

The Terrifying Century of Beautiful Urbanism

by Bert de Muynck

Make it beautiful!

I would like to start with a confession. As the date clock turned over into the new Millennium, I found myself working in an architecture office somewhere in Europe. In the end, it turned out to be a total waste of time, however the only thing that still rings in my mind is the word - beautiful. At the end of every day and after every design discussion, the principal concluded with the messianic words, "*Remember! Make it beautiful!*" After saying this, we all knew he would leave the office and go home. "*Make it beautiful! See you tomorrow!*", nobody in the office really knew what he wanted to say, but everybody knew what to do; to make things beautiful. Ironically, and needless to say, nobody in the office ever succeeded in "making it beautiful."

On beauty...

When found beauty is unexpected, empirical and accidental. When constructed beauty is expected to be deliberate, mandatory and forced upon a situation. Beauty/beautiful transcends the everyday, the normal, the real; it charges and changes our perception and understanding of reality, it mediates between the individual and the collective desire.

In the city beauty can be found and constructed; but in contrast to height, color or texture, it cannot be defined or measured. It can loom around the corner, hidden, waiting to be discovered, it can be in your face, ready for consumption. Our cities are beautiful and also not so beautiful, as they are full of conflicts and contradictions. Some cities may not be called beautiful but could be described as attractive; they please by that delightful disorder that does not derive from art but from chance. Sometimes it is important to find out what the beauty of the city is – instead of what its beauty was, or what its beauty should be.

In the next pages I will explore beautiful urbanism as a collection of found, constructed, accidental and

accumulative events. I will use the terrifying beauty of the Contemporary City as the backbone for discussion.

How beautiful!

What makes the city beautiful? Is something beautiful when we can't make sense out of it? Today beautiful urbanism does not relate to singular objects but to the experience of a temporal simultaneity. Beauty can be the coexistence of completely different elements in clearly defined relationships. In the contemporary city beauty generally equals the transmutation as found in a legendary surrealist expression: It was as beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table. Sometimes the City is beautiful because we are unable to understand it, its construction, its destruction, its silence, simplicity, age or appearance. Everything can be beautiful. Sometimes the city becomes beautiful because we are unable to read it. G.K. Chesterton's confrontation with Times Square could be emblematic to describe this situation: *He remarked in 1922, of the neon hieroglyphs which bemused Gleizes, that Times Square would be "a glorious garden of wonder ... to anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read."* (...) *A version of Chesterton's remark about Times Square was attributed to Mondrian in 1940. "How beautiful!" he is alleged to have exclaimed, "if only I couldn't read English."*(1)

How does beauty operate beyond its definition in dictionaries? Sometimes we find it tantalizing our senses or exciting intellectual or emotional admiration. Aesthetically pleasing; highly enjoyable and having qualities that delight the senses, especially the sense of sight. What is beautiful has a way of being marvelous, whether a product of calculation, reason or intuition. When thinking about the relation between what is architecture and urban and what is beautiful – we understand its relation with the sense of sight,

with the experience of appearance. Nobody is making architecture for the blind.(2) But what are the criteria that help us understand why something is beautiful or not? And equally interesting; how can we create it or destroy it?

The terrifying beauty of the twentieth century

For those who can forget – for a fleeting moment – the arbitrary delusions of order, taste, and integrity, Europe is now, almost everywhere, ridiculously beautiful. Through the objective agent of ideological mismanagement, its cities are now exhaustive textbooks of flaws; the European metropolis is like a reef on which each intention, each ambition, each solution, each question, each answer implacably runs aground.

Rem Koolhaas, the terrifying beauty of the twentieth century, 1985

Beautiful Creation and Presence

Can one find beauty in the Contemporary City? Can we find beauty in the early twenty-first century urban landscape? Is one allowed to talk about the marvelous Metropolis? One architect that can't be overlooked when talking about the beauty of the Contemporary City is Rem Koolhaas. At the end of the 1980s he intended to write an analysis of the Contemporary City, thereby exploring cities like Atlanta, Tokyo, Paris and Singapore. He explained his ambitions as follows: 'The Contemporary City will be a retro-active manifesto for the yet to be recognized beauty of the late twentieth-century urban landscape.'⁽³⁾ The manifesto has never been completed, never finalized; the analysis of the beauty of the twentieth century (as we can find in several publications and interviews) is rough and fragmented while its counterpart, its not so beautiful aspects, were lyrically explored in *The Generic City* and *Junk Space*.

Koolhaas' investigation into 'The Contemporary City' was a reaction to two phenomena. The first one was the failure of urban research to investigate and interact with a form of urbanism characterized by its lack of architectural or methodological treatment inherent

in it, notwithstanding the fact that these areas are recognized as architectural or urban. Koolhaas says, 'In other words, I find that amazingly large areas of the world are right now in a state of development without recognizable connection to the profession I know.'⁽⁴⁾ The fact that these areas are depicted as 'nothing, hopeless, totally ugly, forget-about-it' set for Koolhaas a dangerous precedent. The second reaction was more personal, the indigestion of an ambiguous feeling related to Koolhaas's personal observation of these cities. This can be seen in the case of Atlanta (1987/1994). In his opening sentence Koolhaas states that 'sometimes it is important to find out what the city is – instead of what it was, or what it should be.'⁽⁵⁾ In an interview in 1990, he explains his motives for his research as follows: 'to actually find things beautiful or exciting – and the same goes for the *villes nouvelles* around Paris.'⁽⁶⁾ In his investigation Koolhaas negotiates between two possible perspectives on this situation; one denies the existence of these areas, the other celebrates the unique that is developing there: 'Maybe it's a very rich field, with a lot of potential freedom for people to live and work, etc.'⁽⁷⁾

With a similar attitude Koolhaas analyses La Défense, Paris. Koolhaas defends strongly the at the time unrecognized geniality embedded in La Défense; without doubt, he says, it saved Paris. The geniality lays in the area's lack of geniality; it combines simplicity and brutality in one gesture. The encirclement of an area, outside the center, where everything is possible, where good and bad taste coexist and where beauty and ugly play rather relative roles giving La Défense an 'accumulative beauty'. Ugliness, randomness and mediocrity are neutralized by the grandeur of the accumulation: '...in its accumulation has a certain grandeur and can even be seen absolutely and positively beautiful.'⁽⁸⁾ In this period Koolhaas explains that every building, once it goes beyond a certain scale and the impressive effect this brings about, has the potential to become beautiful: 'Ethically that is very difficult to admit for an architect, believing that beauty is something that you create, not something that comes from the outside or simply because of a certain scale.'⁽⁹⁾ As such La Défense is the embryo for Koolhaas' later concept of 'Bigness'. 'It seems incredible that the size of a building alone embodies an ideological program, independent of the will of its architects.'⁽¹⁰⁾ Beauty is no longer about creation, but about presence. Simply, Big becomes beautiful.

Simultaneity and Multi-Purpose

The city is an artifice, one that doesn't reflect a singular vision on beauty. Architects don't talk about the natural beauty of a building or about cities that can be moulded into works of art. As architects, planners, politicians or developers we participate in creating and reorganizing parts of the artifice, but at the end of the day we live in a construct that we are unable to change fundamentally. We are all beautiful losers.

Architectural or urban beauty is a reaction to a stimulus, reacting to what excites us intellectually or something we admire emotionally. Every experience and expression of this feeling is an abstraction, an evacuation, a disassembly of the real. In architecture beauty is a taboo; it is a perverted, sentimental, awkward and outdated way of dealing with architecture or the city. It is an unspoken convention that projects should be economic and functional; they don't aspire to be ethical, beautiful or permanent, but are a commercial exploit or a mere expedient. They have no higher ideal of unity than commercial success; beauty is the byproduct, an accidental accumulation of an accidental encounter between form and content. Beauty seems to have no purpose and contrasts with the multi-purpose organization of the city. *Kevin Lynch* explores beauty in *The Image of the City* beauty as follows: Most objects which we are accustomed to call beautiful, such as a painting or a tree, are single-purpose things, in which, through long development or the impress of one will, there is an intimate, visible linkage from fine detail to total structure. A city is a multi-purpose, shifting organization, a tent for many functions, raised by many hands and with relative speed. Complete specialization, final meshing, is improbable and undesirable. The form must be somewhat noncommittal, plastic to the purposes and perceptions of its citizens.(11)

Some case-studies

But the situation changes, beauty is back! After using Koolhaas to understand how to read the beauty of cities that seem to be devoid of it, I want to throw light on how to make it beautiful! While conducting research into this topic I brought together some urban attempts that deal with beauty; the beauty of a past devoid of ideology, the beauty of modern architecture, the beauty that can't be measured and the beauty that engages.

Berlin

During the last years the Palace of the Republic, opened in 1976 as the home of the East German Parliament, has been threatened with demolition. Yet in the last year or so, a growing chorus of voices has been rising in defense of the building. These are not grizzled old Communists hoping for a return to the glory days of socialism. They are architectural activists, mainly in their late 30's and early 40's, who refuse to see the Palace in purely ideological terms. Less dogmatic than their elders, they have cited elements of the building's beauty that many Germans - conditioned by decades of cold war oratory - find difficult to see.(12)

Milan

"Milan is living through an unprecedented urban transformation," said Mayor Gabriele Albertini at the signing ceremony. "Quality is the common denominator for all the projects underway -- more green, more beauty, more functionality, more international prestige."(13) Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Cesar Pelli and Norman Foster are commissioned to build in Milan.

St Petersburg

Recently in St Petersburg there was a discussion about the construction of new, modern, buildings in the historical center which soon became enfolded in a heated discussion between the traditionalists and admirers of radical architectural solutions. Discussing style they agreed that the existing regulations were too vague to apply to specific sites. It seemed anything would be possible, until Vasily Sopromadze, president of construction company Corporation C, entered the stage, and set up a new criterion for architecture; beauty. Sopromadze said beauty should be a major criterion for an architectural design. Applying it would make it easier for the public to judge buildings and would bypass the obstacles created by professional critics operating with measurements and exact categories, he said. His approach would be more flexible than that proposed by Lisovsky and would not hamper creativity, he said. "An architect should work on a project with all their heart, and then put it forward at a competition," he said. "If the jury likes it, they'll take it, if not, they'll reject it - it is that simple. In architecture, taste is more important than all those height and length limitations, and taste, as well as beauty, can't be measured."(14)

Shanghai

"The Kiss is a dynamic object of beauty which will engage constantly and dynamically with the Shanghai cityscape," Alsop Director Stephen Pimbley said.(15) The proposal for a Ferris Wheel in Shanghai, a 250-meter-tall sculptural tower, that is intended to rotate once every 4 hours while a series of visitor pods travel up and around the legs, offering visitors unique and exciting views over the city.

One could give a thousands of examples of urban and architectural discussions where the notion of beauty is the center of debate. In doing so one would not get any closer to what it means, where it comes from, how to measure it or how it functions. Eventually, all that is beautiful turns into ugliness. Beauty is the psychic element of the City, when found beauty can arise from the most cruel urban elements and tells us about the untold possibilities of beauty, when constructed beauty is forced upon a situation and renders us speechless, nobody is supposed to be against beauty.

Conclusion

Charles Baudelaire said 'Everything that is beautiful and noble is the product of reason and calculation.' As such something beautiful seems to be a product of an intention, reasoned and calculated. It is not based on an accidental or subjective experience, but on objectivity, or is intended to be so? French Surrealist Breton said the following on beauty: 'Let us speak out: the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, there is even only the marvelous that is beautiful;' (16) and 'Beauty', stated Breton, 'will be convulsive or it will not be.' (17) This is the very basis of the surrealist quest: marvel, as conceived by poets, borne by the image, and charged with the desire to transmute the real.

The relation between what is beautiful and what is architecture has been for long time analyzed in the light of an divine relation; beauty stood in relation to aspirations of a higher order, stood in relation to authority and to religion. Architecture was conceived as a by-product of a divine sense or order. Entering the age of industrialization, man made it possible to rationalize and industrialize the building process, demanding it would follow another order than the simple higher one. Beauty had to remain and was still its basic quest, but to deal with this a new order had to be invented. An order we seem unable to debate, to recognize or to construct. Today we talk about

beautification, as the savior that can turn failures into successes, we talk about revamping, about pimp my public space but not about investigating the causes that make our cities not so beautiful.

I believe the key is to bring the human imagination back into the design, to explore the untold possibilities of beauty. What can beauty do, beyond just being beautiful and as such being a very suspicious criterion for design and analysis? What can beauty do beyond a merely pimping our psyche? In today's city beauty is not a normative concept, and the foremost important task in discussing this is the connection of the architects with the publics understanding of what is beauty. Once we will understand that we will know that the only cause we have as architects is to bring beauty back.

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People's Architecture (located in New York and Beijing) is an internationally operating multi-disciplinary forum for the exchange of ideas, with the goal of facilitating a better global understanding of China's architectural, urban, infrastructural and cultural development. www.peoplesarchitecture.org

- (1) Conrad, Peter, *The Art of The City – Views and Versions of New York*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1984, p.120
- (2) Here I am not intending to say that designing architecture for the blind or the visual impaired is not interesting, as there exists amazing work that concentrates on the acoustical treatment and spatial proportions of the built space that help the disabled to experience space.
- (3) Rem Koolhaas, 'Postscript: introduction for new research "the Contemporary City"', p.325
- (4) Rem Koolhaas, *Skala* 1990 nr21, p.32
- (5) Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau, 'S, M, L, XL', p.835
- (6) Rem Koolhaas, *Skala* 1990 nr21, p.32
- (7) Rem Koolhaas, *Skala* 1990 nr21, p.32
- (8) Rem Koolhaas, 'Returning to verticality', p.14
- (9) Rem Koolhaas, 'Returning to verticality', p.14
- (10) Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau, 'S, M, L, XL', p.496
- (11) Lynch, Kevin, *The Image of the City*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, p.91
- (12) <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/01/09/features/parl.php/>
- (13) <http://app1.chinadaily.com.cn/star/2004/0819/fe22-1.html>
- (14) http://www.sptimes.ru/index.php?action_id=2&story_id=1155
- (15) <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/counselorsreport/europereport/200505/20050500084837.html>
- (16) *Surrealism (World of Art)* by Patrick Waldberg. Thames & Hudson, 1997, p21
- (17) *Surrealism (World of Art)* by Patrick Waldberg. Thames & Hudson, 1997, p27