

The Beautiful City: Towards an Emotionally-Laden Paradigm for Urban Development

The question of what makes a ‘good’ city has fascinated humankind for decades. But, due to urbanisation and global climate change, this old-topic concern has attracted new interest in recent years. To help make cities more liveable and loveable, scholars and practitioners have devised a number of different paradigms for urban development, such as smart city, creative city, compact city, and sustainable city. What is largely missing from these popular paradigms is a concern for beauty, which many dismiss as a matter of taste. This is unfortunate because, as research shows, beauty in cities has benefits that citizens want to reap. As such, this study aimed to identify and evaluate beautiful city-making approaches as a way of embracing new models of reflection on urban development. 15 city-buildings ‘experts’ from fields like design and planning were interviewed over Zoom. Based on the thematic analysis of data, this paper shows experts’ conception of urban beauty as an emotional experience that can be conjured through particular architecture and design principles. The value of urban beauty is that as an emotionally-laden concept, it can integrate different urban development paradigms under a common pluralist umbrella, supporting the systematic endeavour to create ‘good’ cities.

Keywords: Urban beauty, aesthetics, emotional experience, urban development paradigms, expert approach

Introduction

The question of what makes a ‘good’ city has fascinated humankind for decades. While each time period produced different responses, there exists some common understanding of the issues at stake. This understanding has largely been shaped by events and problems such as climate change, as well as by famous or influential urban design theory. Books like *The Image of the City* (Lynch, 1960) and *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs, 1961) have inspired a whole generation of urban practitioners, remaining widely influential today. More recently, scholars have advocated for good urbanism through urban development paradigms that express goals and targets set for the future city. Among the most popular paradigms are smart city, compact city, creative city, sustainable city, and age-friendly city. Surprisingly, the majority of these paradigms or visions of the city lack a concern for beauty. Indeed, Toderian (2007) notes that urban practitioners seem to loathe to use the word beauty, and many have turned their back on the goal of creating beautiful city environments (Feldmann, 2011). As a result, the widely shared ideal of urban beauty is not practically manageable, yet.

This paper aims to strengthen the pursuit of beautiful cities, making beauty a guiding principle in urban planning and design. For this to happen, it is necessary to identify aesthetic principles of what a beautiful city might look

like, irrespective of cultural and other contexts. Therefore, the question raised here is whether there are some commonly accepted elements regarding urban beauty that can help urban practitioners design and plan for more beautiful cities. Finding an answer to this question is important because urban beauty pays off in terms of welfare, improving health and well-being (Greer, 2010), social and economic development (Baggio & Moretti, 2018), community satisfaction and overall happiness (Florida et al., 2010; Leyden et al., 2011), as well as the spirit of a place (Scruton & Smith, 2020). Moreover, urban beauty is believed to have osmotic qualities, inciting people to behave in morally acceptable manners (Mackintosh, 2005; Kelling & Coles, 1998). In light of these positive social outcomes and public benefits, it seems irresponsible to continue to neglect urban beauty.

To answer the research question, expert interviews were conducted. ‘Experts’ in city-building circles (e.g. architects, designers, planners) have the power to shape the look of our cities (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). We need to scrutinise what Bogner and Menz (2009) call their ‘unwritten rules’ and ‘decision-making maxims’ to gain a better understanding of the aspects they consider essential for urban beauty and whether that corresponds with popular appeal. By comparing the results produced here to existing or new public perception-based data, we can resolve potential conflicts between the tastes of experts and those of the public.

Literature Review

Since ancient times, and throughout history, many thinkers attempted to find a definition of beauty, from Plato to Kant, from Goethe to Proust, from Vitruvius to Le Corbusier, and so on (Dal Fabbro, 2007). Different as these definitions are, the idea that beauty and goodness are closely related and mutually reinforcing has been, and continues to be, pervasive in Western thought (Clewis, 2018). This might be explained etymologically. The word “beauty” is derived from the ancient Greek word “kalon/kallos” and from the Latin “bellum”. The former can be translated as beautiful, good, noble, or fine (Reid & Leyh, 2019), while the latter comes from “bonus”, meaning good or well (Baggio & Moretti, 2018). Not surprisingly, it has been argued that beautiful cities are a by-product of ‘good’ urban planning that provides a high quality of life (Calafiore, 2020). But critics like Scruton (2009) counter that urban beauty cannot merely be a translation of form into function because the aesthetic enjoyability of objects in the city is at stake when attending only to ends set by reason. Indeed, modern architecture, the apex of rationality and efficiency, has been called “dispiriting, chaotic, and distasteful” (de Botton, 2021, para. 1). Hence aesthetics and morality are not always aligned in the urban context.

If a beautiful city is not necessarily good and moral, then how do we describe its look and feel? This is difficult to answer given that the evolving story of thinking about beauty can be seen as a single movement from certainty

1 to doubt (Powers, 2010). We no longer have a single canon where a central
 2 authority can decide what is beautiful and what is not (Gardner, 2012). Many
 3 think that beauty is an entirely subjective and conditional matter (my viewpoint
 4 versus yours) about which there cannot be a reasoned argument, and
 5 concerning which it is futile to search for a consensus (Scruton, 2009). Of
 6 course, beauty is at least partly in the eye of the beholder because aesthetic
 7 judgments imply a certain degree of taste, which is shaped by different socio-
 8 demographic variables. Moreover, what we find beautiful today may have been
 9 ugly yesterday (Maggi & Scholz, 2008), meaning beauty is a volatile,
 10 unpredictable, and unruly quality. And yet despite this, scholars in the field of
 11 neuroaesthetics argue that beauty can be quantified beyond personal taste,
 12 cultural imprint, and epochal trends because there are neural links between
 13 aesthetics and emotions common to all humans (Zeki, 2019). Visual patterns of
 14 contrast, grouping, and symmetry are thought to activate the brain activity in
 15 the architectural experience, triggering a huge variety of emotions (e.g.
 16 contemplation, comfort, curiosity, awe), most of which are aesthetic (Coburn et
 17 al., 2017). As such, the story of beauty is one of coexistence since aesthetics
 18 interweaves nature and culture (Postrel, 2007).

19 Little is known about the characteristic emotional profile of urban beauty,
 20 that is, the feelings elicited by the physical properties of natural-built
 21 environments. But research offers some insights into the eliciting stimuli
 22 through which aesthetic pleasure in the city is thought to occur. First and
 23 foremost, people locate beauty in natural, well-maintained environments that
 24 have calming and uplifting effects, such as gardens or parks (Harvey & Julian,
 25 2015; Ipsos MORI, 2010). While greenery is most positively associated with
 26 urban beauty, broad streets, fortress-like buildings, and council houses are
 27 often labelled or viewed negatively because of noise and pollution (Quercia et
 28 al., 2014). Besides nature, people hold certain ideas of beauty in architecture
 29 that, in Western civilization, are bound up with a set of ideals dictated by the
 30 arts (Cozzolino, 2022). These ideals are encapsulated by principles of
 31 aesthetics like balance, visual order, and harmony (MacDonald, 2012), which
 32 characterize the monumental buildings of ancient Greece and Rome. On the
 33 one hand, it has been argued that building according to classical categories of
 34 beauty will stifle innovation (Gutschwo, 2020), hence we should reject rigid
 35 architectural styles in favour of plurality, playfulness, and possibilities (Rizzi,
 36 1990). But, on the other hand, research in the field of design and psychology
 37 maintains that people find those building façades and objects most aesthetically
 38 pleasing that are most diverse, yet still ordered in their complexity (Prieto &
 39 Oldenhave, 2021; Kumar & Garg, 2010). As such, urban beauty can be
 40 measured by the presence of nature and buildings of different types that have a
 41 familiar architectural language.

42 Other recurring themes in how we feel about our urban environments
 43 are defined by combinations of details as signs of a place's identity (Vitiello &
 44 Willcocks, 2006). For example, signs of longevity, grandeur, and preservation
 45 lead people to call buildings beautiful (Harvey & Julian, 2015). Moreover, a
 46 sense of walkability, measured by things like street connectivity and sidewalk

safety, informs our perception of urban beauty (Calafiore, 2020). Implicated in walkability is access to aesthetic experiences in the form of amenities and events (Carlino & Saiz, 2008; Feldmann, 2011). Lifestyle offerings facilitate social interaction, an expression of urban beauty (Ipsos MORI, 2010) associated with feelings of intense pleasure (Brielmann et al., 2021). Finally, legibility is, for Lynch and the vast majority of other theorists, fundamental to creating a sense of urban beauty (Cozzolino, 2022). Legible environments feature unifying design elements – landmarks, paths, districts, edges, and nodes – that make it easier to ‘read’ a city in terms of its layout, creating more memorable experiences (Quercia et al., 2014). As such, urban beauty involves not only beautiful elements in the physical environment but also our sense of place and belonging (Caramel, 2017).

In summary, urban beauty must be considered in much wider terms than the physical attributes of a city, including buildings, spaces, and street patterns. This is because beauty is about aesthetics, but also about sensation; it is lived, experienced, and felt (Reynolds, 2017). On one hand, beautiful cities are materially articulated through elements like well-preserved historic buildings, walkable streets, vistas, green spaces, meeting places, amenity-rich areas, and more. On the other hand, they are produced at the visceral level through the experience of being in the city. For example, a feeling of beauty may arise when people feel the freedom and possibility to express themselves in the urban fabric (Cozzolino, 2022). Therefore, urban beauty is at once comprised of distinct biophysical features and the perceptual, experiential processes that those evoke in the recipient (Daniel, 2001). This paper asks whether there are similarities in the dispatcher that can support subjective experiences of urban beauty.

Methodology

This paper adopts an expert interview approach to widen and deepen our understanding of urban beauty from an insider perspective. To increase the richness and credibility of the data, I derived the sample in a random purposeful way (Patton, 1990). This entailed working with a gatekeeper who holds a position at a high-prestige design company based in Switzerland. To maintain transparency, it is important to disclose that I have a work and financial relationship with the gatekeeper. However, there were no conflicts of interest in connection to the study because he left the responsibility for decision-making in my hands and gave me enough room to pursue ideas and leads.

For sampling, the gatekeeper leveraged his extensive network of renowned scholars and practitioners in the field of urbanism. Prior to recruitment, I held two meetings with him to discuss issues of selection bias, and to explain the inclusion criteria (Oppong, 2013). These included: Personal interests and research projects, and indicators of peer esteem like prizes, publications, teaching positions, and advisory roles (Gläser & Laudel, 2009). Profession-

wise, I opted for heterogeneity because it shows whether results are widely applicable to different occupational contexts (Robinson, 2013). But the focus is restricted to Anglo-Saxon countries because bringing in other planning histories, design traditions, and aesthetic philosophies of non-Western cultures would entail a wider treatment than the scope of this study allows for.

A total of 20 city-building experts were contacted via e-mail, among them architects, designers, planners, developers, architectural historians, curators, authors, and futurists. 15 of these experts were successfully recruited. This number marks the cut-off point for gaining maximum variation in the data set (Guest et al., 2006). Before the interviews, all participants gave written consent about the use and confidential treatment of their data. Some questions and prompts included what makes a city beautiful, where do you situate yourself on the idea that beauty is ‘in the eye of the beholder’, please reflect on the relationship between beauty and utility in the urban context, and name some key stakeholders involved in the making of beautiful cities. By and large, questions were phrased similarly and raised in a set order, with some flexibility in the extent of probing.

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed with computer support and cleansed from transfer errors through corrective listening. Data analysis was carried out based on the constant comparative method and its three-staged coding process: open, axial, and selective coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). Several interesting issues emerged during the initial round of coding. Based on common information and ideas, these were grouped together in broader themes by axial coding. Finally, selective coding was conducted to further refine core themes and establish theoretical links between them. Based on the analysis, this paper discusses the way experts conceive urban beauty and how they think it can be brought about.

Before proceeding, some limitations of the paper should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative data clearly does not provide a basis for statistical generalisations. Even though I registered much concordant content, data saturation was not reached because new insights emerged even in the final interview. While this study enables experts’ viewpoints to be aired and analysed, it does not cover the complexity of the topics presented herein.

Discussion

Two major themes emerged during data analysis: one closely related to what understandings experts attach to urban beauty and the other related to the creation of the idea of a beautiful city.

Urban beauty as an exhilarating emotional experience

All respondents viewed urban beauty as an exhilarating emotional experience resulting from contact with certain features of the city. They used different emotion terms to describe how urban feels, such as, healthy, inclusive, safe, accessible, inviting, welcoming, dynamic, caring, inspiring,

1 vibrant, participatory, diverse, exciting, and interesting. Echoing Lynch (1960),
 2 one respondent called a beautiful city rhythmic like “well-tempered music”
 3 (architect & planner, Hamburg). Another described beautiful cities more
 4 simply as “places I like to go” (investor & developer, Cologne). Likewise,
 5 Stamps (2000) suggests that when somebody says: “this place is beautiful”,
 6 what they mean is “I feel pleased, enchanted, and happy here”. As such, behind
 7 the summarizing term urban beauty hide a variety of feelings, even negative
 8 ones associated with the lack of beautiful stimuli. These included – in
 9 respondents’ words – confusing, boring, derelict, uniform, nondescript,
 10 deterrent, foreboding, inhospitable, and technocratic; sort of “like Gotham city”
 11 (architect & designer, Seattle).

12 One area of contention was ugliness: Many argued that “urban beauty
 13 happens when you have the ugly and the beautiful mixed together and you
 14 sometimes catch the one or the other” (architect, New York). For example,
 15 “Athens has an urban beauty...because of its clash of wonderful ancient
 16 buildings and incredibly ugly generic buildings” (architect, Munich). The ‘fact’
 17 that “too many architectural jewels are boring and produce a museum-like
 18 situation in the city” (architect, Zurich & Singapore) means that people need
 19 moments that “cleanse the palate” (architect, New York), offering an
 20 “interesting counterpoint” (architect & researcher, Stuttgart). These sentiments
 21 chime with de Botton (2006) who argues that there is a tyranny about
 22 perfection, and that beauty flirts dangerously with ugliness. Notably, for Kant
 23 too, the feeling of beauty is compatible with a dual process of being attracted
 24 and also being repelled (Mennighaus et al., 2018). On the other hand, some
 25 respondents stated that the opposite of urban beauty is “urban ugly”
 26 (architectural academic & curator, Madrid), a “horrible design” (architect &
 27 designer, Washington).

28 Another area of contention was the relationship between urban beauty and
 29 utility. A few respondents reinforced the well-known axiom ‘form follows
 30 function’, arguing that “the most functional object is the ultimate beautiful
 31 form there is” (futurist & urbanist, Berlin). By contrast, others spoke of an
 32 “unmotivated urban beauty that is like an extra effect on top of the utilitarian
 33 foundation”, such as the “buzz of being in a market, which has a self-
 34 organising dimension” (architect & researcher, Edinburgh & Singapore). As
 35 such, Kant may be right that there are two types of beauty: a purpose-based one
 36 and one that pleases unselfishly (Clewis, 2018). The overall sentiment was that
 37 urban practitioners must succeed on both paths since “pure functionality looks
 38 like a mausoleum” (head of strategic foresight at a STEM university, Zurich)
 39 and pure beauty is “art without function” (architect & researcher, Stuttgart). A
 40 “game of ping-pong between form and function” (architect & planner,
 41 Hamburg) should inform the creation of beautiful cities.

42 The bad news for urban practitioners is that for all their good intentions,
 43 they cannot guarantee that experiences of urban beauty will take shape among
 44 city users. This is because there is great heterogeneity across the meanings and
 45 perceptions held by people in relation to the environment, as well the

1 experienced situational context¹. Moreover, “like love, urban beauty is difficult
 2 to define” (architect, Munich) and people use all kinds of terminologies to
 3 describe the feeling it evokes in them, for example, “cute, charming,
 4 picturesque, kitsch, and picturesque” (architect & researcher, Edinburg &
 5 Singapore). Urban beauty is too variable to be rationalised and formalised,
 6 hence it is impossible to benchmark beautiful cities based on a normative
 7 standard that permits pancultural comparison. In fact, “we should resist turning
 8 urban beauty into just another term like liveability or sustainability” (architect
 9 & researcher, Edinburg & Singapore). The pursuit of urban beauty should
 10 remain nuanced and attentive to context so as not to become shallow and
 11 trivialized.

12 The good news, respondents argued, is that urban practitioners can give
 13 form to the experience of urban beauty. This is because “there are a set of
 14 underlying principles in urban design and planning that can yield similar
 15 experiences of the same place by different people” (architect & designer,
 16 Washington). If urban practitioners master these principles, they could greatly
 17 increase the odds of people experiencing urban beauty – true to Hartmut
 18 Esslinger’s motto ‘form follows emotion’.

19 20 Urban beauty as the fabric of cities

21 There was agreement among respondents that aspects of the urban fabric
 22 converge more or less reliably with the positive emotions associated with
 23 experiences of urban beauty. As one respondent stated: “There are urban
 24 elements that can be considered a common experience across all aspects of
 25 society, for example, parks” (architectural academic & curator, Madrid).
 26 Four themes characterized respondents’ practical navigation of urban beauty.
 27 These denote the beautiful emotional experiences that urban practitioners
 28 should strive to create through their design and planning practices.

29 30 *Creating healthy living experiences*

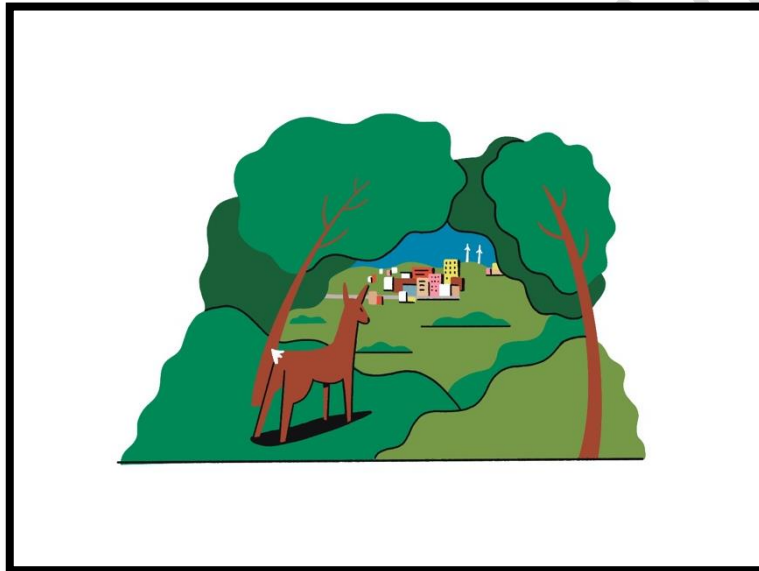
31
32 Respondents stressed that beautiful cities are those that make them feel
 33 alive and vital. If a city is to be healthy and vital, it requires integration of and
 34 access to nature. Establishing and protecting green spaces, natural area parks,
 35 and community gardens provides the substance on which experiences of urban
 36 beauty can spread. Moreover, urban practitioners must build with nature in
 37 mind by applying biophilic design. For example, they should build with natural
 38 materials that are specific to a local area, imitate natural forms and
 39 processes in design, and provide views of nature and daylight (architect &
 40 designer, Washington). When buildings are “ecologically sound and

¹ To offer two examples that respondents gave: Somebody sightseeing on a relaxed holiday during summer will be more receptive to experiences of urban beauty than somebody on a business trip during winter time who is stressed and cold” (architect & researcher, Stuttgart). Also, “a person interested in the architectural philosophy, history, and material goals of a building might perceive it as an object of beauty, whereas a passer-by who does not care for that building will likely remain unphased” (curator & architectural academic, Madrid).

1 technologically advanced”, then “humans can live healthy lives there for the
2 next 50 years or longer” (architect, Düsseldorf). This “concern for the climate,
3 human soul, and longevity naturally leads to an urban beauty” (head of
4 strategic foresight at a STEM university, Zurich), especially if we also adopt
5 “non-anthropological perspectives” that entail “caring for animals and plants”
6 (architect & researcher, Edinburgh & Singapore). Creating an ecologically
7 viable city that promotes carbon neutrality of the built environment is the
8 crucial first step for creating beautiful cities (Jiahua, 2021).

9 Importantly, ensuring high-quality living environments not only has an
10 environmental dimension but also one of social sustainability. As one
11 respondent said: “Beautiful cities have healthy neighbourhoods where people
12 can come together to discuss stuff, have a barbecue, and sit on the sidewalk
13 with a cold drink” (architect & researcher, Stuttgart). The importance of feeling
14 connected to places and people emerged as another key theme in the creation
15 of beautiful cities.

16
17 **Figure 1.** *Non-anthropological outlooks on urban beauty*



18
19 *Source:* Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.
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24

1 **Figure 2.** *Fostering neighbourly interactions*



2
3 *Source:* Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.

4
5 *Creating seamless social experiences*

6
7 Beautiful cities, according to the respondents, make it easy to reach, meet,
8 and interact with people. Reachability involves walkability and transportation
9 infrastructure. Having “safe and reliable mobility within a 15-minute walking
10 distance is an attribute of beautiful cities” (head of strategic foresight at a
11 STEM university, Zurich). This is because “density in the city creates a
12 situation where people can reach places faster, with regard to work and leisure”
13 (architect, Düsseldorf & Berlin). The city should boast “an array of cultural
14 things like gastronomy, retail, and museums” to be regarded beautiful because
15 these “offerings foster a resting culture and enrich social presence” (investor &
16 developer, Cologne). Street life activation can also unfold through flexible
17 leasing and unfold by “rejuvenating dead capital like parking spots into micro
18 parks or pop-up restaurants” (architect & designer, Washington). A city feels
19 beautiful when “the social life corresponds to the spatial output” (architect &
20 planner, Hamburg), and when “the physical and social energy are congruent”
21 (curator & architectural academic, Madrid).

1 **Figure 3.** *Creating compactness and a mélange of activities*



2
3 *Source:* Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.

4
5 To enable a wide variety of people to participate in public life, cities need
6 to feel safe and secure to their users. Otherwise, people – particularly those
7 among the most vulnerable and marginalised in society (e.g. women, LGBTQ+
8 populations, ethnic minorities) – will avoid certain areas that they fear,
9 dividing and homogenizing the urban landscape. A beautiful city is “where one
10 feels safe and welcome” (architect, Munich). As such, urban practitioners need
11 to incorporate natural surveillance techniques like street lighting and open-plan
12 layouts into their designs and plans. Creating a sense of eyes on the street can
13 deter criminal activity and give people “the feeling they can manage well in the
14 city...and go out anywhere day or night” (architectural academic & curator,
15 Madrid). Finally, it is important to also “minimise barriers to participation and
16 make room for everybody” (architect, New York) since this may increase
17 tolerance of diversity. Truly inclusive cities meet the needs of all their
18 inhabitants, not just a privileged few. Ensuring the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre,
19 1968) will bring vibrancy and beauty to urban areas.

20 21 *Creating sensorially engaging experiences*

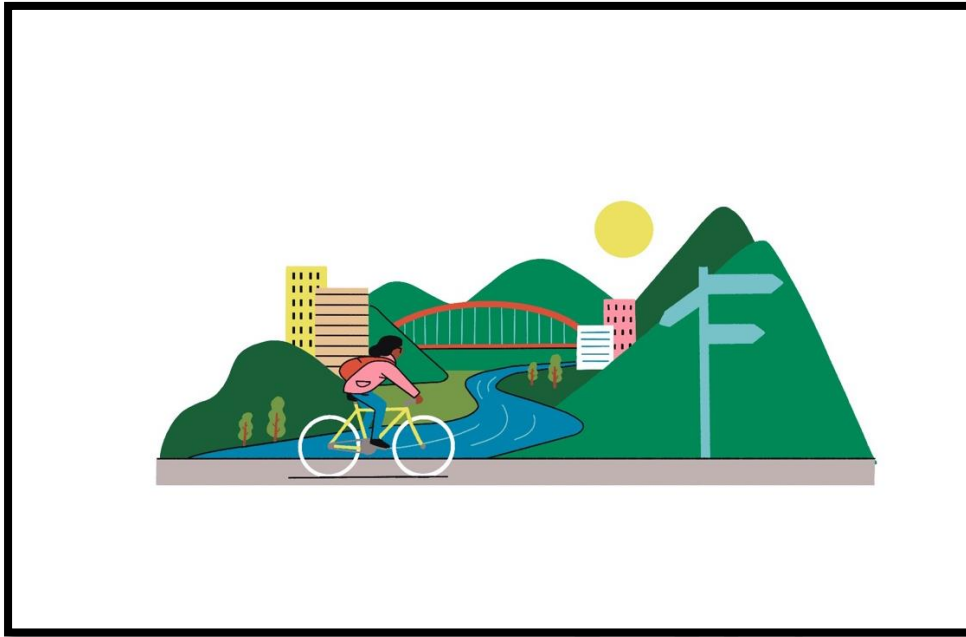
22
23 While a beautiful city buzzes with life, it also has other beautiful things to
24 offer in case social life stands still. These find themselves in the physical and
25 spatial structure of the city, its use of land, street network, and buildings.
26 Regarding the latter, many respondents remarked on the importance of ‘human
27 scale’, arguing that people “feel confined and constricted by their surroundings
28 when they exceed a certain height” (architect, Duesseldorf & Berlin).

1 Similarly, in the classic text *A pattern language*, Alexander et al. (1977) write
 2 that “high buildings make people crazy” (p. 144). While small- and medium-
 3 sized buildings are “not the one truth to be taken at face value..., eye level is
 4 something we have lost a little bit” (architect & researcher, Stuttgart), and
 5 should bring back for urban beauty’s sake (Gehl, 2010).

6 To increase interestingness and excitement, urban practitioners should
 7 keep in mind the “urban beauty principle of ordered chaos” according to which
 8 people like seeing patterns that are not monotone (architect & planner,
 9 Hamburg). It was argued that “buildings need to form contrasts and build up
 10 tension through variations of colours, materials, envelopes, and volumes”
 11 (architect, Düsseldorf). However, “buildings need to communicate with each
 12 other and not radically destroy their ensemble context” (architect, Zurich &
 13 Singapore). Otherwise, they cannot become “real, true partners to the city and
 14 its urban fabric” (architect & planner, Hamburg). Like Scruton (2009), who
 15 argues that buildings should be a fitting member of their community,
 16 respondents believed that there must be “a good relationship between the new
 17 building and the ones in the neighbourhood” (architect, New York). Newsom
 18 (1969) finds the approach ‘no look-alike but not too unlike’ helpful.

19 In terms of legibility, respondents felt like “beauty in the city is, can I
 20 understand the city?” (curator & architectural academic, Madrid). Basic things
 21 like signage can create a sense of orientation, as can “a connection to nature
 22 that expresses an authentic unity between the city and its people” (architect,
 23 New York). For example, Barcelona was regarded as having a “beautiful
 24 layout” thanks to “slightly downwards-sloped paths that give people a good
 25 sense of where the ocean and the mountains are” (architect, Zurich &
 26 Singapore). In a similar vein, Berleant (2018) suggests that curved paths and
 27 winding roads appeal to the body more than streets that press forward in
 28 straight lines and on level planes. As such, cities should not only be easily
 29 understandable and navigable but also enable “meandering experiences”
 30 (architect & designer, Seattle) that encourage exploration and discovery.
 31

1 **Figure 4.** *Utilising topographic uniqueness*

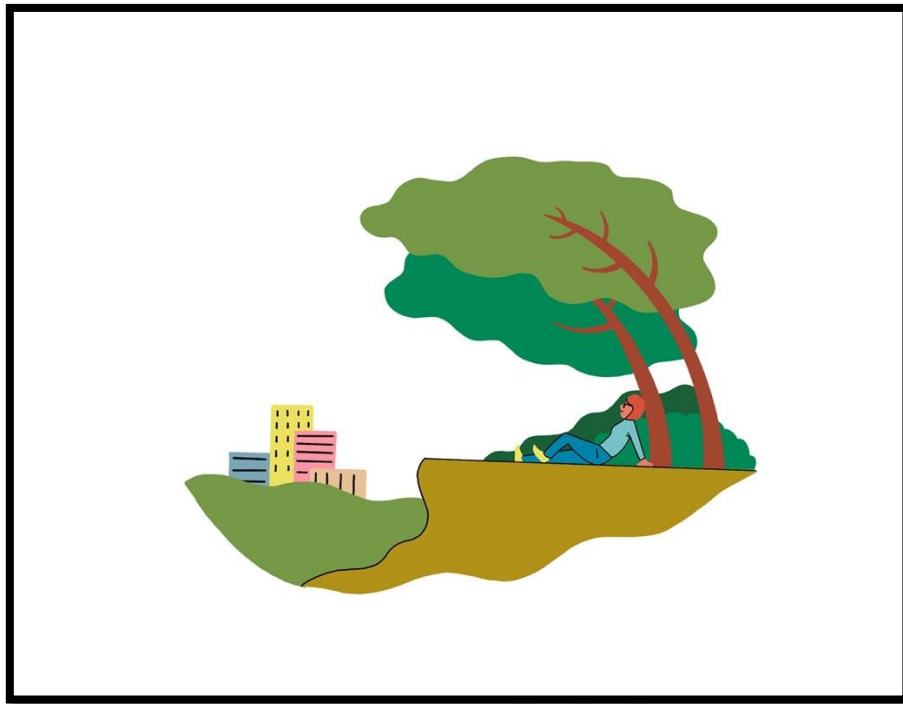


2
3 *Source:* Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.

4
5 One way to pique peoples' curiosity and keep them moving is by
6 providing them with an alternating sense of enclosure and openness.
7 Respondents raised the idea of compression and release, arguing that "an
8 enchilada kind of succession of narrow and grand spaces makes the way from
9 A to B very beautiful" (architect, Zurich & Singapore). By choreographic
10 spaces to release volume sequentially, urban practitioners can "make people
11 feel tightly bound and at the same time able to breathe and open out" (architect
12 & designer, Seattle). Urban beauty comes "when the city opens and closes
13 again and again" (architect & researcher, Stuttgart).

14 Another way to spark visual interest in the built environment is by
15 providing seating areas and look-out areas. For example, people instinctively
16 enjoy 'prospect and refuge', that is, "niches and hidden places where you sit a
17 little bit uplifted with a wide view over an urban scene and something
18 protected in your back or overhead like a canopy" (architect & planner,
19 Hamburg). Besides providing sheltered observation points, urban practitioners
20 should make building façades "open and interesting with windows, balconies,
21 and in-between layers with plants" because this likewise improves peoples'
22 "analogue experiences" (architect, Zurich & Singapore). When the eyes can
23 roam free, social activities and natural processes come to the fore, creating a
24 sense of urban beauty.

1 **Figure 5. Prospect and refuge**



2
3 *Source:* Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.

4
5 Finally, sensorially engaging experiences may bring elements of surprise
6 and reward, at least according to one respondent (architect & designer,
7 Washington). He mentioned two patterns that can arouse people and make
8 them intrigued to want to know more. The first – mystery and enticement –
9 refers to elements like curved roads, but also “music coming from around a
10 corner” and “smells oozing out of a bakery”. The second – risk peril – is tied to
11 more challenging designs like “uneven stepping stones” and “spiralling
12 ramps”, such as the famous Guggenheim Museum ones. Both patterns are
13 equally effective in “creating anticipation and pushing people outside their
14 comfort zone to give them a dopamine rush”. This feeling of a tingle is also
15 mentioned by Gardner (2012) as a defining characteristic of beauty.

16 17 *Creating participatory experiences*

18
19 Beautiful cities reject top-down control in favour of bottom-up place-
20 making processes. Next to the basic structure of the city, “there needs to be lots
21 of freedom for people to unfold and be creative because otherwise we feel
22 restricted when our surroundings are very regulated” (architect, Düsseldorf &
23 Berlin). As such, urban practitioners need to “leave a space raw” and
24 “empower people to contribute, take authorship, and co-curate something to a
25 vision that is collectively held” (architect, New York). Cozzolino (2022)
26 advances the same argument when proposing the idea of ‘beauty as
27 spontaneity’. To give one example of beauty as spontaneity: The Chilean
28 architect Alejandro Aravena’s designed an affordable housing solution where

he built only half of a house and left the other half unfinished, allowing tenants to complete the construction themselves based on their needs. This personalisation created an urban beauty that is “specific to the individual” (architect & designer, Seattle) and “really in the eye of the user” (futurist & urbanist, Berlin).

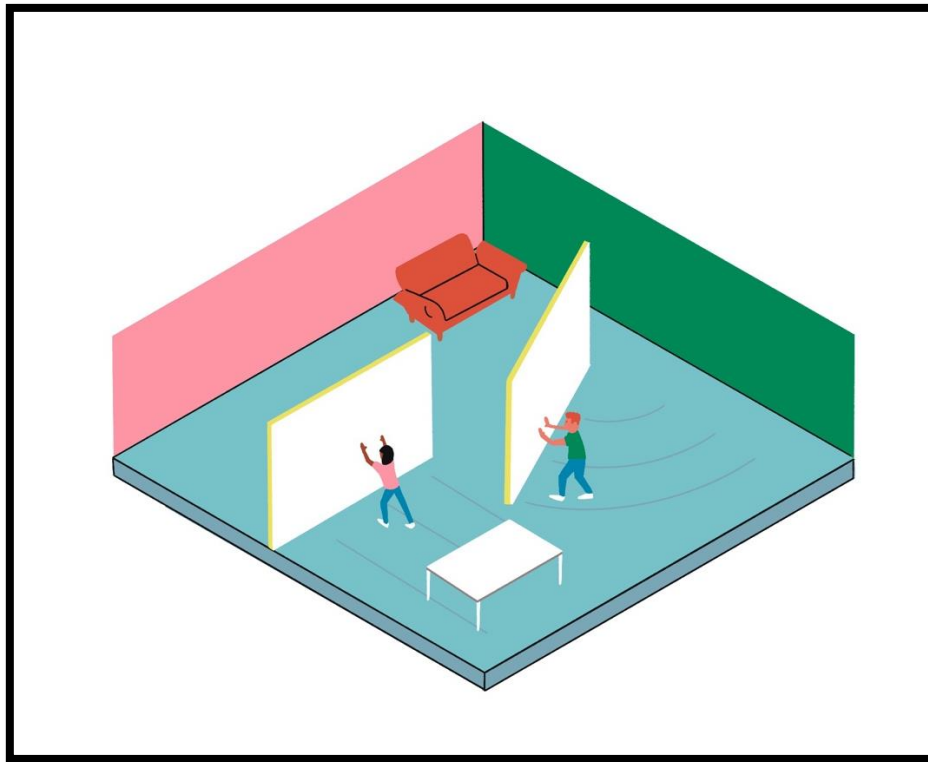
Figure 6. Encouraging co-creation



Source: Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.

In addition, urban practitioners should encourage mixed-use and build flexibility into new developments to account for rapidly changing business models and user needs. Indeed, “we need to get away from both typologies that say ‘this is a school, this is a house, this is a church’ and zoning that prescribes ‘offices here, commercial here, and something else there’ (curator & architectural academic, Madrid). Instead, “more experimentation with temporary designs and innovative structural programmatic expressions are needed to bring about more urban beauty now and for the next millennium” (architect & designer, Seattle). One piece of advice was that “every place should offer at least ten different things to do and with that, at least ten different functions” (architect & planner, Hamburg). Another recommendation was to build adaptable ground planes that can morph over time; “maybe it is a museum today and an office tomorrow” (curator & architectural academic, Madrid).

1 **Figure 7.** *Allowing local adaptations*



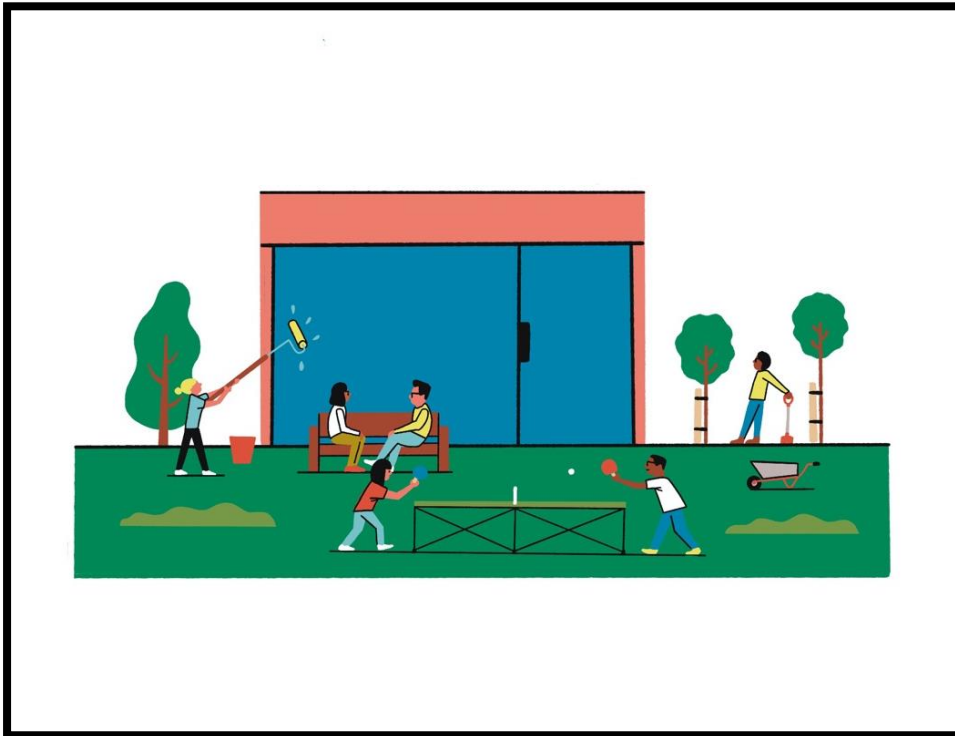
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3 Source: Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.

4
5 Creating “humanizing spaces” starts with the planning process because
6 “there needs to be real effort to engage people and help them feel that they are
7 part of the same building effort” (curator & architectural academic, Madrid).
8 One respondent used the analogy “if you want to have people build a boat, do
9 not tell them how to build the boat but tell them where the journey goes”
10 (architect, New York). In other words, people want to be inspired. As such,
11 “urban practitioners should clarify their goals and explain what value they add
12 with a project, be that during roundtable discussions, town hall meetings, or
13 through the media” (curator & architectural academic). Of course, “the public
14 should not be asked to co-design the physical in direct ways...because asking
15 what colour people would like to have on the façade can lead to style wars”
16 (architect & researcher, Stuttgart). Instead, it is about “giving people to chance
17 to air ideas and grievances that can be leveraged and resolved to successfully
18 guide a project towards a desired outcome” (architect & designer, Seattle). The
19 limited perspective of those concerned with revenue rather than social issues
20 must be overcome to create beautiful cities (Feldmann, 2011).

21 Responsibility is not a one-way street. Citizens also need to show they
22 believe “urban beauty is worth caring for, from the administrative levels down
23 to the people on the streets” (curator & architectural academic). They can do so
24 by “carrying out civic duties such as street sweeping and garbage collection”
25 (architect & researcher, Stuttgart), or “leading by example on a smaller scale”
26 (architect, Munich). The latter might involve placing sunshades, benches, and

plant buckets outside one's home to awaken a passion for stewardship in others.

Figure 8. The more helping hands, the better



Source: Robert Samuel Hanson, 2020.

Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate whether there are some commonly agreed-upon aspects of beauty related to the urban form that can support the pursuit of beautiful cities. A review of the literature showed that urban beauty should be a ‘hot topic’ because it has much to offer cities in terms of health and well-being, community satisfaction and happiness, social and economic development, and the symbolic value of place. What complicates beautiful city-making is that there is no consensus about what is beautiful and what is not. For example, some people think graffiti gets in the way of beautiful experiences (Harvey & Julian, 2015), while others – artists, creatives, and activists, for example – believe that graffiti brightens and beautifies a cityscape (Morrison, 2017). Thus, to bring about an enhancement of urban beauty, this paper aimed to find some commonalities about what people find beautiful using interviews as a research instrument. 15 city-building ‘experts’ from the broad field of urbanism (design, architecture, planning, etc) were interviewed over Zoom and asked about their opinions, ideas, and attitudes regarding urban beauty and its creation. The results offer new insights into the nature of urban beauty and the physical elements and environments associated with it.

Urban beauty, respondents argued, is grounded in a variety of feelings, constituting something that is intensely felt. Experiences of urban beauty are not only context-dependent but also characterised by projection because the aesthetic agent actively allows or constrains such experiences. But, even though experiences of urban beauty vary in complex ways, there are generally acknowledged characteristics of built environments associated with the planning and designing of beautiful cities. These pertain to the aspects of healthy living, seamless social interaction, sensorial engagement, and public participation. Notably, some attributes of urban beauty resemble the elements of ‘good city form’ described by Lynch (1981). As such, urban beauty is clearly connected to utility functions, even if it is a separate entity to be considered on its own terms. Moreover, there are parallels between urban beauty and other concepts like conviviality (Shedid & Hefnawy, 2021). Future studies could look in more detail at the level of crossover between urban beauty and popular urban discourses (e.g. liveability) to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue and innovation.

This paper advances discussions about the construction of future cities by introducing urban beauty as an emotionally-laden concept that can expand holistically to integrate today’s urban development paradigms and their compartmentalised visions under a common pluralist umbrella. As we have seen, to make a city beautiful is to make it compact (e.g. dense, mixed-use, walkable), inclusive (e.g. accessible, diverse, safe), sustainable (e.g. green/blue, resilient, low carbon), and more. Urban beauty encapsulates many virtues and can therefore support the systematic endeavour to make cities more of all things deemed ‘good’ (age-friendly, compact, creative, sustainable, etc).

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