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EDITORIAL

We have . . . judgments of, or pleasure in, the beautiful: 'this pleasure accompanies the ordinary apprehension [Auffassung; not perception] of an object by the imagination . . . by means of a procedure of the judgment which it must also exercise on behalf of the commonest experience.' . . . This judgment is based on 'that common and sound intellect [gemeiner und gesunder Verstand] which we have to presuppose in everyone.' How does this 'common sense' distinguish itself from the other senses, which we also have in common but which nevertheless do not guarantee agreement of sensations? . . . The term 'common sense' meant a sense like our other senses – the same for everyone in his very privacy. By using the Latin term, Kant indicates that here he means something different: an extra sense – like an extra mental capability (German: Menschenverstand) – that fits us into a community. The 'common understanding of men . . . is the very least to be expected from anyone claiming the name of man.' It is the capability by which men are distinguished from animals and from gods. It is the very humanity of man that is manifest in this sense . . . ' The only general symptom of insanity is the loss of the sensus communis and the logical stubbornness in insisting on one's own sense (sensus privatus), which [in an insane person] is substituted for it . . . Under the sensus communis we must include the idea of a sense common to all, i.e., of a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of all other man in thought, in order, as it were, to compare its judgment with the collective reason of humanity . . . This is done by comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgment of others, and by putting

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Pier Paolo Pasolini during
the making of "Decameron",
1971
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ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment . . .
Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 70–71

Tints happily broken and blended, and irregular masses of light and shadow harmoniously melted into each other, are, in themselves, as before observed, more grateful to the eye, than any single tints, upon the same principle that harmonious combinations of tones or flavours are more grateful to the ear or the palate, than any single tones or flavours can be. They are therefore more properly beautiful, according to the strictest meaning of the word beauty, when applied to that which is pleasing to the sense only; and not, as it usually is, to that, which is alike pleasing to the senses, the intellect and the imagination; according to which comprehensive signification of the word, many objects, that we call picturesque, certainly are not beautiful; since they may be void of symmetry, neatness, cleanness, &c.; all which are necessary to constitute that kind of beauty, which addresses itself to the understanding and the fancy.
Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London: T. Payne-Mews Gate and J. White-Fleet-Street, 1805), p. 148

Nobody talks about beauty. Nobody dares. (Or, at least, not in architecture; if you are in the soap business, then it's another story.)

If you mention beauty – meaning a universally evident beauty – people stare at you like some sort of dinosaur who forgot to acknowledge his own extinction. Actually, they also fear that just before you acknowledge it, you could still eat them.

If you do dare to mention beauty, then some well-intentioned idiot says “beauty is subjective”, as if this indisputable truth (given that beauty *is*, of course, subjective) would implicitly mean that nothing subjective *and* shared (or universal, or common, or whatever you'd like to call it) could possibly exist; as if subjects could never agree, or could never admit their shared nature and recognize themselves in what, in the end, is nothing more than this: the sudden appearance of something that we all like, something to which we would all like to surrender ourselves (i.e., the sudden appearance of beauty).

So, yes: beauty is subjective. But this is no reason to stop worrying about beauty.

It seems difficult to talk about architecture without mentioning beauty. The modern idea of doing without beauty does not really seem to have worked out very well. Just randomly scan dezeen.com: Why a “circular bridge on a Uruguayan lagoon”? Why a “huge horseshoe-shaped market hall”? And why a “pre-rusted steel staircase based on the form of a single-surface Möbius strip”? What are all these buildings trying to achieve? Are they trying really hard to look efficient? Environmentally friendly? Progressive? Why all this effort? Is this just a nonsensical race towards the bizarre? Or is it, in fact, just a misunderstood search for *beauty*? And why don't we want to call this thing by its name? (And wouldn't this quest be at least slightly more successful if it had been explicit about its goal from the beginning?) Modern architecture murdered beauty, erasing it from the very core of the architectural discourse. In a few cases, the purge of beauty was an attempt to substitute the indirect politicalness of beauty with direct political action (although this remark probably only applies to Hannes Meyer's work and that of a few others). In the vast majority of cases, however, the expunging of beauty was just the consequence of a computational/liberal paradigm according to which anything that cannot be immediately calculated should simply be made to disappear. So beauty was suddenly dead, dead as a *dead dog*.

Efficiency became the new paradigm, and its logic forever mined the possibility of thinking of beauty as the ultimate goal of architectural production. The minutiae of the difficult dialectic of beauty were soon lost in a rude new common sense. Given the obsession with measuring the effectiveness of any given building's performance, the pre-modern ineffability of the investigation of beauty became obscene, as did its embarrassing permalink with the sphere of the *sacer*. And in the space left vacant by the absence of a proper discourse on beauty, a lesser one soon developed. This space was soon occupied by “the picturesque”, a minor beauty entirely dedicated to the reveries of the individual. In fact, while beauty was abstract, logical and impersonal, the picturesque was sensual, psychological and personal. While beauty imposed itself on the subject (in the name of a Common that preceded all of the individuals belonging to it), the picturesque merely reawakened previous sensations experienced by the subject, without any interest in something shared or universal. (In the end, if you did not eat the cookies as a child, then you can never rediscover their taste later in life.)

Beauty was political. Beauty was violent and optimistic. Beauty wanted to change the world. As such, beauty had a theory. The pic-

turesque, on the contrary, was nostalgic and consolatory. The picturesque wanted the world to stay as it was. As such, the picturesque had a hermeneutic.

If the production of beauty is an explicit goal of architecture, then aren't we in need of a proper theory of beauty?

Good old Immanuel Kant might help a bit here, specifically his analysis of the beautiful in his *Critique of Judgment*. Employing an apparent oxymoron, Kant refers to the beautiful as the result of a "subjective universal" judgement. The judgement is subjective; it is not tied to any absolute or determinate concept. However, the judgement is made in the belief that other people ought to agree with it, even though it is known that many will not. The force of this "ought" comes from a reference to a *sensus communis* – a common sense, a common *form of life*.

And using this principle as a starting point, wouldn't it be possible to imagine a few, schematic first elements of a theory of beauty for contemporary architecture?

For instance:

- a) Beauty is both an explicit problem (in theory) and an explicit goal (in design).
- b) There is no chance of producing beauty unless it is explicitly desired; or, beauty does not *happen*: beauty is a *project*; or, even better, beauty *only happens if it is a project* (given that, of course, the project of beauty is not sufficient to make beauty happen).
- c) Beauty indeed *happens*; it is an event.
- d) Beauty is the rediscovery of a pre-logical, pre-linguistic commonality that is achieved through logical, critical, political work.
- e) Beauty must be *pure beauty*; it cannot do without the crazy pretension of being evident to everybody (*offered* to everybody).
- f) *Pure beauty* is based on the refusal of an idea of a lesser beauty, of a minor, harmless beauty, a quasi-beauty that is to pure beauty as a lapdog is to a lover.

ALL THOSE IN FAVOUR OF PROPORTION, SAY AYE

Michael Robinson Cohen

On 18 June 1957 a group of prominent architects and historians gathered at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to vote on the following statement: "Systems of proportion make good design easier and bad design more difficult."¹ Geometric and mathematical proportion, the set of formal laws based on the harmony between musical consonances and mathematic ratios, are the foundation of the classical conception of architectural beauty. Thus, the RIBA vote was fundamentally about the status of beauty in architecture. The final tally was 60 nays and 48 ayes, so the institute denied the codification of proportion as an objective design tool that innately generates beautiful architecture.

In the aftermath of World War II, rapid industrialization and the standardization of the construction industry threatened architects' control over built form. By advancing classical methods of proportion at this time, architects aimed to humanize standardized building practices and maintain the sovereignty of their disciplinary expertise. Faced with accelerated industrial development – something not dissimilar to the technological positivism of today's digital age – postwar architects revitalized the classical task of regulating formal harmony. Congregating at the RIBA in 1957, the British architectural community indulged in a rare moment of self-reflection and critique. Before the vote, the attendees engaged in fierce debate, examining the classical re-awakening that had occurred in the profession over the previous decade. This discourse reveals the existence of divergent perceptions of architectural labour with regard to the production of beauty.

As moderator of the debate, Nikolaus Pevsner provided a historical overview of architectural proportion, starting from the Book of

1. This statement by Peter D. Smithson is a reference to Albert Einstein's declaration that Le Corbusier's Modulor system was "a language of proportions which makes evil difficult and the good easy". As Smithson noted, the ethical content was removed from Einstein's statement for the RIBA debate; "Report of a Debate on the Motion 'that Systems of Proportion make good design easier and bad design more difficult'", *RIBA Journal* 64 (September 1957), 456–63.