

FINCH

# Building Beauty Awards

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The inaugural Building Beauty Awards celebrated winners at an awards ceremony late last year, with Norman Foster the guest of honour. Norman is president of the Royal Fine Art Commission Trust, which has organized the awards, with sponsorship from housebuilder Ballymore.

The overall winner was invited to take part in the 'finals' of the International Building Beauty Prize at WAF in Lisbon – an unusual example of an award which is launched at a national and international level simultaneously. I should declare an interest: I am deputy chair of the Commission and was a judge this year.

A tangential reason for launching the awards is the fact that, as discussed here before, 'beauty' is now referenced in the UK planning system for the first time, albeit without any serious attempt to define it. We are told, in the Introduction to the government's National Design Guide (NDG), that we can make judgements about a building's beauty, though it is remarkably quiet, not to say mute, about how we

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might go about making any such judgement. In respect of 'place' the guide is more forthcoming. Elements informing a beauty judgement 'may range

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from a long view down to the detail of the building or landscape'. So a place can be beautiful because of a building detail. Really?

Desperate to avoid any suggestion of stylistic preference, the guide notes that: 'All design approaches and architectural styles are visually attractive when designed well'. Is this supposed to be a defence of Brutalism? It's not what the Beauty propagandists (scratch them and they bleed Classicism) had in mind when they started promoting 'beauty' as opposed to good design.

They managed to get the word inserted into the National Planning Policy Framework, Paragraph 126: 'The creation of high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve.' But the document never says what beauty is, or how you might measure it.

The former Prince of Wales remarked in 1988 that Denys Lasdun's National Theatre was "a clever way of building a nuclear power station in the middle of London without anyone objecting". The best response to this is John Constable's observation: 'There is nothing ugly; I never saw an ugly thing in my life: for let the form of an object be what it may — light, shade, and perspective will always make it beautiful.' ■

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