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## **Marx was right - Beauty Matters**

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This is a discussion about Beauty.

Beauty is a word used frequently and broadly, yet few stop to question what it means, why it is important or even what we would do if we didn't have it.

It is a concept hardly ever discussed or debated outside of academic aesthetics and in those circles it has received a pretty hard time where it has been pretty much relegated to a secondary and debased status in terms of criteria by which we judge the quality and value of an object.

This also goes for architecture.

I cannot recall a recent review of a building that talked about it, or critiqued it, in terms of Beauty.

But to me, and I believe many others, Beauty matters.

This talk explores some of the ideas behind my respect for and attraction to the idea of Beauty and it starts with a paper I discovered whilst writing my graduation thesis, which included a chapter called, 'Beauty - who says'.

The article was written by an American Marxist academic named Howard Press and addressed what was to me the revolutionary idea that Karl Marx was into Beauty.

Now Marx (1818-1883) was known for, and has been blamed for, many things, but an advocate of aesthetics and, more specifically, Beauty is not normally one of them and, frankly, I cannot see many of my friends from the deep left seeing that as an essential component of his message.

But for me it has been an enduring and fundamental component of my approach to what I have done for most of my professional life.

Now, before I go further I want to say that I am to my shame not a deeply read or highly informed Marxist theorist (or philosophy for that matter), so don't bother testing me too hard on that - but Beauty is something that has been central to my thinking for as long as I can remember and in that light I ask you to consider the following:

**The aesthetic object is unique among man-made objects [because] it possesses a life of its own.**

What Press argues is that it is through a Marxist analysis of consumption and objectification that a true understanding of Beauty lies.

His argument goes thus:

Man is the animal who lives through culture, that is, by producing objects, objects gratifying need, objects for consumption.

This is what Marx calls 'objectification'.

This objectification, as Marx writes is the species-activity of Man, his species-behaviour, his life-activity.

Now an object may be consumed, or as Marx says, 'appropriated', in essentially three ways. It may be consumed as means of subsistence ... or it may be consumed as means of production ... or it may be consumed as an aesthetic object ...

In the first two cases, and above all in the case of food, the object consumed is used up, and is lost to the subject.

This is the dilemma of practical man..... that the object of his need, in gratifying his need, is lost to him.

Only in the aesthetic mode of consumption, where as Marx writes, **the senses 'relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing'**, is the object not used up.

Indeed, it is consumed, but in an entirely different way - aesthetically - and in being consumed aesthetically (for its own sake, as it were), Marx argues the object becomes a social object, able in principle to be consumed by all.

Moreover, the aesthetic object is available to be collectively consumed and yet not used up.

And, as I said, for Marx it is this production that differentiates the human race.

Marx says:

It is true that animals also produce.

They build nests and dwellings, like the bee, the ant, etc. But they produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young; they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need; they produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature; their products belong immediately to their physical bodies, while man freely confronts his own product.

Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence, man also produces in accordance with the laws of Beauty. (1844 Manuscripts)

For Marx then everything depends on Beauty for, as Howard Press observes,

**only thus can the object be my direct activity, and only thus can it be my existence for other men and their existence for me**

Is this not exactly what we architects believe.

That our work, the objects we create, define us in the eyes of ourselves, our peers and the world.

Press takes the argument further.

What this implies, he argues, is that the act of creation of a beautiful object is an act of transformation. For:

in acting on the external world and changing it, man at the same time changes his own personality

Think on it.

What Marx proposes, states Press, is a true utopian dream whereby the true revolutionary goal is to make Beauty visible in the world;

where the object and the presence of Beauty is not external to each person but where "the object has become a human object".

A society based on collectivity and aesthetics where, as William Morris wrote, "not that every artist is a special sort of man but that every man is a special sort of artist".

Consider Immanuel Kant's (1724 -1804) famous definition of Beauty,

**Beauty is that which is represented as the object of a universal satisfaction**

Here, then for me lies the fundamental questions we should ask ourselves over and over again.

What is Beauty, what is its purpose and how is it achieved?

So, lets look at what we are talking about.

And to do that I want to start by going to the writings of someone who on the surface would appear to have an antithetical approach to Marx's view of the utopian dream, the legendary french philosopher Simone Weil (1909 - 1943). In her writings, that take us into what has been described as her legendary spiritual odyssey, Weil describes Beauty as:

the harmony of chance and the good

Weil argues that:

Beauty captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul

and is

the experiential proof that the incarnation is possible

and she says,

the subject of art is sensible and contingent Beauty

There is much more in Weil's thoughts on this topic, which with many other core intellects of western thought such as Plato and Socrates, saw Beauty as both essential and universal (though she appears to be less interested in concepts such as 'universal design' than one may have expected), but I want to go to just one more quote which I think is the most significant for us as architects and artists and takes us straight back to Marx.

Weil states:

**the beautiful is that which we desire without wishing to consume it. We desire it should be.**

This longing and desire, if I understand Weil correctly, is at the core of my personal fascination with Beauty and is a theme we will continue to return in this discussion.

It is for me what makes Beauty so compelling, intriguing, addictive and elusive.

It is Plato's universal and his recognition that the ideal is always unattainable. **The perfect sunset is only a copy or intimation of perfection, not perfection itself, if for no other reason than it will fade and decay.** But it still fills our hearts and souls with wonder, and joy, and longing, and pain, and happiness.

So, we desire it, strive for it and set it as our ideal.

And, our endeavours as intelligent and sentient beings is to produce Beauty as a way of expressing ourselves.

The Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866 -1952) in his treatise, Theory of Aesthetic, says:

**We may define Beauty as successful expression or better, as expression and nothing more, because expression, when it is not successful, is not expression.**

To clarify this Croce looks at Beauty's opposite - ugliness. Croce describes ugliness as:

unsuccessful expression

Think about it ..... all those ugly buildings are simply, unsuccessful expression.

They may have parts we might describe as beautiful but, as a totality, they fail to take us to that place Marx and Weil were describing for, as Croce argues, Beauty requires, 'complete fusion'.

Croce argues that whilst ugliness does possess degrees, from rather ugly to extremely ugly,

The beautiful does not possess degrees, for there is no conceiving a more beautiful, that is, an expressive that is more expressive, an adequate that is more adequate.

Kant says the same thing:

It would be laughable if a man who imagined anything to his own taste, thought to justify himself by saying: "This object is beautiful for me." For he must not call it beautiful if it merely pleases himself.

Many things may have for him charm and pleasantness; no one troubles himself at that; but if he gives out anything as beautiful, he supposes in others the same satisfaction — he judges not merely for himself, but for every one, and speaks of Beauty as if it were a property of things. Hence he says "the thing is beautiful"

We could spend the rest of the evening discussing just that point but there is much more to cover and we should probably go from here into the usual discourse that arises when Beauty is discussed - that of the differentiation between Beauty and the sublime.

This argument, famously raised by the 19 year old English philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797) argues that **the beautiful:**

**is what is well-formed and aesthetically pleasing, whereas the sublime is what has the power to compel.**

For Burke, Beauty is:

some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses; without any assistance from reason or will

Based on this, it can be argued that much of what I have described above may not be about Beauty but the sublime.

On this basis, whilst the sublime is what Wiki describes as:

that quality of greatness, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, spiritual or artistic, beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement or imitation

Beauty becomes:

a characteristic of a person, animal, place, object, idea or even an action that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure, meaning, or satisfaction

The best explanation of this dichotomy I have found is in a recently published book called, 'Aesthetics and Material Beauty' by Jennifer McMahon, a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Adelaide, who has sought to update the Kantian approach to the topic. In discussing the relationship of Beauty and the sublime she says,

**In Beauty we experience aesthetic ideas as if they were expressed by the beautiful object. This experience, in conjunction with the way the object is felt brings us closer to the way the world is.**

**The sublime by comparison directs our attention to ourselves. We are prompted by the effect of the sublime object to think thoughts to compensate for the inability of our sensory apparatus to find a cohesively structured single percept for the towering or powerful phenomenon**

Whilst this makes the sublime the point of utopian aspiration it also reduces Beauty to a more prosaic and less un-attainable role.

This is the more commonly held contemporary position, or at least in post enlightenment, western academic thought.

That is, the relativist notion of Beauty as something that is cultural, individual, and which can vary from era to era, country to country, race to race, sex to sex.

That is **Beauty is** nothing more than:

**in the eye of the beholder**

For many this has reduced Beauty to an irrelevancy and much of 20<sup>th</sup> century art theory has argued exactly that; that its all too personal and relative to have any true value and is best left on the shelf.

Or worse, that it is a bourgeois, middle class device aimed at repressing innovation and creativity.

The thing is that this reductive process is in fact, at least in part, an outcome of Marxism, for as Howard Press points out, Marx argues that the history of the ascendancy of any particular class is therefore the history of a form of Beauty expressive of the sensuous powers of that particular class. To quote Marx himself:

And it is for this reason that a ruling class attempts to debase the sensuousness of the subordinate class ... for to debase the sensuousness of the masses, to debase their taste, is to debase, to blunt their revolutionary praxis - the unity of subject and object - the achievement of Beauty.

That is, the debasing of those outside the ruling group as tasteless is to deny imagination as belonging beyond the elite.

And what is taste then. A simple definition is that taste is:

The faculty of discerning what is aesthetically excellent or appropriate - usually according to some generally accepted standards (Chambers Dictionary)

Its complex stuff.

And in a sense we are no closer to knowing the thing we are dealing with.

In fact the more you delve, the more confusing, complex and enigmatic it gets.

But - and here's my point - does that matter.

I suggest not.

Why?

Several reasons.

First, because the debate continues on unabated. No matter how hard the theoreticians might push us otherwise, people still talk and think about Beauty and it remains a fundamental measure against which we assess everything from a butterfly to a fighter plane.

Second, because without it we are left without a universal term to compare, evaluate or even describe our aesthetic response to ..... just about everything. Delicious gets close, as does wonderful, amazing, profound, exquisite, superb - even sublime - but when you roll them around in your mind they conjure quite different responses than you get when you insert Beauty.

Third, because actually no one has been able to definitively work out what makes us see something as beautiful or experience Beauty.

Fourth, because it is sort of irrelevant whether you are talking about Beauty or the sublime because either way you are talking about a core aesthetic response

Fifth, because actually the withdrawal of Beauty from art discourse has led to a searching for new terminology such as the current debate on the 'contemporary sublime' and in fact a spate of books in recent years reclaiming Beauty as a central theme in human activity

Sixth, because I think for most of us the differences between meanings and concepts of Beauty and the sublime are blurred, overlapping and symbiotic

And

Finally, because just when we thought the debate was all but over and the post modernists had got their way, not only has there be a resurgence in interest in the concept but the scientists and anthropologists and genetecists are all sticking their oar in and suddenly we have a whole new breed of theorists taking us back to what I think it really is all about anyway:

Feelings

**Feelings that are not necessarily rational**  
**Feelings we cannot control directly**  
**Feelings that give us pleasure**  
**Feelings that can make us feel inadequate**  
**Feelings that inspire us**  
**Feelings that we want to share**

One of the things Benedetto Croce does, which I consider so important to how we as architects approach our work, is that he, like the other thinkers I have referred to, talks of feelings, not of image or vision but that which the image elicits - feeling.

Let me share a story with you.

My daughter was at MOMA in New York a couple of years ago and was in a room surrounded by Rothko, and other great abstract expressionists. Now I have to tell you that Rothko is one of my favourite painters and the kids grew up with Rothko images in the house and so on, so it was not something Stef was unfamiliar with.

Anyway there she is in possibly the world's greatest collection of contemporary art and she is just overwhelmed by the sheer Beauty of it all and what does she do - she rings us in the middle of the night to say here I am and its all so amazing and beautiful I just have to share it with you.

That is - the feeling she got from experiencing all that Beauty was an immediate and burning desire to share.

Let me take you back to Kant and Weil:

**Kant said : Beauty is that which is represented as the object of a universal satisfaction**

**Weil said: the beautiful is that which we desire without wishing to consume it. We desire it should be.**

Sure Stef was also experiencing wonder, excitement, exhilaration and even loneliness but what she wanted to share was Beauty.

Maybe it was that she got a sense of the sublime, being in the presences of so much great art - the pinnacle of human endeavour.

As Croce might say - pure expression

And ..... so what if it was in part culturally biased.

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So where do we go from here?

There are so many strands to the debate on Beauty and frankly I only have a limited knowledge of a few of them but where I would like to take this



discussion is to my personal beliefs and one very interesting piece of work I have recently come across.

Personally I think that John Ruskin (1819 - 1900) was correct when he argued that Beauty is related to our appreciation and feeling for nature.

Ruskin wrote, of one of his trips to the Alps:

And then I learned — what till then I had not known — the real meaning of the word Beautiful.

With all that I had ever seen before — there had come mingled the associations of humanity — the exertion of human power — the action of human mind.

The image of self had not been effaced in that of God. . . . It was then that I understood that all which is the type of God's attributes . . . can turn the human soul from gazing upon itself . . . and fix the spirit . . . on the types of that which is to be its food for eternity; — this and this only is in the pure and right sense of the word beautiful.

What I understand Ruskin to be saying is that **Beauty comes from our inspiration at seeing what reminds us of the eternal.** You can call it god, nature, the eternal or whatever, it sort of doesn't matter.

It's the recognition and the appreciation of the feeling that is of first importance. Because, like any good drug once you have experienced it you look forward to doing so again.

The following is an extract from an essay by George P. Landow, a Professor of English and the History of Art, at Brown University titled Ruskin's published in 2005.

The difficulties Ruskin must solve appear first in the brief mentions of the beautiful that he makes in the opening volume of *Modern Painters*. In the chapter "Of Ideas of Beauty," he states that, "any material object which can give us pleasure . . . without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful"

The perception of Beauty is thus an act of some non-intellectual part of the mind — non-intellectual, because he later states that ideas of Beauty "are the subjects of moral, but not of intellectual perception"

**Ruskin believes Beauty, then, to be a disinterested pleasure which has an objective reality and which is perceived by the non-intellectual part of the mind.**

Landow goes on to discuss the issues and conflicts between emotion and objectivity but brings it back to relevance to this talk when he states:

He (Ruskin) attempts to solve the problem of feeling in Beauty by reasoning that all men perceive, or should perceive, certain qualities with the same emotion much in the same manner that all men find sugar sweet and wormwood bitter.

Men react so, says Ruskin, because it is God's will and because all men have a divine element in their nature, but men do not receive pleasure from certain forms and colors "because they are illustrative of it [God's nature], nor from any perception that they are illustrative of it, but instinctively and necessarily, as we derive sensual pleasure from the scent of a rose"

Since Ruskin wrote this stuff there has been endless debate about his ideas and his relevance, which is reasserting itself, but again I am not here to argue for a return to the Pre-Raphaelite preoccupation with gothic or anything else that is associated with the romanticism Ruskin is primarily associated with.

But what I am interested in is several themes that have been reoccurring throughout this talk.

They are that:

**Beauty is experiential - that is it is something we experience**  
**Beauty is in some form universal**  
**Beauty is in some form connected with our view of the world and the human condition**

and

**that the desire for and pursuit of Beauty is in fact a fundamental human trait.**

And this brings to mind Stendhal's (1783 -1842) famous quote:

**Beauty is the promise of happiness**

The critic Alexander Nehamas is quoted as arguing in his book 'Only a Promise of Happiness:

The Place of Beauty in a World of Art' that:

The perception of Beauty manifests a hope that life would be better if the object of Beauty were part of it. This hope can shape and direct our lives for better or worse. We may discover misery in pursuit of Beauty, or find that Beauty offers no more than a tantalizing promise of happiness.

But if Beauty is always dangerous, it is also a pressing human concern that we must seek to understand, and not suppress.

And that leads me to what I think, for us as architects, is the one of the most interesting points.

I have always believed that our pursuit of, desire for, interest in and focus on Beauty is in fact psychological, biological and anthropomorphic.

I have always believed that, in terms of architecture, the degree of abstraction from anthropomorphic form is one of the key determinants of the perception of the Beauty of a building, and that the human form has a central role in the creation of architecture and therefore the perception of Beauty.

Moreover, I would contend that **the relationship between anthropomorphic shape and pure geometric shape is at the heart of the architectural act.**

That is, we build in our own likeness.

There have been numerous theses on this topic addressing our relationship with our deep evolutionary past, from Vitruvius to Corb. They have all suggested that what makes us do what we do, and appreciate what we appreciate, is at least in part intrinsic to our nature.

Sort of sounds obvious and I am conscious this discussion is moving into the areas of psychology that I am frankly not qualified to discuss, but the point I want to make is that this is an important part of the discourse.

In fact, there is, as I have recently discovered, a growing debate led by post-darwinian theorists that Beauty is not only intrinsic to human nature but has, in fact, been a fundamental component of human evolution.

That is, **our appreciation of Beauty has not only always been with us but has continued to evolve throughout history.**

This is not to deny the importance of culture in forming individual taste but to place it in context.

The philosopher, art critic and academic Dennis Dutton (1944 -2010) argued that our appreciation of art is not fundamentally culturally learned, but rather stems from evolution.

Yes, evolution.

Dutton brings a progressive darwinian perspective to the discussion by arguing that:

**evolution's trick is to make things beautiful - to make you satisfied just looking at them**

That is, its part of the process of species preservation. By being beautiful we are moved to preserve rather than consume or destroy an object.

Which, if you think about it, takes us right back to Marx.

Remember that Marx wrote that;

**The aesthetic object is unique among man-made objects [because] it possesses a life of it's own**

But Dutton goes further.

He argues that, whilst Nature might have learnt how useful Beauty is in preserving any amount of things from butterflies to beaches, for us humans this desire to preserve is in fact genetically wired and has evolved as the species has evolved.

Dutton draws our view to the most typical and universal image in landscape painting - the vista into the distance contained by mountains, with a stream or water, a path leading us there and a tree in the foreground giving us a sense of proportion, scale, familiarity and safety, and describes how this view, found across all cultures and ages, relates directly back to the savannah landscapes our very earliest ancestors occupied.

That is, we are consistently and universally recreating our ancestral experience.

And, in that sense, Beauty, or rather our appreciation of it, is something that has been with us since the beginning of time and which has continued to evolve throughout human history.

In his truly wonderful piece on TED, Dutton, who sadly died in 2010, says:

**is Beauty in the eye of the beholder ?**

**..... No**

**its deep in our minds ..... its a gift handed down from our most ancient ancestors and it will be with us for as long as the human race exists.**

And this fact helps explain why Beauty is in fact cross cultural.

We all admire and desire things from other places because we all share the same wiring that finds certain things beautiful.

Whether it be the Mona Lisa, Tutankhamen's sarcophagus, a blue porcelain plate from China, a prehistoric nude from Crete, a carved wooden mask from Africa or a painting by Mark Rothko.

And ..... not just objects but the whole raft of human activities and experiences.

For, at the core of it all, what we are really appreciating is the manifestation of the ideal that Beauty brings us, whether it be in human form, a mathematical formula, a piece of gymnastics, an exquisite vista or a wonderful building.

For, in the end, what Dutton argues is that, at the core of our appreciation of Beauty is the simple fact that:

**we find Beauty in something done well**

And that is why Beauty matters and why Marx was right.