

HOW MUCH DOES BEAUTY COST? : AN ARCHITECTS'S VIEW By Richard MacCormac

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Architecture lies in an uncomfortable position between two areas of understanding. On one side stand reason and ways of evaluating and measuring objectively, that come from the Enlightenment and the rise of science, commerce and industrialization. On the other are cultural values like subjectivity, humanism and aesthetics.

Architectural education suggests that architecture is part of a great cultural venture. But, although the commercial world occasionally builds architectural icons, most developers want to maximise the profitability of their buildings and may see aesthetic issues as conflicting with this priority. As a student I was advised, perhaps facetiously, 'Whatever you do, don't use the word beauty with an English client; you'll get fired.' In response, British architecture produced the 'high-tech' movement, a wonderful architecture that managed to elide this duality by raising rational construction to an aesthetic proposition, but at the price of a deliberately limited field of reference.

Another approach is to accept that architecture exists in relation to this unstable duality between these two sets of criteria.

The side of reason has a powerful philosophical background in the belief that knowledge, science and technology determine human destiny. It is embedded in the origins of modern architecture. The guiding ideas of the Bauhaus, including form following function and the need to make the building process more efficient, have a counterpart in its contemporary logical positivist circle in Vienna (although when Ludwig Wittgenstein spent years designing a house for his sister, his attempt to find entirely rational connections between architecture and philosophy ultimately failed).

What of the cultural side and its criteria? The tendency in modern societies, such as ours, is to find values that can be quantified reassuring. But when we seek to make everything accountable in this way, subjective values like aesthetics and beauty appear unmanageable and dangerous - precisely because they cannot be quantified.

Clients are often interested in these values, and if they are to be developed it is essential for clients to have direct contact with their architect. But - especially in those complex buildings where there is a split between the end users and the project managers - it is difficult to have that vital contact. A process called 'value engineering' often intervenes and imposes measures of financial value over everything else. The constitution of the BBC project ensures that the cultural and quantifiable are reconciled.

In our design for the senior common room at St John's College, Oxford, we had a very strong, confident relationship of mutual exchange with the college fellows. Our discussions identified how valuable the medieval garden is to the college, so we deliberately created an interplay between the garden and the room where the college's governing body meets - to reflect this relationship in the design. Various devices - the edge of the floor, the deep balustrade, the glass wall and external shutters - each define the limits of the room in different ways, and the garden might seem to penetrate into it between any of them. The shutters make these possibilities explicit. In the morning they are closed to protect the room from the sun; as

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the sun moves they open outwards to become fins, which (in the sort of trick that Frank Lloyd Wright understood well) seem to draw you from the room into the garden. Yet despite the close relationship between inside and outside, the room barely touches the garden; it is cantilevered over it, suggesting that the relationship is intangible rather than physical. This relationship and the effects of the design would be very hard to quantify.

The idea of architecture as an art that can be beautiful has preoccupied me for over twenty years. But creating that kind of architecture is only possible for a client who really understands the aspiration. Otherwise the construction industry is like the NHS, full of managers who are disengaged from the final product, and just manage risk through the process. Rudimentary measurement prevails over qualitative value.

However, it seems that this position is now being subverted by verifiable economic trends. As Labour peer Lord Evans, Chairman of Faber & Faber, suggested in a *New Statesman* lecture in 2001, the creative industries - including art, architecture, design, music, broadcasting and film - now employ more people than all the traditional industries of shipbuilding, steel, car manufacturing and textiles put together. Politicians and accountants may find this hard to measure because the output is intangible, but it constitutes 6-7% of GDP - 12% in London - and it is growing at 16% annually. This affirms that culture is integral to our economy, as well as our society: it adds value rather than cost.