

Selective samples of the mainstream Western perception of beauty as a category in architecture - tracing physical beauty connected with mind, emotions and spirit

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The intention of this article is not to determine principles that might be universally applied to architectural beauty in general, but rather to question the relevance of the term *beauty* in an architectural context. I have quoted the views of architects from a spectrum of opinion, time and place, to stimulate the reader's perception of beauty instead of presuming to present a definitive understanding or even a thorough interrogation of the concept. The discourse on architectural beauty goes back to classical antiquity. There have been many changes - with contradictions and evasions - in its perception, yet beauty seems to be present, with or without our acknowledgment and theory. The disputes themselves and the very possibility of speaking the same language about beauty seem to connect architectural beauty with the mind, emotions and spirit, revitalising our lives and enhancing our social activities.

Keywords: architectural beauty, spirit, soul, mind and intellect.

Wybrane przykłady postrzegania piękna jako kryterium architektury w kulturze zachodu – w poszukiwaniu piękna wizualnego powiązanego z umysłem, emocjami i duchowością.

Intencją artykułu nie jest ustalenie uniwersalnych zasad wartościowania architektonicznego piękna a raczej poszukiwanie wartości piękna w architekturze. Cytuje różne poglądy architektoniczne pochodzące z różnych miejsc i wypowiedziane w różnym czasie aby stymulować postrzeganie piękna przez czytelnika a nie dostarczać formuł. Rozważania te wiodą nas do klasycznego antyku i początków cywilizacji. Było wiele zmiennych - kontrastujących i pokretnych – poglądów na temat piękna, które jest integralną częścią naszego życia niezależnie od tego czy go postrzegamy czy też nie. Kontrowersyjne debaty oraz ogólna możliwość komunikowania się przy pomocy języka piękna pomagają nam dostrzegać związki pomiędzy pięknem architektonicznym a umysłem, emocjami i duchowością, które stymulują nasze życie i aktywność społeczną.

This review of the architectural concept of beauty originated in the simple observation that the perception of beauty in architecture has always been evolving, leading to intriguing disputes. Such disputes might be expected between lay people or professionals from different fields, but when it occurs between architects, it can be puzzling. Although one might expect to find a more objective evaluation of architecture than of fine art, disagreements among architects often go beyond substance or personal opinions. They may even extend to matters of fact - sometimes to a quite remarkable degree. The completely contradictory and unrelated issues can leave you wondering if disputing architects are discussing the same subject. You may agree or disagree with another's opinions, but then personal views also keep changing. Even opinions which have been agreed upon at one time may be disputed later.

The paper addresses architects and non-architects – anybody experiencing architecture. However, it may require a basic knowledge of the history of Western architecture. At the beginning of this paper, statements on beauty are kept in chronological order but further on, when the contradictions and comparisons come into play, it is impossible to keep this order and the discourse then is more about specific arguments and matters.

The first section starts with a chronological review of beauty as one of the three basic architectural attributes since classical antiquity. Next the thoughts of selected architects on hierarchy, order, proportion and regulating lines are presented as a benchmark of architectural beauty. The approach of *just a pretty face* or *beauty for beauty*, shifting the discussion into beautiful forms and their definition, ends the first section. The changes in the perception of beauty over time are then investigated in an attempt to find a timeless resolution. This thinking takes us to deeper appreciations of beauty by including the concepts of intellect, wisdom and fitness. Social responsibility and architectural beauty feel to be in accordance with our understanding

of the world we live in. How we define our architectural task will be definitive. Our emotional responses to beauty as well as our sensible understanding of what constitutes it also come into play in redefining beauty, meaning and perception. The current literature confirms this, as will be seen in a review of recent publications on beauty.

Since classical antiquity, *beauty* has been one of three basic architectural attributes

Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, active in the 1st century BC, is referred to as the first architect, but it is more truthful to refer to him as the first architect to have written on architecture, although he himself cites older but less complete works. He had a much wider scope than modern architects, practising a wide variety of disciplines that would now be the province of engineers, architects, landscape architects, artists and craftsmen. Vitruvius was less of an original thinker or creative intellect than an organizer of existing architectural practice. His architecture has disappeared, and of his writing the only surviving book is a treatise written in Latin and Greek on architecture from classical antiquity. As the author of *De Architectura*, known today as *The Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius 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.

Vitruvius believed that a timeless notion of beauty could be learnt from the ‘truth of nature’, where designs were based on universal laws of proportion and symmetry. It led him to defining the human body inscribed in the circle and the square - the fundamental geometric patterns of the cosmic order famous as Vitruvian Man (see Figure 1). 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 and proportions, the Golden Section was the rule.

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 the medieval period.

During the Renaissance, beauty became more grounded in human and earthly realities. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), inspired by the art and architecture of antiquity, elaborated the theory of beauty as harmony, expressed mathematically in every way. He worked on the reconstruction of the Roman city *Descriptio Urbis Romae* (1434) and claimed that the proportions of the Roman buildings contained the basis of architectural design. Alberti 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 craftsman became intellectual. This harmonic vision is to be found in Alberti’s own work and statements: “Beauty: the adjustment of all parts proportionately so that one cannot add or subtract or change without impairing the harmony of the whole” and “Beauty is that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered, but for the worse. It is a great and holy matter... beauty is some inherent property, to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful.” (Alberti online 2007).

In contemporary architectural studies (as in Frascari 1991: 500-514) Alberti’s architectural theory is summarised as the art of the selection of appropriate details whose result is beauty. Beauty is his meaningful goal. Beauty is the skilful joining of parts to and from which nothing can be added or subtracted, and in which nothing can be altered. A building should be a complete and finished whole, architecture which is complete in itself. Alberti’s search for beauty is the

setting of a precise relationship. His idea of beauty is the result of a process of signification, with internal harmony as the process for achieving it (Frascati 1991: 504).

Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) is widely considered to be one of the most influential people in the history of Western architecture. He became well known after the publication of *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura - The Four Books of Architecture* - in 1570. His success and influence were a result of his integration of extraordinary aesthetic quality with expressive characteristics that resonated with his clients' social aspirations (Palladio online 2007). His integration of architectural beauty and profound meaning is apparent in three major building types: the urban palazzo, the agricultural villa, and the church. Interest in his style was renewed in later generations and became fashionable throughout Europe. Palladio 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. Thus beauty served to illustrate a social order and culture.

In 1624, an English author and diplomat, Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639), published *The Elements of Architecture* - written during his time in Venice - which was a free translation of *De Architectura* by Vitruvius. (Johnson 1994: 316-317). Wotton therefore shares authorship with Vitruvius of the oft-quoted line, "Well building hath three conditions: *firmness, commodity, and delight*", as he had simply translated it. In modern times, a misunderstanding of the English usage of Wotton's time has led some authorities to term his *Elements* a 'paraphrase' rather than a true translation, and the quotation is most often attributed to Vitruvius with the words, *durability, convenience and beauty*. One wonders whether more recent statements are not also 'paraphrases' or contemporary versions of Vitruvius. Compare these statements, for example: "An object ... must fulfil its function usefully, be durable, economical and beautiful" by Walter Gropius in 1926 (Condrads 1971: 95) and in 1956 Gropius's definition of the essence of architecture was "technics, function, expression". Then there is Norberg-Schulz's 1965 definition: "technics, building task, form". Beauty as delight, expression and form has been one of three major parts of the essence of architecture since the 1st century BC.

Proportion, order, regulating lines as a benchmark of architectural beauty

The Vitruvian Man was superbly drawn by Leonardo da Vinci (Figure 1) and again in the twentieth century by Le Corbusier (Figure 2). The second version represents the human body as an example of a modular creation from nature chosen by Vitruvius, and became Le Corbusier's paradigm for the required rules of proportion.

Proportion seems to have been the first and principal subject of architectural theory and beauty, but has become less popular of late, as Paul-Alan Johnson claims in his book *The Theory of Architecture: Concepts, Themes & Practices* (Johnson 1994: 352): "Only le Corbusier was to carry on anything like the classical systemic, with... his *Modulor* proportional system... in term of beauty and perfection." Systems of order, harmony and hierarchy now grounded architectural theory, as is evidenced in this statement by Robert Morris (1734 – Lectures on Architecture) cited in Rowe (1987: 63): "Architecture is an art useful and extensive, it is founded upon beauty, and proportion or harmony are the great essentials of its composition. This translates architectural composition into proportion and harmony." Le Corbusier connected beauty and geometry in formulating his own systems of architectural composition. In his book *Vers une Architecture*, published in 1923 (published in English in 1927 as *Towards a New Architecture*), he wrote about the beauty of primary forms. "Primary forms are beautiful forms because they can be clearly appreciated. Architects today no longer achieve these simple forms. Working by calculation, engineers employ geometrical forms, satisfying our eyes by their geometry and our

understanding by their mathematics; their work is on the direct line of good art.“ (Le Corbusier 1948: 26).

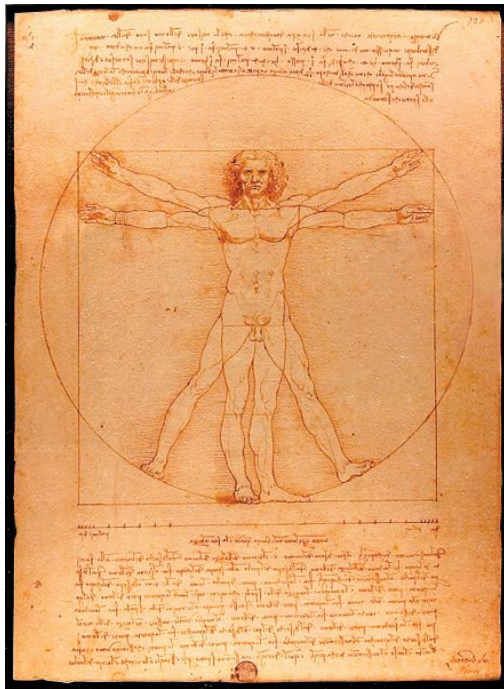


Figure 1
Vitruvian Man by Da Vinci
 (Da Vinci online 2007)

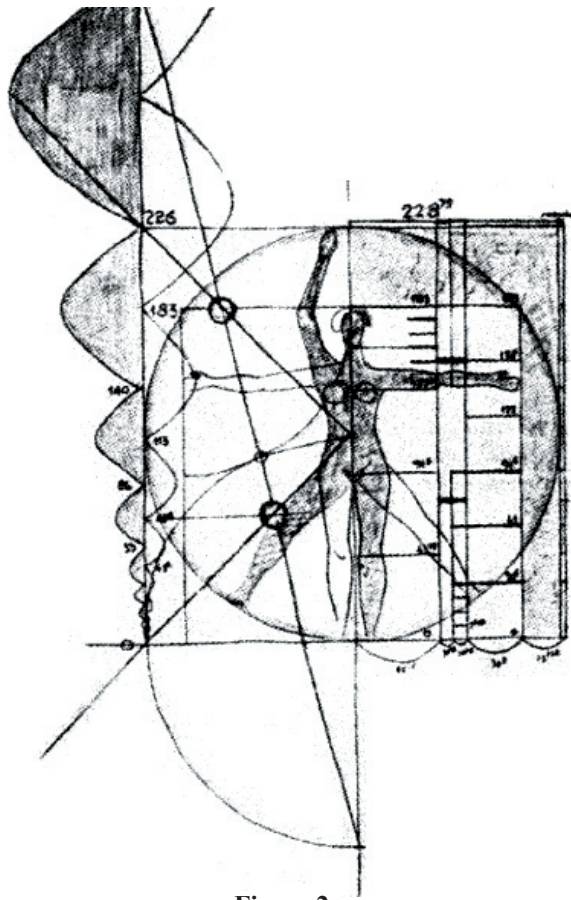


Figure 2
Modular creation by Le Corbusier
 (Le Corbusier online 2007)

Le Corbusier respected certain rules and formulas and questioned others. He disparaged the beauty of Gothic architecture, writing: “Gothic architecture is not, fundamentally, based on spheres, cones and cylinders. Only the nave is an expression of a simple form, but of a complex geometry of the second order (interesting arches). It is for that reason that a cathedral is not very beautiful and that we search in it for compensations of a subjective kind outside plastic art.” (Le Corbusier 1948: 31-32) He compared it with that of the classical antiquity of Egyptian, Greek or Roman architecture of prisms, cubes and cylinders, pyramids or spheres (the Pyramids, the Temple of Luxor, the Parthenon, the Colosseum, Hadrian’s Villa). In his opinion: “a cathedral interests us as the ingenious solution of a difficult problem, but a problem of which the postulates have been badly stated because they do not proceed from the great primary forms” (Le Corbusier 1948: 31-32). Le Corbusier perceived cathedrals, however, as examples of system and order. Searching for system and order in the age of serious industrial at technological changes led him to yet another statement: “Genius is personal, decided by fate, but it expresses itself by means of system. There is no work of art without system.” (Le Corbusier 1948: 21). When defining the perception of order, Le Corbusier introduced regulating lines: “Regulating Lines’ showing by these one of the means by which architecture achieves that tangible form of mathematics which gives us such a grateful perception of order.” (Le Corbusier 1948: 64).

Coomaraswamy was later to underline the importance of order one more time, in discussing beauty and architecture: “...order is the creation of beauty. It is heaven’s first law and the protection of souls.” (Coomaraswamy 1977: 257).

Robert Venturi was more open and less restricted in analysing order in 1966 in his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*: “Although Aalto’s order is not quite so easily grasped at first glance, it involves similar relationships of order and the circumstantial.” (Venturi 1979: 41). He added later during his acceptance speech of Pritzker Prize in 1991: “Aalto’s can be interpreted in many ways. Each interpretation is more or less true for its moment because work of such quality has many dimensions and layers of meaning... but Aalto’s most endearing characteristic for me as I struggle to complete this essay, is that he didn’t write about architecture.” (Venture online 2007). Venturi discussed the power and limitations of order saying: “The main justification for honky-tonk elements in architectural order is their very existence. They are what we have.” Architects can bemoan or try to ignore them or even try to abolish them, but they will not go away. Or they will not go away for a long time, because “architects do not have the power to replace them (nor do they know what to replace them with), and because these commonplace elements accommodate existing needs for variety and communication.” (Venturi 1979: 42).

Although Rob Krier wrote his *Architectural Composition* in 1988 - more than twenty years later - he articulates strong statements about beauty, geometry and principles writing: “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.” It was like a warning to those architects who think that the spontaneous individual line and liberation form geometry are the pre-conditions for becoming an artistic personality. He advised that “... whoever builds up and teaches an architectural theory must examine every theorem in terms of its universality. This means that the margin of possible interpretations of principles has to be anticipated, and all tangible experiences in history have to be reviewed for practical application.” (Krier 1988: 306).

Frank Gehry propounds a different philosophy saying : “...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, he 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”. Maybe it explains how some modernism failed. He says that when decoration started getting used by the developers: “it became faceless. It became a language that self-destructed.” (in Friedman 2003: 47-48). What Adolf Loos (online 2007) defined as “the artist’s task to find a new formal language for new materials” has not been applied.

Just a pretty face or beauty for beauty

In the nineteenth-century, beauty was considered an ideal. It was discussed in saloons in the age of socialism. Paul-Alan Johnson confirms the extent of this concept: “Modernist idea that to be ‘of its time’, everything in artistic practice has to be original, beyond history, i.e., to start from a ‘clean slate’, or *tabula rasa*” (Johnson 1994: 252). Intellectuals, artists, architects, philosophers and literary scholars have debated aspects of beauty. In *What is art?* Leo Tolstoy draws a connection between beauty, morality and truth (Tolstoy 2005). Though the thinking is profound, the nineteenth-century perception of beauty in architecture is not. The following 1835 statement by Glitter may cast light on this: “There is nothing really beautiful but only that which serves no purpose; everything utilitarian is ugly. And more expressive statement: “You see that utilitarian principles have nothing to do with mine because enjoyment is the goal of life and the only useful thing in the world.” (in LoDato, 2005: 24).

The nineteenth century was the age of many style revivals – but they were revivals only. To Le Corbusier, *style* was like a feather on a woman's head, nothing more when he wrote: "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." His architecture has graver ends "capable of the sublime" and "impresses the most brutal instincts by its objectivity" and "...calls into play the highest faculties by its very abstraction." (Le Corbusier 1948: 23)

The constant presence of beauty as a concept 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 texts below state this clearly: "Architects seem to believe either that aesthetic matters such as beauty, style, composition, harmony, character, and taste are now so understood that they may be codified and loosened from human involvement, or that they are so little understood that it is best not to talk about them at all." (Johnson 1994: 402). Beauty seems to be present, with or without our acknowledgment and theory. The disputes themselves and the very possibility of speaking the same language about beauty seem to connect architectural ideas although 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).

If one questions the importance of beauty, what then becomes of concepts like form and style? Obvious and rapid technological changes have affected our lives and our perception of beauty. Many questions could be asked: What has gone? What has influenced us? What is still present and what is new? How are we to accommodate the new? These questions are asked more to stimulate our thinking than to arrive at ready answers and formulas. Nesbitt (1966: 20), similarly, poses questions: "What use can one make of past experiences with design and buildings? Is imitation the best route to beautiful and communicative architecture? Or have standards of beauty and comprehension of form changed, such as *mimesis* leads only to mute form?"

Defining *beautiful* forms with less & more

Robert Venturi was not happy that it was considered unusual to employ 'prettiness' as part of a building. His position can be directly related to a post-modern paradigm. To modernist Mies van der Rohe's dictum 'Less is more' (1923), he replied, 'Less is a bore' (1966), making the point that modern architecture had become too simplistic. Frank Lloyd Wright was more crisp and precise saying: "Less is only more where more is no good." (Wright online 2007). In another statement he is equally accurate: "Form follows function - that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union." (Wright online 2007).

Yet Richard Rogers comments acerbically, "Form follows profit is the aesthetic principle of our times" (Rogers online 2007). So *beauty* has gone?

Time and *beauty*

Architecture should represent its time. Following this thinking, Mies van der Rohe (1923) specified the architectural task: "An object is defined by its nature of our tasks with the methods of our time. This is our task." Frank Gehry formulated a more demanding task for architecture: "Architecture should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness." (Gehry online 2007).

If architecture is beautiful, you would like to protect or at least not destroy it. But do everlasting beauty and timeless beauty exist? If something new has been created, introducing a new form of beauty, how long could it be expected to last? And when new architecture represents a milestone, should it not be protected? Richard Neutra's views seem prophetic with hindsight: "While 'beauty' is proclaimed timeless, relegated to an occasional pedestal, and there honourably marooned, civilization is liable to turn into blight." (Neutra 1954: 73). The surprise demolition in 2002 of the Maslon House which Neutra had designed in 1962 in Palm Springs, USA (Architecture Week online 2002), seems to confirm this, Barbara Mac Lamprecht (author of the book *Neutra: Complete Works*) described the building as follows: "... a residential palazzo of art that embodied sophisticated abstractions about positive and negative space in a structure that was equally sophisticated in construction... beautiful materials used to accomplish richer human relationships with the outdoors and with other humans, placed in ways that spoke to the beauty of asymmetry." (Architecture Week online 2002). Even in 2002, the iconic work of a world-renowned architect could be and was destroyed. Before granting the demolition permit, the city had conducted only one review: for the presence of asbestos. No public or professional evaluation was needed before such architectural beauty was torn down. Richard Neutra is considered one of the world's most influential architects. He responded to climate with designs in which indoor and outdoor spaces flow freely together and into a carefully arranged landscape. He believed that modern architecture should act as a social force in the betterment of humankind. Beauty was not skin deep. Physical qualities were connected with mind, emotions and soul. Neutra's own comment serves: "There is no 'pure reason', just as there is no 'pure beauty'. Emotion most naturally tinges every mind operation, be it mathematical task or creative design." (Neutra 1954: 129)

The demolition of Neutra's Maslon House reminds us of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion experience: "Mies's Barcelona Pavilion has been hailed the world over as one of the few masterpieces of the twentieth century comparable to the great architecture of the past." Its beauty has been said to be eternal but this was by no means agreed while the Pavilion was still in existence. "The building was only widely acclaimed thirty years after it had been demolished – and then only for a period of about fifteen years." (Bonta 1979: 12)

Is the public too slow to appreciate beauty? Is this how we are to learn? Courage, wisdom and intellect are needed to create and protect true beauty. Some architects let the idea of the beauty of architecture go to their heads, and their work then reinforces the stereotype of “stuck-up beauty” - architecture that is judged before people have really experienced anything. This kind of ‘beauty’ becomes a burden to the building as well as to the public, and should not be confused with intrinsic beauty. Architectural beauty should be friendly to visitors and users. Architecture should not make people insecure and its beauty should not oppress them in stead of serving them.

Intellect, wisdom, *beauty* and fitness

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).

An architect coming from the field of engineering, Peter Behrens, has made a case for the place of the intellect: “Type is one of the most eloquent means of expression in every epoch of style. Next to architecture, it gives the most characteristic portrait of a period and the most severe testimony of a nation’s intellectual status.” (Behrens online 2007). The obvious is not so obvious when 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).

Social responsibility and architectural *beauty*

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 permanently 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 order and harmony was redefined and assisted in organising our lives and those of others more successfully. Nikolaus Pevsner’s crisp declaration, “No beauty without fitness’ (in Johnson 1994: 307), together with broad analyses of *beauty* and *fitness* by Paul-Alan Johnson (1994: 398-400), helps one experience the energy inherent in beauty, which architects can bring into our lives. This is a stronger declaration of what Le Corbusier had written earlier:

“The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit: by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree, and provokes plastic emotions: by the relationships which he

creates he wakes in us profound echoes, he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and our understanding: it is then that we experience the sense of beauty.” (Le Corbusier 1948: 16)

Harmony alone is not, according to Le Corbusier (1948: 23), that which moves our spirit - we need more:

“Architecture is a thing of art, a phenomenon of the emotions, lying outside questions of construction and beyond them. The purpose of construction is to make things hold together of architecture TO MOVE US.... Architecture is a matter of ‘harmonies’, it is ‘a pure creation of the spirit’”.

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 comeback of redefined *beauty*

For a hundred years art and architecture seem to have lost interest in beauty as a category of architecture. But now beauty has begun to make a comeback. Large exhibitions have been held, and books published, on the subject. 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.

Beauty is central to culture, and the free pursuit of beauty offers us the key to escaping our own and our environmental limitations. One of the one 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.

Enzo Tiezzi, in his book *Beauty and Science*, demonstrates that beauty was fundamental for biological evolution and is fundamental for a scientific view of complexity (Tiezzi 2004: 25). He asserts that science cannot be based only on a reason and logic but must combined passion, intuition and emotion claiming that science cannot be cold. He demonstrates that the role of form, colour, flavour, sound, scent cannot be ignored. He argues that the aim of science should not be to dominate nature but to live in harmony with it and that beauty plays more significant role in our life than aesthetic.

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 online 2001).

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). He follows Frank Lloyd Wright’s perception of better operation resulting from better architecture (Wright online 2007): “Maybe we can show government how to operate better as the result of better architecture. Eventually, I think Chicago will be the most beautiful great city left in the world.” But when it comes to the evaluation of cities, even Le Corbusier can be lost. “A hundred times have I thought New York is a catastrophe,” he writes, “and 50 times: It is a beautiful catastrophe.” (Le Corbusier 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.” (in Latour 1991: 212).

For Luis Barragan, beauty has a standard of almost international language and he claims that “Beauty is the oracle that speaks to us all” plus “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). Michael Graves is practical and does not want the subject of beauty to be too complicated, saying: “In designing hardware to be used every day, it was important to keep both the human aspects and the machine in mind. What looks good also often feels good.” (Graves online 2007).

Beauty has a life of its own; it exists beyond any intentions, actions and objects. Even Tadao Ando does not try to define it - he refers instead 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). The experience of 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. But this is how we learn to ‘walk’ 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.

This paper presents only selective samples of the mainstream Western perception of beauty as a category in architecture. The exclusion of other equally important developments elsewhere could be the subject for another paper, as beauty itself seems to be inspiring and addictive. Experiencing architectural beauty connected with the mind, emotions and spirit stimulates our growth.

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