



The Question of Beauty in Architecture

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What I want to talk about today is 'The Question of Beauty in Architecture', and by that, I mean two things: first of all, does it matter what buildings look like; and secondly, what is a good-looking building, if we do agree that it does matter?

The question of whether architecture matters or not is something that you see running right through the history of religion, politics, economics, art and so much more. There is a very basic thought of whether the space that we are in creates an influence, either negative or positive, that we should take very seriously, and if so, how should we respond to that challenge?

I remember thinking that architecture really mattered quite a lot when I spent time in a building which perhaps taught me more about the power of architecture to influence who we are and how we feel than almost any other I have been in before or since. It was the Travelodge Hotel just near Colchester, where I happened to stay. I was staying in this building, and it is not particularly architecturally distinguished, but I remember thinking that everything about it was having a very big impact on me. The bedspread was conspiring, together with the carpet and the lights, to suggest that life was essentially a meaningless and rather cruel exercise, best done with rather quickly. I remember thinking, dreaming, as I lay on that bedspread, how much happier I might have been if only I had been here in the Villa Rotunda, built by Andrea Palladio.

So does it matter or doesn't it, what kind of environment we are in? This question has perturbed theologians and all those who have thought about ecclesiastical architecture for centuries.

We can summarise this theological architectural debate by looking at two churches. The first was a church put up by people who believed that architecture mattered a lot to your state of mind. It is the Chiesa del Gesù, built in Rome in 1584. It is a high point of the Catholic baroque; it is an extremely lavish and expensive building precisely because the belief of those who put it up was that if you don't get the architecture right, you will get people who are thinking the wrong way.

The second church to consider is very different: it is the world's earliest extant Protestant chapel, the Schloss Torgau in Eastern Germany. Built in 1544, it is a very simple, unadorned building. This divide has generally been the division between Catholic and Protestant architecture, with Protestants often believing that the location in which you are, does not particularly matter. What really matters is what you are reading and how you are interpreting what you are reading, not so much whether the walls have got a certain kind of gold or pilasters on them.

By what I might call 'innate temperate' I am a Catholic - not by religion, but by temperament, in that, in this area at least, I do believe that, for better or for worse, it does really matter where you are and the quality of the building is going to have an impact on you. So I am not a Protestant, in that respect. I say 'for better or for worse' because it is a rather unfortunate situation if you start to take architecture seriously - you will soon become rather unhappy - and the reason is that most of the world looks architecturally dull. For example, the view from my window in Shepherd's Bush in West London, is of a tower block built by a spectacularly unsuccessful architect called Sidney Kay. The problem with really unsuccessful architects is that what they do hangs around for a very long time - this will probably be with us for another 300 years. In other words, architecture is a serious business, and I do think that it impacts on our state of mind.

So if you become sensitised to architecture and its good and bad moments, you will be unhappy a lot of the time, because most of the world has gone wrong, most of the world is quite ugly. What do we do about

this?

Well, one temptation of people who have loved architecture is to take their love to such an extreme that they become a little bit ridiculous. They become what the 19th Century started to get to know as an 'aesthete'. The most famous aesthete in the 19th Century was of course Oscar Wilde, who famously said that the wrong kind of wallpaper could upset him far worse than a death in the family - but that does, of course, depend on the members of your family!

Punch magazine nicely satirises this Wildean ideal with two pictures: one is of a man walking through unpleasant scenery and having to keep himself calm by clutching a piece of beauty in his hands in the form of a flower, the other is of the man stupefied and unable to get out of his chair due to all the beauty which is around him. In other words, if you start taking architecture seriously, not only might you get rather unhappy, but you might also become rather absurd.

There are lots of claims upon our time and our resources, and it is almost as though, if you put beauty in architecture at the top of your list, it is in danger of unbalancing your perspective on things. Anyone who lives communally will soon start to realise that proper social relations and a concern for beauty do not always match.

I live with somebody who really does not care at all about beauty. I have tried to talk to him about my concerns, but the discussion tends to go nowhere and he tends to lose his temper, walk out and slam the door. This is Samuel, my son, who is now coming up for 3. As I say, he really is not interested in beauty. He would like to get the whole thing over and done with as he prefers his toys.

There is another reason why we might be uncharitable towards beauty, and that is because of a huge claim that people who love beautiful things often make. This is that if you gather together a sufficient amount of beautiful things and put them in beautiful surroundings, people will become better. This is often what architects tell politicians. When architects are trying to get money out of politicians, they often build arguments saying, 'If only we were able to redevelop this city or create a new master plan, there will be less crime, people's mood will improve,' etc. It is a lovely argument, but I do not think it is actually true. I do not think there is an ironclad relationship between making things beautiful and making people better.

One very good example why I do not think beautiful surroundings make people better is that Hermann Goering lived in one of the most beautiful houses of all the Nazi hierarchy, surrounded by devotional images from the Middle Ages that he had plundered from museums and private collections. But, of course, all of this beauty did not do him any good.

This has led some people to think that beauty therefore does not matter at all - there is nothing we can do and people will never become any better. I would not go so far as saying that. I think that beautiful objects and places make suggestions to us about how we might behave. They are not ironclad laws, they are not medicines, but they are suggestions. We are free to take up those suggestions, or to reject them, but nevertheless, I do think that they do have a kind of beguiling and suggestive effect at their best.

So these are all, in a way, caveats, from somebody who does take beautiful architecture very seriously, but these are caveats about some of the limits that you might encounter in your quest for a beautiful architecture.

To park all those concerns for a moment, we are then led on to the question of, if we accept that architecture matters, what on earth is good architecture? What is a beautiful building? If you go to most architects nowadays and start talking to them about beauty, they will start to look extremely alarmed. The question of what is beautiful is not one that lies at the top of the architectural agenda. The word 'beauty' is seen as reactionary, old-fashioned, and plain mystical, and one that architects would rather not engage with. Of course, it is the question that most of us in the general public want answered immediately: does it look good? Is it a successful building? Not just does it work well, though that is of course of concern, but also, what does it look like?

This was not always such a tricky and bizarre question to ask. For thousands of years, the question of beauty in architecture was relatively simple, at least in the West. A beautiful building was understood to be a classical building. There are countless examples of this, but one is Kedleston Hall, built by Robert Adam in 1765, embedded in the southern elevation of which is the Arch of Constantine, put up by the Romans in AD 315. Robert Adam did not think he was copying or slavishly imitating; he thought he was paying homage to the great Classical tradition. This was the case for about a thousand discontinuous years in the history of the West, where a beautiful building was quite obvious - a beautiful building was a Classical

building. This is why, for example, the Town Hall in Birmingham, put up in 1832, is an exact replica of the Maison Carriere in Nimes, put up by the Romans in AD130. There was a huge area of agreement about what is beautiful architecture at this time, and that is why, if you walk through towns and cities across Europe, and indeed, the United States, you will see relics everywhere of this great consensus about what is beautiful. A beautiful building is one that basically borrows from the traditions of the Greeks and the Romans.

However, this comfortable, and in many ways glorious, consensus is shattered by a building which appears in almost every History of Architecture you care to lay your hands on, because it signals the moment when the Classical consensus breaks down. It is the Strawberry Hill by Horace Walpole, which began going up in 1750. The reason why it is so significant is that it is the world's first domestic ecclesiastical building, the world's first house, if you like, to borrow from the traditions of the Middle Ages and to unleash great curiosity about the styles and traditions of other countries and other eras, and to break that classical consensus. So, whereas in 1730, if you had been a wealthy English person who had been looking for a house, you would go to an architect and the choice would have been classicism or classicism, but by 1790, the menu had hugely expanded. Now, freedom in choice and long menus are a very admirable thing in many areas of life, but when it comes to architecture, choice has a horrible habit of producing slightly compromised, or at least difficult, results.

A good example of what can happen is a building that went up in Northern Ireland in 1767. It was the work of a very wealthy aristocratic couple. He was Viscount Bangor and was in his fifties. He had recently got married to a 19 year old that he had met in Bath, Lady Anne. They discovered that they loved architecture and wanted to build themselves a great house in Northern Ireland, but they realised soon enough that they just did not agree on their architectural tastes. He was a traditionalist, which meant that he was a classicist. He wanted Palladian columns and all the classical traditions that he had grown up with. His young wife, 19 year old Lady Anne, was a modernist, and that meant that she was into the gothic style she had read about in magazines etc. There then followed, on a grand scale, the sort of argument between a couple that you could see on almost day of the week in the aisles of Ikea, with both of them squabbling furiously about how on earth to build their house. In the end, the despairing architect came up with a solution of almost Solomonic ingenuity. He suggested that the front elevation be done in the classical style, and that the rear elevation goes up in the gothic style.

Now, when the more sensitive architectural critics saw this building, they were appalled, and it seemed to them a symptom of everything that could start to go wrong when choice entered the field of architecture, when people could no longer be sure how to create something beautiful. There then followed decades of an anguished search for some sort of principle that architects could lean on to find out what on earth a building should look like.

Now, the answer, when it eventually starts to emerge, starts to come from an odd direction - not from architects, but from engineers.

In 1889 the Forth Railway Bridge is erected, and the interesting thing about how engineers go about their work is that they very rarely ask what things should look like; they simply focused on mechanical function. So the builders of this bridge just wanted to span a piece of water, quickly, efficiently, safely, and they did not really care whether it would be done with classical columns or with gothic arches; what they wanted was efficiency.

There then followed, from the examples of engineers, that most famous credo of modernist architecture, the idea that the form of any built structure should follow its function. You look at what a building should do, and that determines what it should look like. So there should be no more arguments about aesthetics, no more agonised discussions about what sort of arch to put in. You would look at what the programme is, you would look at what the function is, and you determine what a building should look like in that way. This is a very unusual assumption. For thousands of years, architects had seen their job as of course having certain functional, mechanical directions - keeping out the rain, etc. - but they also saw themselves as decorators and as artists.

Whilst looking at the Doge's Palace in Venice of 1490, the German classical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, wrote, 'To turn something useful into something beautiful: that is architecture's duty.' The job of an architect is not just to make things work; it is also to make them look nice.

All of this was brutally rejected by modernist architects, the most famous of whom was probably the French architect Le Corbusier, who came along at the beginning of the 20th Century and poured scorn on

decoration and on the aesthetic ambitions of traditional architects. Instead, he spoke up in favour of machines, technology, and engineering. In his book 'Towards a New Architecture', he praised a 40,000 kilowatt electricity turbine as a great piece of architecture. He saw it as an architecture that was doing something that all architects should be doing, and often were not, which is focusing on being efficient.

Because of this, he had only scorn for such buildings as Garnier's opera house in Paris, a very lush 19th Century building, full of gold and angels and expensive brocades. With disgust, Le Corbusier states in his book that, 'Things like this were being built at the same time as our railroads.' Le Corbusier suggested that all of this orthodox architecture should be rejected in order to make way for a new era of efficiency and a kind of machine age focus on the mechanical function of a building.

Now, what on earth would a house look like, if it stopped trying to look pretty and simply started to focus on working well? One suggestion from Le Corbusier himself was the Villa Savoye in Poissy, which went up in 1931. It does indeed look like a team of robots assembled this in haste on a production line. It looks like the epitome of, as it were, the machine age aesthetic.

But let us examine this sentence which says that the form of a building should follow function, because if you really look at it and take it apart, it starts to crumble in your hand, because what does it mean for a building to honour its function? What is the function of a building? We think we know what that means - we think that must mean something to do with air conditioning and heat and light; but of course we ask of many buildings that they not only perform well mechanically, but also follow a function in a more emotional sense. So for example, we might complain of a church that a church does not look enough like a church, or a library that may work very well, but at the same time, somehow does not emit the right feelings that we want from a library.

There is a lovely quote from John Ruskin: 'A good building must do two things,' he says, 'firstly, it must shelter us, and then secondly, it must also speak to us; speak to us of all the things that we think of as most important, and that we need to be reminded of on a day-to-day basis.' In other words, architecture has a kind of memorial or communicative function. We want our churches to talk to us of churchy things, we want our libraries to communicate feelings of rest and concentrated study, etc. and we will be as upset by failures in those areas as we will be upset by a leaking roof.

Fortunately or not, modernist architects have never really practised what they preached. Le Corbusier might have spoken in favour of efficiency and not really worrying about what something looked like, but if you study what he did rather than what he said, he was in fact ruthlessly focused not on how a building worked but on how it looked. The perfect example is when he had a building handmade by artisans and brought in from Switzerland at huge cost. Nothing in this building worked as it should: the building leaked; it was too hot in summer; it was too cold in winter. It was a sham. It was, as it were, a kind of a promise of efficient technology, but only a promise. There is a lovely letter from the owner of this building in Le Corbusier archives in Paris, where they are complaining about the incessant rain. She says that her son has had to go to Chamonix in the French Alps to recover from pneumonia brought on by the leaking roof. She says, 'Dear Architect, it's raining in the hall, it's raining on the ramp, and the walls of my garage are absolutely soaked. What's more, it's still raining in my bathroom, which floods so terribly in bad weather that the water pours right in through the skylight.' In other words, Le Corbusier talked about efficiency, but really, like architects before and since, he was just interested in things looking nice, and whether it was a choice of it really working or looking like it worked, he always wanted things to look like they worked.

The modern movement in architecture often justifies its choices in the language of science. For instance, if you go to Norman Foster and ask, 'Why did you design the Gherkin the way you did?', he will probably say something like, 'Well, it's all got to do with the movement of the air, the aerodynamics around the tip of the tower,' etc. and mechanical answers. However, the answer is really that he designed the tower as he did because he thought it looked nice. But, of course, architects are not really allowed to admit that because of an anxiety about what their clients will say. If you are a client and you are told by your architect that you need things to look this way because of scientific reasons, or even better, ecological reasons, you are really going to swallow that; whereas, if you are simply told that the architect likes the shape, it just appeals to them, that is much more vulnerable ground. So architects have traditionally, in recent years, always grounded their decisions in arguments about the building performing well.

We are slowly seeing signs that architects are beginning to rediscover that maybe the way they do things is for no other reason than because it looks nice. We are now in an era of choice once again. The orthodoxies of high modernism, the mid-20th Century ideas about science and technology, are fracturing, slowly and hesitantly.

One example of this is that the architects of the Tate Modern, Herzog and de Meuron, built a library in Germany which they covered with imprints of paintings, pictures of animals and other things, onto a concrete façade. Why is it done like this? For no other reason than because the architect thought it looked pretty.

Another example is a tower covered in Islamic motifs by the French architect Jean Nouvel proposed for Doha in the Middle East. Those motifs do not do anything from a functional point of view or from a mechanical point of view, but they do honour that second function that Ruskin identified: they communicate. These motifs help to communicate where the building is and where its traditions lie etc.

In other words, we are slowly seeing a return in architecture of an awareness that buildings should be communicating and that a good building is not just an efficient building; it is also one that talks to us of the right sort of things.

This leads us to the question of how on earth do objects talk to us? Let us focus a little bit more on this idea of communication in architecture. How could a building communicate, or how could any work of design communicate?

A good way of beginning on this question is to think of crockery, or tea-sets. The interesting thing about crockery, like any items of design, is that it is quite easy really to attribute them things like a gender, a politics, an outlook on the world, a newspaper to read, that they might be reading. For instance, if one looks at a piece of Scandinavian crockery, I think that, if it was a person, it would be commuting on its bike and it would be reading the Guardian. Alternatively there are crockery sets that portray a much more aristocratic vision of life; a Telegraph-reading crockery set, etc. I am being silly, but I think what I am trying to bring out is that you can ascribe things like gender, politics, and outlook on life to inanimate things. You could look at anything. You could look at your chair that you are sitting on or any object around you, and you could quite easily write a little short story about whether it was a man or a woman, about whether it was someone who was aristocratic or more democratic, etc. There are all sorts of things that emanate from objects.

Now, the interesting thing is that when we say that we find something beautiful, we are not just saying that we like the way it looks. If you scratch below the surface, really what we are saying is we like the outlook on life that this object is suggesting to us. We are saying that if the object was a person or an animal, we would like the sort of person or animal that it was.

If you look at two very different buildings, some very important things can be derived from your views. Though both are only a matter of years old, one might be in the foothills of Mount Fuji in Japan a few years ago, and one might be a contemporary developer's house just near Barnes. The interesting thing is that, if you like one of them more than the other, it is not just that you like the way it looks, you also like the sort of feelings that it communicates to you about how life should be lived. So there is a whole area of experience, politics, and economics, and views on society that are present in our discussions about how things look. This is why couples argue so vehemently at Ikea. They are arguing about what a sofa should look like, or what kind of glasses to buy, because it is not just a visual argument; it is an argument about what life is about. So be very careful if you are choosing sofas or if you are sensing large disagreements with your friends and partners in these aesthetic discussions.

To scratch even further into how objects communicate? If we take a look at this Henry Moore sculpture, Two Forms, completed in 1934 and now at the Tate. If you go round sculpture shows of contemporary, modernist sculpture, you will very often find extremely elaborate descriptions of what pieces of sculpture mean. There is a lovely and fascinating essay by the art critic Herbert Read, where he basically spends twelve pages discussing what this piece means. It gets more and more elaborate but Herbert Read basically ends up saying that this is a sculpture 'expressing the condition of modern man in an alienated, technological environment, from which God has recently departed.' To this, one might say, 'Well, hang on, Herbert, this is just two blocks of wood with a hole in them!' but I think I want to be sympathetic towards Herbert Read's argument, however pretentiously he states it, because really what he is saying is there is a whole lot going on in these shapes. You could look at a shape which, in a way, does not mean anything specific, and you can read into it all sorts of quite plausible analyses. When we say that we like something, or do not like something, we are frequently responding to what this object is managing to communicate to us.

One of the other ways in which inanimate things communicate to us is by reminding us of animate things. There are an awful lot of animals in buildings and bits of furniture and chairs and glasses, etc. I have seen

tables where ox-like creatures or some sort of deer lurk, likewise I have seen some kind of portly accountant lurking in the kettles, and a sort of penguin struggling to get out of jugs. Then, to move up to the scale of whole buildings, if you take a look at a particular convention centre in Malaysia, there is a rather threatening insect that is seemingly looming out of it. So, as I say, when we say we like a building, or like an object, we are also subtly and often unconsciously saying, 'I quite like the animal that seems to be lurking unconsciously in this object.'

One of the reasons why I think we are incredibly sensitive to forms and why we will spend hours discussing what a glass should look like or what a window sill should look like is that our eyes are incredibly attuned to what people's faces look like. Very often, we transcribe that incredible sensitivity built up in relation to faces to our relationship to objects as well.

Let me talk to you a little bit about faces. The 18th Century Swiss physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater wrote a book called 'Essays on Physiognomy'. This was the high point of the pseudoscience of physiognomy. This argued that you could learn what people are like simply by looking at their faces. This book on physiognomy was a sort of manual, basically telling you that you no longer had to talk to people; all you needed to do is to look at their face, and this would give you a penetrating glimpse of what they were actually like. It was a sort of manual full of noses and eyes and ears, and appended to each one was a little description of the character of the owner of this nose or face or mouth or whatever. For instance, according to Lavater, there are such things as 'mild and forgiving' noses, 'crafty but vulgar' noses, or 'sad and sarcastic' noses.

This idea that you can just look at people's faces and say what they're like is completely mad, but I think there is something sensible in it, and the sensible thing is the idea that people's faces do evoke characters. People may not actually be what they look like, but they do look a certain way. There is such a thing as a generous face, or a mean face, etc. Now, the interesting things for our purposes, when it comes to architecture, is that the difference between a mean face and a generous face, a vulgar nose and an honest nose, is almost infinitesimal. It has got to do with a tiny variation in the swelling of a lip or the curve of a nose - and yet, these differences have a huge impact on how we end up reading a face, and we transcribe that sensitivity to how we read a windowsill, how we read the juncture of a roof, how we read how a door meets its frame, etc. We take that sensitivity and unconsciously apply it to the whole visual world.

So, as I say, when we describe something as beautiful, we are often really saying we quite like the animal or person that is lurking within it. If you are trying to choose kitchen taps, at one level, you could say, 'What's the most beautiful kitchen tap?' But another way of saying it is 'Who would you like to go on holiday with if these kitchen taps were magically transformed into people?' I think that we would all be able to make this leap and come to a useful conclusion. It may be a hard choice, but essentially, all of us are very adept at immediately transposing a character into inanimate objects. So, when it comes to beauty, when we say that something is beautiful, really what we are saying is that we like the vision of life, the personality, or the character that is emerging from it. There is a lovely quote from the French writer Stendhal, where he said, 'Beauty is a promise of happiness.' I think what is nice about that quote is the idea that what is beautiful quickly leads you on to a sense that if only you could live around that object, you would have a happy time. So if you think this building is beautiful, one way of describing that beauty is to describe simply the physical object, but another way of doing it is to say, for instance, that there is some sort of harmonious feeling that is coming from it, and that you want to live there, and you could quite easily describe the qualities of the life that you might have if you lived around it.

If we have settled that aspect of things, we are still left with all sorts of conundrums, one of which is that, if we accept that beauty is important, and if we accept that beauty emanates from the personality of objects, as it were, then why is it that some people like some kinds of styles of buildings and others like other kinds of styles of buildings?

I think one of the things that goes on is that a beautiful object captures, or a beautiful space often captures the sort of qualities that you respect and admire, but maybe do not have enough of in yourself. I think we are very often attracted to buildings and places and objects which somehow capture our ideals, but ideals that we have a hard time holding onto, as it were, on a day-to-day basis. So I like spaces which are minimalist and sparse, because it is nothing like my life, which is noisy and chaotic and lots going on. Such spaces seem to capture an atmosphere of serenity and calm that I deeply aspire to and respect, but I cannot seem to get hold of enough in my life. So it is almost as though, when decorating spaces, what we try to do is to surround ourselves by objects which capture a spirit, as I say, that we're attracted to but don't fully possess. There is something elusive about the things that we find beautiful.

If we look at the design for a bedroom at the Palace of Versailles which was decorated in 1765, the interesting thing to ask is, what sort of a life would you need to want in order to think that this was a nice way to decorate your bedroom? What is it that you would admire but maybe think was a little bit lacking in your life? I think that in order to think that such a bedroom was very beautiful, one of the things that you really are afraid of, and I think that you do not have quite enough of, is a luxurious lifestyle. This extreme ostentation can only really be the work of people who, at some level, do not fully possess inwardly the ostentation that this bedroom suggests. There is something tentative and fragile about the owner's relationship to luxury. I think that, when we speak about an aristocratic age, it is also an age that is always very close to poverty and revolution. For instance, for this Versailles bedroom decorated in 1765, the underlying fear of the owner was something like the French Revolution, which was coming down the road very swiftly. There was a kind of unconscious fear of the opposite of this sort of building.

In other words, when we are decorating spaces, we decorate not just with the things we love, but also we are decorating to get away from certain things that we fear. So there is an awful lot contained of our psychology in the way that we are decorating things.

Let me come to another room decoration by some wealthy people. One of the wealthiest couples in Belgium, the heirs of a huge brewery fortune, built a house which is of great contrast here. The walls of this building were made out of breeze block. So think how different the walls are in this building in modern Belgium to the Versailles building. One is wealth in 1765, and the other is wealth in 2002. What has changed? What is going on? What are these people afraid of? I think one of the things that these young Belgium people are afraid of is, at some level, losing touch with what you might call reality, and they are using their breeze blocks to anchor them. They are using their breeze block walls to give them a closer contact with some of the things that they respect and admire, a kind of democratic simplicity, but which they are afraid that their life may strip them of contact with. So, as I say, we decorate with our love, and we decorate with our hate.

But, to return to Versailles, there was a little weekend hideaway that Marie Antoinette built for herself at the bottom of the garden, the Petit Trianon, built in 1785. It is utterly unlike the rest of the Versailles buildings and gardens in that it is an peasant dwelling where she could play at impersonating peasant life for her own amusement. Many housing estates in Britain now look a little bit like this. It is an image of rural arcadia. If it was in Britain, we would call it the mock-Tudor style, thatched roofs, etc. Now, what sort of a life do you need to have in order to think that the peasant aesthetic is a nice and a good idea? One of the things you need to have is nothing like a peasant life! The interesting thing about peasants is they do not like living in this sort of thing. You need to have a seriously elevated income and a seriously safe and technologically advanced way of life in order to think that this is a good idea.

Let me digress into kitchens a moment: I was looking at a magazine about kitchens the other day, and it struck me that if you look at the adverts for kitchens in a magazine, like Elle Decoration, there are basically two kinds of kitchen on offer by the major manufacturers. On the one hand, you get the minimalist and empty kitchen, which is clean and serene and it looks like a monastery. The other kind of kitchen that you get is the country kitchen, which is all wooden, it has got an Aga, and there is a picture of a dog somewhere, it is all rustic, etc. What is going on here? These are basically two of the central fantasies of the modern age. These two styles of decorating your kitchen reflect two things that we are sorely lacking in modern society, but incredibly attracted to, and that is, on the one hand, calm and serenity, and on the other hand, contact with nature and tradition. These are two things that are very much missing from our societies and that we are desperately trying to get hold of, in our kitchens and other areas of our lives. So, if you look at what people are afraid of, look at what people are lacking, then that will tell you an awful lot about how people are decorating.

Now, for the minutes that remain, I am going to try and lay down certain suggestions of what is beautiful and what is ugly in architecture. It is an incredibly high risk sort of thing to do. Modern architects do not really like doing this, because they simply believe that it is too complicated. You cannot arrive at laws of good architecture, but I am going to have a go, and I think it is a useful exercise. I think all of us, as we are walking through cities, look around us and we say, 'Oh, I like this,' 'I don't like that,' and it is quite interesting to try and build up for yourself some kind of a sense of why you think that building is successful and why do you think it is not. It makes walking through cities very interesting.

Now, one of the things that I think lies at the heart of good architecture is the word 'order'. When we look at successful buildings or streetscapes, the word 'order' lies right at the heart of what is attractive, I think. The Rue de Castiglione in Paris, which went up in 1802, is a classic image of an ordered street scene - bilateral

symmetry extending as far as the eye can see, a repetition of elements going right down into the distance. With it, there is something inherently pleasing about this precisely because the human condition is never far from disorder. So there is something in us that is often seduced by order and perspective precisely because these are things which lie right at the heart of civilisation but are also continually threatened.

So order in construction is something that we often respond to, but before we get too excited about this, it is important to realise there are limits to our love for order. For instance, an office building in Trenton, New Jersey, might be very ordered with everything absolutely symmetrical, etc. but I think they are quite ugly and boring in a way. That tells you something interesting: I think there is a way in which you can get too much of a good thing. This is a point that British philosophers make in the 18th Century, that beautiful things are very often right in the middle of a spectrum, at one end of which you have excessive order, and at the other end of which you have excessive chaos, and somehow, the beautiful object is wonderfully able to sit in the middle of that, to draw in some of the energy from chaos, and also draw in some of the security and rigour of order, and somehow it sits in the middle.

Let me bring that to life by looking at two buildings in Venice, within a few feet of each other: one is the Procuratie Vecchie, built in 1832; a few feet away is the Doge's Palace, 1420. Now, I think one is clearly more beautiful and the other is more boring. Why is that? I think both of them are ordered buildings, but that they are ordered to a different degree. If you look at the one building your eye very quickly detects the order and works out the order that is intrinsic in it. You can quickly see that it is just a repetition of elements, and so your eye very quickly gets a bit bored. The good thing about the other building is that there is an order within it, but you cannot immediately work it out, which is why you look at it and it is why tourists are always just sitting and staring at this building, because it is a complicated ordered construction. If you compare this to music, one is like a monotone drum beat, and the other is like a complex Bach fugue, where you intimate an order which you cannot immediately work out.

So somehow a balance between order and disorder lies right at the heart of many beautiful structures, and this is not just buildings but even just a brick wall. A good looking brick wall frequently has this quality in spades. A brick wall is an obviously ordered thing - bricks laid out symmetrically according to a logic - but a good brick wall also knows that you need each individual brick to be slightly different in order really to bring home the beauty of brick. So I think a brick wall that is working well is one where each brick is differentiated within an otherwise very symmetrical grid, and this kind of balance you can find in whole streetscapes.

A good example of this can be found in modern canal streets in Amsterdam, where canal houses each of the buildings can only be a certain width and only be a certain height, but within that very logical grid, all sorts of play and fancy is allowed. It is an urban idea that they took from the main square in Telc, in the Czech Republic, where, again, all the buildings are exactly the same width and height, but within that there is an enormous amount of play and fancy allowed.

Let me try another principle of beauty on you just to see how we go. Another thing that buildings need to get right in order to be beautiful I think, is to remember what the time is and where they are. This is going to sound like a rather weird idea, but many buildings are sometimes prone to forget what the time is and where they are. Some buildings that have done this rather spectacularly are some buildings that look as if they should be in medieval Netherlands, but are in fact in modern Japan, just near Nagasaki. This is the work of a crazy Japanese property developer, who went to Holland and fell in love with the architecture of the medieval Netherlands, and though that it would be a good idea to build a whole development near Nagasaki that just transported that kind of architecture. So he even built canals. It is very odd. It is, in a way, perfect, it is good architecture in that sense, but it is bad architecture because it has forgotten where it is and what the time is, what the era is, what the historical period is.

So I think one of the things that we ask of good architecture is that it is somehow attuned to its location and attuned to its era. There is nothing worse than arriving in a foreign country and realising that the buildings look like they could be anywhere, or look like they come from the wrong sort of time period.

We get this even at the level of light switches. I am a great fan of light switches, and whenever I travel, I like looking at the light switch, in the hotel room, say, and there is nothing nicer than when you arrive in a country and somehow the light switch matches the country. I agree this sounds a little bit odd, but it can certainly be seen in countries if you take the trouble to look for it. For instance, a Swiss light switch seems very wonderfully fitting, capturing lots of qualities of the country in a very small piece of design. In contrast, the North American light switch displays all sorts of qualities of North American life are captured in it.

So we want our light switches and, by extension, our buildings, to be attuned to where we are. There is nothing more depressing than arriving at a place like where you just do not really know where you are because the buildings are just blocks which could be anywhere: Are you in Atlanta? Are you in Detroit? Who is to say?

So buildings and architects often forget where they are. They also forget their era. This can be seen in some medieval artisans' cottages built by the Prince of Wales in 1994 in his village of Poundbury. In it live some IT programmers who commute in their Toyota to a nearby trading estate. Here the question arises of what people are doing building houses that look like this? In other words, however satisfying the architecture may be from a purely formal point of view, there is an added requirement that we have of buildings, that somehow they do acknowledge the era that we live in.

I have come across many wonderful examples of this in my travels in the world. For instance, in Japan there are modern buildings that seem to remember and honour the past, and particularly certain principles of Zen architecture, but nevertheless, remember that we are also living in an age which has certain distinctive qualities. Likewise in the Netherlands, there are many housing estates that honour the basic forms of the traditional barn-like structures of the early modern Netherlands in the countryside, but that are doing something rather distinctive with them. It is important to remember and honour our desire for tradition while, nevertheless, not producing kitsch, which is a great danger.

Now, to come towards some sort of finishing point, we can look at a picture from a few years ago of a particular field outside Stratford-Upon-Avon with 300 year old oak trees on it. It is a very beautiful field, but, unfortunately, it is no more. Barratt Homes bought it last year, and it is now covered up in disgusting houses. When we see this sort of example, we very frequently turn against property development. Property development has a very bad name, and the reason is that property developers have done very bad things.

When eco-campaigners and people who do not want buildings to be built are talking about architecture, they are almost always talking about bad architecture. But it is important to remember that the job of an architect is to produce the sort of architecture that does not make you miss nature.

If we consider what the lagoons of Venice looked like before the city was built, no one minds losing this when you get the beautiful city of Venice itself. That is really the point of arguing for good architecture: at the end of the day, good architecture is a major contribution to civilisation, and when we are too often polarised between nature on the one hand and development on the other, and it really is not that simple. It is a choice between good architecture and bad architecture.

William Morris, once said, 'Had we lived in Venice in her early days and watched the swamplands of the lagoon being turned into streets and canals, as eyelet after eyelet was built upon, we would have grudged it but little.' - In other words, it is a major requirement that we should make on ourselves, on the developers and architects that we as the public are employing to make sure that we put up the sort of buildings that do not leave us regretting the countryside and the nature that are inevitably swallowed up in their name.

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