

The value of Beauty in Architecture

Marco Serra, November 2022, Berlin

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I think there is barely something more difficult in Architecture to quantify than beauty. How can I quantify beauty in a market, where values are controlled by capital? How can I give an emotion not only a value, but also a price? How can I rely on people feeling with their heart and not just reason with their brain in a world, where the biggest trust goes to data and digital?

I will declare my position straight ahead. Beauty is an art and not a science. You can't learn it, you must train. Therefore, I will not give beauty a capital value or a price and I will not talk about numbers. I will also stay away from formulas. Instead, I have decided to give my very personal 10 criteria for beauty. These are neither complete nor absolute and they do not pretend to be correct. Since I have taken the liberty to do this in a very personal way, I will outline the criteria not only theoretically, but practically. I will do this based on my own understanding of beauty and based on projects, I have designed myself or collaborated personally with.

Beauty 1

My first criteria for beauty is DIFFERENTIATION. I would like to start with the Doctorade of my wife, which indirectly reflects the question around beauty. She has written about Patrimony and Urbanism and has taken the Riedtli Siedlung in Zuerich as her example. These buildings have been built between 1908 and 1919. Today such a long construction time would be unacceptable, which is already the first indication we get about the work.

For me, differentiation does not mean to have a handwriting and adapt it to a location. It does not mean either to have a catalogue of measures and instruments and spread them over a construction parcel. If I observe construction projects in general, and housing projects in specifics, no matter if they are built in centers or peripheries, in Zuerich or in Paris, they look to have all a similar taste. The ingredients seem to be the same, dictated by a strong intention of optimization and profitability, by a need of rationalization, by a run for time records.

Differentiation to me means to be able to think a location without prejudice. It means, to be able to relate to nature in the most urban of locations one can imagine, because this is what we do as Architects, we continue building on nature, even if we build in a city.

If you study the Riedtli Siedlung, you will find out, that it strongly relates to nature and human beings. Corner houses are not simply cut corners, but create corner houses. Roofs are not invisible tops without ending, but give the building an additional quality of space. Entrances are not simply visible because of their big house numbers, but because they welcome us to step in. Balconies are not just brutal cut outs in the facade, but connections of inside and outside spaces. And the windows are not banal formalities or empty faces, but eyes of the buildings, which you can use to look out, or to look in. In the same way that a human relation is not only made of duties but also of pleasures, a house is not only made of functionalities, but also of differentiations. This to me means beauty.

Beauty 2

My second criteria is HANDCRAFT. I have chosen this image of a stair, not only because it is a wonderful example, but because it illustrates, what it means to be mastering handcraft. It belongs to a house of the shaker community of faith in the US. Impressive is not only the result, but the process of its making. Richard Sennett, the wonderful American sociologist, describes in his book *#The Craftsman#* the fundamental importance of the connection between Brain and Hand, between Thinking and Doing.

Architecture has always been planned in visuals. But the search for the right form developed on paper by hand, which is dynamic, representing the immediate expression of your brain and able to move in all directions, to me looks like something different than a mouse click, following the rules of the IT. Mistakes are not possible on the screen and when they happen, they are being reversed by another mouse click, called ctrl z, undone in other words. What is serendipity, if not making mistakes useful? You may say, computers allow so much more than hands, and yes, you are not wrong. Virtual reality, augmented reality and others give indeed many possibilities. But I hope we agree on the fact, that one and the same representation can lead to a wonderful, as well as to a terrible result. A beautiful, as well as an ugly stair. The difference lies in the reality of things. In the same way that the immediate

connection between brain and hand gets lost through the work on the computer, the connection between the eye and the emotions gets lost through glossy images on computer screens or fashion magazines. One right word, a good selling argument or an attractive visualization is enough to suggest a feeling of beauty in your brain. The searching machines then deliver the right criteria of the object, which fits your profile best. They model the images in your brain, which you think to find during your first visit in the object itself. Beauty can be quantified in functionality, views and materials. If what you buy, finally will be human, feel warm at touch, reveal to be practical, can be maintained by yourself and build a human relation to, you will only discover during the years. You will discover it only when you will experience, that metal is cold on your hand, concrete reverberates in your ear and what you have seen on the glossy magazine will lose its paint and what is underneath ages very badly. This is a stair, which I have built myself and the respective roof, which I consider a modern and beautiful handcraft.

Beauty 3

My third criteria is OWNERSHIP. The dream for a house on one's own is a common dream. But if you look at ownership today, you will discover that there is ownership and ownership.

Many years ago, I have designed a swimming pool for a good friend in Florence. The house you see on that image, has been inherited from a family property over generations. It embodies Family and Memory.

The client who asked me to design that project, did not have a real imagination of what he wanted to do. He just knew, that he wanted to build a swimming pool, which would not only reflect the context, but also its history. His missing imagination unveiled finally to be the driving force behind the project, because he was open to any imagination and his criteria was only, that his family and his memories would have to be in-graved in the project. We designed and realized the project in a way, to talk to the site, to marry the topography and to respect the principles, according to which the site had been originally built. Not too long ago, you would find many people who would never have taken a mortgage to finance a house, because they were convinced, that to own a house must really mean to own a house. And to own in this sense, means to give and take in a balance. This is a different form of

ownership. It means independence and responsibility und this leads to a different treatment of architecture. My client wanted exactly this, independence from the conditions of the market and responsible handling of his story and his history. Whenever he is there, he has this feeling of independence and responsibility towards his environment and towards his beautiful house.

Beauty 4

My fourth criteria is ILLIMITABILITY. When the project for the Novartis Campus in Basel was mandated, the briefing was a simple one. It should illustrate the highest potential of the existing site, irrespective of what would be realized. Professor Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, who at the time was the masterplanner, illustrated that potential immediately. He had received full trust and free field by the client, but he had also an excellent far-sightedness. And so a plan came to life, that went beyond all borders. The long-term plan foreseed to realize more than 70 buildings within 30 years and spill over the national borders of Switzerland into France. None of the two ideas has and probably will ever be realized, we stood within Swiss borders and realized approximately 20 buildings in 10 years, but the illimitability of the thoughts lead to the fact, that what was built. raised an extraordinary level of quality. In addition, ideas came up, which were not expected initially like the exchange of land with the City of Basel or the impropriation of public land and streets into private ownership.

Interesting in this project is, that the illimitability of ideas is expressed timewise, as well as it is expressed in urbanistic terms. The same thought was followed when composing the planner team. Lampugnani proposed an interdisciplinary team, who was supposed to fully cooperate in the thinking of

a Gesamtkunstwerk. Initially the exponents were Lampugnani himself for the urbanism, Peter Walker for the Landscaping, Harald Szeeman for the Art, Alan Fletcher for the Design and Andreas Schulz for the Lighting. Later Jacqueline Burckhardt succeeded Harald Szeeman and Michael Rock succeeded Alan Fletcher, but the spirit stood the same.

As an illustration for this collaboration, I am showing a Square, that we planned and built on the Campus. It is the first public space we realized, The Forum. Initially the intention was to have all the Landscapes designed by Peter Walker. The principle proved successful for the streets, but after we discussed Peter Walkers design for the Square, we realized, that this would lead to a too high monotony, so we started treating every Square like a separate project. Since we didn't want the Squares to be totally detached from the rest, we mandated the Workshop, composed of the exponents mentioned above, with the design of The Forum. So Szeeman was not just the Art Curator anymore, but also Planner. Lampugnani was not just urban planner anymore, but also Architect. Because of the long discussions the planning took quite some time. But what came out was a project, that began communicating with its context on totally new and different levels.

Similar to a classic work of an urban planner, which spanned from the urban context to the house and to the window, so this team spanned topics which

went from the Masterplan to the paving joint. All of a sudden the Art began to talk to the paving, the trees began to talk to the buildings and the street names began to talk to the facades. What we often see end as the sum of the elements into a cacophony of forms and colors, on The Forum ended into a harmonic coexistence. This is where the illimited thinking, space-wise as well as time-wise, became a premise for beauty.

Beauty 5

My fifth criteria for beauty is RESPONSIBILITY. During 10 years of my career, I had the mandate to redesign a 900 old monastery. I was so lucky to have a client, that gave me an exceptional briefing. #I want to eat well, sleep comfortably, work concentrate, sell wine and have meetings. Beyond this, we should do the right thing for the estate.# Without telling you too much about the estate, I can say, that we spent almost three years, until we had defined the right space program. The result is a 5* Luxury Hotel in the area of Relais Chateau. Hotel and Winery make good money and are self-sustaining. Against all expectations, the pandemics has reinforced its growth.

The first question of the project however, was not the monetary one, but the one around the right thing to do. And for the right thing to do, the estate was the primary actor. For a long time, I asked myself, why this building, despite its physical destruction, still carried an inherent beauty. It goes without saying, that the beauty is hidden in the building itself. But you will find it only by trying to understand, what the building wants to tell you and under what conditions it has been conceived. It is vital to understand, that what we perceive as a unity, has been built over centuries. We all know that technologies were under today's possibilities, the availability of materials was scarce and the workforces minimal. Well, I do believe that what we see as

disadvantages today, in fact is an advantage. So I asked the question, why this building, despite its physical destruction, is still beautiful.

The difference between us and the monks lies in the responsibility. While today we have a specialized construction market of unlimited possibilities, the monks had to do everything themselves. While today we have segmented the responsibilities in a way, that every project becomes an organizational masterpiece, the monks were responsible for everything. They were at the same time clients, planner, construction firm and user. Just think for a second what this would mean for your projects. You begin to think, how you will have to maintain a building, how you will best overcome the cold, how you can give the building longevity, how you design it in a way, that you feel comfortable and if you really want to live in such a building. The monks were everything in one, they had the total responsibility over their actions, which is why it survived until today.

Beauty 6

My sixth criteria is TRUST. For 20 years I have been working as an Architect at Novartis. Today, as an Architect in a corporate organization, you exercise everything but Architecture. Architects in corporate organizations that exercise the job of an Architect are rare, or do not exist anymore at all. The same is true for building authorities, investors and real estate firms. And yet, if you look at the history, not long time ago clients often used to plan and realize projects themselves. The example I showed you earlier for instance, the Riedtli Siedlung in Zuerich, was realized by Friedrich Fissler, an Architect working in and for the City Authority of Zuerich.

The project I am displaying now is one that I designed for and in Novartis, short after my start in 2003. It is the Main Gate of the Novartis Campus, a quite exposed project. The beginning of the project was a competition with the attendance of 5 very renowned Architects, Zaha Hadid, Vito Acconci, Jose Luis Mateo, Buol & Zuend as well as Sumi & Burkhalter. All of them delivered spectacular projects. Neither the preliminary examination, nor the jury were positive about the proposals. So it happened that my initial wish to work as an Architect was heard, and I was asked to submit an alternative proposal. My sense was that the job would be much too big for me, but I had expressed that wish, so I had to deal with it. I had participated in the Juries for

the other Campus projects, so I knew how the client was thinking. My opinion had often been heard, so I had the experience of understanding the client from within. All 5 Architects participating in the competition were excellent ones, which I had helped choose. I had a high respect of their works and not the presumption to be better. But there was one fundamental difference between them and me and this was the trust of the client. It was this, that gave me the possibility to realize that project, which after 15 years I think is still beautiful.

Beauty 7

My seventh criteria is SURPRISE. For this one, I would like to show you the Novartis Campus parking, laying underneath the Main Gate. Probably the client himself underestimated the potential of an underground parking. The Architects competing aimed at making a spectacle out of the project, but all the client wanted, was a beautiful, invisible and secure parking, in order to be able to design a natural park above it. And so he mandated me with a functional, beautiful, but above all invisible project.

As a young and unexperienced Architect, that was given such a task, it was perfect, because this allowed me to experiment and remain invisible. I concentrated on the inherent qualities of a parking. Room height, overview over the space, comfortable parking geometries, no crossings, safety and security. I am not sure if you know that in Switzerland they foresee parking slots for women, in order to allow them to feel safe and secure. Well, I wanted this parking not to have women parking, because all the parking should feel safe and secure.

The most important element of the parking was the illumination. The biggest challenge a parking has, is orientation. To build a big hall helps, but I wanted to conceive the parking as an underground house.

If you think about the orientation within a normal house above ground, you will find out, that this happens always in relation to the exterior. You have windows you can look out. Since in this parking we had no possibility of a relation with the outside, I designed the outer facade like a facade of a normal house and called it Light Facade. The idea of the Light Facade is to help understand, where the perimeter of the building end. Beyond this, the Light Facade also houses all technical installation, Ventilation, Electricity, Plumbing. The imbricative character of the construction in the direction of the circulation, avoids being blinded by the light while driving.

If I think about this project after 15 years, I realize, it was one of the biggest endeavors of the Campus project. The fact that it was underground, and that it had to be invisible, gave me the opportunity to stay invisible myself as well. The project lives from the fact, that one does not expect such a space in the underground. It lives from the bad experiences one generally makes in underground parkings. And it lives from the fact, that parkings are underestimated as first contact points of a location. For me, the project lives from the surprise. The surprise to see beauty in the invisible.

Beauty 8

My eight criteria is TIME, which I would like to illustrate through the last project we built on the Novartis Campus in Basel. It was realized by the wonderful Italian Designer and Architect Michele de Lucchi. Completed in April of this year, it had an approximate planning and construction phase of 5 years, but if you look at the whole thinking phase of the project, you will see, that it took 10 years.

The project started as a conference center. At the time, the plan was to use a hotel building in the periphery of Basel. 10 years ago, it was a common model to build such conference centers. The monastery I showed earlier in this presentation is a luxury hotel, but finally it is also a conference center of that kind. During the planning phase however, we realized the way you learn today, was fundamentally changing. Society began not to learn in conference centers, and therefore we decided to bring the project nearer to the workplace. The next phase of the project was a Learning center and different projects were developed again. The learning here was, that learning does not happen just internally and in theories, but on a day-to-day basis and in exchange with society.

The result you see on this picture, is an exhibition building at the border of the Novartis Campus. The program is an exhibition about the life science industry of pharmaceuticals, a school laboratory for scholars to learn about the pharma industry, an event space used as a platform for intellectual exchange, a small but very precious book store where you will find excellent literature of life science and a cafe, where public can go and talk or work.

Often an idea is wonderful, but maybe it has just the wrong timing. The experience I made with this project was, that every idea has its time. Only then, I think, it can become timeless, and beautiful.

Beauty 9

My ninth criteria is NATURE. The project I would like to illustrate here is the Hedgemuseum. I built it together with Ulrich Rueckriem in conjunction with the monastery project Abadia Retuerta. In fact, it is not a museum, but we liked the name, since it conveys a new typology of Architecture expressed as a natural piece of nature. The program for the project were 17 sculptures of the Artist himself, which we wanted to position in the context of the monastery.

Ulrich had this wonderful idea, to exhibit the sculptures under the open sky. The landscape around the monastery is exceptionally wide and in principle the Hedgemuseum is an assembly of hedges, planted around a core made of tamped concrete. The sculptures are positioned like a parcours through 6 chambers. One can just walk through and visit the sculptures, as if they would be standing in free nature. You are alone with the sculptures under the free sky, the sun and the warmth or the cold.

The beautiful part here is simple. I think that all we do, should be at least as beautiful as what we find. Often, what we find, is a piece of nature, but more often, we find something we have to decide upon if to demolish or not. Often one is confronted with the department of the building protection, who decides about the value of an existing building.

However, what we rarely do, is to ask the question, if the piece of nature that was there before us, is worth being replaced by one of our interventions. Either we build on a free field, or in the center of a city, this questions needs to be asked. Are we replacing a piece of nature by something worth replacing the piece of nature? This is what the Hedgemuseum does, replace a piece of nature with an evenly beautiful one. For me, an evident but new form of beauty.

Beauty 10

My tenth and last criteria for beauty is LOVE and for this one, I would like to show the gardenhouse I designed for my father. Most probably you will not see any beauty in this project or at least not as I see it. It's being said, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I prefer to think, that Love is in the eye of the beholder. The beauty that emerges from that Love, then, should be visible. I am convinced that there is in fact a common understanding of beauty. Before my father decided to buy this little piece of land, he had built himself many different huts. These were all incredibly chaotic little things, made out of spare materials. They were built to be demolished again. Despite the fact, that they were really ugly, to my father they meant an important piece of his life. They represented the little piece of freedom and calm, which a modest person may expect. My father used to disappear for days in these huts, curating his piece of nature, his garden and he was happy. Of course, for him these huts were beautiful, for me they were not.

On the other hand, the little land house you see displayed, was beautiful for him, as well as it was for me. It has the profile of a little animal, standing amongst the trees. On the left side you have the canopy with the form of a spout, the window represents the eye and the water tank on the right side could be the tail. As an Architect, I just gave directive inputs, but this I did with

Love. Probably this kind of Love is not recognizable, the beauty spilling out of it I hope is. I believe that building beautiful means building with Love.

These were my 10 thoughts about beauty. You may ask, what all of this has to do with workplaces. One simple fact is, that most of the examples are part of Workplace environments, even if only as apparently not explicit workplaces. But if you look for a second at the use of the word beauty, it starts to emerge in Vitruv's trilogy, Utilitas, Firmitas and Venustas, two thousand years ago. Thanks to Google, today we know, that the word beauty has been intensively used until the beginning of the industrialization, approximately 1850, but from then on, it collapsed. Google has also good news, which is, that beauty started to be used again and more often during the last decades. I hope it will not stop to be used again. Thanks to the last research, in particular neuro science but also neuro aesthetics, today we know, that beauty is fundamental to our health. It has, in fact, the importance similar to truth, trust and love. And this is true for workplaces too.

THANK YOU