

People and places: essay six

The X factor: beauty in planning

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St Paul's Cathedral, London © Flickr/peter pearson

Introduction

From the way we dress and decorate our homes, to the things we buy, the places we visit, the concerts we attend or the walks we enjoy, beauty often drives what we choose to do and why. Yet public policy, ranging from town and country planning to the arts, eschews talk of beauty. Why is this? No doubt there are many reasons: insecurities about identifying beauty; the assumption that pleasures of beauty are in some sense trivial; the sense that beauty fails to contribute to people's welfare; and worries about the elitism of taste.

Whatever the reasons, as the 2010 Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) study *People and places* suggests, beauty is fundamental to many people's lives. Where we find beauty varies, but we do agree that appreciating it is a deeply positive experience contributing to happiness and wellbeing. This fact alone is enough to justify taking beauty more seriously. And a proper understanding of what beauty is and the purposes it may serve will show why beauty should even be integral to planning and policy.

What beauty is

Beauty, we are told, is in the eye of the beholder. Yet, at the same time, when we speak of something that it is beautiful, we expect others to agree. How can both these statements be true? The first captures the idea that appreciating beauty is intimately tied to our experience – think about what is involved in appreciating music, works of art and urban or natural landscapes. We might turn a corner in a city and the vista that opens up might strike us as beautiful: the way the sense of depth is exaggerated by the curving path; the way the lean, tall building on the right gives a sense of grandeur and elegance; how the scene is framed and so on. Whatever the object of our appreciation, we attend to it in terms of how the various features interrelate and crystallize into a sense of elegance, harmony, dynamism, complexity or a host of other aesthetic features. It is in the self-sustaining nature of our appreciative experience, the reward that comes with attending to such things, that we derive pleasure. Hence judging something to be beautiful is essentially tied to our personal experience with and response to something.

Appreciating beauty is often thought to be a kind of sensual pleasure (Baumgarten, 1750–58) or a pleasure of the faculties of the mind (Kant, 1790) taken in the form of an object. Of course we often take pleasure in the mere look or sound of something. The oscillation between and progression of harmonies, or the sharp cragginess of mountains plunging into the valley before us, can and do give rise to deeply felt pleasurable

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experiences. Nonetheless, it is more often true that our responses are bound up with grasping the nature of what it is we are appreciating, whether that is in terms of the history, function or meaning of the object concerned (Kieran, 2005). For example, someone's appreciation of a landscape can be enhanced by grasping the valley's formation as emerging millions of years ago through the blind, elemental force of a glacier carving its way through the hardest of rock.

What is true of nature is ever more so regarding human artefacts. Appreciating good design – whether the elegance of a piece of furniture or the grandeur of a building – is often tied to a grasp of how form and function interrelate, underwritten by a sense of the inventive mastery involved. St Paul's Cathedral was, at the time of building, the second largest dome in the world. The use of a unique triple dome structure maintained the harmony of the interior whilst enabling, not merely the height, but the sense of lightness that is so impressive for such an immense structure. It also matters what purpose the inventiveness serves. Large scale post-war estates are often criticized as if modernist architectural style and material are the problem, despite the fact that smaller scale modernist housing and developments – like those designed by Lubetkin – are often highly sought after. The problem too often was the total scale, the lack of differentiation and the failure to take into account the desires and needs of those destined to be housed there (Hanley, 2007).

Underlying complexities of design or meaning entail that beauty is not always easy to appreciate. Where appreciation of the look or sound of something depends on knowing how or why something came about, it follows that a certain amount of background knowledge can enhance, or diminish, our appreciation. What it is to see a particular building as squat or plain might, for example, depend on having a sense of the relevant architectural style, whether that is Georgian, Victorian or Modernist. And the more experienced we become in paying attention to and appreciating particular kinds of aesthetic objects, the more discriminating we start to be in picking out discreet elements and how they interrelate. This is not to say that naïve appreciation is radically mistaken or no good; it is just to point out that our appreciation can be more or less refined (Hume, 1757). This is part of the joy of beauty. For we can, and often are, motivated in savouring our experience, analysing it and trying to understand more about it in ways that lead to ever greater rewards. Thus we tend to enjoy talking about our experiences and learning from others who know more than we do.

Cultural diversity brings with it differences in expectation and expression. It is often thought that this means beauty is relative to particular groups – as if individuals typically belong to one group rather than having many multi-faceted attachments. This is a mistake. All it shows is that people have different backgrounds and predispositions which shape how they engage with their environment. Hence

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certain styles or developments might resonate more with some than others. Nonetheless people recognise beauty even where it does not speak directly to their interests and concerns. You do not have to be a city lawyer to admire Norman Foster's Gherkin building or Bangladeshi to appreciate the dark brown sculpted concrete contrasted with the vivid yellow panels of the Tarling Estate housing regeneration in East London. It is those buildings and landscapes that can be appreciated by many different kinds of people that are truly beautiful. It may be difficult to appreciate beauty when confronted by the shock of the new. Yet tradition is only one part of the living conversation that gives new form to beauty in meeting the needs and interests of all.



Tarling Estate, London

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Why beauty matters

Traditionally there are two approaches to why beauty matters. The first is to talk about the intrinsic value of beauty and how the conservation or creation of beautiful things adds to what is valuable in the world (Kant, 1790 and Moore, 1903). We appreciate beautiful things for their own sake. In our experiences we seek to do justice to whatever gives rise to our pleasure in the activity of appreciation, and no further end or goal is required to explain what it is that makes such appreciative activity worthwhile or meaningful. Considering beauty in this way makes it a value that can and should be appealed to in justifying certain preferences and actions. In answering questions – such as why fight to preserve this work of art or choose that planned development – and appealing to beauty as a reason, as something we are all disposed to value for its own sake, makes perfect sense. Indeed, if beauty is something that is intrinsically valuable then we will have various duties to honour and promote beauty in the world around us.

The second is to consider the value of beauty in instrumental terms, in terms of the experiences afforded and the further value of such experiences (Mill, 1863 and Stecker, 1997). This is not to deny that our experiences of beauty are valued because we enjoy them – moreover we enjoy many experiences from sport to relaxing outdoors on a sunny day – but what makes the pleasures of beauty so special? Devoid of some notion of intrinsic value, the answer is given in terms of further end or goal. For example, the Mozart

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effect, which suggests training children at a young age in classical music enhances their spatial or mathematical capacities (Rauscher et al, 1993 and Campbell, 2001). It is also assumed that experiencing natural beauty reduces stress, thereby promoting wellbeing or mental capabilities (Wells, 2000 and Hartig et al, 2003). The further ends or goals commonly cited as resulting from promotion of beauty in various forms range from improvements in mental abilities, emotional stability and a sense of wellbeing, to facilitating innovation and job creation. Unsurprisingly governments tend to be particularly keen on the latter and it is tempting for planning or arts policy not only to be framed in such terms, but for the nature of public debate on beauty to be conducted as if the instrumental value of beauty is all that matters.

The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. It could be that classical music, for example, is both intrinsically valuable and that learning to appreciate it at an early age does promote mathematical skills. Nonetheless there are several important points to note. We should be wary about resting the case for beauty on instrumental value alone. At least in many cases, apart from anything else, the evidence is controversial to say the least (Chabris, 1999). Moreover, if the further end much was promoted better, then it is not clear what more could be said in favour of beauty. Imagine if it was discovered that feeding children a balanced diet turned out to be more important for promoting academic ability than being cultivated into the appreciation of beauty. If

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the case for beauty were to be couched in purely instrumental terms then there would no longer be a case to be made for beauty in that respect. It is also true – as the results of the CAFE study reveal – that people do appreciate beauty for its own sake. What often motivates them is the experience of what they find to be beautiful. It is not some kind of eminently disposable means to a further end. Further benefits come about as a side-effect of aesthetic appreciation.

Consider an analogy. There is a good deal of psychological research that suggests friendship makes for a healthier, better, more meaningful life. This is not surprising given that we are, by nature, social animals and having friends enables us to realize all sorts of goals. Amongst other things, friends care for us, point out our mistakes, enjoy hanging out with us and provide emotional support. These are some of the constitutive goods of friendship. Yet it would be a mistake to conceive of the value of friends in purely instrumental terms. Indeed, doing so might render us incapable of forming true friendships and caring about them properly. We would flit from person to person depending on just who seemed to provide the most fun, the strongest emotional support for our needs at any given time and so on. True friendship, by contrast, involves appreciating and caring for someone for his or her own sake. Indeed it is often because of the activity of caring, and the pattern of the development of a particular relationship, that we come to care for a person in the ways we

do. Hence we have many different friends – and not everyone wishes to have the same friends. The situation is similar with respect to beauty. It is because we care about and respond to beauty for its own sake that further beneficial side effects arise. It is not that beauty is to be valued principally for those further ends or goals.

Motivation, purposes and planning

The most direct way of bringing this out is to consider the role of motivation. In this instance, a classic study (Amabile, 1985) saw 72 creative writing students given the task of writing poetry. One group was first asked to concentrate on a list of intrinsic motivating reasons for writing, ranging from the joy of word play to the value of self-expression. A second group was asked to think about a list of extrinsic reasons, ranging from making money to social prestige. The control group was given no list. Twelve independently successful poets judged the group given the list of extrinsic reasons to have not only produced the least creative work, but also to have achieved a marked drop in the quality of their work compared to an earlier task. Where the motivation for creating something beautiful, moving and expressive became instrumental, the subjects were less likely to produce good work. This should hardly be surprising. If someone's motivation is driven purely by further goal then the patience, discipline, and attention to detail required to produce the most creatively beautiful work will be less robust than where they are driven by a passion for and love of beauty itself.

Nonetheless, we usually engage in particular acts or projects for external ends and being externally motivated can reinforce rather than undermine appreciation and the creation of beauty. William Blake was overstating matters in claiming that 'where any view of money exists, art cannot be carried on'. Dr Johnson is not only more worldly

Often beauty is the upshot of serving our practical needs with elegance, integrity and imagination

but truer to the mark in observing that 'no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money' – or recognition, status, esteem, and usually some combination thereof. Financial or social motivations external to beauty can be turned to beauty's advantage. After all, the nature of design, whether we are talking about phones, computers, cars, clothes or housing estates, is constrained by the practical ends to be served. It is no accident that people desire iPhones or Dyson vacuum cleaners. We respond not merely to things that look beautiful but to good design that serves its function well. Designers, architects and government policy planners are usually motivated by values which bind considerations of beauty to various external ends, ranging from wealth, health and wellbeing to social inclusion and the celebration of diversity. The crucial point is that the creation and appreciation of beauty does not require the motivation to be solely for its own sake. This is, if you like, the classic mistake of the art for art's sake movement. Rather considerations of beauty should be considered integral to how the relevant practical ends can be served. This is what it is to aim at aesthetic virtue (Goldie, 2008; Kieran, 2010–11 and Lopes, 2008).

What are the implications for planning policy? In an age of financial austerity it is tempting to think of beauty as a needless decorative expense. This belies a profound misconception of the nature of beauty. It is not merely that decorative beauty has an important role to play in our lives – far more often beauty is the upshot of serving our practical needs

with elegance, integrity and imagination. If we look at the housing estates that thrive or the urban areas people value, what matters is the beauty in all its different forms that people find there. Thus beauty is not just intrinsically valuable but also economically beneficial and socially cohesive. It is only if we recognise this truth that we can restore beauty to its rightful place in public discourse and provide the architecture, urban design and public spaces that people deserve.

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Matthew Kieran is Professor of Philosophy and the Arts, University of Leeds. He is the author of many works, including *Revealing Art* (Routledge), and is particularly interested in the crossover between aesthetics, philosophy and psychology. He has spoken at a wide range of places from The Tate and the Miami-Basel International Art Fair to the National Icelandic Visual Arts Awards, and has written more widely in places such as *The London Magazine* and the *Times Higher Education*.

Thinkers from the 18th century to the present have sought to understand why beauty matters. Matthew Kieran argues that beauty is what happens when we respond to our practical needs with imagination and integrity. It is not just intrinsically valuable but part of what makes a place economically and socially successful. Planners should recognise it as a legitimate and practical objective.

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