



Commentary: beauty in urban design - oppression or emancipation?

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Abstract

In this commentary, I respond to Cozzolino's (URBAN Des Int 27(1):43–52, 2022) recent paper titled 'On the spontaneous beauty of cities: neither design nor chaos' published in URBAN DESIGN International. In the last few years, the concept of beauty has been used widely in urban planning and design. Cozzolino's notable contribution is a call for more diverse processes of creating *grown/spontaneous* order in planning and designing cities. He proposes this as a definition of beauty that can enable people to better express themselves. Here, I use debates from cultural studies to situate the notion of beauty within a broader critical context. Reasons why urban design research must take into consideration the ways in which beauty disproportionately affects different groups of people (particularly marginalised groups) are then explained. The aim is to highlight the potential discriminatory consequences of seemingly apolitical approaches taken to create beauty. This is in line with broader movements of the decolonisation of knowledge.

Keywords Urban design · Beauty · Order · Cozzolino · Spontaneous beauty

The concept of beauty in urban design literature focuses mainly on delivering *order* and *harmony* in urban form. Reviewing urban design literature on beauty, it appears that scholars almost always unquestionably take beauty as a virtuous and desirable concept for everyone. In what follows, responding to Cozzolino (2022), I argue that this approach falls short when addressing the real impact of beauty on people. Therefore, unexplored harms caused by beauty must be further researched. I also address the urgency for such research, which is necessarily more aware of power dynamics ingrained in the notion of beauty, particularly when it disproportionately influences people based on gender, race and class.

Cozzolino (2022) makes a welcome contribution highlighting the importance of a less centralised process for creating *spontaneous beauty*. Defining this concept, he uses Jacobs (1961) and Romano (2008) to distinguish between made/design order and grown/spontaneous order. Cozzolino suggests that spontaneous beauty enables people to 'express themselves in urban fabric' (p. 43). He identifies three

pre-conditions for the operationalisation of spontaneous beauty: (1) adequate space for creative action; (2) a real process of spatial democratisation (i.e. participation and direct action); and (3) an institutional framework that protects the collective dimension of cities (p. 49). I argue that the power dynamic is paramount yet absent in this argumentation.

So far, explorations of how beauty impacts various groups of people differently are left underdeveloped. It can be concluded that beauty is assumed to benefit everyone equally. There is a similar unexamined assumption in planning. The word *beauty* has been in and out of the main narration of urban planning (MacDonald 2012). Even when the word *beauty* is absent from the planning discourse, this absence is the one that fits Gaw's (2021) description of experiencing absence with an expectation of impact, almost like a shadow presence. Planning models picture more pleasant environments. Even modernist architecture, which detested decorative finesse, promised greener, more effective and desirable environments, which are associated with a specific experience of beauty. Evidently, beauty is not the only objective of planning. Recently, the disproportionate impacts of urban planning models on people (in particular marginalised groups) are increasingly being studied, yet beauty is left out from this body of research.

In 2020, as the result of a report by the *Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission* (BBBCC), the government

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in England took a very specific definition of beauty as a principal guide for revising the planning system manifested in the Planning for the Future White Paper (MHCLG 2020). A similar concept of beauty appears to underpin the subsequent Levelling Up policies (HM Government 2022). The commission was first chaired by a controversial philosopher, Sir Roger Scruton, who previously discussed beauty and architecture from a conservative point of view (Scruton 1979, 2009). Following the publications of the BBBBC's report, questions have been raised about why beauty is taken as the main value of planning and whether this definition of beauty—heavily informed by upper-class Victorian and Georgian housing architecture—is beneficial to everyone. If not, who might be negatively affected by the replication of such architecture? Here, the fact that urban design research was underdeveloped in this area has left us unable to critically evaluate the consequences of such recommendations.

Learning from cultural studies, it is evident that the notion of beauty has been used to oppress people, often those more vulnerable (Craig 2021). Notably, feminist studies highlight how beauty has been used to put the female body in specific social moulds of appearance and behaviour (see Colebrook 2006). If this is the case, resisting this or seeking alternatives would be an emancipatory act (Sontag 1990). There is a parallel here between making sexist cities and the sexist culture that is an underpinning driver of urbanisation. So is the case in relation to diversity and race;

Racism is an aesthetics and a politics of aesthetics. It debilitates and seeks to transmogrify and produce blackness as grotesque: the material embodiment of abeauty. And, thus, racism targets the beauty of blackness (Jackson 2020, p. 211).

Felski maintains that we cannot accept beauty without exploring 'whose interests it serves and how it has been valued' (2006, p. 136). As cultural commentators have highlighted (Foster 1983, p. xv), beauty is deeply ideological and political. In shaping cities, having *second-ranking citizenship* (as Cozzolino observes) is an inevitable consequence of the power dynamic embedded in cities; thus, the attempt to provide citizens with the *right to narrate* (Bhabha 2014) is an emancipatory possibility. Nevertheless, this would not occur by Cozzolino's theory of spontaneous order. Cozzolino's description of the *growing complex order generated by social systems* may appear to be inclusive and apolitical. In effect, however, it is likely to replicate the *status quo* of power relationships. Those who hold more power can more easily express themselves. Unlike what Venturi (1977) advocated, deregulating architectural design will not result in more democratic environments but will promote post-Fordist capitalist production. Whilst absolute deregulation is not possible, the question remains who defines and manages beauty. In fact, historically, debates on aesthetics were

developed in the fine arts to support the (overwhelmingly white upper-class) establishment, as was the case in the Royal Academy by Ruskin (Harris 1997). Accordingly, the role of aesthetics was to teach people what to find beautiful and how to enjoy it (Lang 1987, p. 131). In urban design, the rich sense of order and beauty found in cities such as Venice, Amsterdam, and Bruges are manifestations of various forms of power such as ownership, knowledge and skills. Historically, urban aesthetics programmes are often developed by those who heavily benefit from them (Rubin 1979).

Academic and social activist 'bell hooks' (1995) offers an alternative definition of aesthetics as *a way of inhabiting space*, calling to negate what advanced capitalism forces us to see. 'hooks' identifies the limitations of the Black aesthetic movement (as a power structure within the wider marginalised group) and calls for functionalising beauty in a way that offers empowerment and agency, especially for victims of oppression. Such beauty belongs more to the social dimension of urban design than the visual. Beauty can, and some think must, contribute to societies and social justice (Scarry 2010). But even this version of beauty and its social impacts has dynamic social functions insofar as it can be captured in the power network. Beauty is socially valued. As a result, any beautiful image will have commodity and symbolic value (see Cuthbert 2006, p. 186). Therefore, as Jameson notes, '[t]he image is the commodity today, and that is why it is vain to expect a negation of the logic of commodity production from it, that is why, finally, all beauty today is meretricious' (1998, p. 135). In many alternative spaces in cities, such as artistic quarters, when desirability (i.e. a beautiful image), is achieved, the land value increases, which results in the gentrification and displacement of the creative class (Miles, 2015).

Urban design research needs to reveal the ugly consequences of beauty policies, illustrating how beauty can be utilised as a means to reproduce privilege and oppress marginalised groups, as has been attempted in other disciplines. In so doing, it is essential to separate beauty from art. At least since the modernist movements, unlike that which Cozzolino indicates, art and artists are no longer seen as the agents of delivering beauty (Adorno 2007). Alternatively, by recognising how contemporary art, in its location and content, is fundamentally an urban phenomenon (Osborne 2013, pp. 133–173) we can open up possibilities of seeing urban design as an active agent of collaborative endeavours for social change (for example see Inam 2013).

Studies on beauty must therefore be informed by the rich body of cultural studies and be aware of the disproportionate impact of beauty policies on disadvantaged groups. Alternative views can then look into the possibilities of unsettling and decentralising white beauty standards (Painter 2006) to decolonise beauty and urban design.



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