

## Love and Beauty

by

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**T**he nature of love, the nature of beauty, and the relationship between them has been a puzzle to philosophers for thousands of years. Here, I finally clear it up.

I am being facetious, of course. But at the same time I do not wish to apologize *too much* for trying to say something direct and helpful about love and beauty—ideals that we are often too embarrassed discuss seriously.

Are disquisitions on “love” and “beauty” really best left to Shakespeare, to nineteenth century poets, to pulpit occupiers and soft-hearted philosophers? Perhaps. But if we blur the focus a little and lower our expectations, I think we can come away from a short investigation with something worthwhile in hand. We can at least disembarass our thinking about love and beauty, this in a field that for the last few years has been overly wrapped up in self-important talk of sustainability and “systems.” I mean, of course, architecture.

Blurring focus: If we set the word LOVE in the center of a slide, around it would hover “consort words”—words often used in service to, explanation of, or manifestation of love. Here are some: *hope, forgiveness, goodwill, generosity, loose accounting, compassion, desire, admiration, peace, affection, protection...* Rather than define LOVE alone, we can let its meaning emerge from the murmurings of the group.

Blurring focus again: If we set the word BEAUTY in the center of a slide, around it would hover such consort words as *symmetry, novelty, inevitability, complexity, unity-in-variety, significance, economy, order, objectivity, fecundity, perfection, loveliness* (the last is especially interesting). Again, rather than define BEAUTY all alone, we can listen to the the collective.

Now the relationship between LOVE and BEAUTY, which is often a multiple relationship between their respective consorts, follows two traditions in the west: the Hebraic-Christian and the Greco-Roman.

In the Hebraic-Christian tradition, which came to a head in the Gospel of John, LOVE *reveals/creates/justifies/inspires* BEAUTY (where it was not before).

In the Greco-Roman tradition, as expressed and slyly challenged in Plato’s *The Symposium*, BEAUTY *attracts/desires/justifies/inspires* LOVE (where it was not before).<sup>i</sup>

Heirs to both traditions in the west, ordinary people today often put one view forward and then the other without thinking. Our bias, as architects, however, has been towards the Greco-Roman view. This stands to reason, given the History of Architecture. *If we make a building beautiful enough, we feel, people will love it* (and maybe us).

What of the other option, the Hebraic-Christian? Does it make sense to say: *if people love a building (or me) enough, it will be made beautiful(ly)*? One wants to say "yes and no"; one wants to apply qualifications. The proposition seems less straightforward than the Greco-Roman claim. I take this to be a sign of our unpracticedness with it as architects. And yet there are examples of it in action, as we shall see.

We can open up the discussion a little more using the device of a 2 X 2 matrix comparing the two adjectival conditions Beautiful and Ugly on the one hand, with the two conditions Lovable and Unlovable on the other. (The words 'Beauty' and 'Ugliness' with 'Loved' and 'Unloved' work just as well, bringing in other nuances.) Thus:

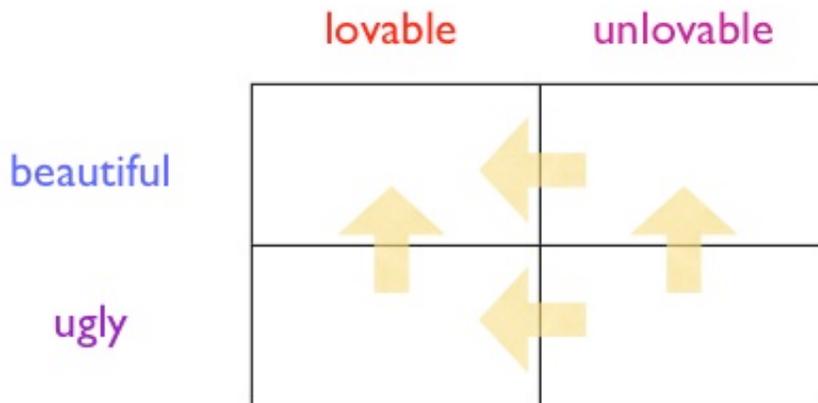


Figure One: A 2 x 2 matrix

In Figure One, the two arrows going upward would represent the Greco-Roman impulse; the two arrows going leftward would represent the Hebraic-Christian impulse.

We notice immediately that both impulses (or both approaches, speaking more philosophically) agree that the highest state is *lovable beauty*, and the lowest is *unlovable ugliness*. The most obvious difference between the two approaches is about which route to take from the lowest state to the highest state. But there is a more subtle difference. It is about how hard to push, as it were, once one had achieved the state *unlovable-beautiful*, and concomitantly, how hard to push once one had achieved the state *lovable-ugly*. There is a tendency to think the job done in each case: the Greco-Roman resting at *beautiful* (lovable or not), and the Hebraic-Christian resting at *lovable* (beautiful or not).

Time now to turn to examples. Can we find architecture—or more broadly, can we find places and things subject to design and choice—that exemplify the four cells of Figure One, each one representing a “state”? The four transitions (the arrows in Figure One) emerge from how we see the examples’ pasts and futures.

As this is a very short paper and not the slide lecture upon which it is based (where 83 images were offered), I am restricted to showing just a few images standing in for the rest.

Let us start with the lower left cell of Figure One: *lovable ugly* or loved ugliness.



Figure Two: Some examples of lovable ugliness

Perhaps the most common manifestation of lovable ugliness is the *juvenile*. Consider the large, wide-set eyes and the charmingly uncoordinated antics of babies and puppies; consider the freshness and awkwardness, the innocence, the unwarranted confidence and nonjudgmental affection of the very young. These together constitute an esthetic that spills over from animals to objects like buildings (especially Venturi and Scott-Brown’s early designs) and cars (like the Mini, the Scion xB, and the Nissan Cube). Cuteness is one manifestation, but not the only. Lovable ugliness is also what we see in the Zen art of *raku* (rough pottery) and Zen drawings of the Buddha, in the work of many naïve folk artists worldwide, and in long-established places of work that make no pretense to beauty, but are clean, cared for, and intensely lived- as well as worked in.

Lovable ugliness is also the state striven for, I think, by such architects as Sam Mockbee at the Rural Studio, and with a more cosmic view, Christopher Alexander.

Let us move rightward to the cell in Figure One that represents *unlovable ugly* or unloved ugliness.

What makes (some) ugly things lovable is the hope for transformation, or the knowledge that it is imminent. The duckling we know will become a swan is not really ugly. A cared for building is probably beautiful in at least someone’s eyes.



Figure Three: some examples of unlovable ugliness

But unlovably ugly things (and places) offer little such hope. Careless, stupid, and arrogant, they have about them the air of finality, the whiff of death. The book *Dictator Style* by Peter York and Douglas Coupland collects many examples. With other places, such as the undersides of low freeways and the stairwells of public garages, no reasonable amount of attention, it seems, could redeem or transform them: only supreme lovingkindness—think of Jesus among the lepers—could bring them back. And massive amounts of money.

Absent that heroic lovingkindness (and money), we distance ourselves from them, ironize about them, photograph them, or frame them cynically as Art *a la* Marcel Duchamp or Piero Manzoni: remember “heroin chic?” or OMA’s celebration of raw parking garages: just add glass and chandeliers? Contrast that with Herzog and De Mueron’s redemption of the garage *type* in Miami: coming close to going from the bottom right cell to the top left cell of Figure One in one fell swoop. (It remains to be seen what time will do to this building.)



Figure Four: 1111 Lincoln Road, Miami, Herzog and De Mueron

**W**e move now to the upper right cell of Figure One: to *unlovable beautiful* or unloved beauty. Here we enter the territory of much modern architecture: the world of the Ice Queen, the world represented most emblematically by Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, and then by the thousands upon thousands of buildings since that imitate that building’s posture: aloof, unforgiving, pure, demanding of admiration for its self-denials, perfect in proportion and construction, all weakness and stresses and blemishes concealed.<sup>ii</sup>

More broadly, early modern interest in the “machine esthetic,” and functionalism generally, might be seen as an attempt to banish the sentiment of LOVE from the task of architecture: we were to be as (unmarried) engineers, fearless and pioneering, taking “lovers” at will. One would not be wrong, I think, in detecting the male youthfulness of this view. We see it again, if with a more surreal touch, in the work of firms like MVRDV and Bjarke Ingels (BIG).



Figure Five: Unlovable beauty: Farnsworth House, Mies van der Rohe.

**W**e move at last to Figure Six and the top left cell of Figure One: the state of *lovable beautiful* or loved beauty. This is the condition desired by Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and probably atheists too...the point being that, here, the full range of cultural variability can be given expression in the confidence that all who try to see it, can. Architects who have produced work of this kind are few that we know well—I would list Plecnik, Maybeck, Wright, Aalto, Kahn, Scarpa—and not *all* of their work qualifies. But there are multitudes of architects who did beloved and beautiful work, and are doing it still, architects we know not at all. They work in anonymity, unpublished precisely because of the heterogeneity and forgivingness of their designs, their disinterest in self-promotion, their allowance of “sentiment,” their passion for people placed equal to their passion for order, and their attempts, always, to reconcile intimacy and monumentality. All this is a complex and often tragic undertaking, but it represents, I think, the highest ideals of what might be called religious humanism.

**I**n conclusion: I remarked earlier that most architects follow the Greco-Roman impulse: *first beautify*. The minority of architects who place social concerns first—you know them, they’re always “working with communities” here or buildings schools in the third world—follow the Hebraic-Christian impulse: *first love*. Both stop short of the goal. If this small article has done nothing but make this point clearer, its job is done.

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Figure Six: Lovable beauty: Villa Balbianello in Lenno; Brion Vega Chapel, Carlo Scarpa; peppers.

ENDNOTES:

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<sup>i</sup> You might have heard this put this way: “the ancient Hebrews worshiped the beauty of goodness, the ancient Greeks worshiped the goodness of beauty.” I have not been able to determine the provenance of this formulation. It’s worth noting that Socrates, renownedly ugly, loved physical beauty as much as the next man, but volunteered himself as having “inner beauty.” This is something of a workaround.

<sup>ii</sup> Miss Farnsworth herself, in love with Mies and rejected by him, did not live in the house for long. Finding life impossible for more reasons than one, she left for Italy, where she died as a nun.