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## SKILFULL ACTION AND DEEP HAPPINESS VERSUS SHALLOW BEAUTY

### SIŁA MĄDROŚCI I ZGŁĘBIONEJ RADOŚCI PRZECIWI PIĘKNEMU SPŁYCONEMU

Piękno jest integralną częścią naszego życia. Debata na temat piękna architektonicznego wiedzie nas do początków cywilizacji. Zmienne i kontrowersyjne poglądy oraz powszechna możliwość komunikowania się za pomocą języka piękna nasilają związki pomiędzy pięknem architektonicznym a umysłem, emocjami i duchowością. Interesująca architektura centrum informacji turystycznej w Twyfelfontein w Namibii ilustruje tak pojmowane piękno wzbogacające nasze doznania i życie oraz pobudzające naszą wrażliwość i wyobraźnię.

#### Defining architectural beauty

This study tracks the description, interpretation and meaning of architectural beauty. I have selected different opinions while reading, reviewing statements, papers, and books on architectural theory focusing on beauty. I have quoted and compared constructive, intellectual and emotional responses.

Beauty is part of being human. Although it does not mean the same to all of us, it can still communicate in spite of polemics and contradictions. The disputes themselves and the very possibility of speaking the same language about beauty representing all professions seem to connect architectural beauty with the mind, emotions and spirit.

The discourse on architectural beauty goes back to the roots of civilization. There have been many changes – with contradictions and evasions – in the perception of beauty. Beauty has a life of its own; it exists behind any intentions, actions and objects. Beauty seems to be present, with or without our acknowledgment.

When defining beauty even Tadao Ando does not say directly what it is – instead he refers to our perception and memories: *“You can’t really say what is beautiful about a place, but the image of the place will remain vividly with you.”* (Tadao online 2007).

For Luis Barragan, beauty has a standard of almost international language: *“Beauty is the oracle*

*that speaks to us all...”* and *“Life deprived of beauty is not worthy of being called human...”* (Barragan online 2007). Robert Venturi, in his Pritzker Prize speech, said: *“From what we find we like – what we are easily attracted to – we can learn much of what we really are.”* (Venturi online 2007).

It remains difficult to explain the nature and meaning of architectural beauty, but people’s reactions may do it. Helmut Jahn provides an example: *“You’d never think of taking a cab if you had to walk a mile down Chicago’s Michigan Avenue. But in a bad city you take a cab just to go around the corner.”* (Jahn online 2007).

Whether or not you are a professional, whether or not you have been educated, you can be affected by beauty, as Louis Kahn confirms: *“The capacity for wonder is a primitive instinct: with no knowledge, no study, by wonder alone one can get really close to beauty which is total harmony... We know in a spontaneous and innate fashion when things are beautiful.”*

#### Recent publications on beauty

Beauty is central to culture, and the free pursuit of beauty offers us the key to escaping our own and our environmental limitations. Recently essays, discourses and books have been published on beauty.

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In this regard John Armstrong's *The Secret Power of Beauty* is designed to help the reader define and categorise beauty, and to celebrate its mysterious – even sometimes mythical – power. He offers an elegant journey through various and complementary interpretations of the essence of beauty and the meaning of pleasure.

One of the world's leading experts on aesthetics and art, Umberto Eco, has written *History of Beauty*, aimed at a general audience and providing an excellent history of the idea of beauty. He pays a great deal of attention to one of the most interesting developments in the history of beauty, which was the identification of beauty with reality in many great works of art and architecture in the medieval period. He follows the chronological order of the development and evolution of beauty during the Renaissance, when beauty became more grounded in human and earthly realities and the focus fell on the beauty of material objects, nature, and people. Later the ideal nature of beauty turned to the sublime, reasoning, machines, abstracts and various representations of culture.

Arthur Pontynen, in *For the Love of Beauty*, focuses on the study of beauty that is central to culture, and offers a key to escaping the limitations of the aesthetic mind. He provides a counter-narrative based on a cross-cultural pursuit of beauty. He illustrates the substantively different cultural traditions, the claims of each probably being valid in whole or in part, and shows how the history of parallels of beauty in the intellectual history of culture affect both aesthetics and ethics.

### **Architectural history and theory on beauty as a meaningful goal**

Vitruvius as the author of *De Architectura*, known today as *The Ten Books on Architecture*, is most famous for asserting the three qualities of *firmitas, utilitas, venustas* – translated into contemporary English as being *durable, useful, and beautiful, or strength,*

*functionality and beauty.* If a building is to create a graceful atmosphere, Vitruvius held, it is essential that it mirrors natural laws of harmony and beauty. When perfecting the art of building, the Golden Section was the rule plus – invented by Greeks and continued Romans – Ionic, Doric and Corinthian orders.

From the Middle Ages we have some books of simple advice, patterns and building designs. In all three categories the Golden Section is lacking. One of the most interesting developments in the history of beauty was the identification of beauty with reality, in many great works of art and architecture in this period.

During the Renaissance, beauty became more grounded in human and earthly realities. Alberti inspired by the art and architecture of antiquity, elaborated the theory of beauty as harmony, expressed mathematically in every way. He was a philosopher, architect, musician, painter, sculptor and theoretician, who gave a scientific basis to works of painting, sculpture and architecture in the same way as to literature and philosophy. The architectural craftsman became intellectual “*impairing the harmony of the whole.*” (Alberti online 2007).

Palladio, in his *The Four Books of Architecture*, integrated extraordinary aesthetic quality with expressive characteristics that resonated with his clients' social aspirations. He found a powerful expression of the importance of the owner and his social position. His success as an architect was based not only on the beauty of his design, but also on its harmony with the social order and hierarchy of his time. This beauty served to illustrate a social order and culture.

Beauty as *delight, expression and form* has been one of three major parts of the essence of architecture. One wonders whether more recent statements are not also ‘paraphrases’ or contemporary versions of Vitruvius. Compare statements, by Gropius: “An object ... must fulfil its *function usefully, be durable,*

*economical and beautiful*” (Condrads 1971: 95) and his definition of the essence of architecture was “*technics, function, expression*”. Then there is Norberg-Schulz’s definition: “*technics, building task, form*”.

Rob Krier in his *Architectural Composition* articulated strong statements about beauty, geometry and principles: “*Still, straight-forward geometry is also a good protection for mediocre architects. The realm of irregular design can only be mastered by extremely talented artists. This may be a warning to all those young architects who think that the spontaneous individual line and liberation from geometry are the pre-conditions for becoming an artistic personality. Whoever builds up and teaches an architectural theory must examine every theorem in terms of its universality.*” (Krier 1988: 306).

Frank Gehry propounds a different philosophy: “*...you can’t redo old ideas. The only way to gain is to go forward and not look back. You can learn from the past, but you can’t continue to be in the past.*” (in Friedman 2003: 12). When he explains the meaning of architectural scale, Gehry relates to issues already discussed in this study: “*I’m a strict modernist in the sense of believing in purity, that you shouldn’t decorate. And yet buildings need decoration, because they need scaling elements. They need to be human scale, in my opinion. They can’t just be faceless things. That’s how some modernism failed. When it started getting used by the developers, it became faceless. It became a language that self-destructed.*” (In Friedman 2003: 47–48).

Can ornament, decoration and material play significant roles in the construction of meaning and expression? Or do they just represent a shallow beauty?

### **Against shallow beauty – replacing style with life-style**

If one questions the importance of beauty, what then becomes of concepts like form and style? To

Le Corbusier, *style* was like a feather, nothing more: “*Architecture has nothing to do with the various “styles. The styles of Louis XIV, XV, XVI, ... are to architecture what a feather is on a woman’s head; it is something pretty, though not always, and never anything more.*” (Le Corbusier 1948: 23).

The constant presence of beauty in architecture since classical antiquity seems to have inhibited further debate. Peter Eisenman also refers to “*the condition of the always present or the already within, that the beautiful in architecture attempts to repress...*” (1988: 114), and he proposes the ‘grotesque’, the idea of the ugly, the deformed and the supposedly unnatural (1988: 114). He claims that the grotesque offers a challenge to the continuous domination of the beautiful, its repressor since the Renaissance. He considers the Modern movement an extension of an uninterrupted 500-year-long period he refers to as the classical. In Eisenman’s work and in other recent theory, beauty is re-emerging in the context of opposition to the sublime. His alternative to the exclusion of oppositional categories recognises that the grotesque is present within the beautiful. In Eisenman’s opinion, the Vitruvian triad of *use, structure, and beauty* or *commodity, firmness, and delight* still lies at the root of the present concept of architecture (1988: 566–570). Beauty as a dialectical category has been understood as singular or monolithic: it has been about goodness, about the natural, the rational, and the truthful. That is what architects have been taught to aspire to in their work. But, Jacques Derrida claims: “*...there is no natural beauty. More precisely, artistic beauty is superior to natural beauty, as the mind that produces it is superior to nature. One must therefore say that absolute beauty...appears in art not in nature as such.*” (1987: 25).

After such comments, architects, who work in nature and are expected to respect and enhance its beauty, can be ashamed or at least consider claims

or aspirations to beauty taboo. A professional custom develops in which certain words, subjects and actions must be avoided because they are embarrassing or offensive. Architectural publications confirm this and the text state this clearly: "*Beauty... is not a word readily found in the indexes of recent books on architecture, although it is a topic that seems to fascinate architects.*" (Johnson 1994: 408).

### **Mind, emotions, spirit and beauty**

When we consider beauty, what role is played by the mind, emotions and spirit? To say something is beautiful can mean it is very good and pleasing to look at, but a beautiful action implies skill; a beautiful experience is something very moving, that evokes a deep happiness. And can beauty be appreciated over time without intellect and wisdom? I do not think so. Consider Le Corbusier's statement on architecture: "*a phenomenon of poetry and wisdom that is called beauty*". (1948: 160).

Intellect is seen as deep and beauty is perceived as shallow. For beauty to have meaning, the intellect and beauty should complement each other. This is what Tadao Ando claims: "*People tend not to use this word beauty because it's not intellectual – but there has to be an overlap between beauty and intellect. There is a role and function for beauty in our time.*" (Tadao online 2007).

Modernism came with a programme and solution for the masses. Social issues predominated and architecture promised systems accommodating different social groups. *Beauty* was for all. Noever, in his seminar and publication, *The End of Architecture*, stated clearly, "*There can be no great architecture without a social program*" (1993: 27). Zaha Hadid in the same publication but in her chapter *Another Beginning* says more: "*A serious drawback is that new forms without new programs and new ways of (social) life have a hard time transcending formalism. And the struggle is hard and lonely, and one is per-*

*manently in danger of running out of resources.*" (Hadid 1993: 28).

Friedman (2003: 16), writing about Gehry, emphasised his responsibility and maturity in the statement, "*No pretty pictures. He wants a direct link to the craftsmen who are building the buildings.*" He believes that Gehry has "*a greater faith in process than any other architect.*" (2003: 22). During this period architects became more aware their social responsibilities. The old perception of beauty was redefined and assisted in organising our lives and those of others more successfully.

### **Redefined beauty – a fully grown and mature beauty**

Beauty has begun to make a comeback as a *fully grown and mature* beauty. The influential Charles Jenckes probably represents the view of leading critics when he argues that a love of beauty is inherent, in his article *What is beauty?* and writes: "*Beauty is back. Architects are designing harmonious skyscrapers for London, artists are producing works on the subject, and evolutionary psychologists are presenting evidence that canons of beauty are hard-wired into the nervous system.*" (Jenckes in Prospect Magazine on line 2001).

Beauty can revitalise our lives and enhance our social activities. We have to learn how to design wisely, led by beauty in the right direction. Beauty may enhance the spiritual fabric of our lives. Our mind, emotions, intelligence, and the deep intellect representing the beauty of our soul and spirit can help to change the world – even social problems and poverty.

### **Architectural beauty from Twyfelfontein in Namibia**

Great architects have understood the human need for beauty – like Arthur Erickson: "*Great buildings that move the spirit have always been rare. In every case they are unique, poetic, products of the heart.*

*Whenever we witness art in building, we are aware of an energy contained by it.*" (Erickson online 2007)

The centre of tourist information in Twyfelfontein in Namibia illustrates the concept of beauty inspired by skilful action. It provokes deep happiness rooted in the local environment and context. The centre has been built mostly of rusted oil canes and local stones. What had been abandoned and left as rubbish was collected and creatively applied. The most profoundly rich imagination and concerns have formed what is joyful and happy architecture. The building serves a function, organizes and expresses construction and responses to local landscape and local skills.

The architecture of this tourist information makes the visitors and locals feel good. Structures are light and substantial parts of the building provide series of open shelters for many indoor and outdoor activities. Spaces are integrated with the routes. It is about the appearance of the building in its context. You know where it comes from. You are amazed at the applications. It is about creative use of materials spread around and enhancing beauty and

wealth. Cultural and physical contexts appear to inform the architecture.

On the one side, open shelters correspond with the physical environment. On the other side, it is the way of respecting the uniqueness of the place. Enhancing identity to cultural cues and people's lifestyles, is the way of integrating the nature and people. There are no dark and claustrophobic spaces. Understanding of locals having long traditions of living in natural environment and tourists by accommodating most of the activities outdoor is the clue to this architectural beauty. It seems to be the most natural and beautiful way – allowing the best use and recycling of any resources. There is a sense of innovative design. The forms help to make legible identification of building parts and functions. The relation between people and the built environment indicate how social needs and the desire to explore are physically and symbolically translated into built forms. The concept of beauty as architectural design has its own vocabulary. The limitation of materials and resources became the inspiration and activated the imagination and creativity.

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