

## Why can't government talk about beauty?

This research essay started life under the rather open working title of 'politics and beauty'. It set out to look at the changing attitudes towards beauty and the history of their relationship with politics in Britain, particularly with regard to that most public of arts: architecture.

The spark for this research topic was the publication, by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), in autumn 2010, of a survey of public attitudes towards beauty.<sup>1</sup> Working in politics and policy, the appearance of this publication was rather a surprise to me: this was the first time I had been aware of a government body discussing the subject so freely and openly, and, as a former student of architecture, my ears naturally pricked up. But it also prompted the question: why? Why, normally, doesn't government talk about beauty?

I had a vague sense that this was probably a relatively contemporary condition. The little I knew about Ruskin and Octavia Hill and the wrangling over the architectural style of the Foreign Office suggested to me that our Victorian philanthropist and politician forebears held far stronger opinions about the social importance of beauty, about elevating the masses through the contemplation of art and civic architecture, and about the political and public nature of architecture. The fact that Ruskin, an architectural writer and critic, was such a culturally dominant figure points to this. Foucault is succinct on how the domain of architecture and urbanism used to be a political and public battleground:

*From the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, every discussion of politics as the art of the government of men necessarily includes a chapter or series of chapters on urbanism, on collective facilities, on hygiene and on private architecture... This change is*

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<sup>1</sup> *People and Places: Public Attitudes to Beauty*, Ipsos Mori, 2010, on behalf of CABE

*perhaps not in the reflections of architects upon architecture, but it is quite clearly seen in the reflections of political men.*<sup>2</sup>

One of the first challenges in exploring why government doesn't talk about beauty, and why there is no longer a strong public discourse about architecture, is the difficulty inherent in analysing a conversation that isn't happening. For this reason I ruled out trawling through twentieth century urban policy white papers as unlikely to reveal very much about aesthetic thought, and recent architectural theory as unlikely to say much about politics. Rather I began with architectural history and works on aesthetics at the point at which the two things seemed to be more closely linked to politics and public discourse (the 19<sup>th</sup> century), as well as theories of macro trends in both throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I also benefited from the opinions of two very useful people, the former chief executive of CABA, Dr Richard Simmons, and an MP and historian who has written extensively on the Victorian City, Tristram Hunt.

What follows is a discussion of how government used to talk about beauty compared to how it does now, and a summary of the main findings of CABA's research into public attitudes. I will then continue with a survey of potential causes: the disappearance of beauty in art, the changing nature of government over the last two hundred years, the rise of a far more individualistic and empiricist society, certain trends in architectural discourse which have served to undermine its claims to social power, and the implications for architecture of living in a capitalist democracy.

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### **How do we talk about beauty?**

The New Labour Government of 1997 – 2010 has come the closest in recent years to an interventionist stance on the quality of the built environment, commissioning a review of

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<sup>2</sup> M. Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge, and Power' Interview with Paul Rabinow, *Skyline*, March 1982, in K.M.Hays (ed.) *Architecture Theory since 1968* (MIT Press, 1998)

urban policy shortly after their rise to power. The result was the final report of Richard Rogers' 'Urban Task Force', '*Towards an Urban Renaissance*',<sup>3</sup> which sets out a long-term vision for British towns and cities, advocating clusters of higher density. It laments the recent tendency to sprawl and dependence on cars – in a way, harking back to pre-industrial patterns of living. '*In England,*' says Rogers, '*we have lost the art of designing cities which was once part of our rich urban tradition. Before the industrial revolution, we created urban areas of great beauty and lasting quality.*' Beauty is not completely absent from this agenda then. In fact the word beauty appears twice more, once in the phrase, '*People respond to beauty in cities.*'

But compare the language of this to earlier claims, such as made by The Builder in 1845:

*The architectural embellishment of a city is of much greater consequence in forming the character of a people than some hasty thinkers now-a-day recognise. The constant contemplation of fine forms, or the reverse, has a powerful effect upon the mind...*<sup>4</sup>

Or by Ruskin in his 'Seven Lamps of Architecture' in 1849:

*Architecture is the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man for whatsoever uses, that the sight of them contribute to his mental health, power and pleasure.*<sup>5</sup>

Whilst there is a more than hint of condescension to the great unwashed in the Victorian statements, in the one hundred and fifty or so intervening years, the relationship between citizen and architectural beauty has been reversed: the 'power' it once had to form minds has been lost; it is now in the hands of the autonomous citizen to respond to an inert quality, or not. We no longer believe beauty to possess agency, apparently.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Rogers, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 1999

<sup>4</sup> *The Builder*, 131, 9 August 1845

<sup>5</sup> J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, (Dover Architecture, 1989)

Reflecting Ruskin's dictum that architecture is the most political of the arts, this same edition of the Builder is also enlightening on the involvement of politicians in architectural debate. The previous quote finishes with *'it should be the duty of governments to aid in obtaining for the multitudes the advantages of the former (architecture) to the extent of their power.'* The article continues with an account of heated debates in the Commons chamber on the virtues of various buildings and proposals, as well as the question of free access to cathedrals, art galleries and monuments for the betterment of the 'working classes'. A search for mentions of 'architecture' in Parliamentary debate in 2012 predominantly throws up references to the structure of legislation and institutions: 'the architecture of this bill'. References to actual physical buildings are largely confined to 'heritage assets', with the rare questions to government that arise being answered by a junior minister in the Whitehall department with the least spending power. Devoting a whole day in the Commons to debating architecture would be unimaginable.

Unfortunately the interest shown by New Labour in raising the political status of architecture has been largely reversed by the current administration. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), the arms-length architectural quality enforcer established on the back of Rogers report, has since been disbanded (and then absorbed into the Design Council), as part of widespread public spending cuts. During its brief life, CABE tried to talk about architecture in as objective a way as possible, focusing on 'design quality' rather than style, and ensuring adherence to some basic minimum standards (of room sizes and access to natural daylight, for example). This was the remit given to them by their masters, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). CABE, according to their former Chief Executive, never discussed beauty because the Department specifically asked them not to.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Later we will go on to discuss why a denial of 'styles' in architecture may have done the profession a great disservice.

However it is not only ponderous government departments that shy away from this discourse, politicians do too. In a recent review of the Tate's exhibition on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Melanie McDonagh, commenting on the political nature of the movement, asks where that former idealism went:

*Looking at our Labour movement, you can't visualise any of them...demanding that workers should live in homes that are beautiful as well as functional, that public buildings should be inspiring and dignified, that people should enjoy the work they do as being inherently satisfying.*<sup>7</sup>

The architectural ideologies that split the Commons along party lines in the 1860s have been lost,<sup>8</sup> which suggests that architecture itself has ceased to have associative meaning in the minds of politicians, and perhaps the public too. Discussing the most recent addition to London's skyline, the controversial 'Shard'. Simon Jenkins bemoans the lack of any meaningful public debate about the building:

*We have lost the ability to articulate what is beautiful for the purposes of developmental control.*<sup>9</sup>

Part of the problem, the reason the leader of the opposition feels compelled to talk about such pseudo-scientific and equalising concepts like 'pre-distribution',<sup>10</sup> rather than access to beauty, must be his audience, and how readily we (the British public) think about and value beauty.

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<sup>7</sup> M. McDonagh, 'What arts and crafts ought to teach Labour', London Evening Standard, 13 Sep 2012

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the disputes about the building of the Foreign Office, see 'Battle of the Styles: The Foreign Office and Northampton Town Hall' in Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London 2004

<sup>9</sup> S. Jenkins, 'The Shard has slashed the face of London for ever', The Guardian, 3 July 2012

<sup>10</sup> A term coined by Ed Miliband to mean focusing more on decent wages and relying less on tax credits to reduce inequality

In 1896, George Santayana felt confident enough to assert that *'nor does man select his dwelling, his clothes, or his companions without reference to their effect on his aesthetic senses'*.<sup>11</sup> In 'People & Places', CABE found that members of the public had significant difficulty understanding the questions 'what is beauty?', and 'where do you experience beauty in your life?', often responding by asking 'what do you mean?' Roger Scruton similarly suggests that we are currently, culturally, in the throes of a 'flight from beauty':

*Beauty is vanishing from our world because we live as though it did not matter...  
The false art of our time, mired in kitsch and desecration, is one sign of this.*<sup>12</sup>

And yet, if one continues reading the report, after spending some time with the question, it turns out respondents were overwhelmingly pro-beauty. Whilst it is not on the tip of our tongues, when prompted we are likely to agree to its importance:

*The conclusion people often reach is that beauty is a universal good – worth promoting and preserving for the future. This indicates just how much of a shared understanding there is about why beauty matters...The consensus is that beauty deserves more of a place in public and social discourse.*<sup>13</sup>

Specifically in relation to the built environment, people felt that beauty was *'important for civic pride and for attracting people to an area.'* They associated a lack of beauty with deprivation, and recognized that not everyone had equal access to beauty. In terms of architecture, older buildings tended to more frequently be viewed as beautiful for reasons beyond the purely visual: people appreciated the history and memory encased in

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<sup>11</sup> Santayana, G., *The Sense of Beauty*, Dover Publications, New York 1955

<sup>12</sup> Scruton, R., *Beauty*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> The most common association with beauty was 'nature', the Kantian paradigm case for aesthetic theory. Interestingly, it is in relation to nature that successive governments have used 'beauty' as justification for action to protect certain places: with the classification 'areas of outstanding natural beauty'. This national caretaking mission began with the National Trust, the brainchild of Victorian philanthropists. Why the natural environment should receive more sympathetic treatment than the built is a question I have unfortunately not had time to pursue further.

older buildings, the craft, care and investment that went into making them, and their 'character'. Modern buildings, as well as lacking much of the above and frequently seen as 'bland', are disliked for disrupting existing relationships and histories.<sup>14</sup>

CABE's findings support the Kantian dictum that aesthetic judgment is a function of every moral and rational being, not the preserve of an aesthetic elite of connoisseurs. They also emphasise the view of the nature of beauty in architecture, espoused by Bonnie Greer in her essay responding to the survey,<sup>15</sup> that it is a function of meaning and experience, rather than something purely visual or stylistic. However the CABE survey also revealed an interesting contradiction. Whilst there appears to be a fairly common agreement that beauty matters, and that local government ought to take some responsibility for it, there is less shared understanding about what beauty consists of, and people seem acutely aware of the subjective nature of beauty, as per the 'eye of the beholder' platitude.

*Their perception of beauty is their perception and as a result they avoid giving reasons for finding something beautiful in case it jars with someone else's perception.*

This evidence differs from Kant's influential theory of beauty:

*If a man says that canary wine is agreeable he is quite content if someone else corrects his terms and reminds him to say instead: it is agreeable to me. It is quite different with the beautiful. Many things may be charming and agreeable to him; no one cares about that. But if he proclaims something to be beautiful, then he requires the same liking from others; he then judges not just for himself but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things... He demands that they agree. He reproaches them if they judge differently, and denies that they have*

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<sup>14</sup> *People and Places: Public Attitudes to Beauty*, Ipsos Mori, 2010, on behalf of CABE

<sup>15</sup> B. Greer for CABE, *People and places: essay five: Beauty, well-being and prosperity* (2010)

*taste...*<sup>16</sup>

Whilst many architects have used this theory of aesthetic judgment to justify their claims to beauty, as we will see, the CABE survey suggests this manifestly is not the way large swathes of the British public think in 2012. This position, I would argue, is a natural result of our political and social contemporary condition, as an egalitarian, meritocratic democracy.

So far we have seen that government used to talk about beauty, and no longer does in the same way; but also that the common understanding of beauty has changed – we now consider it a highly personal value. I will continue with a survey of what I believe to be the major causes of these two interlinked positions.

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### **The fate of beauty in art**

Visual art is another realm where the discussion of beauty has lost currency, as Dave Hickey notoriously discovered in 1993. His book ‘The Invisible Dragon’<sup>17</sup> was prompted by the vacuum he stumbled upon when suggesting at a symposium that ‘beauty would be the defining problem of the decade’ for the art world.

Arthur Danto’s ‘The Abuse of Beauty’<sup>18</sup> offers an interesting and plausible explanation. Up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Renaissance paradigm of mimesis ruled in art, as did the connection between mimesis and beauty (a beautiful painting is the painting of a beautiful scene), as did the sanctity of art through its connection to religion and moral authority. Modernism veered away from mimesis, and from a definition of ‘art’ as skill in execution, to art as the display of great originality of talent. It also embarked on the

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<sup>16</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (Oxford University Press, 2007)

<sup>17</sup> D. Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (University of Chicago Press, 2009)

<sup>18</sup> A.C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, (Illinois, Carus Publishing Company, 2003)

divorce of artistic excellence from beauty. As Danto puts it, the process of acceptance of modernist art is the process of understanding that 'good art can be ugly'. However the appreciation of this new direction took some time to set in, and in many cases still reigns. That people can pronounce judgments of beauty on art whose primary function is surely to provoke disgust (Damian Hirst comes to mind) is testament to this hangover of Edwardian values. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century art pursued many agendas, one of which may have been beauty, but it was no longer a necessary condition for something to be considered art. Hickey's remark was perhaps met with incomprehension because in the States at the time, art frequently aligned itself to the exposition of social injustice; to strive after beauty in this case would have been wrong.

As in architecture, beauty in art may also have been undermined by the course of social history. Before its political abuse and misuse by, for example (but not solely), the Third Reich – Wagner, classical architecture, the suppression of 'degenerate art' – beauty had been strongly associated with moral goodness in classical aesthetic theory, and commonly seen as a mark of civilisation. That nations capable of producing works of high beauty also waged the most savage and protracted war of human history seriously challenged those assumptions.

In art and architecture, the stark departure of modernism was, Scruton argues in 'Beauty', often a search for beauty in untainted forms, an attempt to sweep away and clean the offences of war. And in other places art was a downright rejection of the civilisations that had wrought such destruction – the silliness of Dadaism can be seen in this way. The Dadaists had no interest in making beauty through their art, and the trend has stayed the course. However the significant difference between the visual arts, and architecture, is the extent to which they impinge on our lives without our permission. Anyone can avoid looking at, for example, surrealist art if they so wish. Buildings are harder to avoid. If the loss of beauty is a consequence of modernism, its effect has had far greater social implications in the case of architecture.

## **From patriarchy to public administration**

One of the primary causes of the disappearance of beauty from political discourse is of course in the nature of politics itself. In the 1850s, when the notion of beauty as a force for social reform possibly had the strongest currency, the concept and conditions of government were entirely different.

First, the machinery of state was smaller, ‘welfare’ did not exist apart from some small contributions to education, and the whole programme of government was far less busy. Second, at the height of our imperial power, there was a great deal of money to be spent (and they were not spending it on healthcare or pensions). Third, politicians were only accountable to a small landowning minority (approximately 15%). The Great Reform Act (1832) and subsequent amendments gradually extended the vote, but throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the voting public was still a fraction of what it is today. If there is one thing that motivates politicians, it is the concerns of the public that puts them in office. A wealthy industrialist – of the type funding the municipal architecture of rapidly expanding cities – is probably more likely to show an interest in the management of the built environment than a mill-worker. Indeed it would be interesting to trace in more detail how the language and voice of government has changed as its audience has expanded.

Today that audience is the entire adult population, and organisations like Ipsos Mori<sup>19</sup> have sprung up in response to the need of politicians to understand what their voters – all of them – are thinking and feeling. Enfranchisement has had an equalising effect on the minds of the people: every vote counts. Accordingly, governments of today have lost any hint of a paternalistic stance. The highest accolade has become: ‘a man of the people’. No longer a club of wealthy educated patriarchs who know best what the people need, the role of government is to hold the strings of the vastly expanded public purse, and ensure that the money is spent without wastage. This burden of budgetary responsibility has a significant effect.

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<sup>19</sup> The research company that carried out the ‘People & Places’ survey for CABE

Government is acutely reluctant to deal with matters it cannot justify with quantitative evidence. Westminster is drowning in reports that identify the ‘risk-averse’ nature of the civil service, and, by extension, politics in general, as a hindrance to advancing whatever policy idea or cultural change that particular report advocates. The tax-funded public sector operates on a basis of accountability: institutional and personal responsibility to spend the citizens’ money wisely. Each spending decision must be defensible, because the consequences of errors, ‘climb downs’ and ‘u-turns’ are politically and personally extremely unpalatable. This tendency has only been exacerbated by the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

This, then, is a hostile environment for such an elusive and allegedly subjective concept as beauty to attempt to operate as a driver for decision-making.<sup>20</sup> As well as being impractically vague, it is drowned out by hundreds of other causes competing for attention: arguably, it may be more important that we sort out, for example, our social care system than debate architectural styles. (The Victorians, of course, had no publicly funded social care system.) In the anxious and cash-strapped political climate of now, at a time where there is low public trust of politicians, and a fear within government of accusations of unnecessary spend, legislating for beauty might almost seem perverse.

Further, if we have agreed (politically, democratically) that all opinions deserve to be heard, and we also commonly understand judgments about beauty to be highly personal and subjective, how can we possibly have a public conversation about it? In this context it is not surprising that governing administrations feel it would be inappropriate to dictate on the matter. It would appear elitist and patriarchal. And if politicians outside of government, Members of Parliament as representatives of the people, do not speak about architecture, that is perhaps reflective of the demands of their constituents.

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<sup>20</sup> The media fuss about the overspend on Portcullis House in Westminster is a good example of how spending on architecture is often characterised as a frivolous use of taxpayers’ pounds, even when the building is the seat of government itself.

So whilst creating beauty in our urban environments may be desirable and in the public interest, it does not seem to be in the remit of politicians to make such judgments. However I would argue there are also causes external to government – it is to those I shall now turn.

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### **We're all Nietzscheans now**

If finding beauty is a process of constructing meaning, it is not a useful concept for making public decisions if there can be no agreement about that meaning.

I noted previously the widespread contemporary feeling that finding beauty is a highly personal judgment. In this section I will turn to several writers who discuss the loss of any shared architectural values, which makes a public discussion about beauty almost impossible.

We find this frequently in the writings of Charles Jencks, who says that this is a consequence of our '*post-modern situation*', and the failure of modernism means we are now living in '*an age of contentious pluralism*'. He quotes Lyotard's assertion that '*the postmodern situation of dissensus is irreversible*'.<sup>21</sup> Scruton agrees with the diagnosis: '*We are living beyond judgment, beyond value, beyond objectivity—so the post-modernist movement tells us*'.<sup>22</sup>

Philip Bess, architect and critic, digs down into the condition of pluralism in a 1993 paper called 'Communitarianism and Emotivism: Two Rival Views of Ethics and

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<sup>21</sup> C.A. Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York 1977

<sup>22</sup> R. Scruton, *A Bit of Help from Wittgenstein*, in *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 51, Number 3, July 2011, pp. 309–319

Architecture'.<sup>23</sup> He proposes the philosophical underpinning of this 'dissensus' as the increasing influence throughout society of a Nietzschean/ emotivist stance, which is expressed in the architecture that such a society creates. Rather than architecture conceived with reference to the formal order of the wider city, we increasingly build with reference only to the taste and economic concerns of architects and patrons.<sup>24</sup>

Architecture has become an autonomous art, rather than a civic one:

*The relative absence of spatial and formal hierarchies in contemporary architecture and urban and suburban design embodies an individualist/ emotivist ethic.*

According to Bess, this Nietzschean position has superceded an Aristotelian one of communitarianism and civic virtue, which produced the traditional urban architecture fondly recalled by Rogers when he talks about our 'pre-industrial' cities:

*The spatial and formal hierarchies of traditional architecture and urbanism are physical manifestations of a communitarian culture and social ethic most accurately described... by the Aristotelian intellectual position.*

The crux of Bess's argument is that certain societies are far more in agreement about their aims, and this kind of civic construction is regulated by the social expectation that any individual will participate in working towards these common goals (and indeed that this is how human beings derive meaning in their lives). By contrast, in a Nietzschean society, individuals are motivated by self-interested pursuits, which have to be constrained by sets of rules. The former produces a kind of civic architecture, where 'public and figural' spaces, which express the functioning of communities, sit at the top

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<sup>23</sup> P. Bess, 'Communitarianism and Emotivism: Two Rival Views of Ethics and Architecture' in K. Nesbitt (ed.) *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: an anthology of architectural theory 1965 – 1995*, (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996)

<sup>24</sup> Peter Rees, current City Planning Officer for the Corporation of London is the very embodiment of a singular and individualist will directing the building of a city. He operates, according to architecture publication BD, 'a tyranny of subjectivity to which anyone hoping to build on his patch soon discovers they had better submit.'

of the architectural hierarchy. All the rest becomes a sort of background order, although each with its own typology. 'Style' is dictated not by rules, but evolves in the work of *'small communities of craftsmen directed less by statute than by custom and habit'*. One of the acts of modernism was to throw away that accumulation of custom and habit, and so, in our Nietzschean condition,

*we find ourselves...in a social setting in which specific disagreements about ethics and aesthetics – the good and the beautiful – are incapable of rational resolution... (and)... inevitably come down to the contestants feeling strongly about the matters in question, unable to reach rational consensus.*

It is because of our Nietzschean disposition that the concept of beauty only makes sense as a personal value.

Scruton arrives at a similar position in his 'The Aesthetics of Architecture',<sup>25</sup> and an essay in which he updates his argument, 'A Bit of Help from Wittgenstein'.<sup>26</sup> His premise is that everyday life (rather than art, or nature) should be the paradigm case for the study of aesthetics, and that our ability to make aesthetic judgments (does this shirt match these trousers? is this picture in the right place?) is a part of our rational nature. As a universal practice then, aesthetic discourse is important in the life of the community, allowing consensus-building, and also the physical building of a shared environment. Moreover, the tangible objects of a community present the 'social mores, moral values and religious aspirations' of a communal life.

*A public space is one in which the virtues of civility are not merely exercised by the people, but recorded and endorsed by the surrounding boundaries.*

If we lose our ability to discuss aesthetics, we lose the ability to discuss our communal life, which leads him to argue for more aesthetic education. In fact this is the central

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<sup>25</sup> R. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, (London, Methuen Press, 1979)

<sup>26</sup> R. Scruton, *A Bit of Help from Wittgenstein*

agenda motivating the CABE survey, even though they knew talking about beauty would be unpalatable to DCLG. It was their way of responding to the Coalition Government's bid (whether or not one believes it to be a cynical one) to resurrect civil ('Big') society: by asking people where in their environment they found beauty, they hoped to get to the heart of civic engagement.

At present it appears we have little shared basis for a public conversation about architecture, or design more broadly, and thus little agreement about what constitutes beauty: private concerns trump public. Unfortunately for Scruton, and Bess, it is probably impossible to engineer it in reverse, to create social cohesion through architecture. Attempts to build civic architecture in the old way usually result in clumsy neo-traditionalism, ironically imposed on the public sphere by private interests.<sup>27</sup>

In our Nietzschean social context, meaning is difficult to build into design, to prescribe in advance, emerging, if at all, over a period of time after the fact. Or in different ways to different people. Bess cites a description of Peter Eisenmann's work as no longer being directed toward any particular meaning, but rather an attempt '*to create a formal and material environment capable of engendering many meanings*'. There are now as many potential meanings as there are individuals.<sup>28</sup> Even if one was so inclined, it would be impossible to improve the 'spiritual, social and intellectual condition of the people'<sup>29</sup> through architecture, because 'the people' no longer exists.

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<sup>27</sup> This is the standard criticism of the architectural projects of Prince Charles: Poundbury, for example.

<sup>28</sup> This focus on the individual can also be seen in the history of design theory: starting with the introduction of ergonomics in the Eighties, design has stolen increasingly more from behavioural sciences. Partly this is a commercial technique, an attempt to understand how to appeal to all members of a market. But the consequence is it is a rare designer nowadays who dares to design without 'the user' in mind.

<sup>29</sup> The Mayor of Northampton as quoted in 'Battle of the Styles: The Foreign Office and Northampton Town Hall' in Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London 2004

## Architecture has undermined itself

We have lost faith in the social relevance of architecture for other reasons: namely, architects overstated the necessity of their chosen style, and claimed for it a social agency that largely failed to materialise – rather spectacularly in the case of modernism, whose downfall proved the end of both of these practices. Or, as Jencks puts it, *‘modern architecture, as the son of the enlightenment, was an heir to its congenital naiveties.’*<sup>30</sup>

Mis-stating the relationship between society and architecture has been the bedrock of architectural discourse since the eighteenth century. This is the central theme in David Watkin’s *‘Morality and Architecture’*,<sup>31</sup> and his examples – Pugin, Viollet-le-Duc, Pevsner, Le Corbusier, William Morris and others – all have in common a conviction that architecture is not about ‘style’, but rather the rational and inevitable expression of something else – religion, sociology, politics, the ‘zeitgeist’ or ‘kunstwollen’, new technology, or truth to materials. All such arguments rely upon collusion in the belief that there can be ‘only one logical solution’ to the problem of a brief, whereas in fact there are probably ‘a hundred and one solutions’, which will rely on taste and fashion as much as the underpinning idea. It is incredible how many architects have made the same exclusive arguments for wildly different building styles.

Watkin argues that in the eighteenth century, the idea of architecture as an art ‘involving taste, imagination and scholarship’ went out of fashion, and so the grounds for finding beauty had to change. If present at all, it was as a consequence of the correct application of the ruling idea, whatever that might be. For example, Ruskin believed for architecture to be beautiful it must mimic the shapes of the natural world:

*Man cannot advance in the invention of beauty, without directly imitating natural form. Thus, in the Doric temple the triglyph and cornice are unimitative; or imitative only of artificial cuttings of wood. No one would call these members*

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<sup>30</sup> C.A. Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York 1977

<sup>31</sup> D. Watkin, *Morality and Architecture*, (University of Chicago Press, 1977)

*beautiful.*<sup>32</sup>

There is a denial here of architecture as an image-making activity with its own internal aesthetic traditions, canons of judgment, and, heaven forbid, tastes. Viollet-le-Duc goes so far as to condemn *'the caprices of that fantastical queen we call fashion'* as debasing to the higher moral and social purposes of architecture.

Another feature of these positions is what we would now see as their intense subjectivity, juxtaposed with claims to universality. Le Corbusier continues this tradition, using the same rhetoric as Ruskin to claim quite the opposite basis for beauty:

*...cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders, and pyramids are the great primary forms that light reveals well; the image is clear and tangible for us, without ambiguity. That is why these are beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms. Everyone is in agreement about this: children, savages and metaphysicians.*<sup>33</sup>

He later dismisses the Gothic that Ruskin would have vigorously defended, instructing the reader that 'a cathedral is not very beautiful'. Such statements now cry out to be contradicted, and the passing of time has in most cases revealed the true subjectivity of these positions, although the clue was always there in Le Corbusier's text. What clearer signal that his architectural theory stemmed solely from personal experience than the statement, *'man looks at the creation of architecture with his eyes – which are 5ft 6 inches from the ground.'*

The assertion of personal views as fact – one way of characterising these works – is no longer a valid means of making an argument. It reads as patronising. Watkin suggests that pre-modernists got away with it because they were still talking about a popular and historically recognisable idiom: in the context of Gothic or Classical the 'inadequacies of the argument' never became apparent, or indeed really mattered. It was only when these

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<sup>32</sup> Ruskin, J., *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, (Dover Architecture, 1989)

<sup>33</sup> Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. J. Goodman, (Frances Lincoln, 2008)

arguments were used to justify entirely new languages – namely Modernism – that their use became problematic. Le Corbusier’s (and other modernists’) assertions of beauty just did not pan out, as noted by Mark Girouard:

*modern architecture has failed to produce images of enjoyment or entertainment, or images of domesticity, with which any large number of people can identify.*<sup>34</sup>

In relation to this, Scruton’s argument leads to a defence of the classical language of building. This, he says, is our best bet for good civic architecture, as a tradition which has emerged over hundreds of years, ‘regularities precipitated out from the constant flow of human choice’.<sup>35</sup> He suggests that for the most part architecture should be the work of ‘ordinary and untalented people’ who are happy to follow precedents, and not be left to those who have ‘fallen prey to the illusion of their own genius.’<sup>36</sup> His critique of modernism is of the readiness of ‘exalted’ and ‘opinionated’ modernists to trash this long-established vernacular, without being able to invent a satisfactory replacement:

*The failure of modernism... lies not in the fact that it has produced no great or beautiful buildings—the Chapel at Ronchamp, and the houses of Frank Lloyd-Wright abundantly prove the opposite. It lies in the absence of any reliable patterns or types, which can be used in awkward or novel situations so as spontaneously to harmonize with the existing urban decor, and so as to retain the essence of the street as a common home.*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Watkin, *Morality and Architecture*

<sup>35</sup> Although I don’t see why this argument does not also apply to Gothic.

<sup>36</sup> Prince Charles would no doubt agree. His contribution to the public debate about architecture (his mid-nineties campaign against the builders of ‘carbuncles’) was highly provocative because, as the unelected heir to the throne, he is the last person who should be dictating anything about aesthetic choices in a meritocratic democracy. But in fact his intervention was, according to him, in defence of the tastes and preferences of the common man against the edicts of the ruling architectural classes in their ivory tower. In questioning the profession he provoked their contempt, but for a time he did create more of a public debate about architecture.

<sup>37</sup> R. Scruton, *A Bit of Help from Wittgenstein*

Promises of social reform through architecture went undelivered too, finally and irreversibly discredited by the demolition in 1972 of the Pruitt-Igoe urban housing project, but undermined in many other places by the deterioration of the tower block housing estate. Le Corbusier's romantic notion of 'streets in the air' was not so romantic in practice. Unfortunately, by tying the social reform agenda to an aesthetic that had little resonance or success as a vernacular, the 'social power of architecture' baby has been thrown out with the modernist bathwater. If the proponents of modernism had been less dogmatic, the whole enterprise of architecture would not have been condemned. By making claims they could not deliver, architects have been complicit in removing architecture from public discourse.

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### **The Steady March of Empiricism**

The public conception of beauty, and the credibility of those arguments listed above, have both been affected by a sea-change, post-Enlightenment, in the common understanding of what constitutes knowledge, fact and truth.

Returning to Jencks, we can see the '*postmodern situation of dissensus*' as the '*the logical outgrowth of a scientific and technological society*,' one in which the paradigms of positivism, empiricism and quantifiable evidence have increasingly held sway over more qualitative values and practices. If beauty is believed to be subjective, it is out of keeping with the nature of truth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore not worthy of serious political debate. Disraeli's narrator in his 1844 novel, *Coningsby*, points to the start of this trend:

*What Art was to the ancient world, Science is to the modern; the distinctive faculty. In the minds of men the useful has succeeded the beautiful.*<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> B. Disraeli, *Coningsby, or The New Generation*, (Book Jungle, 2007)

Likewise, many architects have been complicit in establishing the dominance of what Jane Jacobs referred to as the ‘pseudoscience’ of building, from Viollet-le-Duc (*‘in this general movement, individualities soon disappeared, and architecture assumed the form of a science’*), to Otto Wagner (*‘nothing that is not practical can be beautiful’*), to Frank Lloyd Wright (*‘in such an age, the painter or the poet does not count for much’*), to Louis Sullivan and others (*‘form ever follows function’*).<sup>39</sup> It is the assumption that somewhere there are architectural ‘truths’ waiting to be made manifest that has led to a great deal of pontificating on particular styles and approaches.

It is still characteristic of archi-speak to use qualitative descriptive terms as though they were fact. The following are all taken from the Urban Task Force final report (1999):

*...logical hierarchy and balance of the whole urban structure... a clear articulation of public space... positive amenity value... design excellence.*

However ‘factual’ they try and sound – and in this instance it is probably to carry weight and legitimacy in a report to government – these qualities are of the order of aesthetic judgment.

Scruton’s position on the nature of aesthetic judgment is that whilst it is a universal practice, and one based on reasoning, individual aesthetic judgments are contextual, contingent on *‘the way things come across in experience’* in each case. Thus it would be impossible to construct *‘a rule-governed argument (or indeed a policy) which has a judgment of beauty as its conclusion’*.<sup>40</sup> The attempt to assert them as facts, rather than judgments to be publicly debated, undermines the whole enterprise. Architecture is not a science, however much elements of building may depend on functional attributes such as gravity and tension and waterproofness. And yet it does not have the freedom of the other artforms, precisely because of its public responsibilities. Conceptually, its fence-sitting is problematic, as Karsten Harries explains in a meditation on ‘The Ethical Function of

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<sup>39</sup> All quoted in Watkin, *Morality and Architecture*

<sup>40</sup> R. Scruton, *A Bit of Help from Wittgenstein*

Architecture’:

*As reason triumphs in science and technology, art withdraws from the totality of life and asserts its own autonomy as art for art’s sake... Architecture alone is unable to participate in this withdrawal. Caught between engineering and art, modern architecture has been unable to achieve a convincing and lasting reconciliation of pragmatic-technological and aesthetic considerations.<sup>41</sup>*

In a scientific age, architecture has been impoverished by a denial of its artistic heritage.

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### **In conclusion**

Power, in a capitalist democracy, is diffuse, not only (or even) in the hands of politicians, the monarchy, the professions – but also, in architectural terms, of the consumer and the builder. Thus it is unfortunate, and perhaps no coincidence, that a public and political silence on beauty reigns at a time when the primary purpose of building has become the pursuit of mammon.

This is why the question of whether beauty is a ‘public good’ is a pertinent one. In other arenas where market forces have led to the diminishment of public goods (clean air, the numbers of fish in the ocean, street lighting) the state has sometimes stepped in to correct that ‘market failure’. With buildings, their ‘beautifulness’ is a positive externality, precious to the publics they address, but not always possible for the owner to monetise. If developers can’t make significantly more money from building well with respect to the edification of the public realm, they have little incentive to do so. This could constitute a

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<sup>41</sup> K. Harries, ‘The Ethical Function of Architecture’ in Nesbitt, K. (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: an anthology of architectural theory 1965 – 1995*, (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996)

market failure, which would justify an intervention by government, and 'People & Places' furnishes some evidence this would be publicly supported.

Unfortunately, because we don't understand beauty other than as a personal value, because modernism fundamentally questioned the centrality of beauty in art, because government must answer to a diverse multitude of views and spend carefully, because we no longer live with a strong civic consensus, and because, finally, architects have undermined their own claims to social relevance: government can no longer legitimately talk about beauty.

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