

# Rehabilitating Aesthetics

In a parallel universe out beyond our Twilight Zone, one could easily imagine a television soapie dramatizing the struggle in an architect's office to get it right or else. Outmoded are the petty cop-shop theatrics and the trauma-ward melodramas. This is real quality of life or death stuff. Has our hero got his mix of contrasts right? What about the balance of the elements making up the primary texture of the facades? Has he allowed for the voiceless spiritual expectations of complete strangers who'll be forced to suffer for generations what he's about to lob on them? If it sounds amusing, it's likely that aesthetics is widely understood now to mean mere cosmetics, superficial decoration or style, nothing serious.

Aesthetics used to be a branch of philosophy. That's possibly why so many people lost interest, linking it to logical positivism. But there's more to it than just idle prattle. It's earthy, vital, substantial. Architecture and music have been likened by past cultures because of the ground and tools they share in affecting our emotions. The artful forms of a city like Aix-en-Provence have an effect on us that can't be approximated or simulated by forms in Main Street USA - the model adopted for neo-English buildings around the world. In the latter, the elements are all there, but the music is stodgy and brittle. It's as though the score was written by a committee of people suspicious of art and creativity, and contemptuous of fun and joy.

With human sensations as its central concern, aesthetics is essentially about consciousness at the observer's end of the transaction, and communication at the observed. Rescued from the mouldy halls of philosophy, it boils down to 'what makes a desirable impact on us'; 'what makes us feel decent'. Normally, that would signal the high human priority it deserves. It ought to. But a furphy that's long kept that priority low has beauty as merely being in the eye of the beholder. Let's face it: it often simply isn't in the eye, or anywhere else for that matter. Around 1890, Christian Morgenstern remarked that "all secrets lie before us in perfect openness. Only we gradate ourselves against them, from stone to seer. There are no mysteries as such, only uninitiated of all degrees."

It gets to the heart of the matter of a materialistic discomfort with the question of aesthetics and the peripheral place it enjoys in our cultural ratings. It makes our (human) understanding, our eye, the variable, not what is to be understood. That's a welcome spiritual advance on the materialistic status quo. The 'subjectivity' of aesthetics has more to do with our lack of exposure and experience, or feeling or curiosity, than any nebulosity inherent in experienced phenomena. By extension, we can conceive that men evolve at different rates toward the same single goal - not at the same rate towards different goals. Aesthetics is thus released from the shackles of mere opinion and believable nonsense.

In the context of building design, "desirable impacts" get generated by the artful combination of old elements to form new wholes. Like a good cake, the ingredients can't be selected arbitrarily from the pantry, or grabbed in any old proportion or quantity. Simplicity isn't indicative of a lazy artist but the seasoned pro. Hegel distinguished between low aesthetics and high; craft and art. Not to ban one as unworthy, but to show the range of initiation lying before us. Art is not art without the creative act. And since the new—by the change it implies, indeed imposes—is disturbing to solid manners and convention, it forcibly operates with shackles and muzzle of convention. Art's social mission is to make our dreary lives less wooden, less depressingly dull; to shine new light on old shadows.

The day will come—as it already has out past the Twilight Zone in a distant parallel universe—when Councils will refuse building permits on the grounds that the applicant's designer was a crushing bore whose sole ambition is deemed to be to flaunt his lack of imagination and talent throughout the community with monuments to his insensitivity. In moments of quiet contemplation, well might one ponder on the day his offspring asks: Daddy, what did you do to bring about the revolution? In a cynical age where the word 'utopian' still means 'impossible', eminently realisable and eminently desirable Utopias are still being squandered as though being human means being inept as well as indifferent about it.