

OPINION

BEAUTY AS AN ETHICAL CONCEPT

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One of the main issues discussed in connection with the open letter of British students (Architecture Education Declares, 2019) is the question of beauty in architecture. Meanwhile, the judgments of modern architects about beauty are usually subjective and blurred. They can accommodate the requirements of the functionality principle — “what works well, looks good” — and the love of originality and novelty, residual ideas of classic beauty and harmony.

Most modern architects generally avoid the word “beauty”, referring ironically to it and associating it with manifestations of kitsch, “Las Vegas style”, etc. When I hear this discordant chorus I feel sorry for the students because there is no consistency in these judgments. There is no integral view of beauty, of the person who needs it and of the world he/she lives in.

On the contrary, traditional notions of beauty have a fundamental ontological foundation that cannot be ignored by turning to the experience of the past in the hope of improving the present. Otherwise, we will get only fragmentary beautiful casts of long-gone centuries.

All traditional cultures associate beauty with the highest divine principle. The philosophical basis of this fundamental connection was laid by Plato; later it was accepted and developed by Christianity and became the basic of classical European aesthetics.

A spiritual view of the problem of beauty allows us to see the logic of the development of architecture, explains the reasons for its heyday and decline and finally, it provides a solid methodological basis for its analysis. In the twentieth century, a similar approach to the study of art was proposed by the Vienna school of art studies (Dvořák, 2001; Sedlmayr, 2000).

Today, when the entire field of humanitarianism is experiencing confusion due to a lack of guidelines, the relevance of this method is even more pressing. Theology, religious philosophy, and philosophical traditionalism help to reconstruct the approach to beauty that gave us such a beautiful architecture in the past. Tradition has developed certain

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ways of achieving beauty in art, which remained as part of numerous testimonies (for example, the famous treatise of Abbot Sugerus (Bazin, 1994; Suger, 2020)). If we generalize to the maximum, we can reduce these methods to three main ones:

Method 1: Strict adherence to the canons that contain not only the practical experience of generations, but also the memory of Revelation, i.e. sacred knowledge received from above. For example, the old Testament artisan Veseliel received direct instructions from God, according to the Bible, on how to build the tabernacle of the Covenant (Exodus 31:1-11; 36-39). The Christian Canon, both Western and Eastern, has preserved many traditions about how artists and architects received revelations from above about what their works should be, and these works became models for future generations (Florenskii, 1922).

Method 2: Personal spiritual experience, prayer, and asceticism. Its purpose is to purify the heart, without which, according to the Christian Gospel, it is impossible to know God (“Blissfully pure in heart, that they may see God” (New Testament, Matthew 5: 8)).

Method 3: Mimesis as a principle aimed at understanding the general laws of creation through the contemplation of nature (reflected beauty). Mimesis is usually interpreted as an imitation of nature, but this too general interpretation needs to be clarified. This method is unlike modern biomorphic architecture, for example, which imitates particular natural forms and structures, whereas true mimesis is aimed at comprehending the *principles of creation*. “The whole world is the great and glorious book of God, in which the preached God is revealed by the very silence” (Saint Gregory the Theologian, 2020).

This approach provided ontological truthfulness, objectivity of beauty, and showed its connection with truth. It should be noted that both the mimetic principle and personal spiritual experience as ways to achieve beauty were at the same time important conditions for preventing excessive absolutization of the “letter” of the canon to the detriment of the “spirit” of living creativity. The truth is one, but there are many paths to it. Hence the infinite variety of traditional architectural forms, which, however, are united by a number of common features, such as tectonicity, hierarchical subordination of parts and the whole, symmetry, strict orientation to the cardinal directions, as well as the general vertical orientation of the old architecture.

This perception of beauty prevailed until the Renaissance, when the concepts of beauty and truth began to diverge. The vector of creative attention gradually began to shift from supersensible, uncreated perfection to the material beauty of “ready-made” forms of the past (historicism), and to the search for a mathematical calculation of beauty. It is significant that in this same period architecture ceases to be “truthful” and tectonically “honest”: the former unity of form, function and construction is lost.

Having ceased to be the “radiance of truth” (according to Plato), beauty gradually became a meaningless frozen mask. The increasing splendor of facades could not compensate for the substantial emptiness of desacralizing forms. The new atheistic ideas exploded these false empty shells from within. The era of modernism had arrived.

Modernist architecture pursued completely different goals: to figuratively destroy the old world and build a new one from the “primary elements” (whatever those may be). This new world of a universal bright future had to be radically different from the old one, which had been focused on eternity and heavenly Paradise — so radically different that it gave reason to the architectural historian S.O. Khan-Magomedov to talk about two “superstyles” in architecture: classicism and modernism (Bembel, 2018).

From the traditional point of view, ideas of beauty as the goal of art — and at the same time as one of the ways of knowing God — modernist architecture was and remains ugly.

According to the philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, ugliness in nature is reduced to the following features (Solovyov, 1990):

- “(1) excessive development of material animality,
- (2) return to formlessness, and
- (3) caricature of the highest form.”

According to Solovyov, these three reasons can be further reduced to one: namely, the resistance that the material basis of life exerts on the organizing force of the ideal cosmic principle.

Modern architectural trends match all of these signs of ugliness. Functionalism (including the newest “green”), which emphasizes the satisfaction of humankind’s material functions, seems to be nothing more than an “excessive development of material animality”. Going beyond functional modernism makes the situation worse. In postmodernism, there is a caricature, a parody of beauty and meaning. Deconstructivism clearly and significantly demonstrates the return to formlessness and chaos. Parametric architecture, created by a computer, deserves our special attention. As a computer performs a calculation technique, it cannot create beauty in the highest, Aristotelian sense, where the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

As Nikos Salingaros writes, these are dead forms based on the geometry of death (Salingaros, 2017). It is also very important that Salingaros writes about sacred spaces. Sacred objects have always been places of attraction for life and catalysts for the development of living architecture (Salingaros, 2006).

Today, churches are built by modernists in forms whose symbolism actually preaches God-fighting. So, in the millennial architectural tradition, the cube always symbolizes the earth and matter, and the sphere symbolizes the heaven, the highest spiritual world (Guénon, 2011). The temple in the form of a parallelepiped with a flat roof symbolizes nothing more than the cult of dead matter.

One of the participants in the discussion on the future of architectural education asks the question: “How can we become modern and at the same time return to the sources?” The answer is to go back to the beginning “from the right end”, to see the “spiritual hoop” that bound the world of tradition (Dvořák, 2001).

Students should have an opportunity not only to study a large variety of architectural traditions (not just the ancient system of Classical orders), but also to get acquainted with the spiritual basis of several pre-modern cultures. The choice of landmarks, of

course, will remain for them, but it is necessary to open the possibility of choice to them.

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