

# *Truth, beauty, and goodness as guiding ideals for a school of design<sup>1</sup>*

by

Michael Benedikt  
Hal Box Chair in Urbanism

What is truth? What is beauty? What is goodness?

Philosophers might never answer these questions to their satisfaction. But this much can safely be said: that truth, beauty, and goodness are three ideals going back to antiquity—three “ultimate values,” together somehow complete—which people have judged supremely worth achieving.

Almost everyone recognizes that certain acts and artifacts embody greater truth, beauty, or goodness than others. Many are happy simply to make the distinction. Others, however, also want to *search* for them, even *create* them. Theirs is a quest not to develop abstract formulations of the *nature* of the True, the Beautiful, and the Good, which is the job of philosophers; nor is it simply to bask in their blessings when available. Their quest is to realize these ideals in actions, and to do so *creatively*, that is, to put *new and more* truth into the world, *new and more* beauty, and *new and more* goodness.

If any group of people ought to feel thus committed, it is the professoriate. Professors have the education to know of these values by name, and the security (if tenured) to pursue them autonomously. They have more time than most people do to reflect on the long-term implications of what they advocate. But perhaps most importantly, they have the public charge to cultivate the love of truth, beauty, and goodness in young adults. Indeed, it is largely up to the professorate to convey to the next generation, and to develop, the knowledge and skills required to realize these ideals in an increasingly complex world.

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<sup>1</sup> Appeared as Attachment A to the Official Charter of the School of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin 2003.

<sup>2</sup> I take planning to be a design discipline, for otherwise it would be political science, government, public administration, urban studies, or some such. Other design fields, conventionally speaking, include architecture,

Professors in the field of *design* (be it interior, landscape or architecture) have perhaps a fuller measure of responsibility to be guided by all three of these ideals: truth, beauty, *and* goodness, more or less *equally*.<sup>2</sup> They cannot, like teachers of art or music, throw themselves fully into the pursuit of beauty, trusting that the other two are being taken care of by others. They cannot, like teachers of law, politics, or religion, dwell entirely in the domain of the good, leaving beauty and truth to take care of themselves as a consequence. Nor can they devote themselves only to the sciences—physical or social—because science is pursuit of truth in all its detail regardless of where it might lead aesthetically and ethically. Nor do teachers of design languages, so that students can say whatever they wish to whomever they please, or teach engineering, which is pure technique applied, agnostically, to the making of perfumes, nerve gas, windmills, nuclear reactors....

The *ideal* designer aims at all three ideals—truth, beauty, and goodness—simultaneously and equally. The ideal designer does not play favorites among them. The ideal designer's designs, like games put into play, are beautiful to see, hear, touch, and contemplate. They conserve natural resources and reduce human conflict (the good). The ideal designer's designs seem novel *and* inevitable at once; efficient *and* glorious; they are beautiful. They come out of research and insight, and produce insight in turn in all who behold, use, or participate in them; they call upon truth and reveal it.

Moreover, everything the ideal designer touches and makes, and not just his or her final product, bears the stamp of this triple idealism at work. In his or her hands, no document is just a piece of paper proposing a form to be built or a plan to be followed. It is something, rather, that exemplifies what the final product will come to exemplify too: *truthfulness* in content, *beauty* in composition and execution, *goodness* in purpose and effect. Ditto with the buildings they work in, the furniture they use...

Do such ideal designers exist?

If they do, they are few and far between. (I am thinking of Phillippe Starck as one possible example.) Do ideal *professors* of design exist? I would venture they are still fewer and further between—not because they are inferior to practitioners, but because universities so relentlessly seek out and reward specialization. This is why, if one goes into any large

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school of design, one will find all types: the scientists and social historians; the artists, aesthetes, and art historians; the practice prophets, earth savers, and community do-gooders...each championing *one* of the three ideals, or perhaps two, but rarely all three except in lip service to the others, which otherwise "go without saying." Then there are the Engineers who idealize only efficiency, leaving others to worry about the "what" and the "why."

To my mind, these observations, if accurate, offer certain broad policy choices for a multi-disciplinary design school such as our own.

The first policy choice:

*Either*

(A.1) the school as a whole strives for "value-balance" in the composition of its faculty, programs, and administration. In that way, all three ideals are served—not by every or any one person, but by the institution as a whole. Faculty specialize.<sup>3</sup> Students get complete exposure as they go through the whole curriculum (having their own natural preferences of course), and leaders and spokesmen for the school can point to areas of excellence in all three domains (even if they don't always explicitly name them).

*Or*

(A.2) the school decides to become known as the champion of one of the ideals: the *best*, say, at offering community design services and/or development policy formulation (i.e. doing good); or the *best* at producing formal explorations and/or winning design competitions and prizes (creating beauty); or the *best* at building-performance analysis, or investigative scholarship and research (finding truth).

Second policy choice:

*Either*

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<sup>3</sup> It is clear for example, that many if not most classes naturally "major" in one of the ideals and "minor" in the other two. For example: drawing majors in beauty; history, truth; pro. prac, goodness...

(B.1) the school encourages faculty members to identify and devote themselves more clearly to one of the ideals, to exemplify it, and indeed to be the advocate of that ideal "against" the others in the spirit of friendly rivalry.

*Or,*

(B.2) the school encourages each faculty member not just to recognize the equal worth of all three ideals, but to practice the one or two they are temperamentally (and probably also by training) less comfortable with.

Before exploring the merits of these choices, it should be noted that all of them have this over-arching merit: that they are based on the commitment to realizing the ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness by *some* means in the first place. To my mind, a consensus commitment at the institutional level to these ideals would be deeper and more motivating than any commitment to "excellence" per se, to "prominence" among our peers, or any other marker of our growth and prestige as a school on campus.

On the merits of A.1, and A.2; B1, and B.2.

A.1 has the merit of being intrinsically pluralistic. It is therefore more likely to be accepted as a policy choice by an already diverse, close-to-balanced, faculty. It has the demerit of certain wishy-washiness, deferring nearly all motivational power to B.1. or B.2.

A.2 has the merit of raising the school's profile more quickly than following A.1 would, since resources could be focused. But it will be harder (if not impossible) to reach internal consensus as to which ideal (let alone which program or specific activity) should become the privileged one. And the resentment at not being the chosen one will linger. Leadership will have to confess to bias or plead the wisdom of *lassaiz-faire*: "may be best program/man/woman win."

B.1 describes the situation more or less as it is, except that there is little awareness of the philosophical grounds of the rivalry (which this position paper has tried to identify). It might be that merely recognizing truth, beauty, and goodness as the coequal ideals they are, would make our rivalry more self-aware and friendly. B.1 goes with A.1 rather than A.2.

B.2 goes with A.1 or A.2. It also has the most teeth since it asks for ideal-balancing at the finest scale, namely, *project by project*. Here are some hypothetical consequences of choosing B.2: If a faculty member submits a commissioned report, say, to a city council or planning commission, and the document is graphically and physically unattractive, and/or proposes indifferent buildings, then the credit he or she receives for that report during promotion and tenure evaluations would be reduced, even if the report was in several ways ethically good and city officials vouch that they are satisfied with it. Ditto with built works submitted for academic promotion: no matter how energy-efficient they are, say, or for what needy client they were built, if they are ugly, or based on false information, or were paid for unjustly,<sup>4</sup> they would be discounted. Ditto with beautiful, award-winning buildings that are wasteful or environmentally destructive or for ethically compromised institutions, programs, or clients. Similarly, books and articles that are biased or vapid, that use old or bad data, or flirted with plagiarism, should not receive full credit even if they get published and look great. By the same token, books or articles (or buildings) that are new and true, elegant and helpful, should receive credit even if they are brief (small) and/or appear in little-read journals.<sup>5</sup>

More about B.2. Choosing B.2. can spark collaboration between *unlike* minded, or at least differently skilled, faculty members. It encourages the artist to help the planner and vice versa; it encourages the engineer help the prophet and vice versa. The result is also the point: that no creative product of the faculty 'leaves the building' that is not handsome, accurate, *and* contributory to a good cause. Achievement of one of these ideals does not excuse lapses in the other; and never is one of them put forward as the *sole* point of the exercise.

More yet about B.2. Every poster, flyer, letter, web-page, symposium, catered table, slide show, party; every building, room, studio, desk, computer...all of these things are held to the highest standards: ethically (they are clean, safe, recyclable, there for the people who need them), aesthetically (they are composed, fresh, and good looking), and scientifically (they are clear, they tell the truth as far as it is known, they help us know what we need to know).

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4 For example, a faculty member could receive a commission or charge fees for work done essentially by students the semester before, or—more brazenly—that same semester.

5 I am not saying that such judgments are not already being made in the relevant contexts. They are. Academics are nothing if not critical of each other. *I am* saying that making truth, beauty, and goodness explicitly the criteria of excellence in everything we do might be a good thing.

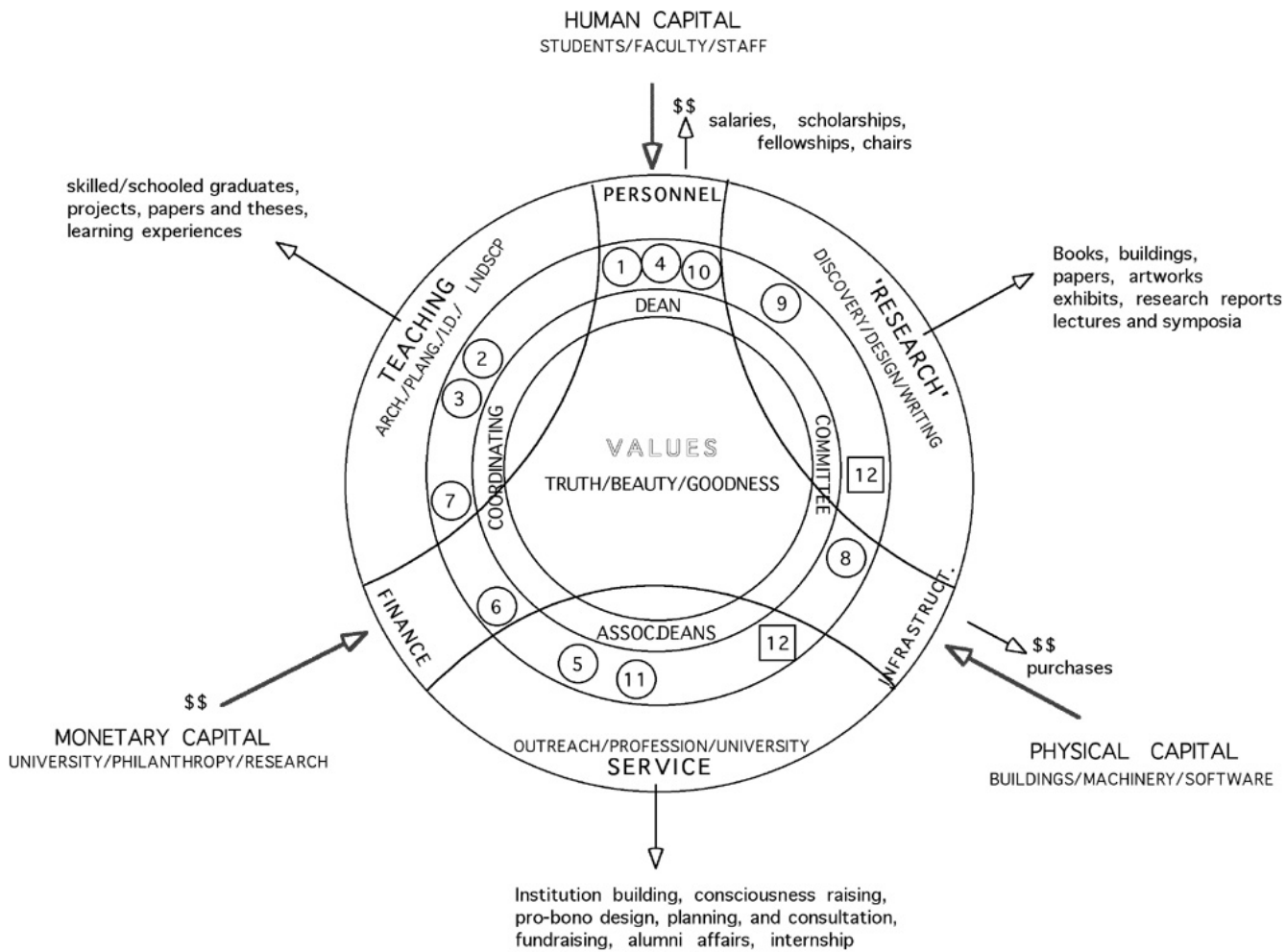
Clearly, I am attracted to B.2. It is the hardest to do well, and also the most idealistic. Whether we choose A.1 or A.2, B.1 or B.2, however, the decision to allow *values* to be the guiding light of the school can have important organizational consequences in terms of faculty teaching, research, and service. (See diagram). In this short report, I am proposing that these values (there are so many) take the form of three time-honored areas of idealistic effort, i.e., more truth, more beauty, and more goodness.

A few remarks, then, on the engineering value or ideal: efficiency.

Efficiency is properly a ratio: output divided by input; and the higher this ratio the closer to ideal is the efficiency of the system. Ought inputs to be minimized on principle? No, not if *increasing* input increases output more. One first needs to explain, however, and to agree, about what counts as "output," and what counts as "input."

Inputs into a design school are easy to identify: they are financial, physical, and human capital. What, then, is the "output" in the case of a design school? Number of graduates per year per \$1000 faculty and staff salary? Number of teaching credit hours taught per faculty member per year? Research dollars generated per year per faculty member? Buildings built, papers published, prizes won..? These are not unreasonable measures if taken in aggregate and as an overall indicator of school's vitality.

But actually, "output" is what we have been discussing all along: namely the degree of realization of one or more of the ideals—truth, beauty, and goodness—in teaching, scholarship, and service. This, in the end, is the only output that counts. It is also the only output the dream of which motivates hard work and encourages cooperation in a lasting way, and the only one that will increase all the other outputs—the books, the buildings, the happy graduates—automatically. Can the output of truth, beauty, and goodness be measured? Not by any technical means, of course, but by the "honor system" of paying genuine attention to each other and periodically weighing our hearts. •



### STANDING COMMITTEES

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1. Budget Council  
(Promotion and Tenure Committee)
  2. Arch and Int. Des. Curriculum Committee
  3. Graduate Studies Committee
  4. Admissions Committee
  5. Advisory Council
  6. Scholarship Awards Committee
  7. Events Committee
  8. Information Technology Committee
  9. Research Committee (new)
  10. Faculty Search Committee(s)
  11. Alumni Affairs and Student Internship Committee
  12. Centers (CAAD, CSD, PQGP)