

To be beautiful or not to be beautiful, that is the question

Andrew Rogers gives us an essay on beauty in the style of (and with apologies to) George Saunders



The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of men.– Fedor Dostoevsky, 1879

beautiful –

good-looking, attractive; with qualities that give delight to the senses especially the eye...or which awaken admiration in the mind; very enjoyable, excellent. – The Chambers Dictionary

Beauty includes everything that promotes a healthy and happy life, everything that makes a collection of buildings into a place, everything that turns anywhere into somewhere, and nowhere into home. It is not merely a visual characteristic, but is revealed in the deep harmony between a place and those who settle there. Beauty is not just a matter of how buildings look (though it does include this) but involves the wider 'spirit of the place', our overall settlement patterns and their interaction with nature. It involves both the visual character of our streets and squares, and also the wider patterns of how we live and the demands we make on our natural environment and the planet. – Living with Beauty, The report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Jan. 2020

Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful. – William Morris

First you have to define beauty. In schools of architecture we no longer talk about beauty; nor do we have an architectural canon [of what is considered beautiful] to draw on. We focus instead on sustainability, technical resolution and preparing to practise. A debate on beauty and what it means is long overdue. – Professor Alan Dunlop (University of Liverpool)

Definitions of beauty vary greatly, as shown by the following: "Only then .. did I realize how unspeakably beautiful all of this was, how precisely engineered for our pleasure, and saw .. this grand marketplace lovingly stocked with every sublime thing: swarms of insects dancing in slant-rays of August sun; a trio of black horses standing hock-deep and head-to-head in a field of snow; a waft of beef broth arriving breeze-borne from an orange-hued window..." – Roger Bevins iii

We must have religion for religion's sake, morality for morality's sake, as with art for art's sake ... the beautiful cannot be the way to what is useful, or to what is good, or to what is holy; it leads only to itself. – Victor Cousin

Beauty in the 21st century is not about style, architectural 'isms' or methods of construction, it is about providing people with what they need and want rather than just what financial capital needs and wants. It is about streets and buildings... A built environment with integrity that works for everybody – now that would be beautiful. – Professor Yolande Barnes*

Beauty is more complex than the opposite to ugly ... through reference to where damage has been done, it is easier to assess how 'beautiful buildings' might be designed. – Robert Kerr*

It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But ... it is better to be good than to be ugly. – Oscar Wilde

Beauty... comes with the baggage of implied universality on the one hand, and being of mere opinion on the other – residing in the 'eye of the beholder' and simply a question of personal taste. – Gillian Horn*

There is nothing ugly; I never saw an ugly thing in my life: for let the form of a thing be

what it may, - light, shade and perspective will always make it beautiful. John Constable

It is, rather obviously, very difficult to define beauty. One person's avant garde is another's 'carbuncle'. Yet coming to some form of agreement on this is a central role of the planning system... – Benedict McAleenan*

Proust proposed that "beauty is a succession of hypotheses"... beauty is an inherently subjective concept and mutates both with time and according to the aesthetic canons of the evaluating perspective. The ... judiciary is poorly prepared for a future where beauty is in the eye of the virtual beholder. – Dr Sue Chadwick*

The Normal ... is the Ordinary made beautiful; it is also the Average made lethal. – Peter Shaffer

How can it be possible to write down a set of rules that will define the beauty of any planning proposal? Especially given the ever-changing opinion of both the man in the street (or on the Clapham omnibus) and those who claim to set the standards for what is aesthetically acceptable and what is not - many of whom are neither keenly discriminating nor intuitively sympathetic to innovation. – Professor Edmund Bloomer

There is sometimes a greater judgement shown in deviating from the rules of art, than in adhering to them; and ... there is more beauty in the works of a great genius who is ignorant of all the rules of art, than in the works of a little genius, who not only knows but scrupulously observes them. – Joseph Addison

The idea of self-appointed community representatives defining 'beauty' for planning purposes is undesirable in principle and impossible in practice. – Paul Finch



Beautiful... Or not??



Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them. – David Hume

(Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2)

There is always a temptation to make a design fit in with prevalent tastes, especially when this can be done superficially without changing what may basically be a poor design, in order to satisfy what is fashionable or uncontroversial at the time: "...'beautified' is a vile phrase".

The requirement of conspicuous wastefulness is not commonly present, consciously, in our canons of taste, but it is none the less present as a constraining norm, selectively shaping and sustaining our sense of what is beautiful, and guiding our discrimination with respect to what may legitimately be approved as beautiful and what may not. – Thorstein Veblen

Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance. – John Ruskin

Beauty is worse than wine, it intoxicates both the holder and beholder. – Aldous Huxley

* Policy Exchange, 2019