking that it remained dormant for over a hundred years.

In Britain, the amateur architect Roger North also

³ *De architectura*, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, 1486-, *De re aedificatoria*, L. B. Alberti, 1452, *The Elements of Architecture*, Henry Wotton, 1624

⁴ *Parentalia*, Christopher Wren, 1750

Beauty lay in the way that elements were composed with variation of rhythm and scale, something that everyone could see and appreciate.

took a different direction from Wren, claiming that beauty lay in the way that elements were composed with variation of rhythm and scale, something that everyone could see and appreciate. This idea also influenced subsequent thought and taste.

The Great Fire of London was the perfect occasion to rebuild the city as an example of civic humanism. Wren and his scientific colleague Robert Hooke provided plans with straight radial streets, at whose junctions major buildings could be seen – as demonstrated in the re-planning of Rome. But because of the need to rebuild quickly, and the hostility towards any form of royal intervention, none of this happened. The Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich, carried out under Wren and his successors in the Office of the King's Works, gives us the best idea of what an absolute monarchy, like that of Louis XIV in France, could have done to change the face of London and other cities.

The first two King Georges lacked interest in the arts, leaving the aristocracy to take on the role of artistic patronage in the cause of civic humanism. A pure ancient Roman style of architecture – received via Vitruvius and Jones – was advocated as essentially British, Protestant and virtuous. The more emotionally engaging classical style of Baroque – represented in England by Wren and his followers, Nicholas Hawksmoor and John Vanbrugh – was condemned as foreign and over-personalised. In the manifesto-like introduction to his 1715 book *Vitruvius Britannicus*, the ambitious

architect Colen Campbell rhetorically condemned the works of architects now seen as geniuses: 'How affected and licentious are the works of Bernini and Fontana? How wildly extravagant are the designs of Borromini, who has endeavoured to debauch mankind with his odd and chimerical beauties, where the parts are without proportion; solids without their true bearing, heaps of materials without strength, excessive ornament without grace, and the whole without symmetry'.⁵

This episode represents one of the most sudden oscillations of the kind described above. Hawksmoor's churches and Vanbrugh's country houses were effectively put out of bounds for architects effectively until the 1950s, although several free-thinkers learned from their powerful evocations of Romanitas.

⁵ *Vitruvius Britannicus*, Colen Campbell, 1715

Classicism and Romanticism in town and country

The Palladians believed they had architecture back on a track of timeless stability.

We can compare buildings in Greenwich with Somerset House, designed by a later Palladian, Sir William Chambers. In place of the former's swagger of domes and vistas, we feel the quality of the craftsmanship and materials while enjoying Chambers' audacity as an engineer in the Nelson Stair and his clever borrowing from a sixteenth century Roman palace in the arched entrance off the Strand. All the same, it is a building that has often been condemned as dull in its larger assembly of repetitive parts.

Georgian town planning is still seen as a major contributor to world urbanism. It reaches its height with the achievement of the two John Woods – father and son – in Bath, with the city's urbane streets, squares and circuses employing Palladian forms to almost Baroque effect.

It was John Gwynn, a contemporary of Chambers and fellow founder of the Royal Academy, who brought a practical aspect to the discussion of urban beauty that had previously been lacking. Inspired by Wren's largely forgotten scheme for the city, Gwynn used the centenary of the Great Fire in 1766 to publish *London and Westminster Improved*⁶, the first action-based book on urban planning in British history which claimed that 'in the present state of building, the finest part of the town...is left to the mercy of capricious, ignorant

Gothic buildings and exotic gardens and landscapes soon became an important part of many architects' repertory.

persons'. His plan was mostly concerned with layouts drawn on top of the narrow and often maze-like streets of the capital, for which he blamed a short-term view of financial return. It was partly a matter of patriotic pride 'to convince the world that blundering is not the only characteristic of English builders', and partly a philanthropic conviction that 'public magnificence' would promote the welfare of mankind.

Tastes, however, were changing. Designers, notably Vanbrugh, and their public became more appreciative of non-classical forms and styles. It was recently discovered that, uniquely among architects of his generation, Vanbrugh – originally a protégé of Wren – travelled to India. This makes sense of the crowded chimneys on the skyline of Blenheim Palace. Vanbrugh built his own house at Blackheath in the form of a castle, and set a new value on customary beauty when he argued in 1709 with the Duchess of Marlborough over the retention of the ruins of Woodstock Castle on associational and historical grounds. Gothic buildings and exotic gardens and landscapes, created as subjects for learned conversation and amusement, soon became an important part of many architects' repertory. Attempts to imitate the formal architecture of Paris in London were less impressive in French eyes than the novelty of the *jardin anglais*, which became a progressive fashion across Europe with its connotation of political freedom as a replacement to the Versailles tradition.

⁶ *London and Westminster Improved*, John Gwynn, 1766

Beauty became even more of a subjective and personal concern, rather than an agreed goal to which a whole population could aspire.

The purity of serious architecture did not have to be compromised. While customary beauty in this form was the antidote to the boredom of over-familiar forms, it was also an avenue for serious investigation into national identity and personal feeling expressed in sensationalist theories of art and architecture. In 1757 Edmund Burke published *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Both of these categories were familiar from antiquity: beauty being associated with 'feminine qualities of smoothness, curvaciousness and poise'⁷; and the sublime with their masculine opposites. In giving new prominence to the sublime – the aesthetic emotion occasioned by fear of danger – Burke contributed to the idea that our sense of beauty is spontaneous and unpredictable. Moving away from the orderly end of the see-saw, Burke reduced beauty to something potentially safe and dull. This was one more step in the retreat from the Platonic view of a universal and unchanging standard of beauty.

Burke's work was reviewed in Germany and praised by Immanuel Kant in 1790 in his *Critique of Judgement*, where he made beauty even more of a subjective and personal concern, rather than an agreed goal to which a whole population could aspire. The classical ideal was by this stage seriously undermined. Although, ironically, the early stages of doubt freed up the potentially rigid system to produce some of the most admired and skilful designs of the whole Renaissance period.

⁷ *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke, 1757

Further English thinking came with the theory of the Picturesque in the 1790s – adding a third category to Burke's in order to account for an in-between sensibility to landscape and the accidents of history and weather, which showed neither the smooth abstract perfection of beauty nor the extreme emotions of the sublime. The Picturesque remains a familiar set of attitudes and today the word beauty will often be used to describe what could more strictly be called picturesque.

The development of Regent's Park from 1811 remains a witness to a new combination of the beautiful and the picturesque. Where nature in the form of woodland, market garden or hay meadow had previously reached the garden walls of new terraces of houses pushing out at the edges of the city, it was now made ornamental in advance, providing the prototype for municipal parks in northern cities such as Birkenhead and Derby in the 1840s.

Disenchantment

At Regent's Park, urban design stands on the cusp of Classical and Romantic. Its architectural and social individualism is expressed in free-standing villas, each in a different style and evoking elements of the past with the insouciance of a Hollywood epic. For some Romantics, such as Wordsworth standing on Westminster Bridge in 1802, a city could wear 'the beauty of the morning' like a garment. This indulgence to the city was a rare emotion and Wordsworth's contemporaries, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Blake saw cities, above all modern cities, as a symptom and a cause of mankind's fall from a primordial state of grace – a view that increased in strength through the course of the nineteenth century.

Some nineteenth century theorists, such as John Ruskin, claimed that a rotten society would inevitably make rotten architecture and cities. His generation saw beauty in urban and rural places disappear under a pall of soot, while a more subtle corruption seemed to be working in people's minds and blinding their eyes. Driven to despair by his inability to do anything about it, Ruskin turned in middle life from writing about art, for which we chiefly remember him, to politics and economics – an area where his ideas are arguably more relevant but less well known.

Far from being a slave to historical precedent, Ruskin inspired designers to see with fresh eyes. He was certain that beauty had been steadily declining through history – a view that many were

A rotten society would inevitably make rotten architecture and cities.

willing to share along with growing awareness that an artist's life could be well spent battling against ugliness. The effort was continued in new institutions such as east end settlement houses and the studios of Chelsea.

Ruskin's ideas influenced the foundation of the National Trust in 1895, as he emphasised the need to vest natural places and scenery in a semi-public form of ownership. At the same time, the arts and crafts became a starting point for two contradictory tendencies in architecture. One was a return to eighteenth century Classicism, bringing a new sensitivity to context, craftsmanship and materials. The other was an embryonic form of Modernism, looking for a rational, scientific architecture not reliant on the past. And in 1895, Oscar Wilde's trial helped to discredit Aestheticism, leading to a long period of safety and dullness in the public expression of beauty.

The City Beautiful

City Beautiful depersonalised beauty in the interests of the machine age and social conformity.

This American movement expressed the confidence of a growing economy. The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, with its grand, French-inspired classical architecture, was progressive in its social aims although stylistically conservative. It emphasised the benefits of good planning in terms of economic efficiency, health and social cohesion. City Beautiful depersonalised beauty in the interests of the machine age and social conformity. It was a significant model for Britain, feeding into the Garden City movement and schemes such as the Aldwych and Kingsway in London. The see-saw was poised in midair until 1900, when Classicism started to push the arts and crafts down.

But this new Classicism was all too often heartless and formulaic. For all its good intentions, City Beautiful was no guarantee of beauty – a warning against thinking that beauty can be squeezed out of a tube and applied like toothpaste to freshen us up. However, we must allow its importance in reasserting the value of a public realm – the provision of shared spaces such as parks and squares for the use of all citizens. Only rare philanthropists took care of these things in the materialist industrial period, while in the twentieth century they were seen as essential to social stability and well-being.

Modernism and beauty

Technological change occurred at a more rapid rate between 1890-1914 than during any equivalent period of time, bringing powered flight, telephones, domestic electricity supply and motor cars, and steel framed construction and reinforced concrete in the building world.

One of the leading architectural ideas of modernism was function. This was a valuable antidote to the excessive decoration of the late nineteenth century and allowed designers to return to basics of proportion and abstract form. The idea that beauty simply comes from the effective and economical translation of function into form, however, is attractive but problematic in action. The results may not appear beautiful, and by excluding so much architectural expression, modernism has arguably made it more difficult for many people to appreciate and understand architecture. Real people and real flowers are not abstractions, but complex formal organisations, and if this complexity is missing from the man-made world of modernism, then beauty is also at risk.

Modernism therefore has a complex relationship to beauty, depending on how we select and shape our definition. It is better to look at actual buildings and judge them on their merits than to take theory too literally. In modernism, qualities of space are all important, but hard to convey in photographs. The views from a building and its relationship to the site are often more important than in earlier buildings and contribute towards understanding

Modern architecture can combine a world of facts and functions with another of imagination.

the architect's intentions. Rather than being a finite object, the building becomes a set of frames and screens between surrounding outdoor spaces, and this relationship can sometimes be magically extended by landscape design.

In Britain, the 1934 De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill by Mendelsohn and Chermayeff, presents few problems of appreciation. It is romantic in spirit and built to a human scale. Its position by the sea and the effect of light created by water are integral to its design. Modern architecture can combine a world of facts and functions with another of imagination. As Le Corbusier wrote, 'techniques are merely the dinner plates of poetry' – at the end of the meal, your mind is released to dream.⁸

During the materially constrained post-war years, architects and planners hoped to banish the inequality, dirt and confusion of the past, replacing it with a new picturesque vision of man at ease with nature and served by clean unobtrusive technology. New schools and universities tried to capture the vision. For a time after the war, enabled by legislation that increased public control of formerly private resources and opportunities, planning seemed to hold the key to a holistic reworking of the natural and man-made environments.

⁸ *Precisions*, Le Corbusier, 1930

What went wrong? There were many enemies of beauty that dominated post-war architecture and planning, but two had overriding effects that contributed to a revulsion against new architecture. One was impatience with the past and its relics that caused older cities to be dismissed as worthless, despite the presence of fine buildings, spaces and potential modern lifestyles. The second, serving the first, was the proliferation of private cars and the willingness to give them roads and parking places, meanwhile neglecting investment in public transport. A rapidly creeping subtopia of non-places was the result. Philip Larkin vividly expressed the moral and physical decline of the first age of consumerist democracy:

'Despite all the land left free,
For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn't going to last,

That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in

Except for the tourist parts—
First slum of Europe, a role
It won't be so hard to win,
With a cast of crooks and tarts.'⁹

However, the conservation movement was well established by the time of this poem, and it is important to remember that planners and architects had taken a leading role. Conservation moved from a museum-like focus on individual structures

⁹ *High Windows*, 'Going, Going', Philip Larkin, 1974

towards an appreciation of context, mirroring changes in scientific thought away from isolated study towards the understanding of complex interaction in habitats and environments. The creation of Conservation Areas in 1967 meant historic buildings could be protected in a setting, perhaps consisting of several streets, with their trees and landscapes as well as the bricks and stones.

Conservation was far more powerful as a means of restoring ideas of beauty in the public realm than architecture and planning of new buildings had ever been on their own. It was also a means of engaging a citizen population in debate and decision-making about their environment.

People today certainly have much to thank conservationists for, as mistakes of the recent past are reversed, and buildings such as St Pancras Station finally find a leading role in a modernised public service infrastructure.

A unifying conception of beauty in architecture and design feels more elusive now than it has ever been

What types of beauty have we identified in history, and which of these could still be useful today? The scale and proportions of the human body, as reflected in classical architecture, help us establish a personal relationship to external objects. The focus on spaces between buildings in Georgian cities provided practical benefits of greenery and fresh air, as well as relieving the monotony of rows of houses. The Victorians, for all their doubts and anxieties, rediscovered individual craftsmanship and launched the environmental movement in time to save wild nature. City Beautiful gave us the model for integrated modern infrastructure in a mass society and the Modern Movement wiped off the make-up to find the bone structure of buildings beneath.

These are insights and achievements of western architecture, now spreading to most parts of the globe. Other world traditions of beauty, however, also have things to teach us. The contemplative minimalist spaces of Japanese interiors, for example, or the intricate abstract patterns of Islamic tiles in cool courtyards shut off from dusty noisy streets.

It is painful to abandon certainty in the passage towards doubt that I outlined at the beginning of this essay. But certainty can encourage complacency and dogmatism. While a unifying conception of, or understanding of, beauty in architecture and design feels in some ways more elusive now than it has ever been, there are

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grounds to hope that beauty has a role to play in informing and influencing governments, national and local. MORI's research shows that people care about beauty and that they want to see more of it. They recognise it as important to both individual and collective well-being. This is part of a growing body of knowledge and expertise among scientists, historians, policy makers, and above all planners and designers.

Perhaps the key thing is to have the confidence to say beauty matters, and not to be afraid of the reaction; to see it as beneficial and valuable to the public, and not beyond the ability of most people to achieve. Insight and care count for more than money where beauty is concerned, which is particularly significant now, as the country faces massive cuts to public spending. When choosing foreign countries to visit, we often favour those that may be poorer than our own, but have a richness of culture that is manifested in the beauty of their towns and their landscapes. Beauty generates lasting benefits, of which tourism is only the most obvious.

The state of the public finances is not the only challenge: the spectre of climate change requires equally urgent action. The objectives of the green movement are relevant here: it is argued that less resource-intensive lifestyles are possible if we learn to live within our means and our resources, taking more time over ordinary tasks, mending, touching and feeling our surroundings. Beauty, likewise, does

not depend on things being new. It is cultivated through a deeper understanding of what we already have, and by looking after and appreciating the unique characteristics of the places where we live. So, like W R Lethaby, we should commit ourselves to living better on less.

About the author

Alan Powers teaches at the University of Greenwich, where he is Professor of Architecture and Cultural History. He is well known as a writer on a wide variety of topics concerned with twentieth century British visual culture. His books include *Britain* in the series *Modern Architectures in History* (Reaktion, 2007). He has also curated a number of exhibitions. He has been active in architectural conservation over many years with the Twentieth Century Society (including the period in which it was known as The Thirties Society). As a commentator and columnist, he has contributed frequently to the *Spectator*, *Building Design*, *Architects' Journal*, *TLS* and other magazines.

Have we become less certain over time of what beauty means to us, to the extent that we are now reluctant to discuss it at all? Alan Powers tracks the development of the concept of beauty in Britain and asks where we went wrong and how beauty could answer some of the most pressing questions for our society today.

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