

Architects' Days, Pula, Croatia

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THE ETHICAL AND EXISTENTIAL MEANING OF BEAUTY

“ Art is realistic when it strives to express an ethical idea. Realism is a striving for the truth, and truth is always beautiful. Here aesthetic coincides with the ethical.”¹

Andrey Tarkovski

”Art is not only a selective sampling of the world; art implies transforming the world, an endless modification towards the good”.²

Rainer Maria Rilke

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BEAUTY, AESTHETICISATION AND NEWNESS

Beauty and ethics, as well as their hidden relationships are, no doubt, unfashionable subjects in today's artistic and architectural discourse. In the era that reveres newness, appealing images and formal inventions, the ethical perspective has been pushed aside, and the ethical dimension has rarely entered recent writings on art and architecture. *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1996) by philosopher Karsten Harries is a rare example in our time of the interest in the ethical dimension of architecture.³ Artistic quality is generally seen as a subjective and unique expression, and instead of suggesting an ethical resonance, it is expected to exhibit unforeseen imageries and experiences. In fact, beauty and ethics have been problematic concepts in the arts for a century and a half, and artists themselves have usually questioned or dismissed both notions. In our obsessively consumerist culture, beauty has turned into a deliberate aesthetic manipulation and seduction; everything from products to environments, personality to behaviour, and politics to war, is now manipulatively aestheticised. We have entered the era of “esthetic

capitalism” in accordance with the title of a book by the late Gernot Böhme, German philosopher and a friend of mine, who has also pioneered in the philosophical analysis of atmospheres. ⁴ This new mode of Capitalism implies a distinct calculated manipulation of appearances, planned ageing, and the loss of sincerity. We used to have two seasons of fashion, summer and winter, then four seasons and now, eight seasons. Have architectural fashions accelerated similarly, we can ask? Besides, today’s formalist and rhetorically dramatized architecture hardly aspires for beauty and serenity, as experiences of the unforeseen, stunning and the *unheimlich*, or of outright imbalance and threat, are frequently more apparent in its imagery. In the culture of attention, anything goes as long as it is noticed.

During the modern era, the requirement for beauty has been replaced by the obsession with newness. Paradoxically, however, even newness turns into repetitiousness. ”As the new is searched only because of its newness, everything becomes identical, because it has no other properties but its newness”, the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen (1970-) points out in his book *The Philosophy of Boredom*. ⁵ However, beauty is always connected with timelessness as it turns our consciousness to permanence and eternity. ”The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality”, philosopher Karsten Harries (1937-) claims. ⁶ ”Beauty connects us with the eternal”, Jorge Luis Borges, the poet and writer, formulated this thought. ⁷

What is the meaning of this forceful distancing of art and architecture from beauty, ethics and life? In his book *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture and Literature* (1925), José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), the Spanish philosopher, suggests that the subject matter of art has gradually shifted from ”things” to ”sensations ” and, finally, to ”ideas”.⁸ In Ortega’s view, this development has gradually weakened the human content in art. Regardless of whether we agree with Ortega’s analysis or not, it opens a thoughtprovoking view into the transformation of the essence of art. This is a shift from concrete and sensory representations of things that exist to fabricated and cognitive expressions. At the same time, artistic expressions have moved towards the realms of conceptual ideas and scientific imagery. In this development, the role of beauty has changed accordingly, and it is difficult to relate sensory representation and phenomenal experience of beauty with the cerebral and instrumentalised ideas in today’s artistic expressions. Art and architecture have frequently turned autonomous and self-conscious of their means and ends. Also the sense of a temporal continuum has been lost. Instead of mediating between different realities, such as life and ideals, ideas and feelings, time and timelessness, art has turned into an autonomous reality. In this development, the role of beauty has changed accordingly, and it is not possible to relate sensory representation and phenomenal experience of beauty with the cerebral and instrumentalized ideas in today’s artistic expressions. Not surprisingly, these fundamental changes in artistic thinking and focus also apply in architecture.

THE ETHICS OF LIMITS

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Sublime beauty was the highest aspiration of art until the end of the nineteenth century, but the quasi-rational and materialist consumer culture of today regards art as a cultural deviation, entertainment and cultural as well as monetary investment. However, an interest in the connections of ethics and aesthetics, truth and beauty, seems to be re-emerging again. The haunting environmental and ecological problems and the consequences of uncritical technological development, such as excessive digitalization, artificial intelligence and genetic manipulation, are also awaking wider ethical concerns. The dramatic mental influence on pre-school children has been revealed. For instance children who have used intelligent phones since early childhood, fail to identify human faces and to recognize motion on the faces.

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At the same time, however, the attention is beginning to shift from the forced and noisy, but mentally empty architecture of abundance to the ways of building that are emerging in the developing world. This architecture of necessity is bound to be based on real needs, scarcities and necessities. In these ways of building, architectural form still arises from the materials and ways of constructing, not from detached aestheticised ideas and meaningless compositional complexities. While the deep existential meaning is disappearing from the constructions of the world of surreal wealth, the severely restricted constructions in the realities of need still mediate existential and ethical values. This architecture of limits expresses the beauty of necessity as opposed to the limitless aesthetics and swiftly changing fashions of abundance. Leonardo da Vinci's wise advice on the meaning of limits, "Strength is born from constraints and it dies in freedom", has regrettably been forgotten.⁹

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The perspective of approaching ecological, political and moral catastrophes calls for a re-integration of the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. At the same time, our focus needs to shift from the subjective, exclusive and exceptional back to the universal, mental and existential concerns. *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1997) of Karsten Harries, as well as several other significant philosophical books of the past decades, such as Elaine Scarry's (1946-) *On Beauty and Being Just*,¹⁰ and Martha Nussbaum's (1947-) *Poetic Justice*¹¹ exemplify these concerns. Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), the Nobel Laureate poet, wrote frequently about the interactions of these two mental dimensions and gave the aesthetic perception primacy: "Man is first an aesthetic creature before he is an ethical one".¹² He considers our aesthetic instinct as the origin of ethics: "Every new aesthetic reality makes man's ethical reality more exact, because aesthetics is the mother of ethics".¹³ But for the poet, aesthetics means something more universal and autonomous than today's commercialized and manipulated beauty, serving the purposes of desire, convention, consumption and forced change. Brodsky's book on Venice, *Watermark*, contains thought provoking reflections on the meaning of beauty and its loss.

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BEAUTY IN SCIENCE

Beauty, reason and truth are usually seen as exclusive and independent properties and notions, but they can well share the same mental and emotive grounding. Beauty and reason seem to be equally valid approaches and criteria of judgement in both science and art. Erich Fromm (1900-1980), the philosopher and social psychiatrist, provides a striking expression of the fusion of beauty and truth: "Beauty is not the opposite of the ugly, but of the false".¹⁴ This view points directly at the interconnection of the aesthetic and ethic criteria.

19 Aesthetic aspirations are primarily related with the world of the arts, architecture, design and styles, but beauty and elegance of thought are essential criteria also in mathematics, physics and other sciences. Beauty represents comprehensive and synthetic qualities and integrities, which cannot be formalized and expressed through any other means. The experience of convincing and disarming beauty is a proof of the correctness, coherence and inner harmony of the phenomenon also outside of art. The pure and selfless beauty of a Piero della Francesca or Johannes Vermeer painting is likely to be beyond analyses and explanations, as it penetrates every cell of the viewer. "Be like me", is the authoritative demand of great poetry, according to Joseph Brodsky, and this command applies to all art.¹⁵

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Beauty is also a quality in mathematics and sciences. The theoretical physicist Paul A.M. Dirac (1902-84) argued that the theories of physics, which project beauty, are probably also the correct ones.¹⁶ Physicist Hermann Weyl (1885-1955), who completed the quantum and probability theories, made an even more outspoken confession: "My work has always attempted to combine truth with beauty, but when I have been obliged to choose one of the two, I have chosen the beautiful".¹⁷ Today, mathematicians use the notion "dirty proof" (in the sense of "ugly") of a mathematical proof, which has been attained through immense computing power, beyond the capabilities of human perception and intellectual grasp.¹⁸ I feel the same "dirtiness" in architectural projects generated by computers or algorithms and texts produced by artificial intelligence.

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THE HOLISTIC ESSENCE OF BEAUTY

Beauty is not an added surface value on top of the essence of things, as it expresses the coherence, integrity, wholeness and completeness of the thing or phenomenon. There is no esthetic reality separate from the reality of things, as beauty arises from a perfect integration and balance of this reality. Our current culture prioritizes power, cerebral capacity and quantification, although emotive reactions and intuitions are often our most synthetic modes of understanding, and beauty arises from the experience of a complex entity as an integrated singularity. The "understanding" of atmospheres is an example of our capacity to grasp even unfocused, shapeless and diffuse phenomena experienced simultaneously through all our senses. Altogether, we tend to regard

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23 perceptions, skills and understanding as processes that advance from details and parts towards entities. This simplistic idea of the dynamics of understanding is regrettably also the prevailing method in education. However, neuroscience has established that we grasp entities first and they give meaning to the parts. This fact of neuroscience shakes the accepted elementarist pedagogical foundations in a fundamental manner. Students of art, architecture and design, for instance, should first be made to encounter real and complete works of art, and only later given detailed intellectual analyses of the artistic phenomena in question. The individual sensory experience of the work has to precede its conceptual analyses and cognitive understanding. "According to the right hemisphere, understanding is derived from the whole, since it is only in the light of the whole that one can truly understand the nature of the parts", Iain McGilchrist (1953-), therapist and philosopher, argues in his thorough book on the human mind. ¹⁹

25 Beauty is a complete judgement of a thing in the same way that we grasp the characteristics of places and vast environmental situations through our unfocused atmospheric sense. We grasp the meanings of the world as integrated entities, not as a flood of unrelated stimuli. We grasp entities before we understand details. As I enter a place the place simultaneously enters me, my sense of self and the place fuse into each other. "I enter a building, see a room, and – in the fraction of a second – have this feeling about it", Peter Zumthor confesses. ²⁰ Beauty is an immaterial experiential and mental quality, which suggests a distinct "thingness"- the sensuous and mental thingness of beauty. At the same time that beauty arises from the integration of things, it appears to have its independent existence. As the light artist James Turrell has argued, also light can project a "thingness" in our experience ²¹ Beauty, like atmosphere, is a complex experiential quality, which is encountered and grasped in a synthetic, embodied, multi-sensory and emotional manner, rather than understood through intellectual and analytic reading. As we experience beauty, it does not remain outside of us, but becomes part of our very being. "Be like me", is the command of poetry in accordance with Joseph Brodsky. ²²

27 We usually experience phenomena and creatures of nature as beautiful. As products of timeless evolution, they are complete, integrated and self-sufficient entities. They are all part of the secret narrative of life. As biological beings, we are also products of the same laws and processes of nature, and consequently appreciation of nature as beautiful is in our very constitution. The time dimension of reality is surprisingly little understood outside of mere historical chronology. We are usually totally unaware of the signs of our biological evolution in our bodies even today, the remains of gills in our lungs, the tail in our backbone, and the pink triangles in our eye corners, which are the spots where our horizontally moving eye lids were attached when we were lizards. Altogether, we should finally acknowledge that emotions and experiences of beauty are part of the domain of "existential intelligence", implying a comprehensive judgement of the perceived phenomenon. By this notion I refer to the powerful

expression of Merleau-Ponty, “the flesh of the world”.²³ We exist in the flesh of the world, as the heart exists in our body, not outside of it as onlookers. Mark Johnson (1949-), philosopher, makes the significant remark: “There is no cognition without emotion, even though we are often unaware of the emotional aspect of our thinking”.²⁴ In his view, emotions are the source of primordial meaning: “Emotions are not second-rate cognitions; rather they are affective patterns of our encounter with our world, by which we take the meaning of things at a primordial level”.²⁵ As architects, we should also sense the primordial dimensions and meanings of buildings and dwelling. Emotions unify ethical and aesthetic qualities and give them their lived existential meanings. “It is only with the heart that one can see right. What is essential is invisible to the eye, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the legendary pilot, (1900-1944) asserts in his best known book, *The Little Prince*.²⁶

INTELLIGENCE AND EXPERIENCE

In his book *Intelligence Reframed* psychologist Howard Gardner (1943-) identifies ten categories of intelligence beyond the characteristics measured by the standard IQ test: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, inter-personal and intra-personal, naturalistic, ethical and spiritual intelligence.²⁷ Based on my personal experiences and intuitions, I wish to add five further categories - aesthetic, emotional, atmospheric, imaginative and existential - intelligences to this already thought-provoking list of the psychologist. All these categories of intelligence are seminal in architecture, and a wise teacher of architecture uses this entire range of intelligences in her teaching method. It is evident that even in the creative fields and their education, the complexities of human intelligence, embodied and emotional capacities, and the essences of the phenomena of beauty and ethical judgement are hardly understood, not to speak of the complex, emotive and largely unconscious nature of the creative process.

The poetic and artistic reality of a work of art is not in the material and physical object, but in its internalization through individual experience and identification; beauty has to be experienced and felt. “Nothing is real until it has been experienced”, as the poet John Keats (1795-1821) wrote.²⁸ This is also the seminal view of John Dewey’s (1859-1952) book *Art as Experience* of 1934: “In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favourable to understanding [...] When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals”.²⁹

Art articulates and expresses the world of lived experiences, and it mediates the human mental essence of these very encounters and so does architecture. A true artist or designer is not depicting an isolated detail or aspect of the world. Every real artistic work is a microcosm, a complete

world of its own, or in the words of Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-86), the film director, "a whole world as reflected in a drop of water"³⁰. Every true work of art, including architecture, projects an entire world. This existential sense of the world, and its interaction with the self, are the most difficult and significant areas of learning for a creative person. However, this seminal inclusivity and relatedness of architecture has been almost entirely lost.

ART AND THE WORLD

33 I wish to argue firmly that art is not merely aestheticization, as it is a form of genuine existential thinking about the world and our being in that very world, through embodied and poeticized images and means characteristic to the art form in question. "How would the poet or the painter express anything other than his encounter with the world", Maurice Merleau-Ponty asks pointing out the existential focus of art.³¹ How could the architect express anything else, we need to ask accordingly. Significantly, like Dewey, Merleau-Ponty does not regard the material or performed work itself as the objective of art. "We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the work", he states³². This view turns art into a mediating act; it tells primarily of something else than itself; the meaning of art is always behind and beyond the work itself. This position also rejects the common idea of art as the artist's self-expression. Indeed, art is a relational medium, which tells us about the essences of the lived world, or perhaps more precisely, about being a human in this world; art
34 expresses the human existence in the world, not the theoretical world of physics or other sciences. Balthus (Balthazar Klossowsky de Rola, 1908-2001), one of the finest realist painters of last century, points out the significance of the world as the artist's true subject: "If a work only expresses the person who created it, it wasn't worth doing [...] Expressing the world, understanding it, that is what seems interesting to me".³³ In another context the painter articulates his position further: "Great painting has to have universal meaning. This is no longer so today and that is why I want to give painting back its lost universality and anonymity, because the more anonymous a painting is, the more real it is".³⁴ This is a thoughtprovoking argument against the understanding of art as self-expression or conscious aestheticisation .

35 ART AND ITS PAST

Here again the ethical perspective enters the domain of art and architecture. Like all art, the art of building is simultaneously about the lived world and the layered histories and meanings of the artform itself. All arts carry their timeless traditions along their route towards the future. Meaningful works are conversations across time, and truly radical works
36 open up new ways of reading and experiencing historical works of art. Picasso has opened our eyes to see the 25.000 years old cave paintings. All great artists reveal the existential essence of art through the layers of recorded history of art. Aldo van Eyck, the structuralist architect, refused
37 to give his inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Delft on the

suggested topic of the influence of Giotto (1267-1337) on Cézanne (1839-1906), and gave the lecture on the influence of Cézanne on Giotto.³⁵ This example opens up the simultaneity of the world of art. One of my closest friends was the legendary Finnish designer and artist Tapio Wirkkala. He told me that his most important teacher was Piero della Francesca, but Piero died 423 years before Tapio was born. It is this amazing simultaneity of the world of art that gives us the opportunity to select our teachers from the entire history of art. I have personally been taught by the artists of the Sienna School and the Cubists.

As a consequence of this multiple time perspective, also architecture needs to have a double focus; the lived world and the mythical traditions of constructing. The highly refined technologies of today tend to weaken the deep unconscious meanings and the essential, but hidden mythical and unconscious contents of building, which are echoed in all great architectural works. All meaningful works are timeless and they are always simultaneously about the past, present and future.

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A BIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The aesthetic reality has also been extended to biological phenomena. It has been well known that certain selective criteria, that could be regarded as aesthetic choices, such as symmetry and signs of health and strength, are essential factors in mate selection among animals. Certain "aesthetic" gestures, rituals and deliberate constructions are also used to attract a mate, such as the empty silk balloon of the Balloon fly (*Hilara sartor*), presented to the female, the huge staged and decorated nests of the bowerbirds (*Ptilonorhynchidae*); in constructing the decorations in front of the entrance to the bower, the bird uses false or reversed perspective to exaggerate the his own experiential size in the eyes of the potential mate.³⁶ Another remarkable example of the role of aesthetics in the animal world is the co-ordinated group singing and dancing by male Blue manakins (*Chiroxipia caudata*) in front of the potential mate. The male birds practice this crucial opera performance all their lives.³⁷

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A recent book *The Evolution of Beauty* by Richard O. Prum (1961-) re-introduces Charles Darwin's second book on evolution entitled *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* published in 1871³⁸, published 13 years after his celebrated *On the Origin of Species* of 1858.³⁹ Darwin published his second book after becoming convinced that the selective principles in his first theory did not explain all the variations among animal species, including the proverbial case of the peacock's tail, which had caused Darwin nightmares at the time of writing *The Origin of Species*. In the Victorian era, a book that suggested autonomous aesthetic choice as sexual motif, practiced by the female sex, could not even be discussed. However, scientists have recently shown through mathematical modelling that, indeed, combining the two theories of Darwin fully explains all the varieties among animal species, including the peacock's tail. Surprisingly, individual aesthetic judgement is a fundamental "principle of choice also in the animal world.

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The notion of *Biophilia*, "the science and ethics of life," introduced and articulated by the biologist Edward O. Wilson (1929-), expands the ethical responsibility beyond the realm of human interaction all the way to our duty in maintaining bio-diversity.⁴⁰ Semir Zeki, a pioneering neurobiologist also connects aesthetics with biological evolution, as he suggests the feasibility of "a theory of aesthetics that is biologically based", in his book *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain*⁴¹. With the intuition and courage of a poet, Joseph Brodsky supports the scientist's view: "The purpose of evolution, believe it or not, is beauty, which survives it all and generates truth simply by being a fusion of the mental and the sensual".⁴²

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BEAUTY, EMPATHY AND INTEGRITY

We have an unconscious capacity to identify ourselves with other living creatures and even with objects and phenomena of our perceptions, such as human and spatial situations, and to project ourselves and emotions onto them. We fuse countless aspects of every situation and place into an atmospheric experience, on which our mood and expectations are grounded. "Be like me", is the imperative of the poem in Joseph Brodsky's view.⁴³ We even simulate the individual characters of great novels and momentarily share their fates, lives, life situations and emotions. Experiencing a work of art is an exchange, the work lends us its authority and magic, and we lend the work our emotions. Neuroscience has associated this act of unconscious mirroring and exchange with our "mirror neurons".⁴⁴

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Recent research on the mental worlds, and capabilities of a number of animals from chicken to dogs and rats, as well as whales and calamaris have already revealed unexpected intelligence, imagination, sense of time and emotive reactions. Somewhat unexpectedly, empathy is a capacity that also animals possess, as Frans de Waal's book *The Age of Empathy* argues.⁴⁵ The recent research on the chemical communication and collaboration of trees and mushrooms extends the realm of purposeful communication far beyond our own mental worlds.⁴⁶

The great ethical value and human equality of art is that we are able to experience our own emotions mirrored by the most profound and sensitive minds in human history. We do not only reflect the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the living, as our empathic imagination can also bring the dead back to life. We can sense through the skin, muscles and emotions of Michelangelo, see through the eyes of Piero della Francesca, hear through the ears of Johann Sebastian Bach, and feel through the heart of Rainer Maria Rilke. As the master poet Rilke suggests in the motto of my lecture, art and beauty are not only adjectives, they constitute the very core of humane and dignified life.

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Beauty is a synthetic and integrated character and quality of a phenomenon, akin to the human ethical quality of integrity. The notion of integrity also refers to the singularity, inner coherence and autonomy of a

thing, behaviour or phenomenon. In 1954, at the age of 85, Frank Lloyd Wright formulated the mental task of architecture followingly: "What is needed most in architecture today is the very thing that is most needed in life – integrity. Just as it is in a human being, so integrity is the deepest quality in a building [...] If we succeed, we will have done a great service to our moral nature - the psyche - of our democratic society [...] Stand up for integrity in your building and you stand for integrity not only in the life of those who did the buildings but socially a reciprocal relationship in inevitable".⁴⁷

These words of the master architect are even more valid today, seventy years later. We need to seek integrity, and integrity is expressed through beauty.

The first version of the lecture was given in the Nils-Erik Wickberg Symposium at the Aalto University in Helsinki in 2018. A further version was given as the CAPLA Lecture in Tucson, Arizona in 2023. A version of the lecture was also published in the *Book of Aesthetics* in Serbia, 2020.

(5127 words, 27732 signs, 32947 signs with spaces)

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