 DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15287514

Paul Guyer*

"Contesting Beauty"

Marcel Duchamp's submission of a mass-produced urinal, modified only by the addition of a signature "R. Mutt, 1917," to a show of modern art in early twentieth-century New York was rejected, even though the show was supposed to be unjuried, and Duchamp himself was a member of the board of the Society of Independent Artists sponsoring it (from which he then resigned). The urinal, or the work of art, entitled "Fountain," was not a beautiful or elegant one, at least by our standards a century later, as exemplified by high-end fixtures in fancy homes, restaurants, hotels, and so on. Whether Duchamp was just making a joke or seriously trying to undermine the assumption that art should strive for beauty perhaps we will never be sure—his subsequent statement that art should not be merely "retinal," that is, pleasing to the eye, suggests the latter, but maybe he was pulling our leg then too (to switch body parts). Nevertheless, many philosophers, writing in English, French, German, and other languages, have certainly taken him seriously, proposing—contrary to the prevailing thinking of the eighteenth-century founders of philosophical aesthetics, from Francis Hutcheson and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten to Immanuel Kant and Thomas Reid—that if the idea of beauty has any content at all, is not an essential end of art. In English-language literature, the names of George Dickie and Arthur Danto spring to mind, and in her paper in this volume Carole Talon-Hugon refers us to French philosophers who adopted a similar position.

What about architecture? Standard translations of the founding father Vitruvius's list of the fundamental goals of architecture, *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*, such as "durability, utility or convenience, and beauty," gave authority for two millennia to the idea that of course architecture strives for beauty. To be sure, it went hand in hand with and

* Paul Guyer: Department of Philosophy, Brown University, Providence; paul_guyer@brown.edu.

had some relation to functionality, that is, successfully serving whatever specific purpose it is for which their buildings were commissioned, designed, built, and paid for. But whether or not particular architects were aware of what was happening in other areas of visual art, let alone aesthetics as a sub-discipline of academic philosophy, some architects in the twentieth century and beyond have certainly been willing to leave beauty off of their lists of their own goals, denying even that architecture should strive to be beautiful at all. And in the eyes of many, brutalist architecture showed that its architects no longer took beauty as an essential goal of their discipline. Others, however, would argue that such landmarks of brutalist architecture as Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp, Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum, or Kallmann McKinnell and Knowles's Boston City Hall, to name but a few, are works of great beauty, just not beauty in any previously recognized style. No doubt Immanuel Kant could hardly have imagined any of these buildings, but in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) he argued that all art, architecture included, aims at both beauty and originality—so what could he have expected but that beauty should take on forms that neither Vitruvius nor he could ever have expected?

As Kant's contemporary Thomas Reid (discussed in Gordon Graham's contribution to this volume) pointed out, the word "beauty" (and, he could have added, its equivalents in other languages) has two sorts of usages: in one, it is a general term of approbation, for anything that a speaker thinks striking in a positive way, especially anything that is a product of human skill, whether a mathematical proof, a culinary dish, a carefully bred horticultural variety—or a work of art; in the other, it is used as a commendation specifically for works of art, or for works of nature viewed as if they were works of art, in particular for their appeal to the eye or the ear, whatever other value they might or might not have. (Reid's "Essay on Taste" was included in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man,* published in 1785, thus five years before Kant's work.) As Reid put it, "Beauty is found in things so various, and so very different in nature, that it is difficult to say wherein it consists, or what there can be common to all the objects in which it is found. [...] I am indeed unable to conceive any quality in all the different things that are called beautiful, that is the same in them all. There seems to be no identity, nor even similarity, between the beauty of a theorem and the beauty of a piece of music. [...] The kinds of beauty seem to be as various as the objects to which it is ascribed." So, of

course, it can be debated whether architecture must aim for beauty, since the concept of beauty itself is polysemous and indefinable.

Vitruvius's own formulation, for all its familiarity, also presents challenges for translation and therefore interpretation. His term *utilitas* seems straightforward: "utility" is the obvious cognate, "convenience" seems a bit old-fashioned but not misleading; "functionality" would seem to be as good as "utility;" but however this word is translated, it seems clear that whatever else it might be or do, a successful work of architecture should satisfy its program, have the rooms and spaces called for, be up-to-date in its plumbing and HVAC, in other words, be functional. *Firmitas* seems only slightly more problematic: "firmness" or "solidity" seem like obvious choices, "durable" has often been used, although that needs to be qualified since some buildings, say exhibition pavilions, are not intended to last long although they must be safe and comfortable enough while they stand, so maybe a paraphrase like "well-constructed for their intended purpose" would be best, although here we can see that there may not be sharp boundaries between Vitruvius's categories. But *venustas*—what is that? Liddell and Scott, the standard Latin-English dictionary, defines *venustas*, classically spelled *uenustas*, as "the quality of being charming or delightful," "charm, grace (of appearance)," "charm, attractiveness (of style, presentation, etc.)," or even "the quality of being lucky in love!" In other words, it is a very broad term, perhaps in the first instance applied to persons rather than objects, meaning appealing in personality, in appearance, in style—the connection with the goddess Venus, whose name is a personification of the quality, seems obvious. Alexander Nehamas's argument, in his 2007 book *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* and in his interview here, that the beautiful is what we find loveable, "we" in the first instance individually and, if more broadly, then contingently but not necessarily so (as Kant would have had it), seems very much in the spirit of the original senses of the word. At one point in his contribution, David Leatherbarrow and, as Nicholas Ray notes, previously Christian Norberg-Schulz suggest "form" as a translation. However, if "form" is taken with any degree of specificity, such as geometrical form, that seems only one example of what we might find loveable in the appearance of an object, although that has certainly figured centrally in many theories of art—again, including Kant's—and architecture—think of Louis Sullivan's "form follows function" (whatever he exactly meant by that). It might seem best to adopt a loose translation of *venustas* as "aesthetic appeal"

or "aesthetic attractiveness," as I have done in *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture* (2021)—but of course, that just moves the burden of definition to "aesthetic!" If "aesthetic" just means "pertaining to art," as it has for many since Hegel's epochal *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1819-1829), then insofar as architecture is considered an art and is also expected to be appealing, it is just tautologous that it aims for aesthetic appeal. Something more needs to be said about what it is to be aesthetically appealing than just that it is to be artistically appealing.

The papers in this collection address this challenge in various ways. In his interview, Nehamas tells us more about what it is like to find a work of art loveable, worthy of our further engagement, in what ways it is and is not like loving a person. He also points out the importance for works of architecture to be found aesthetically appealing in some way or other: because where failures of art in other media can be consigned to the dustbin of history or museums, architecture surrounds us, whether we like or not, as long as it stands. Nicholas Ray shows us that Vitruvius himself attempted to flesh out his own conception of *venustas* with further principles such as harmony, symmetry, proportion, etc., but also argues that perhaps the most fundamental development of, or perhaps addition to, Vitruvius's conception of *venustas* is the idea of architectural *meaning*, which is closely connected to the ethical significance of works of architecture. That it makes sense to talk of the meaning of works of architecture is also presupposed by Nehamas's view that we respond to a work of art that we love with an ongoing process of interpretation, and I have myself argued that this is a fundamental expansion of the Vitruvian conception, beginning perhaps with Kant, taken to extremes by Hegel, and needing to be balanced with the more traditional conception of beauty as a visual or at least sensory property. I say "or sensory," because in her whirlwind tour of the history of the equation of beauty with harmony throughout the history of aesthetics, Carole Talon-Hugon concludes that "architecture has an advantage over the other arts [...] in the fact it summons all the senses except for the sense of taste, not just the traditional senses of beauty: sight and hearing." She invokes Henry Maldiney for this insight, but here we could certainly also think of Steen Eiler Rasmussen's enduring experiential approach to architecture. In his contribution, like Ray drawing on his long experience as a practicing architect, Kurt Brandle emphasizes the role of our emotions in our experience of beauty, something that was recognized by an eighteenth-century author such as Henry Home, Lord Kames, in his widely read *Elements of Criticism* (1762) but,

unfortunately, rejected by Kant; Brandle in effect sets Kant right on his denial of the importance of the emotional importance of the arts, including architecture. Glenn Parsons explores the complex relationship between Vitruvius's two fundamental goals for architecture, functionality and aesthetic appeal (assuming that the goal of good construction is more the means to these ends than an end entirely in its own right). He shows that this relation can take various forms, with functionality as an external constraint on beauty or in a more intimate relation with it, but ends up endorsing what I call pluralism, that is, allowing that this relation may take various forms, and suggesting that it is not for anyone, philosophers or architects, to prescribe a general rule, but rather for architects to find aesthetically appealing and original ways to satisfy the functional demands on their work case by case. Finally, in this more purely theoretical group of papers, David Leatherbarrow offers a fascinating exploration of the difference that often occurs between the imagination and the realization of beauty in architecture. As a historical interlude, so to speak, Gordon Graham's paper on the implications of Thomas Reid's essay on beauty for the case of architecture shows how Reid also recognized the emotional as well as more purely sensory "excellence" that can be afforded by architecture; thus Reid on Graham's account is a forerunner of Kurt Brandle's reflections. The collection concludes with essays by philosophers that focus on concrete cases: Carolyn Korsmeyer uses the case of an unfortunately now demolished grain elevator in Buffalo, New York, to argue that historical significance should also count as a kind or part of beauty (something that John Ruskin had previously argued, although with very different sorts of cases in mind, in his classic *Seven Lamps of Architecture* of 1849), and Fred Rush's exploration of fascist (specifically, Nazi) architecture shows how the emotional and multi-sensory character of architectural beauty can be used for ill as well as for good—like much else in life, architecture being part of it. Each of these essays speaks with its own, highly original voice, so I will now let them speak for themselves.