

The Architecture of Happiness

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Alain de Botton specializes in the philosophical-light approach to many of the essential features of human life, be it the consolations of philosophy itself, the vicissitudes on travel (in which he was rather delightful) or the anxiety connected to the seeking and maintaining of social status (where he was more forgettable). This time he has turned his attention to the role of beauty in our life and its connection to our well-being and ultimate happiness, hence the title of the book.

When we are talking about the practical application of beauty we are talking about architecture, the most palatable manifestation of beauty in our lives. But is it really beauty we are seeking to find comfort, is it not a kind of congeniality that makes us feel at home? de Botton quotes Ruskin who claimed that buildings are not just functional, they also speak to us, confirm our hopes as well as kindle them, address our real selves, the expression of which we want our homes to encourage.

Beauty and goodness are often intertwined, both sometimes being seen as the two sides of the same coin, hence implicitly indicating a common standard of beauty, beyond that of lying in the eye of the beholder, because ethics after all is social and strives for a universal consensus, just like truth, otherwise there would be chaos.

Initially, the author claims, there was a consensus of beauty, at least an architectural kind. The humble abode was built according to the limitations imposed by local conditions and a limited imagination reduced to imitation of existing models. Maybe the notion of beauty did not even enter, or rather that what existed became the aesthetic norm and the very notion of what a home meant. As far as public and more exalted buildings were concerned, the models provided by the Greek and the Romans held sway as ultimate authorities. The architect of the day did not strive for originality, but to keep as close as possible to the ancient models, and indeed way into the 18th century many public buildings in Europe were more or less faithful copies of classical models. But then there was a reaction, an awareness of freedom of expression and a pampering to individual idiosyncrasies. Architecture became more eclectic, also more daring and experimental, trying out a confusion of different models, Roman, Gothic in the same building¹. The result, so refreshingly imaginative initially, threatened to reduce to a chaotic hodge-podge, while each individual building may have been of interest, that interest was mainly due to the fact of differing from a uniform norm, once that uniform norm, against which to measure and define the new, had eroded away, each building was deprived of a context of comparison and identification, and just became peculiar. In fact there is much to be said for conformity in architecture, as the 20th century Viennese architect Loos claimed, each new project does

¹ One late 18th century example quoted by de Botton concerns a couple who could not agree whether their home would be in the Roman style or the Gothic, the architects proposed a Salomonic solution, by splitting the house in two, each fashioned according to one style.

not mean an admonishment to start again.

With the withering of an architectural canon, attempts in the 20th century to find an intrinsic one, were centered on the idea of functionalism. An engineer designs a bridge to conform to certain constraints imposed externally, he seeks the most economical solution, and out of this beauty emerges as an epi-phenomenon. In the same way a house for living should be practical, in fact the practical requirements should, like that of a bridge, fashion the solution. None of the mere decorative parts of architecture, no fake colonnes, everything that is designed needs to have a purpose, otherwise it should be excised. This was an idea that found a fertile reception, and has indeed shaped the attitudes of modern architects. The pioneering name is of course that of Le Corbusier a most enthusiastic proponent of modernism, ready to tear down the historical center of Paris, and in its place erect a truly modern city of huge scyscrapers, complete separation of automobiles and pedestrians, designed to do away with the shoddiness and squalor that so marred the early decades of the 20th century. Le Corbusier did not get his way, unlike previous centuries, there were no absolute ruler, like that of Louis XIV, to which he could appeal and harness his will. But when the architect did get his way, as in the sesignation of private houses, his visions of practicality did not always conform with those of reality. The flat roof more likely than not led to leakage making the austere home unlivable. Lucky we are that Le Corbusier did not get his way, yet his influence on modern architecture was decisive, and in many European city centers, old buildings were unceremoniously razed down to make room for the future.

As Ruskin wrote, we need more of a house than its functionality, we want to maintain a conversation with it. So what appeals to us? According to the young German arthistorian Worringer writing 1907 aesthetic sensibilities throughout history has vacillated between the abstract, with its appeal to order and reason, and the realistic with its emphasis on the rich and multifarious world of sensation, each age aiming for what it lacked in real life. In tortured societies, the tastes in art tended towards the abstract and soothing, while in ordered predictable societies there was instead an urge for the unordered and vivid. On a more individual level, beauty is a yearning for what is missed and hence sought. This is indeed, one of the authors main points, that the sense of beauty has to be sought in the deficiencies of the psychology of an individual, in fact that needed complement to his psyche to effect a balance.

Still there are other aspects to style. One of them being that style should, in contradistinction to the modern functional approach, whose technical solutions are universally valid, reflect location. Thus one expects the buildings of Japan to be distinct from those of France, reflecting different climates and traditions. But also a buidling should confirm to the age and its technical capabilities, otherwise style degenerates into mere kitsch. Thus each location and tradition should provide its own idiom, out of which styles should evolve.

Finally individual aesthetics is not just a matter of personal idiosyncarcies, a sense of beauty is not innate but the effect of education. In fact one may, according to Botton, trace the various shifts in art perspectives to a very limited number of impacts brought about by a very restricted circle of prescient people. Thus when we are abhorred by the lamentable taste of commercial developers, we should take heart and deflect all references to the two major authorative forces in modern western society - money and liberty, by

pointing out that the choices individual consumers make are uninformed resulting from a very limited supply of options.

Unlike most human activities, architecture has very palpable consequences, a bad book will sink and leave no trace after it has been shredded, but a bad building will remain in place and exert a sustained influence. How sad is it not to see virginal land being subjected to the razing of bull-dozers and be replaced by something far inferior. This does not always have to be the case, the author reminds us, indifferent landscape may indeed provide the site for real architectural beauty.

As may be noted the book is rather slim on ideas and rich in illustration making it something of a minor coffee-table book². It is the prerogative of a writer to write on almost everything that catches his fancy, he needs not to be an expert, and an expert de Botton certainly is not. Rather than being the expression of someone who has for a very long time lived with the complexity of architecture and its relevance to human abodes, it is the assignment of a reporter, who with his limited perspective is expected to be able to closer pander to the interests and simple curiosities of the ordinary reader. The book is based on travel, and it is not too hard to charter the authors itinerary, which in addition to Japan also has taken him to Sweden, more specifically the environs of Stockholm. More or less everything he has seen and encountered must somehow find its way into the book.

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² In fact, the circular sticker pasted on the cover reveals that it has provided the inspiration for the TV-series 'The perfect home'.