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# The Problem of Beauty in Architecture: An Institutional Analysis

ABSTRACT: In this essay I examine the perennial problem posed by beauty as an architectural aim. I argue that as problematic as pursuing this aim may be, architects cannot ultimately avoid confronting it. I then focus on the most general question that this aim raises: can architectural beauty be pursued largely independently of function or should the two aims be integrated in some fashion? Following an approach outlined by Anthony Savile, I argue that the question can only be answered by considering the institutional context of the particular architectural work. The upshot is a pluralist view of architectural beauty, recognizing the validity of Functionalist, Formalist, and Ornamentalist approaches in different contexts.

KEYWORDS: architecture, beauty, Functionalism, Formalism, ornament, institution

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In this essay, I examine, from a philosophical perspective, the problem posed by beauty as an architectural aim. My discussion will focus on what is arguably the most general question raised by this aim: whether its pursuit should be carried out largely independently of the pursuit of function or whether the two aims ought to be integrated in some fashion. Both architects and philosophers have long been divided on this question. Drawing on some ideas from Anthony Savile, I will argue that the question can be addressed by considering the relationship between works of architecture and the social institutions they house.

My title echoes perhaps the best-known attempt to address questions in aesthetics in these terms, George Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analy*sis.[1] In contrast with Dickie's approach, however, I will not attempt to define architecture or beauty in terms of institutions; rather, I will suggest that in pursuing architecture, and in particular in answering the problem of beauty as she faces it, the architect needs to understand the specific institutional context in which her building takes place.

## 1. The Inescapable Problem

Since antiquity, it has been a commonplace of Western thinking about architecture that beauty is one of its central aims. Not its only aim, of course; the ancient authority Vitruvius also emphasized the importance of durability and convenience. Good architecture must serve its intended purpose well and it must last, withstanding natural forces and the stresses of use.[2] But it should also, Vitruvius emphasized, be beautiful. Our conception of what counts as beauty would certainly differ from his own, and today we might, at least in some contexts, prefer to use the broader term "aesthetic," rather than "beauty," in describing this dimension of architecture. Nonetheless, the general picture of architectural values articulated by Vitruvius' triad remains an immediately recognizable one.[3]

Creating beauty thus represents one of the perennial and fundamental problems faced by the architect. Achieving durability and usefulness (functionality, we might prefer to say) are difficult enough tasks, to be

[1] G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974.
[2] Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, Dover, New York, p. 17 (1, 3, 2).
[3] P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021, pp. 1–14.

sure. But the problem of beauty has often seemed to pose difficulties of another order. Is beauty not hopelessly subjective, as a string of familiar aphorisms reminds us? Is beauty even a coherent notion? Tolstoy memorably dismissed it from theorizing about art as "the all-confusing concept."[4] While not all thinkers have given in to such despair, even contemporary philosophers who write entire books on the topic often balk at defining it.[5]

Bracketing these general reservations about the very concept, the more immediate worry for an architect must be this: what *kind* of beauty would be appropriate to a work of architecture? The other aims of architecture—function and durability—seem not to raise analogous questions, at least not to the same degree. It is often plain enough, for instance, what the function of a building is supposed to be.[6] History has made this tension within the Vitruvian triad more acute, for today's architects can apply technical methods and thinking to the pursuit of durability, and to a lesser extent, functionality. Not so with the pursuit of beauty: here the architect enters, it seems, an atavistic atmosphere no clearer now than in Vitruvius's day.

Given that the problem of beauty exposes this schism in the architectural consciousness, so to speak, one can understand the inclination to simply deny this unruly side of human nature a role. Such a rejection certainly has precedent in other art forms: modern visual art and music have sometimes simply eschewed aesthetic aims (think of atonal music). But such stratagems, whatever their merits in these other artforms, seem hopeless in the case of architecture. For whatever architecture is, it is necessarily an environment for the humans and other organisms that live, work, or play inside it and using it. As such, it *will* be aesthetically appreciated and its aesthetic effects on those who inhabit/use it cannot but be a factor in its success *as architecture*. It would be an exaggeration to say that architects have no control over the way their works are evaluated, but the inescapably utilitarian nature of those works precludes any wholesale reform of the art that would simply eliminate beauty as a relevant aim or criterion of evaluation. Some have dreamed of a day when beauty ceases to matter to us: recall Loos' sardonic musings that ornament may vanish,

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[4] L. Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, Penguin, New York, 1995, p. 36.

[5] See, for example, A. Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.

[6] Though here, too, philosophical puzzlement can arise; see G. Parsons "Fact and Function in Architectural Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 69, 2011, pp. 21–30.

"in some thousands of years."[7] But if, as some have argued, the urge to beautify ourselves and our surroundings is a part of our universal evolutionary heritage, these are forlorn hopes indeed.[8]

Granting this, the architect might simply choose not to worry about beauty and instead create the work with merely practical considerations in mind. Or, she may opt to follow her own personal aesthetic and hope for the best. Perhaps many architects have taken these approaches, even if they might be reluctant to admit it. And perhaps they have led, in some cases, to acceptable results. But in leaving aesthetic choices unsupported by any further reasoning or evidence, these approaches make aesthetic success or failure largely a hostage to fortune.

Supporting evidence for the choice of a particular aesthetic approach might be found, however, in social science. If the study of human nature shows the inevitability of aesthetic evaluation, as suggested above, perhaps it can also be our guide to success in confronting it. We could simply measure people's aesthetic preferences and design in accord with them. Indeed, this has become practice has become the mainstream practice in many branches of landscape architecture and land management: comparative preference tests are used to determine public responses to various possible features, and landscape features are designed to match them.[9] Similar preference assessments for architecture are readily at hand: why not adopt a similar strategy?

Perhaps a good deal of architecture practice actually follows this strategy to some degree, catering to extant public tastes, at least as a way of avoiding egregious errors. Certainly empirical data of this sort must be of interest to the architect, especially where highly negative aesthetic responses are concerned. A building that corporate workers find nauseating is unlikely to foster productivity. The appeal to empirical preference data is also appealing from a more theoretical perspective, as it

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[7] A. Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in U. Conrads (ed.), *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1970, p.22.

[8] See S. Davies, *Adornment: What Self-Decoration Tells Us About Who We Are*, Bloomsbury, London, 2020.

[9] For an overview of empirical methodology used in the assessment of "scenic quality" in landscape, see T. Daniel, "Whither Beauty? Visual Landscape Quality Assessment in the 21st Century," *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 54, 2001, pp. 267–281; for a defence of basing landscape management choices on popular preferences, see R. Parsons and T. Daniel, "Good Looking: In Defense of Scenic Landscape Aesthetics," *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 60, 2002, pp. 43–56.

to some degree ameliorates the aforementioned schism in the architectural consciousness.

However, I suspect that few serious architects would find *merely* catering to established taste appealing as a principled solution to architecture's problem of beauty. For one thing, it appears to confuse the normative question "What is beautiful?" with the purely descriptive question "What do most people think is beautiful?"[10] A further complication is that the site specificity of architecture can make extrapolating positive reception from past cases to new ones problematic. And in any event, simply repeating the successful aesthetic of past works invites its own form of aesthetic criticism.

Overall, I suggest that these various ways of evading the problem of beauty are ultimately unsatisfactory. If so, then the architect must try to find her way, murky as the philosophical waters may be, to an answer. I will by no means try to sketch anything like a complete story as to how an architect can realize the aim of beauty in an architectural work. What I want to focus on is the problem at its highest level of generality: at that level, the question is one concerning the relation of the aims of beauty and function. Should the pursuit of beauty be constrained, in some way, by considerations of function? Or can these two elements be treated as more or less independent aims, each to be pursued without essential reference to the other? [11] Whatever the architect's strategy for realizing beauty turns out to be, it must start with the choice of one of these options. Can we say anything useful, from a philosophical point of view, regarding how to make this choice?

I think we can, but before we consider that claim, I first explore the two options in some more detail, starting with those approaches to architecture that eschew a connection between beauty and function: Formalism and Ornamentation.

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[10] In the field of landscape management, this criticism was advanced by Allen Carlson, "On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty," *Landscape Planning*, 4, 1977, pp. 131–172; for further discussion see R. Ribe "On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty—A Response," *Landscape Planning*, 9, 1982, pp. 61–75 and A. Carlson, "On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty – A Response to Ribe," *Landscape Planning*, 11, 1984, pp. 49–65, as well as P. Gobster, "An Ecological Aesthetic for Forest Landscape Management," *Landscape Journal*, 18, 1999, pp. 54–64.

[11] This way of posing the problem leaves the aim of durability out of the picture, but one might also consider the relation between it and the other aims, especially in light of contemporary concerns about sustainability. In my discussion here, however, I will set such issues aside.

## 2. Formalism and Ornamentation

In critical or theoretical discussions within architecture, "Formalism" may refer to a number of different ideas, but here I will understand it in the usual philosophical sense in which "formal properties are those related to shape, line, colour, and three dimensional space."[12] Saul Fisher defines architectural Formalism this way: "the sum total of aesthetic properties of an architectural object are or arise from formal properties, such that our aesthetic judgments are warranted based on experience and assessment of just those properties."[13] In other words, the aesthetics of architecture consists in the exploration and enjoyment of form itself. Formalism does not entail that the exploration of form is the *only* aim of architecture: we should insist that architecture is also functional and recognize that there cannot be a purely formal architecture, in the sense that there might be purely formal painting. Architectural works that ignore everything except exploration of form stand accused of crossing the boundary separating architecture from sculpture (some of Peter Eisenman's work may fit this description).

The formalist, therefore, should concede that successful architectural works meet criteria of both aesthetic and functional success. However, she claims that the criteria for *aesthetic* success are primarily a matter of the interesting presentation of form. Put another way, the view is that the aesthetic dimensions of architecture and its other dimensions, including the functional, can be pursued independently of one another without compromising overall architectural value.

It may be objected that this view is a straw man. As Larry Shiner points out, we can hardly say that these two aims can be pursued independently, given that the functional or practical aims of an architectural work will always constrain the architect's choice of aesthetic forms in many ways (except perhaps in the case of purely non-functional

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[12] The classic philosophical presentation of Formalism is given, in relation to painting, in C. Bell, *Art*, Frederick A. Stokes, New York, 1913. Bell equated the formal properties of painting with its non-representational properties, but did so inconsistently since he also included, as part of "form," the depiction of three-dimensional space on the painted surface (so-called "plastic form"). A more principled basis for identifying formal properties is their immediate perceptibility, though this issue does not affect the application of Formalism to architecture, where properties of three-dimensional space are actual, not represented.

[13] S. Fisher, "Philosophy of Architecture," in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/architecture/ sec 5.1 (accessed 5 April 2025).

façades).[14] But while the formalist can acknowledge this causal interdependence of function and form, she will insist that our *experience* of the aesthetic dimension of a building may remain disconnected from functional and other architectural considerations. So, although the formal aspect of an architectural work is partially constrained, if not determined, by functional decisions, our aesthetic experience of that work might still involve form alone.

Still, one may doubt whether any architects hold even this qualified conception of formalism. If we consider architects noted for their exploration of bold formal design—Zaha Hadid, for example, or Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, or Greg Lynn—it seems wrong to see them as entirely excluding context, site, style, and function from the aesthetic dimension of their works. Of his Bilbao Guggenheim, Gehry said: "I spent a lot of time making the building relate to the nineteenth-century street module and then it was on the river, with the history of the river, the sea, the boats coming up the channel. It was a boat."[15]

So even the architects we may be most inclined to describe as "formalists" do not see the enjoyment of form as the only element in the aesthetics of architecture. Therefore, it would be best to understand Formalism as according of *priority* to the purely formal in the experience of architecture. In the case of Hadid's Guangzhou Opera House, for example, there is more going on aesthetically than pure exploration of geometry: resemblance of Hadid's buildings to pebbles eroded by water establishes some connection to the local landscape of the Pearl River, for example. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say that this reference to the site is not a central element of the work, aesthetically speaking (indeed, Hadid uses the same trope in other buildings, such as the Salerno Port Authority).[16] We can contrast these cases with buildings that make a connection to site, context, or function much more prominent and central, through the use of an established architectural style, for example. Collegiate Gothic

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[14] See L. Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture: The Case of the 'Spectacle' Art Museum," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 69, 2011, pp. 32–34.

[15] R. Moore, "The Bilbao Effect: How Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Started a Global Craze," *Guardian,* October 1, 2017.

[16] The formalist might even allow that, in some cases, our understanding of a building's function plays a role in our grasp of its formal properties; e.g., knowing that a building is church allows us to understand certain positions in it as central and as hence privileged focal points for the perception of its formal features (see A. Sauchelli, "On Architecture as a Spatial Art," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics,* 43, 2012, p. 60). Nonetheless, the focus of appreciation remains directed at form alone.

architecture, for instance, aims to provide an aesthetic that is connected to the traditional educational mission of the university. So let us henceforth call "formalist" that approach that puts the experience of form at the center of our aesthetic experience of architectural works.

This approach goes by other names: Anthony Savile, whose views I discuss below, calls it the "sculptural conception of architecture" and indeed works by the architects I listed are commonly described as "monumental sculpture."[17] This is sometimes done in a pejorative spirit, equating the sculptural approach with flash, glitz, and spectacle, not to say an abdication of architectural duty. But I bracket these negative connotations here, for our project is to determine whether there *is* anything wrong with this approach, as its critics have asserted.

One final clarification: Formalism may be understood as an approach employed in creating architecture (as I have done) or as a general approach employed by appreciators of architecture. In the latter sense, the appreciator regards whatever work she is experiencing in such a way that formal elements are central. In this sense, Formalism has been widely and justly criticized: many existing buildings do not lend themselves to formalist analysis, having been created in such a manner that factors such as materials, site, context, style and function are crucial to them as the architectural works they are. Here, however, I consider Formalism as an approach to creating particular works of architecture. If architects decided to create buildings that made "pure form," rather than these other factors, central to the building's aesthetic dimension, would there be anything wrong with this?

So far, we have articulated one possible response to the problem of beauty that takes beauty and function to be more or less independent aims, each to be pursued without essential reference to the other. Another response pursues the same approach, but in a different way, realizing beauty not through pure form, but rather through the use of ornament, adornment, or decoration that refers to functions, though not the *actual function* of the building being adorned. This is exemplified in the use of past styles as a means of beautification, applying the visual style of, say, the Renaissance palace to a modern theater or that of the Greek temple to a bank. To be precise we ought to refer to this as "pseudo-functional ornament," to flag the disconnection of the ornamental element from the

[17] A. Savile, "Architecture and Sculpture," in *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1993, p. 164. Closely related is the view, associated with Bruno Zevi, that architecture is an "art of space": for critical discussion of this view, see A. Sauchelli, "On Architecture as a Spatial Art," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics,* 43, 2012.

building's actual function. But in what follows I will refer simply to "Ornamentation," it being understood that this excludes cases where decorative styles are used to express or embody the structure's actual function, as in the case of Collegiate Gothic architecture mentioned above.

From a number of perspectives Formalism and Ornamentation are odd bedfellows, even opposing attitudes: historically, Formalism has often been endorsed as a reaction against excessive ornamentation, and vice versa. However, for our purposes what is more salient is their shared insistence that the aesthetic aspect of a building need have no substantive connection with its actual purpose.

## 3. Functionalism

Against advocates of these two positions, there are many who argue that beauty in a building must be pursued in a more substantial relation to considerations of that building's function. I will refer to this position as "Functionalism," again acknowledging a range of different uses of that term in architectural theory.

The weakest version of Functionalism would claim that the aesthetic dimension of the work should not conflict with its function. This is the usual interpretation of Kant's well-known conception of "dependent" or "adherent" beauty, an idea that he (uncharacteristically) illustrated with examples, including architectural ones. Kant writes:

> [...] the beauty [...] of a building (such as a church, a palace, an arsenal, or a garden-house) presuppose[s] a concept of the end that determine what the thing should be, hence a concept of its perfection, and is thus merely adherent beauty[...]. One would be able to add much to a building that would be pleasing in the intuition of it only if it were not supposed to be a church.[18]

On the usual interpretation, the thought is that the object's end (in other words its function) merely constrains the type of beauty it can possess, ruling out certain forms of decoration that conflict with the object's function.[19]

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[18] I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 115 (5: 230).

[19] On other interpretations of Kant's notion of adherent beauty, see P. Guyer, "Free and Adherent Beauty: A Modest Proposal," in *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*,

Depending on how narrowly we define "conflict," in this context, the formalist or ornamentalist may have little problem accepting this constraint. Applying a nightclub aesthetic to a funeral home is surely an architectural blunder of the first order, regardless of your theoretical principles. Beyond acknowledging this plain fact, it's not clear that recognition of architectural beauty as "adherent," in this sense, establishes a substantial connection between a building's beauty and its function, instead leaving the architect largely free to beautify through the exploration of form or pseudo-functional ornamentation.

For Functionalism to represent a genuine alternative to the problem of beauty, we need it to demand a stronger connection between beauty and function. This demand is nicely captured by Gordon Graham in the following principle: "Ideally form and function in architecture must complement each other."[20] He further explains: "a style of architecture which satisfies both functional and aesthetic considerations and has a greater unity is intelligible as an ideal, and one to which many generations of architects have aspired."[21] As an example of this unity, Graham offers medieval Gothic cathedrals, in which the form is not used to explore geometry, or as a canvas for free ornamentation, but to express ideas and thoughts that correspond to the religious function of the structure.

Thus construed, Functionalism has found many adherents among architects and philosophers. Here are some endorsements from recent philosophy of architecture:

- "It seems only natural to expect aesthetics and function to complement each other in architecture"[22]
- "In the minds of those who fix what architecture today is and what it is capable of in the future, this art is thought of as fundamentally sculptural in nature [... but] such a conception of their art is dangerously confused [...]"[23]

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Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 357-366. Rachel Zuckert extracts from Kant's discussion a more substantive conception of the function-beauty connection; see R. Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the "Critique of Judgment,"* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007. Her conception is also endorsed by L. Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture," pp. 35–37.

[20] G. Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*, Routledge, London, 2005, p. 256.

[21] *Ibid*., p. 255.

[22] L. Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture," p. 31.

[23] A. Savile, "Architecture and Sculpture," p. 159.

- "It is a hallmark of great design [...] that the qualities making a chair practically usable are at the same time the source of its elegance, grace and beauty [...] When exceptional craftworks and pieces with an explicit religious, ethical or other extrinsic purpose seem to qualify as artworks, they do so usually because of the success with which they *integrate* their practical and aesthetic functions."[24]
- "Given the importance of functional fit, buildings must be appreciated in terms of the functions they perform"[25]

As these quotations show, these writers differ as to how exactly form and function are to "complement" each other; some see form as expressing function, others see form as serving function, and so on. Much of the discussion around Functionalism concerns this question, but here I will simply assume that some way, or more likely ways, of resolving it will be forthcoming. Instead, I want to pursue the logically prior question: What justification might be offered for the Functionalist approach, as it is understood in Graham's principle? Why, after all, should the ideal it posits for the pursuit of architectural beauty be accepted? Or, to put it differently, is it true that buildings like Hadid's opera house, or Gehry's museum, are defective in foregoing the integration of function and form for something closer to a pure exploration of geometry? Functionalism does not imply, of course, that these are bad buildings. But it does imply that they have a flaw, at least from the aesthetic point of view, and moreover that the kind of architecture they represent involves, as Savile puts it, a confusion. Should we accept these claims?

In his discussion, Graham concedes that the Functionalist ideal can, in certain cases, appear highly problematic. He writes:

> How could St Pancras railway station, though undoubtedly impressive, sensibly be thought to express the idea of travelling by train? And besides this there is a further question about what exactly the idea to be conveyed *is.* Should St Pancras say "travelling by train" to the spectator, or just "travelling," or even more abstractly "movement"? [26]

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[24] S. Davies, "Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks and Functional Beauty," *Philosophical Quarterly,* 56, 2006, pp. 236. Davies refers specifically to furniture design in this passage, but his idea seems clearly applicable to the case of architecture as well; I return to the relation between the two domains below.

[25] A. Carlson, "Reconsidering the Aesthetics of Architecture," *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* 20, 1986, p. 24.

[26] G. Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, p.179.

Graham sums up the problem by insightfully remarking that "it is not so much that we find it difficult to answer these questions but that they seem inappropriate questions to raise." He suggests that, since the realization of the ideal seems obscure in such cases, and architectural works are expensive and hard to replace, it may be more prudent to aim for something more manageable.[27] But although Graham qualifies the Functionalist ideal in this way, he nonetheless recognizes it as an ideal. The aesthetic cultivation of form in its own right, independently of function, therefore represents, in general, something of a defect in a work of architecture, a falling away from the ideal for the artform.

We can add a deeper note of skepticism to Graham's worries, however: when posed as an ideal for the art of architecture, as by the authors mentioned above for example, Functionalism usually appears to stand as an *a priori* critical principle. As such, one may wonder whether *any* philosophical defense of it, beyond appeals to intuition, can be forthcoming, for it would be unusual these days to hear a philosopher positing "ideals" for artistic success in painting, literature, or music. Even if one accepts the existence of general criteria for artistic success, or aesthetic value in a given artform (itself a contentious issue), it may be thought that the hashing out of such criteria should be left to qualified critics. Granted, architecture is an unusual art-form. But suspicion lingers as to whether Functionalism presents a genuine ideal or whether it merely articulates a particular stylistic preference.[28]

## 4. Arguments for Functionalism

In light of this skepticism, let me turn now to possible justifications for Functionalism. In the description quoted above, Graham refers to the functionalist ideal as "one to which many generations of architects have aspired." While this might be true as an historical fact, it would not offer us a theoretical reason for continuing to endorse the ideal. One such

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[27] Elsewhere he writes: "There will always be building in which equal but independent attention is given to form and function, and which results in buildings that are pleasant to use and which enhance the built environment. Perhaps the most we should hope for, in fact, is that most architecture is of this sort, for it is precisely aspirations, such as Le Corbusier's, to an architecture which is more than mere building, which has led very often to inconvenient and unattractive buildings" (see G. Graham, "Art and Architecture," *British Journal of Aesthetics,* 29, 1989, p. 257).

[28] This is, all said, perhaps the most common criticism of so-called "Functionalist" views of architecture and design.

reason might be that architectural works that integrate form and function achieve the aims of architecture in a more economical way. The architect kills two birds with one structure (so to speak), while the formalist has to create, in effect, two separate but overlapping elements in her works: a functional structure, and then a formally pleasing one. But why should such economy matter: if a formalist approach produces the "same effect" in terms of functional and aesthetic value, why is it inferior? It's hard to answer this question because it is not clear where exactly the supposed economy would lie. It's not clear, for example, that the functionalist approach would use less materials, or take less time. On the contrary, it is plausible to think that employing a well-established ornamental style would take considerably less time and effort than coming up with a strategy for integrating form and function.

This last idea might be taken as the basis for a different defence of Functionalism. Perhaps such works are superior in virtue of displaying an admirable skill on the part of the architect: given the difficulty of integrating form and function successfully, we must admire the "difficult trick" that the architect has pulled off. However, it remains unclear why such displays of skill should take precedence as an aesthetic ideal for the art-form. Every art-form has its "difficult tricks," requiring admirable artistic virtuosity, but these hardly constitute aesthetic ideals for works and artists in that artform. The poet Christian Bok wrote an entire volume of poetry in which each chapter employs only a single vowel, a feat of no mean literary skill.[29] But surely it would be absurd to elevate such occasions for the display of skill into critical principles for poetry.

One might appeal instead to a kind of aesthetic appeal in the very integration of form and function: a building might display elegance in *how* it brings the two together. Doubtless some buildings have this sort of aesthetic appeal. But the relevant comparison is with such a building and a formalist alternative that has an equal amount of aesthetic appeal, achieved through the arrangement of formal qualities or pseudo-functional ornament. Why, in comparing such cases with the overall "same effect," should we say that the former is better?

We might consider the relevance of a building's wider context. If buildings, by their very nature, are not to be appreciated in splendid isolation, but in relation to their surroundings, then Formalist architecture, one might argue, will typically result in an aesthetic loss. This would be

[29] C. Bok, *Euonia*, Coach House Books, Toronto, 2009.

due to a loss of harmony between a building and its surroundings, if a collection of abstract forms has less cohesion than a set of structures whose form reflects, in some way, their particular functions. In taking an environmental approach to the appreciation of architecture, Allen Carlson has emphasized the way in which buildings have a "functional fit" with surrounding structures.[30] Such a fit might be obscured by a detachment of a building's aesthetic aspect from its function.

While this might be so, it is unfortunately not clear that this necessarily results in an aesthetic loss. Why not also recognize the possibility of a "formal fit" between buildings that emphasize more abstract geometrical forms? Ornamentation, notoriously, can produce a jumble when different styles are employed in adjacent buildings, but uniformity of the applied style avoids this problem. In short, there seems no *a priori* reason why harmony between a building and its location should be compromised by the rejection of Functionalism.

Other ways of supporting our principle might be considered but let me turn now to what seems to me the most promising one, which I extract from Anthony Savile. In his essay "Architecture and Sculpture," Savile emphasizes the power of architecture to not only facilitate human activity but to also shape the attitudes of its users toward those activities, through their experience of, and in, the work. Given this, a building whose beauty is in some way integrated with its function has the potential to foster positive attitudes toward that function:

> [T]he truly architectural masterpiece has to exercise its power over us through the way in which it fashions those thoughts and emotional responses of ours which impinge on the sort of activity that the particular building houses. That is, the beautiful building is beautiful through becoming an embodiment of a constellation of mental states related to the activity that the building serves, be it worship, or military endeavour, or our relation to the past, or family life, or whatever.[31]

However, one may grant that buildings with a functional aesthetic have the causal power Savile describes, but yet wonder why *they* should

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[30] See A. Carlson, "Existence, Location, and Function: The Appreciation of Architecture," in *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, New York, 2000, and also A. Carlson, "On Aesthetically Appreciating Human Environments," *Philosophy & Geography,* 4, 2001.

[31] A. Savile, "Architecture and Sculpture, p. 176.

be considered the "architectural masterpieces." Why should the architect be required to deploy his aesthetic resources to the end of shoring up social sentiment about the building's function, after all?

Savile's reply is that the architect's role is "not simply as the builder of buildings, but also as the builder of institutions."[32] He writes:

> The activities for which building is constructed, be they devotional, memorial, civil, military or domestic, are activities by which our lives for the most part are formed. We live our lives through the institutions that cater for these activities, and, like it or not, the people who we become are in some significant part fashioned by the ways in which we manage to think of the institutions through which we live. So it seems to me that in one line of procedure, the architect helps to fashion the institutions in which we live our lives, and does so not in the merely banausic sense that he makes the places in which they are housed—courts, houses, banks, universities and museums—but, more interestingly, he fashions them for us in getting us to construct a largely unconscious way of thinking about and responding to them, one which sets actual limits to the way in which we are liable to change them in practice.[33]

Savile describes the architect as "a builder of institutions" but perhaps it is more accurate to say that the architect is a collaborator in their construction. This is reinforced by the fact that the materials for architecture are provided to the architect by someone else, either a private or state patron. Given this collaborative role, it may well seem an indulgence for the architect to simply ignore the activity that a building is meant to foster when thinking about the aesthetic dimension of the work.

The conclusion of this argument is that there is something defective, or at least sub-optimal, about architecture that spurns the functionalist ideal, in the sense that it foregoes this opportunity to contribute to the cultivation of the relevant institution. This leads Savile to conclude that Formalism is "dangerously confused" and represents a conceptual wrong turn for architecture.

In response, the formalist or ornamentalist might simply dismiss supposed obligations to contribute to the relevant institution, through

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[32] *Ibid*., p. 177.
[33] *Ibid*., pp. 177–178.

aesthetic design of the work, as a bourgeois imposition on artistic freedom of the kind that the other arts have rightly thrown off.[34] However, the public, collaborative nature of architecture makes this response quite implausible. Savile's argument does seem to provide a legitimate rationale for attempting an integration of function and aesthetics. Granted, this rationale will not be decisive in every particular case: if the architect has no idea how to achieve such an integration, or doing so in an effective way would be prohibitively expensive, then the architect may not have good reason, overall, for attempting the integration. Still, the cogency of the general rationale, it seems to me, can hardly be denied.

Despite all that, however, I think the formalist and the ornamentalist should deny that Savile functionalism as the correct philosophical response to the problem of architectural beauty. What I want to suggest, on their behalf, is that despite its general cogency, the applicability of Savile's rationale depends critically on the *type* of institution that the architect is building.

## 5. Building Institutions

To see this, we must give closer scrutiny to Savile's central idea that architectural works house, and affect, the institutions "by which our lives for the most part are formed." I shall refer to these as "life-shaping institutions." The idea is vague, but perhaps intuitively clear enough for us to recognize some of Savile's examples as plausible instances: the law courts, schools, and branches of government. These examples pick out organizations, but in the most general sense, institutions should not be confused with organizations: rather institutions are stable, self-perpetuating patterns of social interaction. Marriage, parenthood, the use of money in economic exchange: these are all institutions in this basic sense, though not themselves organizations.[35]

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[34] For a discussion exploring this theme, see David Goldblatt's discussion of Eisenman's architecture in "The Dislocation of the Architectural Self," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 49, 1991, pp. 337–348.

[35] In Western countries, there are many organizations associated with these institutions, but the use of the Canadian dollar, for example, is not identical with the Bank of Canada, or any other organization. And in many traditional cultures, these institutions exist without anything that could reasonably be called an "organization." The distinction I draw below between "life-shaping" and "enabling" institutions cuts across competing theories on the nature of institutions, but for an overview of recent debates in this area see F. Guala, *Understanding Institutions: The Science and Philosophy of Living Together*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016.

The fact that Savile's examples of life-shaping institutions do correspond to formal social organizations, however, lends support to the claim that these are deeply meaningful ones that shape our identity, and that of our society, in clear ways. One need not restrict "life-shaping" to such lofty concerns, however: consider pastimes such as baseball in the USA or hockey in Canada. These are pursued with such dedication, depth, and seriousness that they can plausibly be said to "shape lives." Just as a courthouse houses the life-shaping institution of the law, an American ball park could be said to house the life-shaping institution of baseball. Further, in both cases one could argue that the institution in question needs social reinforcement, mandating an integrationist approach to beautification by the architect. Savile says that the activities carried out in these buildings are "catered for" by these institutions, but it is also true that the activities themselves serve to sustain and perpetuate the institution. As such, the building not only houses the institution but is its site of maintenance and operation. Thus, the reinforcement of function by the architect's aesthetic seems all the more pertinent.

However, this conclusion about the architect's role does *not* obviously carry over to buildings that do not house anything recognizable as a life-shaping institution. Factories, warehouses, power stations, multipurpose stadiums—there are all manner of structures that do not house life-shaping institutions, or arguably any institution at all. Here there seems no reason for the architect to employ the attitude-shaping power of architecture to cultivate positive attitudes towards the activities that the building "caters for." In a different sort of case, domestic architecture, Savile's argument fails to apply in a different way. The family, by any measure, must be counted as a life shaping institution, and it is certainly housed in the domestic home. But in this case, the architect's reinforcement of positive attitudes to those activities seems not so much pointless as simply unnecessary. The institution of the family needs no help from architects, and if it was subject to threat from shifting social forces, such symbolic reinforcement as architecture could lend would seem unlikely to have any significant effect.

From these cases we might conclude that Savile's functionalist argument applies to public buildings, though not other types. For, we might think, in the public sphere we find the kinds of institutions Savile has in mind: meaningful, life-shaping institutions, typically corresponding to organizations—the law, government, education—that need constant reinforcement. That would be a significant restriction itself, but the

restriction is wider still, for there are many public buildings that likewise fail to house a significant, life-shaping institution. Consider train stations and airports, for example. Air travel, I submit, is not a life-shaping institution. If it is a social institution, it is one that enables the pursuit of a wide range of various valuable activities (tourism, international work, immigration). It is not an institution that shapes our lives, but an institution that *allows* us to shape our lives. As such, it is again unclear what institutional values, in the case of an airport, call for reinforcement through a building's aesthetic design.

The failure of Savile's argument to carry over to this case explains Graham's puzzlement over the apparent inapplicability of the functionalist ideal to St Pancras station, it being difficult not only to see *how* to integrate form and function, but the very point of doing so. Tying the building's aesthetic to the function of travel—by echoing bird wings in the structure of an airport, for example— is not wrong but it seems little more than an indulgence of a stylistic preference. The architect's role in such cases appears to be creating a useful and beautiful space for the activities associated with air travel, rather than to helping to "build an institution."

Just as this failure of applicability of Savile's argument illuminates the case Graham found problematic for functionalism, so its applicability illuminates the case Graham identities as its paradigm: the Gothic cathedral. For the medieval church provides the *ne plus ultra* of a building that houses life-shaping institutions in need of reinforcement. To the medieval world, it was the site not only of worship, but of marriage, baptism, and funerary rites—in short, a very nexus of life-shaping activities under constant threat from worldly temptations and the frailties of human nature. Despite loose talk of airports and stadiums as the "cathedrals of the modern world," the institutions of modern life are vastly more diffused across the structures we build. Furthermore, in line with more complex and liberal forms of social interaction, many of our important institutions are not life-shaping, but rather enabling in the sense in which air travel is.[36]

Thus far I have qualified Savile's functionalist argument to apply only to a certain sort of work: one housing a life-shaping institution in need of reinforcement. A second qualification is in order regarding a special case: the art gallery or museum. These structures certainly meet our criteria,

[36] In relation to this point, consider structures such as the convention center and the general-purpose stadium. It is also worth noting that modern institutional structures are also relatively fluid: what counts as a significant, life-shaping institution, and which of these needs protecting/fostering, may shift significantly from generation to generation.

but given that the institution in question is one dedicated to aesthetic ends, it can be argued that a *formalist* approach could, in this case, be said to cultivate the required kind of attitudes toward the institution. The use of this approach in gallery and museum design has received much attention in recent years.[37] But Savile's line of thought shows this trend in a different light. Architects such as Gehry and Hadid have sometimes been criticized on the grounds that their structures compete, aesthetically, with the artworks they house. But rather than an illegitimate form of "competition," this can also be seen as the architect fulfilling a broader civic role in cultivating the right sorts of attitude toward the larger institution. In other words, Formalism "works," functionally, if you will, in this context. But, again, the context is critical: Gehry's wild exploration of form works in the Bilbao gallery, which houses an aesthetic institution, but sits awkwardly in the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, which houses the professional institution of medical research.[38]

This example points to a third qualification involving structures housing institutions of a peculiar sort, where attention to the actual aims of the institution—the building's function—actually *interferes with* the building's actual functioning. Here I have in mind certain hospitals, rehab facilities, and psychological treatment centers where users benefit from *not* focusing on the reason they are there. Children's hospitals are an obvious example: although they are the sites for a very important social institution, medicine, the cultivation of an attitude to *that institution* must take on secondary importance relative to the needs of the people to whom it ministers (perhaps prisons also fall into this category, although that seems a more complex case). To return to the example of Gehry's Lou Ruvo Center: if it had been a patient facility, Gehry's formalism may have been more successful (though one could question the appropriateness of distorted and unfamiliar shapes in a facility for neurological patients).[39]

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[37] See L. Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture."

[38] Though the main drift of Savile's discussion is that Formalism is "a confusion," at least one passage in his essay suggests that different aesthetic approaches might be called for in different circumstances ("Architecture and Sculpture," pp. 177–178).

[39] Given what I have said, why does the functionalist ideal seem, if anything, more pronounced in the context of artifact design, as opposed to architecture? This may seem puzzling, since in case of artifacts there is typically no institution to reinforce: do kitchen knives need to reinforce positive attitudes toward cutting and chopping? Perhaps the explanation of the functional ideal, in the case of tools, lies in the intimacy of form and function: in a cutting implement, ornamentation and the exploration of form are highly likely to compromise function. In the case of architecture, a kind of detachment of form from functional activities is possible: as Carlson puts it, there is room for form to "go its own way" without

## Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to clarify the problem of beauty as faced by the architect, identifying as the main choice one between developing the building's aesthetic and functional aspects in isolation or in dialogue with one another. I have also argued that, to make this choice, the architect need not engage in philosophical debate or simply assert their own stylistic preference. Rather, the choice may be made in light of an analysis of the institutional context of the architect's task. The upshot is a pluralist view: while Functionalism is appropriate in some cases, there is also a wide range of cases where Formalism or Ornamentation can be a valid approach.[40]

It may be said that, in the end, I have offered a rather pedestrian solution to a profound and deeply philosophical question: the proper role of beauty in the pursuit of architecture. And it may be so. I suspect that many architects intuitively grasp the context sensitivity of decisions about integrating function and form in more or less the ways that I have tried to spell out. But in this case, I think that an intuitively familiar, not to say pedestrian, solution should be welcomed. As I have pointed out, the choice between Formalism, Functionalism and Ornamentation is only the start of beauty's challenge: the architect then faces the task of actually *creating* a beautiful structure! Given this, philosophers do best in steering architects away from the mists of metaphysical speculation, and helping them to get on with the job.

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directly compromising functionality ("Existence, Location, and Function," p. 208). Other instances of design, furniture, for example, perhaps represent an intermediate sort of case.

[40] My view thus aligns with the pluralist attitude of Guyer ("Free and Adherent Beauty," p. 139), though his discussion focuses on design rather than architecture (see previous note). My view differs from that of Shiner, who writes, regarding architecture, that "in no case [...] can an appropriate aesthetic judgement justifiably ignore practical functions as irrelevant in assessing [...] total aesthetic effect" ("On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture," p. 39).

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