

AN AESTHETIC DEONTOLOGY: ACCESSIBLE BEAUTY AS A FUNDAMENTAL OBLIGATION OF ARCHITECTURE ¹

CHRISTIAN ILLIES AND NICHOLAS RAY

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, especially pertaining to literature, cinema, and now architecture. The idea of an ‘intersection’, especially when construed as ranging over ‘values’, while fruitful, has perhaps limited the field. This paper presents an alternative view, grounded in the idea of a general deontology, with moral and *aesthetic* duties forming discrete but interconnected parts of such a deontology. More concretely, we argue for an “Obligation to Accessible Beauty.”

After having clarified what architectural beauty amounts to (section 1), we will outline the argument for such an obligation (section 2). It will be based upon the moral demand to respect human beings and thus to serve their basic needs, and the need for beauty is one of them. The obligation is strengthened further by the fact that architecture is in the public realm (and therefore unavoidable for people). The notorious subjectivity of beauty does not count against this argument because it is agnostic towards any one ideal of what a beautiful building consists in. It only requires that the architect give beauty due consideration in her design deliberations. While the Obligation to Accessible Beauty is universal to humanity, its satisfaction can be local for any culture.

To conclude, we will discuss how this aesthetic

“ WHILE THE OBLIGATION TO ACCESSIBLE BEAUTY IS UNIVERSAL TO HUMANITY, ITS SATISFACTION CAN BE LOCAL FOR ANY CULTURE ”

obligation can be compared and weighed against other moral demands (section 3). Obviously, the suggested Obligation to Accessible Beauty is not a recipe for the avoidance of moral conflict. But by seeing this aesthetic demand to be commensurate with other moral demands, the design problem becomes more tractable. We conclude that apparently irreconcilable demands have to be resolved by appeal to aesthetic solutions. A building's design is always a synthetic response to varying requirements. Thus, when it comes to reconciling conflicting moral and practical demands in architecture, beauty, not morality has the last word. We explore further architectural consequences of this view in our recent work, *The Philosophy of Architecture*.² Here, however, our concern is primarily with solidifying the philosophical foundation of this project.

1. THE BEAUTY OF BUILDINGS

1.1 BEAUTY AS THE PRIME DISTINCTION OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

We begin with a claim that what distinguishes architecture from mere building is an intention to go beyond meeting a functional brief or solving a problem. Nikolaus Pevsner famously declared that a bicycle shed was a building, whereas Lincoln Cathedral was a work of architecture, which implies that a mundane building could not be beautiful, or, beautiful in the same sense as a cathedral.³ Against Pevsner, we agree with the generally held view that a distinction should not be based on scale, or on the modesty of a building's purpose. Whenever the craftsperson makes something with especial care, we claim, there is and should be an intention, even if unacknowledged consciously, to make something that others can recognize as beautiful.⁴ There are several kinds of beauty in architecture, and a simple utilitarian building might well share some, though not all, qualities with much more elaborate and considered structures. An overriding task of the act of building with this particular care might be described as that of enabling people to feel 'at home in the world'. This might entail a careful consideration of the nature of the context of a building—its setting in a landscape, or in an existing village, town, or city. We are simply not satisfied with mere functionality; we expect architecture to aim at 'more'. And it seems that fulfilling exactly this task, if this is accepted, is the *underlying* purpose behind the various types of beauty, described below, which we regard as the aims of architecture.

1.2 VARIETIES OF BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE

When we talk about "beauty" in architecture, we must be aware of its complexity—there are different varieties of beauty one can legitimately attribute to or expect of architecture. We make no pretense to replicate the enormous literature that has accrued on those varieties: our purpose is to build the basis for a larger argument.⁵

For convenience we might distinguish the following five types.

There is *formal beauty* which accounts for what moves us when architects manipulate volumes to create memorable spaces—such as the Pantheon in Rome, which is based on a sphere, and which few visitors are unaffected by. Related notions of architecture as a spatial art, or as primarily the plastic manipulation of form (as Le Corbusier sometimes claimed), and the careful articulation of surfaces enter here.⁶

Formal, or compositional, beauty can be found in other works of art, such as sculptures and pictures, but *functional beauty* is a quality found in the design of useful products, such as implements, and architecture. Such objects, and those of (engineering) design, sometimes have a beauty inherent in their efficient workings.⁷ When buildings and urban spaces serve functional criteria in elegant ways (such as the beautiful drainage system in St Mark's Square in Venice), they give a particular satisfaction not achieved by purely decorative objects devoid of use.

Formal and functional beauty can be found in many non-architectural artifacts. But architecture is almost always related to a particular location: it is situated in a context, which renders it capable of exhibiting *contextual beauty*. Architecture theorists speak of the “murmur of a site,”⁸ of architecture as an ‘art of the ensemble’, and more. The ways that effective architecture relates to its setting, whether urban or rural, and whether by seeking to blend in with it or stand out from it, is one of its most obvious characteristics, and most often a cause of criticism when people feel a wrong decision has been made. Put positively, contextual fit (especially with regard to cultural context) can co-account for a building's beauty.⁹

There is also *time related beauty*. Given the endurance of much architecture, the way in which a building succeeds in doing so can be a factor in the satisfaction it gives. Its age can bestow aesthetic pleasures; materials may display weathering effects

“WHEN IT COMES TO RECONCILING CONFLICTING MORAL AND PRACTICAL DEMANDS IN ARCHITECTURE, BEAUTY, NOT MORALITY, HAS THE LAST WORD.”

in pleasing ways, and so on.¹⁰

Finally, there is *intellectual beauty*. Just as elegant solutions are accomplished in mathematics or in the fugues of J.S. Bach, architecture can give rise to aesthetic pleasure because it exhibits the solution to a complex set of technical problems. This also pertains to the considered deployment of proportional systems, as in Lutyens's Liverpool Cathedral and war memorials.¹¹ Buildings are complicated artifacts, and some of them can be admired as intellectual achievements over and above their formal beauty. Furthermore, some would claim the Pantheon is an aesthetically moving work of architecture not just on account of its satisfactory form, as noted above, or its intellectually satisfying geometry, but because as a work it reflects deep trans-cultural meanings: the building's volume represents the world. This is perhaps a spiritual rather than intellectual type of beauty.¹²

The different types of beauty can be in correspondence, but they also create a tension. It would seem that it is quite possible to have a formal beauty that is not functional, or particularly rigorous intellectually: this would be evident in a sculpturally compelling structure that was maybe not very useful, such as Zaha Hadid's fire station for the Vitra organization. Buildings can also be formally beautiful, and work well, without being particularly satisfying in the third way: these might be "romantic" works, such as *Neuschwanstein*, the castle built by Ludwig II, that depend to a certain extent on the associations that are summoned up. But a building such as *Neuschwanstein* can be criticized if it is not also skilfully composed—in such cases, it degenerates into mere kitsch. And a laboratory building that was rigorously worked through as a design, and also functioned well, would not necessarily be beautiful formally, even though at various periods architects have argued that we *ought* to find such buildings beautiful. Any building aspiring to beauty must represent some kind of reconciliation of these different types of beauty. This aspiration to beauty is what architects should aim at, or so we will argue.

2. AESTHETIC DEONTOLOGY

2.1 THE OBLIGATION TO BEAUTY

We began by claiming that the intention to make something beautiful is what distinguishes architecture from mere building, even though some have argued that aesthetics should have nothing to do with architecture. Hannes Meyer, who succeeded Gropius as the director of the *Bauhaus*, famously stated that architecture is a "technical, not an aesthetic process."¹³ According to Meyer, architecture can do without beauty: its essence is the creation of a functional space, its worth is merely 'what it does' and how well it does that. Here, beauty is a luxury, not a demand. Alternatively, beauty might arise naturally, or even necessarily, as Functionalists claimed, if the functional aspects are satisfied.

In contrast to either of these two positions, we argue that beauty, in the senses described above, is the prime goal and obligation of architectural design. We shall refer to this claim, and the moral obligation behind it, as the ‘Obligation to Beauty.’¹⁴

There are different ways to argue for this claim, depending on the kind of ethical theory one presupposes. In Aristotelian mode, any human practice aims at some result, this being the implicit goal of the activity. We practice the flute in order to play it better; we make each sculpture not only for itself, but also in order to improve as sculptors. Similarly, the result of good artistic practice, that is to say the practice of the art or craft of being an architect, will be a product with aesthetic quality. And if it is the aim of architects to practice their craft to the highest standard they are able to achieve, then architects must strive for aesthetic quality. Otherwise it would remain opaque as to why we should regard an aesthetically successful building as ‘good architecture’ in a wider sense.

But the Obligation to Beauty can also be supported by a moral argument of a different variety, one motivated by a concern for *human well-being*. If we (morally) must promote human well-being, then this includes all human needs and desires.¹⁵ After all, that is why buildings *should* be functional—because as vulnerable, dependent animals, we need a safe and warm and healthy place to live. But we need more: we also have a fundamental need for a pleasing place where we can happily live. As the 20th century Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck put it: “*Architecture need do no more, nor should it ever do less, than assist man’s homecoming...*”¹⁶ While it is conventionally thought of as supplemental, beauty is (on this view) actually essential to human well-being, for our emotions and our feeling at home, otherwise it would be inexplicable why most people spend so much time and money decorating their homes. The simplistic anthropology of an architect like Hannes Meyer, with his list of ‘motives’ from 1928, is ludicrously reductive.¹⁷ Humans need

“HUMANS NEED MORE: THEY DEEPLY LONG FOR BEAUTY.”

more: they deeply long for beauty, a desire that is probably genetically embedded.¹⁸ Any appropriate notion of well-being will therefore support the claim of beauty being a necessary goal of architecture.

2.2 THE OBLIGATION TO ACCESSIBLE BEAUTY

If we endorse this second moral argument, and if the aesthetic quality, or beauty, of a building responds to a moral requirement for promoting well-being, then something important follows: the beauty that the architect must strive for must be accessible. Not only do people have strong views about building, they also articulate them forcibly, and this gives us reason to believe that they understand what it is that they object to and what they enjoy.¹⁹ Architecture's status as a public art entails moral requirements not adherent to other art forms. Whereas we do not have to pick up a prize-winning novel, or listen to a highly-praised piece of music, it is impossible to avoid the buildings all around us. Thus people will always be confronted by architecture and their desire for beauty will be frustrated if the architecture they experience is banal or ugly. (To be sure, there are many ways of satisfying the human need for beauty but because architecture is in an important way inescapable, any ugly architecture will be a frustration of this need, whether or not we are able to experience beauty in other areas.)

There is therefore an onus on architecture to communicate in a way that, while it may be appreciated on many levels, is *accessible*, rather than conceived in a private language that only the *cognoscenti* can appreciate. Architects frequently tend towards forming sub-cultures that find certain forms and materials (like bare concrete) beautiful, which the general public may find ugly and unfriendly. But to the extent that buildings are a form of public art, used and seen by many, they must also be capable of satisfying the aesthetic desires of many. An exclusively elitist concept of beauty would not do so and is thus not the morally required beauty. As Fontaine's fable tells us, we need to ensure that people with a variety of capabilities can enjoy the good food we prepare.²⁰

Yet, such accessibility needs a pinch of salt. What is accessible is not simply given. It often seems that it is a part of architects' Obligation to Beauty to expand the aesthetic expectations of their clients. If they did not do so, people could be condemned to a banal repetition of conventional buildings. Thus the best architecture might well assist in a re-definition of what we generally call the beautiful. The idea of an accessible beauty can therefore be seen as a dialogue between the architect, or her building, and the public: whilst it is arrogant for architects to say that people *must* learn to understand their buildings, it is clear that public taste develops and moves on, so that inspiring works of architecture broaden the area of acceptability for the general public. It is a principal moral task for

architects, therefore, to judge carefully the aesthetic accessibility of the buildings they propose, and this is applicable for each of the five different types of beauty we identified above.

2.3 CHALLENGING THE OBLIGATION TO BEAUTY

Is there really an aesthetic obligation of the variety we propose? Some would claim that the requirement that architects should create aesthetic quality (let alone beauty) in their designs is pointless, impossible, or even dangerous. Here are four objections.

Firstly, one might object that our characterization too easily subscribes to the formalist conception of the aesthetic sense and does not accurately record how people experience a building. Much of the way we experience architecture is intuitive. We are “enveloped” in the experience of a work of architecture, as Walter Benjamin observed²¹; we do not usually stand in front of it analyzing its divisions into coherent and incoherent parts. In this sense, experiencing a group of buildings is like a walk through a forest, or the exploration of a cave, and could more readily be subjected to psychological analysis than conventional aesthetic descriptions.

Secondly, even if there can be some objectivity in the differing experiences people have of buildings, the way buildings are appreciated is inevitably culturally conditioned: members of certain castes in India may be more likely to enjoy the rich texture and overwhelming detail of a Hindu temple, whereas Europeans of an analogous class prefer the plain abstraction of Mies van der Rohe’s *Barcelona Pavilion*. The attempt to find universal qualities of beauty (desirable intricacy, or perfection of proportion) would therefore be quite futile.

Thirdly, our appreciation is not only conditioned by cultural origin, but also by time. As our technology progresses, forms which were previously impossible or uneconomic to construct become possible. In the past, for example, only limited spans were achievable, so intermediary columns were necessary, and it was natural to adopt some

“ IT IS A
PRINCIPAL
MORAL
TASK FOR
ARCHITECTS
[...] TO JUDGE
CAREFULLY
THE AESTHETIC
ACCESSIBILITY
OF [THEIR]
BUILDINGS. ”

conventions to decorate them. But now, we might not need columns (in a traditional sense) at all. Structures could arise, and warp and twist like a piece of landscape, and the conventions of architectural form are revealed for what they always were—products of the technological limitations of their time.

We can also, fourthly, raise the more fundamental objection whether we should aspire to make beautiful buildings at all. Isn't cultural beauty a dangerous camouflage of a rather grim reality? It might be more truthful to the purposes that they serve, and the conditions of their production, that buildings should be ugly. In his analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and political interests, Theodor Adorno argued that all cultural products, including architecture, were extended instruments of capitalism, necessarily putting those who experience them into the position of passive consumers. "Beauty" in this reading is particularly dangerous, because it obscures the brutal face of reality, that is a system of capitalist exploitation and instrumentalization. "Ugly" art, in contrast, will be a more truthful revelation of the real conditions of society. His observations of 1944 anticipate the feelings of many in the last seventy years.²²

These objections are paradigmatic for the aesthetic debate on architecture and aesthetics. They correspond to fundamental philosophical theories: aesthetic subjectivism would claim that any aesthetic experience remains subjective and no general judgements can be made about aesthetic qualities. Aesthetic culturalism is the basis for the second and third objection; it sees aesthetic judgements as being cultural in origin and shaped by an epoch or time. Again, any promotion of beauty seems futile from this perspective, at least if it aims at more than the preferences of a group at a certain time. The fourth critique is a variation of 'ideology-critique' that the Frankfurt School developed; here theories are debunked according to the motives or interests that they serve implicitly or explicitly.

Let us turn to the first objection. It is obvious that a universal demand for architectural beauty like the one above only makes sense if a generally shared understanding of what beauty amounts to is possible.²³ Thus at least a mild form of aesthetic objectivism is presupposed by our argument. Following Kant, we hold that "judgements of taste" can make a claim to general (Kant would say "universal") acceptance—in face of a building like the Pantheon, we consider some aesthetic judgements as the ones everyone should make.²⁴ This objectivism seems to go hand in hand with an aesthetic cognitivism, i.e., the view that aesthetic judgements can be (more or less) correct or wrong and that we can meaningfully reason about whether they are. After all, even an analysis of types of beauty as suggested above only makes sense if the aesthetic is not entirely outside the reach of reason. However, this does not mean that aesthetic judgments are entirely independent from the subject and its way of experiencing the

world. In his defence of objectivism, Frank Sibley²⁵ rightly points out that aesthetic judgements cannot be inferred directly from non-aesthetic features of an object, but require response-dependent features, that is properties which need the response of the experiencing subjects for being instantiated: “taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation” lie at the heart of aesthetic judgments.²⁶ For example, we cannot talk meaningfully about the ‘harmonious proportions of the Pantheon (or its color) without some *experience* of this harmony (or color). We will therefore base our argument on a moderate objectivism that includes the foundational role of experiences. Following Elisabeth Schellekens’s distinction between an aesthetic perception and an aesthetic judgement, we presuppose that aesthetic perceptions provide “the experiential grounding of an aesthetic judgement,” but that aesthetic judgements are the result of a “rational process” which “relies on the possibility of appealing to an object’s salient features in order to check whether our aesthetic perception is well grounded.”²⁷

The essential role of the subject’s experience explains why aesthetic subjectivism and the reference to individual intuitions will always have a strong appeal. Aesthetic subjectivism is right in emphasizing the possibility of irreducibly subjective aesthetic experiences or intuitions—we only have to remember Peter Eisenman’s notable dislike of *Chartres Cathedral*²⁸—but regarding aesthetic judgements *merely* as subjective expressions of preferences explains too little. Aesthetic subjectivism leaves many aspects of these judgements, like the striking convergence of aesthetic judgements over time and between cultures, underdetermined. A “reasonable objectivism” (to use Schellekens’s term) will have to allow for subjective perceptions and even for impenetrable idiosyncrasies. But it will also acknowledge (at least some) aesthetic features of buildings and other artifacts that more generally evoke aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, reasonable objectivism finds empirical support by

“ ISN'T CULTURAL
BEAUTY A
DANGEROUS
CAMOUFLAGE OF
A RATHER GRIM
REALITY? ”

many psychological experiments that contradict the strong subjectivist claims. There seem, for example, to be hard-wired preferences for certain facial features. There is also a striking cross-cultural agreement (at least amongst so-called “informed” and “educated” people) about the aesthetic quality of many artworks or buildings. To be sure, any reasonable objectivism has to account for a great variety of aesthetic preferences—but it will do so within a framework of generally acknowledged aesthetic qualities. And it is these qualities, their analysis and promotion, with which we are concerned.

The second and third objections are based upon the observation that the understanding of beauty is neither homogenous amongst people nor unchanging over time. In Renaissance times, Medieval architecture was derogatorily baptized “Gothic” by classicizing Italians who blamed Gothic tribes for having sacked Rome and having created a barbarian style of building—while A.W.N. Pugin and other Romanticists of the 19th century celebrated its beauty and dreamt of a (Neo)Gothic world. If ‘beauty’ is an ever-changing concept, does it make sense to demand the design of ‘beautiful’ buildings? Indeed it does, and the arguments above support the demand to strive for architectural beauty within the given cultural context. This culturally specific notion of beauty is implied by a practice which is always part of a cultural context (like building a railway station for a society with a certain infrastructure, tradition, life-form, etc.). Similarly, when we ground the demand for beauty on the promotion of human well-being, the aesthetic experiences of a culture and time *must* be taken into account; it is an essential part of people’s identity, and thus well-being, to be situated in a certain culture and tradition. That is why we specified the aim as an accessible beauty. In other words: the demand indicates an ideal whose realisation can look rather different in different situations. Some features of a building will be required in most contexts (such as a careful design of details), others will be specific for a certain culture and time (such as the use of a certain style), and others can be highly specific to the situation (the “murmur of the site”). The demand to strive for beauty does not come with an elaborated list of forms that must be globally applied, but asks for sensitive artistic reflection about what constitutes beauty in a particular case. This will include an anticipation of the aesthetic responses of the beholders. But because of the (intended) survival of most buildings over time, the architect should aim at those forms that transcend the fashions of the day and are likely to be accessible for users and beholders of generations yet to come.²⁹ (Not an easy task, but then, good architecture is a demanding art and not a simple craft.)

Let us turn to Adorno’s objection. Is there something vicious about creating beauty in an ultimately ugly world? Obviously, one might question his Marxist absolutism about capitalism and doubt whether we can simply

identify the free market as inherently evil (especially if we cannot easily point to a compellingly successful alternative). But we can accept his political analysis here, for the sake of argument, and look at his fundamental thesis about the intention behind the creation of beauty and about the way the experience of beauty affects us. Both seem highly speculative. There's evidence that even in the most straightened circumstances people aspire to decorate their dwellings. If the lights of (Robert Venturi's) Las Vegas, as much as the skyline of Beijing, were created to manipulate people's feelings, it is by no means obvious why beauty must always be a strategic move to deceive others. But although there are situations in which it serves to encourage the acceptance of an unjust political situation, aesthetic experiences can equally well produce an increased level of awareness or sensibility to the world and, for example, its fragility. It can thereby increase our ability to change it for the better. Friedrich Schiller famously argued that art and the aesthetic impulse allow the individual to transcend inner and outer constraints, thus increasing his or her freedom. There is no compelling reason why we should let Adorno's single-sided 'ideology-critique' delegitimize the desire for beauty.

In summary, these more general objections, according to which an Obligation to Beauty presupposes a questionable aesthetic objectivism, or even promotes a dangerous ideology, do not seem to carry much weight. The subjective/objective debate is only a marginal concern to the aesthetic deontology that is outlined in this paper. Most importantly, the Obligation to Beauty is not committed to a single version of beauty—even as a universal imperative it allows us to embrace some particularist insights.

3. IN SEARCH OF A PRIME IMPERATIVE OF ARCHITECTURE

If beauty is one moral obligation for architects, we can certainly identify others: we briefly turn to this expanded field of moral duty, before examining deontic conflicts (that is, conflict among the

“ THE DEMAND
TO STRIVE FOR
BEAUTY DOES NOT
COME WITH AN
ELABORATED LIST
OF FORMS THAT
MUST BE GLOBALLY
APPLIED ”

‘expanded field’ of moral and aesthetic duties for architecture) and their possible resolutions. We will end this section by searching for a prime imperative of architecture that might help to solve these conflicts.

3.1 MORAL OBLIGATIONS AND CONFLICTS

Building entails a complex set of activities, involving many agents and artifacts, and ranges from design and construction to a completed edifice that may remain as continuous reality. Without any claim to finality, this creates (at least) the following reasonable moral demands³⁰: (1) Duties arising from professional behavior; (2) Duties arising from what a building is (designed) for, and pertain to its use, good architecture, independently from the moral discourse³¹; (3) Moral duties pertaining to the impact of the building on individual users: their health, safety, and general well-being, including their psychological well-being; (4) Moral duties arising from the impact of the building on the natural (non-man made) environment; (5) Moral duties pertaining to the influence on human behavior, individually and collectively; (6) The cultural or symbolic meaning that buildings express and communicate, by means of choices in form, materials, colors, aesthetic style, and the like.

To this we would add (7) moral imagination—that is the faculty which anticipates moral answers to complex challenges by portraying a possible and better life-form, society, or world. Moral imagination requires an abstraction from one’s particular situation, an awareness of the values and principles on which one currently acts—as much as an openness to change and the anticipation of different and new ways to deal with current and upcoming challenges (e.g., a library that suggests an ideal of scholarship, a chamber for debate which supposes a society to which we aspire).³² This demand is different from the others in that it is not an obligation but, rather, a luxury (or technically supererogatory): although not all buildings need to inspire our moral imagination, some buildings must do so.

Again, buildings might satisfy some, and not all, of these moral demands, and often the satisfaction of one moral demand will be in conflict with another. To give an example: environmental concerns or even safety can clash with the cultural meaning of a building.³³

This typology might make it easier to analyze questions (and demands) of moral relevance; however, for several reasons things are more complicated. First, things are more complicated because we have to distinguish between what is *objectively* good or bad and what is *subjectively* moral or immoral. The first relates something to a universal ethical standard; in this sense slavery was always as wrong as it is now. When we talk about the subjective morality of the agent, however, we contextualize his or her knowledge of norms and values. Even an antique slave-owner could then have been a subjectively moral person, simply because he could not have known better

at the time. That difference is relevant for both the brief and design areas: we can ask whether a brief is acceptable (objectively right) and also whether the architect was justified (subjectively moral) in accepting it. As we have illustrated above, we can ask the same question in the area of design. The answers in both cases can be different and the historical context will become relevant in helping come to appropriate judgements.

Secondly, things are so complicated because clashes often occur between different types of demands, like aesthetic, moral or functional ones. They sometimes cohere without conflict (it is, for example, as much a moral, a legal, and a functional requirement that engineers design structurally stable buildings). But often they pull in different directions. For example: we might ask whether the gates between the first, second, and third class passengers on the Titanic were morally acceptable, though they were demanded by the etiquette of its time. It is therefore no surprise that some of the finest buildings (that respect the Obligation to Beauty) are erected by blatantly ignoring some fundamental moral demands.

“MORAL
IMAGINATION [...] ANTICIPATES
MORAL ANSWERS
TO COMPLEX
CHALLENGES”

3.2 THE DIFFICULTY OF A RECONCILIATION

A well-known difficulty of any clash of normative demands is that there are quantitative issues, which are calculable with reasonable precision, and qualitative issues, which are not amenable to the same kind of measurement. How these demands should be balanced against each other is hard to decide, in particular if the very idea of “balancing” is biased towards quantifiable issues. This is a general problem, but is endemic for architecture because it is partially an art form and partially a functional thing—which makes it particularly open to expectations from both the measurable and the unmeasurable sides. And even within the same type of demand, for example the aesthetic one, we have measurable and unmeasurable components. Whereas visual comfort, or the use of materials that are warm to the touch, may be matters that can

be quantified, whether the aesthetic quality of a conjunction of particular sets of forms is quantifiable remains questionable.³⁴ In a similar way, we could say that it is easy to measure whether we have or have not met some ethical demands; but there are others that are less objectively measurable. We are therefore faced with a complex of categorically different criteria even within the same type of demands.

These demands are not hierarchically ordered in an obvious way: we cannot simply argue that only those buildings that perform satisfactorily in all *measurable* ways get themselves into the category where they can be judged in *incommensurable* ways, because we can all think of buildings that fail in some measurable way, but are nevertheless highly regarded for good reasons.³⁵ That a building is successful technically, on the other hand, is no guarantee that it is going to be of a high architectural standard.

What makes things even more complicated is that there can be conflicting demands of other types. We have seen that the Obligation to Beauty is a moral demand, but morality demands a respect for multiple demands. Budgetary prudence, for example, could be a reasonable criterion for a client commissioning architects, and the constraints that lead to that demand could be quite precisely measured—if the client is a charity, say, with a limited budget. To complicate matters even more, full moral obeisance is not guaranteed to be the best course of action. At least in hindsight, we know that many acknowledged masterpieces were only achieved because architects were in some sense irresponsible with their client's money in the service of a greater ideal—namely creating a work of architecture that transcended its immediate context—which we would find hard to quantify.

So the resulting picture is highly complex: we have tensions between different types of demands (moral, aesthetic, economic) and between the quantifiable and unquantifiable. Because the different demands are deeply interwoven, we cannot even have a trade off on the level of quantifiable demands, because there can be (more or less) quantifiable moral demands to obey unquantifiable normative demands of other types (e.g., to be economically responsible)—and unquantifiable moral demands to obey quantifiable demands of other types (e.g., for flexible buildings).

Architecture has not come up with a timeless solution to the tensions between different demands and their clash seems an ongoing theme of architectural self-reflection.³⁶ Few areas of human activity face so many and such different demands—and that is possibly the reason it is particularly hard in the case of architecture to find truly unifying, well-balanced reconciliations rather than biased compromises that give too much weight to some demands at the expense of others.

If ethics can neither reconcile different demands *a priori*, nor hope for an objectifiable trade-off, what could do this work? It is tempting to attempt to prioritize the different types of demands. What, in the end, is the highest obligation?

One the one hand, it seems that much, or even all demands have a moral basis. Remember that the strongest argument for the architect's obligation to create beauty is itself a *moral* reason. And moral demands can also be seen as grounding other types of requirements, for example functional ones: to build efficiently, safely, and economically is also a way of respecting other humans, their resources (or the resources of future generations), and so forth. However, it is not clear what exactly follows for this priority in time; in particular, it does not imply that the Obligation to Beauty must, in the end, be sacrificed for other moral demands. On the other hand, architecture can be regarded as a way of overcoming normative tensions by suggesting an ultimately *aesthetic* solution. It must always result in a particular design that in some way or other bridges between conflicting demands. And a successful resolution to conflicting duties will be, as stated in the beginning, an intellectual achievement that can give (intellectual) beauty to a building. Thus, when it comes to reconciling conflicting demands in a building, beauty, not morality, seems always have the last word. To put it another way, apparently irreconcilable demands have to be resolved by appeal to aesthetic solutions.

The purpose of this essay has been to identify accessible beauty as a fundamental obligation of architecture. Our argument could point towards the stronger thesis that this is in some way the prime obligation of architecture. Though we would not claim to have reached that conclusion, which would require much more than this paper can contain; nevertheless, we hope to have indicated its possibility.

“ARCHITECTURE
CAN BE REGARDED
AS A WAY OF
OVERCOMING
NORMATIVE
TENSIONS”

ENDNOTES

1. This paper is a revised and condensed version of our “Why Architects should design beautiful buildings,” in *The Design Turn in Applied Ethics*, eds. Thomas Pogge, Jeroen van den Hoven, and Seumas Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012/2016), and builds on Christian Illies, “Schön ist gut! Ästhetisches Bauen als ethische Forderung,” (presentation, Symposium, Basel, Switzerland, March 7, 2013). We are grateful to Stefan Koller and Tom Spector for very helpful comments.
2. Christian Illies and Nicholas Ray, *The Philosophy of Architecture* (London: Cambridge Architectural Press, 2014). Reviewed by Stefan Koller and Tom Spector below.
3. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: Penguin, 1943).
4. By this phraseology, we recognize that, though this is a common and perfectly proper approach, it is not necessary to believe in “beauty” as an essence, or some kind of Platonic ideal. We can equally well say, in a somewhat Aristotelian mode, that the product of good architectural practice should be buildings that people would conventionally find beautiful.
5. For an introduction to those issues, see Graham Gordon, “Architecture,” in *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 561-569. See also Saul Fisher, “Philosophy of Architecture,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, September 9, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/architecture>.
6. Goethe, who was acutely sensitive to architecture, emphasized its haptic nature in a conversation with Humboldt. See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche. Bd 22 (Goethes Gespräche)*, ed. Ernst Beutler (Frankfurt: Artemis, 1964), 241. The classic text exploring the various ways in which architecture can affect us is Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1959).
7. See David Pye, *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design* (Oxford: Berg 3PL, 2002) for a full discussion of functional beauty in product design.
8. See Rafael Moneo (presentation, Anywhere Conference, Yufuin, Japan, 1992). Re-printed in *El Croquis 20/64/98: Rafael Moneo 1967-2004* (2004): 635-641. See also Francisco González de Canales and Nicholas Ray, *Rafael Moneo: Building Teaching Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).
9. How contextual fit (and its relation to architectural beauty) is to be spelled out precisely is an open question. For a spirited defense of a highly partisan position, see Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8-14.
10. See Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The*

Life of Buildings in Time (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993).

11. See Dennis Radford, and Douglas Cawthorne, “Unlocking Lutyens: A Gateway to the Hidden Legacy of John Pell and Sir Christopher Wren” in *Architecture Research Quarterly* 12, no.1 (2008): 69-85.

12. This could therefore constitute a further category. Others would claim this is an overarching category transcending aesthetics, within which every other category is subsumed. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the hermeneutic approach of Gadamer can be read in this way. See Kenneth Frampton, *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form*, ed. Ashley Simone (Zurich: Lars Muller, 2015), 18-27.

79

13. Hannes Meyer, *Bauen und Gesellschaft: Schriften, Briefe, Projekte* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1980).

14. For a similar argument for beauty as a moral obligation see Martin Dücks, *Architektur für ein gutes Leben: Über Verantwortung, Moral und Ethik des Architekten* (Münster: Waxmann, 2011), 232-235.

15. Given such an inclusivist delineation of ‘well-being’, this proposal differs from the first one, which (at most) relates to Aristotle’s more specific notion of human well-being or ‘flourishing’ (*eudaimonia*). That said, the present argument could be reformulated for that restricted notion, though we do not pursue this eudaimonistic variant here.

16. Aldo van Eyck quoted in Herman Hertzberger, *Aldo van Eyck*, eds. Addie van Roijen-Wortmann and Francis Strauven (Amsterdam: Stichting Wonen, 1982).

17. Meyer’s list is as follows:

pure construction is the basis and the characteristics of the new world of forms.

1. sex life 2. sleeping habits 3. pets 4. gardening 5. personal hygiene 6. weather protection 7. hygiene in the home 8. car maintenance 9. cooking 10. heating 11. exposure to the sun 12. services these are the only motives when building a house.

Meyer was quite optimistic that this would allow for a scientific process of design:

this functional, biological interpretation of architecture as giving shape to the functions of life, logically leads to pure construction: this world of constructive forms knows no native country. it is the expression of an international attitude in architecture. internationality is a privilege of the period. [...] we examine the daily routine of everyone who lives in the house and this gives us the functional diagram – the functional diagram and the economic programme are the determining principles of the building project.

For Meyer’s list and commentary, see Hannes Meyer, “Building,” *Bauhaus Year 2*, no. 4, quoted in *Programs and manifestos on 20th-century architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, trans. Michael Bullock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1975), 119.

18. Christian Illies, “The Evolution of Autonomous Beauty. Sexual

- Selection versus Natural Selection,” in *The Many Faces of Beauty*, ed. Vittorio Hösle (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2013), 133-168.
19. In technical terms this presupposes an “internalist” position for people’s belief formation and justification. Subscription to “acceptance internalism” would seem a relevant position to hold where the judgment of a ‘public art’ like architecture is concerned. This question could be examined in greater detail, no doubt, as Stefan Koller has pointed out to us.
20. Vicious Mister Fox’ serves a delicious soup on a flat plate to Miss Stork. And though she is hungry, she cannot eat it with her long beak.
21. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999).
22. Including Nathaniel Coleman, “Is Beauty Still Relevant? Is Art? Is Architecture?,” *Architecture Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2014): 81-95. For Adorno, see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, last modified February 2005, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm>.
23. Here we get close to, without endorsing, an analogue in the aesthetic domain to a ‘categorical’ imperative in the moral domain. (On the difficulty of pushing such an analogy too far, Bernard Williams, Philippa Foot, and John McDowell have written eloquently.) But as we now go on to explain, we steer clear of brute categorization by recognizing cultural context. Contextualization to cultural specifics also endows a principled deontological framework with the means to absorb some of the explanatory appeal of what is presently known as moral ‘particularism’.
24. For a thorough discussion of Kant’s aesthetics, see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
25. F. N. Sibley and Michael Tanner, “Symposium: Objectivity and Aesthetic,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 42 (1968): 31-54.
26. Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts,” *Philosophical Review* 68, no. 4 (1959): 421.
27. Elisabeth Schellekens, “Towards a reasonable objectivism for aesthetic judgements,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46, no. 2 (2006): 175.
28. Christopher Alexander and Peter Eisenman, “Contrasting Concepts of Harmony in Architecture,” *Lotus International* 40 (1983): 60-68.
29. We say ‘most’ because many forms of architecture—paper architecture and exhibition architecture like the *Weissenhofsiedlung*—can legitimately evade any obligation to enduring aesthetic relevance.
30. Most of these categories are worked out in more detail in Illies and Ray, *The Philosophy of Architecture*. The seventh category is a new addition.

For categories of moral relevance see also Warwick A. Fox, “Architecture Ethics,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Technology*, eds. Jan Kyrre Berg Olsen, Stig Andur Pedersen, and Vincent F. Hendricks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 387-391.

31. It should be added that the intended function does not have to be the function that the building realizes; see Don Ihde, “The Designer Fallacy and Technological Imagination”, in *Defining Technological Literacy: Towards an Epistemological Framework*, ed. John R. Dakers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

32. For the importance of moral imagination see Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic: Ancient Thinking for a Green Age* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011). See also Jane Collier, “Moral Imagination and the Practice of Architecture,” in *Architecture and its Ethical Dilemmas*, ed. Nicholas Ray (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005).

33. See Nicholas Ray, “The Cambridge History Faculty Building: a case study in ethical dilemmas in the twentieth century” in *Architecture and its Ethical Dilemmas*, ed. Nicholas Ray (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005).

34. For a discussion of proportional systems, which sometimes make this claim, see P. H. Scholfield, *The Theory of Proportion in Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958). The Finnish architect Alvar Aalto said his wooden furniture was more functional than the furniture designed by his contemporaries in the Bauhaus, which was metal-framed and cold to the touch. But he acknowledged that scientific analysis “gave out” at some point: “The demands that the chair failed to meet – excessive reflection of sound and light, high thermal conductivity – are actually merely the scientific names of the elements that together make up the mysterious concept of ‘comfort.’” See Alvar Aalto, “Rationalismen och människän” (presentation, annual meeting of the Swedish Society of Industrial Design, May 9, 1935), reprinted in Alvar Aalto, *Alvar Aalto in his own words*, ed. Goran Schildt (New York: Rizzoli International, 1998).

35. Le Corbusier’s famous *Villa Savoye* would be an example: it is impossible to waterproof it.

36. Taylor and Levine for example, claim that the study of the intersection of architecture and ethics enables one to “achieve a more comprehensive understanding of architecture and ethics than traditionally conceived by either moral philosophers or architectural theorists (particularly phenomenologists) alone.” The authors want to see aesthetic issues as an integral part of the function of a building: it would be impossible therefore to design a war memorial that was aesthetically successful if it could also be seen as endorsing an immoral politics. But as we have observed there are well-known instances of (what most people would consider to be) significant works of architecture that were designed to serve autocratic regimes, or contain uses that we would hardly sanction today: the Alhambra,

or the Coliseum, or Terragni's *Casa del Fascio* at Como. According to the authors, the prospects for philosophical investigation are limited, in any case, since they "question the effectiveness of philosophical enquiry, as commonly practised, for understanding moral values in relation to the built environment." See William M. Taylor & Michael P. Levine, *Prospects for an Ethics of Architecture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 78.