



unpacking *urban beauty*:
an exploratory study

“I THINK WE ARE LOSING BEAUTY, AND THERE IS A DANGER
THAT WITH IT WE WILL LOSE THE MEANING OF LIFE”

— ROGER SCRUTON, PHILOSOPHER

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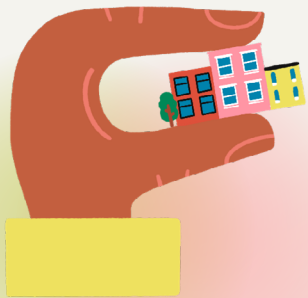


STARTING POINT

1.1 The city hype

Cities today are quite literally booming. Some 55% of the world's population — circa 4.2 billion people — now live in cities (UN, 2018), even though they cover only about 2% of the Earth's surface (Koolhaas et al., 2020). On the one hand, cities have many advantages that render them attractive places to live, such as better opportunities for education, employment, and entertainment. On the other hand, cities struggle to remedy disadvantages ranging from the lack of affordable housing to high crime rates and pollution of all forms, be that water, air, or noise (Rahman, 2015). The issues and problems that cities face have gained new urgency under the specter of global climate change alongside the twin pressures of rapid urbanization and a fast-growing population. As a result, lately, there has been a surge of interest in the pursuit for more liveable and resilient cities.

Cities have recently been assigned various labels by scholars and practitioners aiming to guide urban planning and design in desirable future directions. Popular examples of these labels include eco-city, age-friendly city, smart city, sharing city, compact city, creative city, and the list goes on (Khan & Zaman, 2018). Surprisingly, the idea of beauty has no traction in current discussions on city improvement (Postrel, 2003). In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find the word beauty in most planning visions and documents because it is loathed by many city-building professionals (Toderian, 2007). The relative lack of serious engagement with beauty in cities — from hereon, urban beauty — is unfortunate and problematic because concern for this 'elusive, yet universal concept' (Calafiore, 2020) has proven effective in contributing toward better-loved cities characterized by high levels of community satisfaction (Florida et al., 2009).



compact city



smart city

what about
beauty?



age-friendly city



creative city

A QUICK PEEK AT THE BENEFITS OF URBAN BEAUTY SHOWS THAT THE COST OF UGLINESS IS TOO HIGH FOR CITIES TO BEAR...

1.2 The benefits of urban beauty

1. A SOURCE OF PLEASURE Firstly, urban beauty is valued for the enjoyment it brings, whether that enjoyment is intellectualized or not (MacDonald, 2012). People often have awe-related experiences of wonder, amazement, and fascination when they come across handsome buildings, lush parks, and other instances of urban beauty (Arcangeli et al., 2018). As such, urban beauty can heighten a city's experiential and memorial potential, especially when it appeals to all of the senses. This is because we understand sensory details like sounds and smells as the language a city uses, the perfume it wears, and the way it carries or communicates itself (Vitiello & Willcocks, 2006). In other words, urban beauty can help people make sense of a city and foster the cherished connection that exists between person and place.

2. A SOURCE OF WELL-BEING Secondly, urban beauty found in natural settings can contribute to health and well-being because nature has restorative effects that calm people's minds and spirits (van den Berg et al., 2007; Greer, 2010). Moreover, the 'Broken windows theory' tells us that natural urban beauty can improve safety and security because clean, healthy environments tend to stifle antisocial behavior (Kelling & Coles, 1998; Bratton & Kelling, 2006). Thus, urban beauty is not only a potent marker of enjoyable, memorable city experiences but also a merit good that can yield significant benefits for the community at large.

3. A SOURCE OF DISTINCTIVENESS Thirdly, urban beauty is crucial for the 'wider spirit of a city' (Scruton & Smith, 2020) because it stands in close connection to specific traits like scenic views, proximity to the ocean, cultural landmarks, and historic districts (Carlino & Saiz, 2008). Differently put, urban beauty captures the unique character of a city and reflects its way of life, hence it has considerable impact on whether a place is perceived as original and authentic or generic and placeless. This, in turn, directly affects the influx of tourists and travelers, which spurs a city's socio-economic development (Baggio & Moretti, 2018). Therefore, urban beauty is a vital source of distinctiveness and competitive advantage that can foster a city's creativity and innovation (Florida, 2014).



SO WHAT NOW?

No doubt, urban beauty truly matters because it fills a city with soul that enlivens people, relationships, and lifestyles. While it cannot be a panacea for all city ills (Ipsos MORI, 2010), urban beauty clearly is more than just a nice extra to have when other needs are met, not least because the opposite of aesthetic means ‘lack of feeling’ and translates into the condition of living death (Tuan, 1995).

Since the prospect of cities without urban beauty is depressing, it makes sense that people increasingly call for this forgotten, discarded concept to be reinstated as a public value with meaning that stretches beyond the latest trends in fashion (Ipsos MORI, 2010). In light of the public’s growing desire for urban beauty, we need to take this important but understudied phenomenon more seriously as a subject worth exploring so that people can reap the benefits of living in beautiful cities.

2.1 Agenda

Bringing about an enhancement of urban beauty requires finding common ground on what people find beautiful. To do this, one could either penetrate into the aesthetic experiences of cities by their residents — the so-called ‘human perception-based approach’ — or probe into how city-building professionals handle the creation of urban beauty in their everyday practices; the so-called ‘expert approach’. This exploratory study adopts the latter approach for two reasons:

1. City-building professionals have specialist knowledge that can help establish an initial orientation in a field of study that is substantively new or poorly defined (Bogner & Menz, 2009).
2. City-building professionals have the power to shape the look and, to a lesser extent, feel of our cities (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Therefore, we should scrutinize their unwritten rules and decision-making maxims because they trickle down into our daily lives (Bogner & Menz, 2009).

Thanks to the help of gatekeeper Raphael Gielgen, trendscout future of work, life & learn at Vitra, it was possible to recruit 14 esteemed city-building professionals from a variety of disciplines. They agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews which took place over Zoom and lasted on average 1 hour. The research question that guided the interviews is...

...What ideas and methods pertaining to urban beauty underpin the principles and practices of experts in city-building circles; and how can these help inform the creation of beautiful public spaces and better-loved places?

2.2 Research goals

The goal of this project is not to codify a recipe for urban beauty but to open out an 'ideas bank' from which innovations can emerge. Another aim is to derive some instructive lessons on beautiful city-making so that cities and their inhabitants are better equipped to profit from urban beauty.

The focus here is only on an American-European context because bringing in non-Western planning histories, aesthetic philosophies, and design traditions would require a much wider treatment than the scope of this study allows for. Further input from other cultural contexts and disciplines like social geography will be crucial in going further than just these first steps.

“THE CULTURE OF GOOD PLACE-MAKING, LIKE THE CULTURE OF FARMING, OR AGRICULTURE, IS A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACQUIRED SKILLS. IT IS NOT BRED IN THE BONE, AND IF IT IS NOT TRANSMITTED FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT IT IS LOST”

— JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER, AUTHOR



STUDY FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theory

The following section looks to the highly esteemed American urban planner Kevin Lynch (1981) for guidance on how to dissect urban beauty holistically. Lynch uses three theories — normative, functional, and planning theory — that he assigns equal explanatory power for trying to understand ‘what is good city form?’. The multiple perspectives that his theories provide in combination are a major strength because they can bridge knowledge gaps and fragmented modes of thinking.¹

In what follows, urban beauty is explored from a normative, functional, and planning perspective. Insights gained here will inform the creation of an interview guide, which serves as the empirical basis for establishing how urban beauty can best be brought.

¹There are two other reasons why this study adopts Lynch’s (1981) theoretical framework. For more details, please request the longer version of this report at: hello@meritzimmermann.com

3.1a A normative perspective: Aesthetic universals

Normative theory deals with generalizable connections between cities and urban beauty — or how to know a beautiful city when you see one (Lynch, 1981). Since ancient times, great thinkers have attempted to define beauty, from Plato to Kant, from Fibonacci to Sulzer, from Goethe to Proust, from Vitruvius to Le Corbusier, and so on (Dal Fabbro, 2007). Despite their efforts, the evolving story of thinking about beauty can be seen as a single movement from certainty to doubt because the world's increasing complexity and loss of religious conviction have deprived us of a common language of aesthetics (Powers, 2010).

Today, many think that beauty is an entirely subjective matter, about which there cannot be a reasoned argument, concerning which it is futile to search for a consensus (Scruton, 2009). But, although we should never underestimate the extent to which beauty is 'in the eye of the beholder', ignoring objective commonalities in taste would be foolish because they can lift awkward discussions about aesthetic assessments and appraisals out of the depths of personal preference and individual idiosyncrasies (Harvey & Julian, 2015). Despite the inherent socio-cultural biases in what is considered beautiful, some aesthetic universals do, in fact, travel culture, time, and class (Dittmar, 2019).



The first, most dominant aesthetic universal that forms part of our shared understanding of beauty concerns nature. Much research shows that fractal forms found in nature — a tree, a mountain, a cloud — are intuitively appealing to humans thanks to their captivating patterns of infinite detail and self-similarity (Richards, 2001). In line therewith, psychologists have found patterns of proportion and symmetry, consistency and surprise, originality and familiarity, variety and complexity to cross cultures and ages when it comes to perceptions of beauty (Postrel, 2003).

Concerning cities, it has been found that beauty is related to certain physical building attributes like human-scale height, high to moderate visual complexity, and historical references in architecture (Quercia et al., 2014). Moreover, urban beauty is woven through associations with less rubbish, litter, graffiti, vandalism, and vacant or run-down spaces, as well as with constructions that emanate craftsmanship, grandeur, and longevity (Harvey & Julian, 2015).

All of this underscores that urban beauty has operational meaning because it is a view that people tend to share, or at least want to share (Baggio & Moretti, 2018). **And yet, we have not reached an agreement on the best way to achieve aesthetic pleasure in cities because urban beauty manifests in subjective, heterogeneous, and constantly changing ways, even if it begins with universals (Postrel, 2003).** As such, we should not confine our horizon to classic categories of beauty like harmony, symmetry, and hierarchy but think of beautiful cities as arising out of possibility, plurality, and multiplicity (Rizzi, 1990).



3.1b A functional perspective: Beauty and utility

Functional urban theory deals with how beauty works in relation to its utility — or how to know a city is both beautiful and useful (Lynch, 1981). Within Western philosophy, there is a long, rich tradition of treating beauty and utility as closely related and mutually reinforcing (Clewis, 2018). The word beauty derives from the Latin “bellus”, the diminutive of ancient form of “bonus”, that means good, well (Calafiore, 2020). Echoing this etymology, many believe that a built object must always be suited to its purpose to attain some kind of beauty (Dal Fabbro, 2007) because architecture and design have a social as opposed to purely aesthetic role to play (Haapala, 2017). This conviction shows the importance of ‘doing things well because that’s how they should be done’ (Baggio & Moretti, 2018). However, thinking that the function of an object confirms its importance is problematic in action because something may well appear ugly instead of beautiful when attending only to ends set by reason (Scruton, 2009). So, how can beauty and utility best be reconciled?

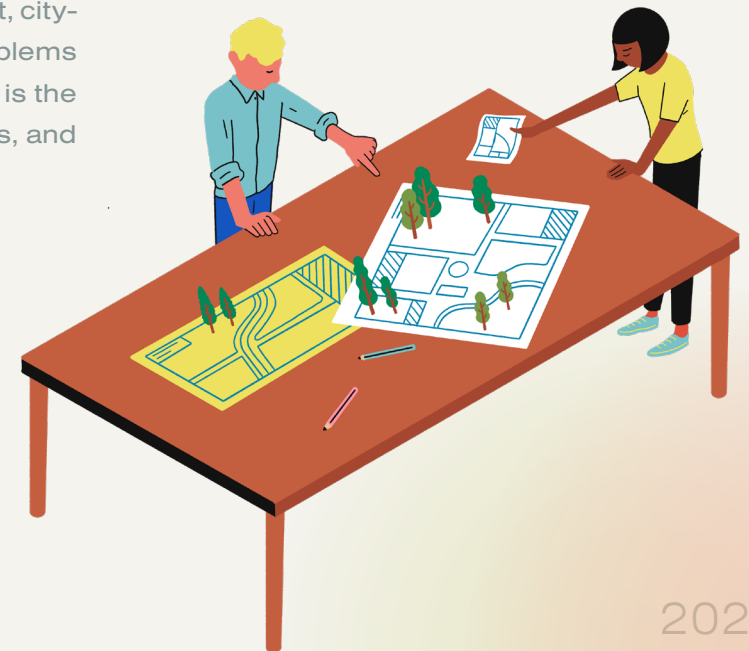


According to Kant, there are at least two kinds of beauties — a pure and a purpose-based one — that are distinct concepts which can but must not necessarily be conjoined (Clewis, 2018). It follows by this definition, then, that urban beauty can be harnessed for purposes of sensual stimulation and/or practical utility. Ideally, however, these motives should be interconnected and mutually interdependent because beauty and utility are like two sides of the same coin that cannot be thought of in isolation. ²

² That beauty and utility go hand in hand and deserve to be placed on an equal footing becomes clear from the overstated dichotomy inferred from the distinction between the City Beautiful and City Practical urban planning paradigms, or the neologism ‘beautility’ which was minted during this paradigm shift strongest in the United States in the early 20th century (Freestone, 2011).

3.1c A planning perspective: Urban beauty from behind a desk

Planning urban theory deals with how complex decisions about urban beauty are made — or how to know beautiful city-making is strategically principled and tactically managed (Lynch, 1981). Thus far, urban beauty has been considered at best an addendum to planning visions, design proposals, and public policy (Harvey & Julian, 2015). Perhaps for this same reason, it is felt that, despite increased wealth, our cities are littered with built debris of a kind that nobody wants to preserve (Scruton & Smith, 2020). To build a more pragmatic ‘pro-beauty’ mindset, city-building professionals need to engage with questions like ‘who decides what are the problems involving urban beauty?’, ‘who prepares and administers relevant regulations?’, and ‘how is the decision-making power distributed among key stakeholders like architects, city authorities, and community members?’ (Newsom, 1969).



A reoccurring recommendation that has been made regarding the provision of urban beauty is that the actual lives and activities of people deserve more prominence, at least as much emphasis as is currently placed on land use policy and the monitoring of building performance (Fincher, 2003). In fact, it has been argued that cities need a ‘community right to beauty’ underpinned by the following four principles (Harvey & Julian, 2015):

1. DEMOCRATICALLY CHALLENGE NEW CONSTRUCTIONS ON THE GROUNDS OF BEAUTY
2. CALL FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF DERELICT, VOID, OR UNSIGHTLY BUILDINGS AND SPACES; AND TAKE ON THE OWNERSHIP OR MANAGEMENT OF SUCH ASSETS TO ACCELERATE THE PROCESS
3. PROTECT, MAINTAIN, AND IMPROVE CHERISHED BUILDINGS AND SPACES, ESPECIALLY WHEN THERE IS NO EXISTING PROTECTION IN LEGISLATION
4. GENUINELY SHAPE, PRESERVE, AND ENHANCE LOCAL AREAS BEYOND THAT WHICH IS ALREADY ENSHRINED IN LAW

Additionally, city-building professionals should create legislative pathways for rewarding urban beauty, appoint officers in charge of championing quality design, and require permitted development rights to ensure better placemaking (Scruton & Smith, 2020). Perhaps the most important thing for them to remember is that people are capable of leaving behind their private appetites to look for beauty norms and conventions that everybody can accept, especially when the motive of sharing arises (Scruton, 2009). As such, city-building professionals need to drop their laissez-faire attitude to urban beauty and become policy-wiser, for this will endow beautiful city-making with more meaning, recognition, and status.

3.2 Methodology

This exploratory study adopts a qualitative research paradigm because it aims to capture a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) rather than numerical quantification of urban beauty. By implication, the goal is not generalizability of results but to widen and deepen our understanding of urban beauty ‘from the inside’ (Flick, 2009). Examining urban beauty from an expert perspective can shed light on city-building processes that are generally hidden from public view. Therefore, this study opens up possibilities for public critique rather than being a purely intellectual endeavor.



For participant selection, a total of 20 experts were contacted via e-mail with the help of gatekeeper Raphael Gielgen, trendscout future of work, life & learn at Vitra. To avoid respondent selection bias, we ensured that certain peer esteem inclusion criteria (e.g. publications, awards, teaching positions) guided our purposefully sampled group of experts (Gläser & Laudel, 2009). Profession-wise, we opted for heterogeneity because this helps make findings more applicable to different occupational contexts (Robinson, 2013). **14 experts were successfully recruited to participate in an online Zoom interview, among them architects, designers, planners, developers, investors, advisors, curators, futurists, researchers, and architectural academics.** This eclectic mix of city-building professionals is plenty for achieving maximum variation in the data set (Guest et al., 2006).

3.2a Data collection

The interviews took place according to participants' availability between May 28th and July 25th, 2021. Before beginning the formal part of the interview, the experts gave written or oral consent regarding the study's objectives, its ethical principles of inquiry, participant anonymity, and data confidentiality. Questions asked during the 60-90min long interviews were formulated based on insights gained in the literature review. They were raised in a semi-structured way because retaining flexibility allows for room to pursue topics of particular interest (Bryman, 2016).

TO GIVE AN IDEA OF THE GROUND COVERED...

...WHAT MAKES A CITY BEAUTIFUL IN YOUR OPINION?

...HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE OPPOSITE OF URBAN BEAUTY?

...WHERE WOULD YOU SITUATE YOURSELF ON THE IDEA THAT (URBAN) BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER?

...DO YOU THINK REGARD FOR URBAN BEAUTY SHOULD BE SECONDARY TO REGARD FOR USEFULNESS IN ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN?

...CAN YOU WALK ME THROUGH AN EXAMPLE OF HOW YOU HAVE DESIGNED FOR URBAN BEAUTY STARTING WITH THE IDEA TO THE CONCEPT CREATION AND PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION?

...WHO ARE THE STAKEHOLDERS IN THE CREATION OF URBAN BEAUTY AND HOW IS THE DECISION-MAKING POWER DISTRIBUTED AMONG THEM?

...WHAT REGULATIONS AND STRATEGIES WOULD WORK BEST TO BRING ABOUT AN ENHANCEMENT OF URBAN BEAUTY?

...WHAT ARE COMMON CHALLENGES AND PITFALLS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PURSUIT OF URBAN BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN?

...WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN URBAN AND NON-URBAN BEAUTY?

...WHAT COMPETENCES AND SKILLS DO CITY-BUILDING PROFESSIONALS NEED TO BRING ABOUT AN ENHANCEMENT OF URBAN BEAUTY?

...WHAT VALUES AND IDEALS ARE PARAMOUNT FOR CREATING BEAUTIFUL CITIES?

...WHAT FUNCTIONS, IF ANY, DOES URBAN BEAUTY HAVE TO FULFILL TO CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS 'GOOD CITY FORM'?

...IS THERE AN IDEAL TYPE OF URBAN BEAUTY? WHY/NOT?

3.2b Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed with computer support before being cleansed from transfer errors by 'corrective listening' (Flick et al., 2004). Guided by a grounded-theory-inspired thematic approach, the data was coded in a cyclical process of open, axial, and selective coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). By moving back and forth between inductive and deductive thinking, it was discovered that there are considerable overlaps between Lynch's (1981) five performance dimensions for 'good city form' and the in-vivo (i.e. actual spoken word) codes fleshed out through a critical examination and questioning of the data. Thus, the next section will present interview findings following Lynch's principles of vitality, sense, access, fit, and control.

To reach data saturation and heighten content validity, future studies are well-advised to use a larger heterogeneous sample of experts and schedule at least 90min for the interviews³. Moreover, scholars are encouraged to further compare 'good city form' and 'beautiful city form' using different methodological tools because this can make urban beauty more actionable in a dialogical way.

³ One possible reason why data saturation was not reached is that urban beauty is too broad and complex of a topic to be covered in detail using only a small heterogeneous sample. Another reason could be that most of the study participants had only a short amount of time available, hence not all questions were asked in every interview.



INTERVIEW FINDINGS

4.1 Urban beauty as experience

A reoccurring theme which emerged from the interviews is that urban beauty signifies an experience of positive emotions. These emotions depend on both features of the city and the experiential processes those evoke in the observer. **This means that urban beauty is, at once, an objective and subjective phenomenon.** Firstly, let us review what makes urban beauty a subjective experience relative to the socially constructed, situationally conditioned eye of the beholder. Then, we will move on to the objective commonalities in the experience of urban beauty and discuss how they can be leveraged in architecture and design.

Just like ‘love’, urban beauty is a felt and lived experience that ‘you cannot clearly define, but know when it is there’ (Respondent 7, architect, Munich). The emotional response that urban beauty prompts in people arises from their interaction with city environments that feel — in respondents’ words — exciting, uplifting, dynamic, diverse, vibrant, interesting, inviting, welcoming, comfortable, caring, and safe. **Essentially, urban beauty embodies ‘a place where I like to go’ (Respondent 10, developer & investor, Cologne); one that gives about the same feeling as ‘well-tempered music’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg).** By contrast, the absence of urban beauty feels — in respondents’ words — foreboding, inhospitable, technocratic, rational, uniform, efficient, nondescript, overstimulating, deterrent, and derelict; in short, kind of like ‘Gotham city’ (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle).

Urban beauty demands a plural ontology rather than linguistic monoculture not only because its experience is attached to various qualities and emotions. Another reason why urban beauty belongs to the realm of interpretation and inference rather than categorization and classification is that it has subtle shades in meaning.

People can draw on ‘all kinds of terminologies’ — e.g. charming, cute, camp, kitsch, picturesque, sublime — to describe the ‘beauty effects’ of a city (Respondent 13, architect & researcher, Edinburg & Singapore). Even the ugly was seen by some as an integral part of urban beauty because ‘ugliness can still be interesting’ and invite our senses to greater attention and participation (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart). Moreover, ‘too many jewels are boring’ since they create a sterile ‘museum-like situation’ in the city (Respondent 11, architect, Zurich & Singapore). People need ‘surprising’ moments that ‘cleanse the palate’ to properly enjoy all the pleasures that a beautiful city can afford (Respondent 1, architect, New York).

In short: The wide semantic reach of urban beauty shows that its experiences cannot be tarred with the same brush simply because people interpret them differently.



The experience of urban beauty not only consists of emotional (e.g. a vibrant feeling) and interpretive components (e.g. a sublime sight). There are also evaluative components (e.g. appraising an object as beautiful) at play. These are socially constructed and situationally conditioned because both biographical factors (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) and situational factors (e.g. time of day, season, weather) prime 'the person doing the beholding' to judge things in a certain way (Respondent 13, architect & researcher, Edinburgh & Singapore). Here are two examples:

1. **Biographical factors** Somebody who cares about the 'history', 'architectural philosophy', and 'material goals' of a building is more likely to perceive it as an object of urban beauty than somebody who doesn't because their level of education and personal interests 'cultivate an attitude that predisposes them toward appreciative responses' (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid).
2. **Situational factors** Somebody sightseeing on a 'relaxed holiday' during 'summer' will probably encounter more urban beauty than a 'stressed businessman' who 'lacks the right coat in the middle of winter' because, under the former circumstances, the city appears in a better light (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart).

The bad news, the good news

As we have seen, the experience of urban beauty hinges on countless contingencies, most of which cannot be anticipated, let alone resolved, in the city-building process. This is the bad news. The good news is that city-building professionals are not entirely helpless in the face of myriad internal (i.e. biographical) and external (i.e. situational) factors shaping people's experiences of urban beauty. Why? Well, we discussed earlier that constancies in the perception of beauty do exist thanks to the common biological basis of our perception and cognition (Lynch, 1981). Consequently, 'there are, of course, urban elements that can be considered a common experience across all aspects of society', say, for example, New York's 'Central Park' (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid).

Luckily, it follows that city-building professionals can design, plan, and manage buildings and spaces in such a way that evokes the class of feelings attached to urban beauty. To achieve this, they need to employ 'a set of underlying principles' in architecture and design that help create 'similar experiences of the same place by different people' (Respondent 6, architect & designer, Washington).

The next section distills interview findings to explain how city-building professionals can provide a fertile breeding ground for the experience of urban beauty. **In a nutshell, they need to pay attention to five conditions — vitality, sense, access, fit, control — that can nudge people's receptivity toward urban beauty in the right direction.**

4.2 The five conditions of urban beauty

4.2a Vitality

Although vitality deals more with sheer survival than with sensual delight and cognitive satisfaction (Lynch, 1981), which are the very fabric of urban beauty, respondents raised three interesting points that deserve mentioning.

1. Sustenance ‘Urban beauty almost comes naturally’ when ‘considerations for the climate, human soul, and longevity’ coalesce into a solution (Respondent 14, head of foresight & innovation at engineering and consulting firm, Zurich). Therefore, city-building professionals need to achieve a cooperative harmony between a city and its natural context. They can do so, for example, by ‘mimicking local ecosystem functions’ and assigning a form-generating role to ‘how a place dealt with things like carbon, stormwater, biodiversity, and the nutrient cycle’ (Respondent 6, architect & designer, Washington).

2. Safety ‘A beautiful city is where one feels safe and welcome’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). Therefore, city-building professionals need to enhance peoples’ physical and psychological safety. They can do so, for example, by improving street lighting conditions, transit stops, and road crossings because a viable and aesthetic pedestrian system gives people, especially foreigners, ‘the feeling that they can manage well in the city’ and ‘go out anywhere day or night alone’ (Ibid).

3. Inclusivity 'A beautiful city has to work for everyone, the poor, rich, fat, thin, tall, short', old, young, male, female, black, white, and so on (Respondent 8, architect, Duesseldorf). Thus, city-building professionals need to create places that cater to a diverse spectrum of people because this will 'eliminate barriers to participation' (Respondent 1, architect, New York). They could do so, for example, by escaping their 'self-referential systems' (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg) and widening their perspectives to include those of other experts like 'neuroscientists' (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle). This can bring about 'boundary objects' that catalyze inclusivity thanks to the broad social outlook that 'different disciplines' provide in combination (Respondent 7, architect, Munich).

A truly inclusive city acknowledges that 'there are other eyes here and not all of them are human eyes' (Respondent 13, architect & researcher, Edinburgh & Singapore). For Mother Earth to strive alongside humans, city-building professionals need to adopt 'non-anthropological perspectives' in the construction process and pay attention to other living beings like plants and animals (Ibid).





4.2b Sense

Sense refers to the clarity with which a city can be perceived and identified, or the ease with which people can read its elements (Lynch, 1981). Respondents identified numerous ways in which a sense of place can be conjured.

1. Proportion People often ‘feel confined, constricted, and threatened by their surroundings when they exceed a certain height’ (Respondent 2, architect, Duesseldorf & Berlin). Therefore, city-building professionals need to ‘find a scale that fits comfortably’ (Respondent 1, architect, New York). Of course, building on a small- to medium-sized scale is ‘not the one truth’ to be taken at face value, but focusing on ‘eye level is something we have lost a little bit in urban design’ and should bring back for the sake of urban beauty (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart).

2. Orientation ‘Beauty in the city is can I understand the city?’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). Besides providing ‘basic things like signage’ (Ibid), city-building professionals should ‘take advantage of the natural environment’ because ‘the connection to nature’ creates a ‘totally authentic unity between the city and its people’ (Respondent 1, architect, New York). Here’s an example: Barcelona has a ‘beautiful layout’ in that its ‘slightly downwards-sloped’ walkways always give people a good sense of ‘where the ocean is and where the mountains are’ (Respondent 11, architect, Zurich & Singapore).

Another way to make people more aware of their surroundings as a potential experience of urban beauty is through congruence. Indeed, ‘urban beauty arises when there is somehow congruence between the physical and social energy’ of a city and its people (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid) or, in other words, ‘when the social life corresponds to the spatial output’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg). City-building professionals can articulate synergy between the hard and soft, material and immaterial, tangible and intangible assets of a city in two ways.

1. Compression & release Creating ‘an enchilada kind of succession’ of narrow and grand (e.g. alley and square) spaces can not only ‘make the way from A to B very beautiful’ by encouraging dynamic movement (Respondent 11, architect, Zurich & Singapore). Moreover, providing people with an alternating sense of enclosure and openness makes them ‘feel like they are in a city’ (i.e. ‘dense’) while, at the same time, ‘able to breathe and open out’ (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle). When ‘paths open and close again and again’ (Respondent 12, architect & researcher), that somehow has a congruent effect on people’s perception of a city. Thus, city-building professionals need to choreograph spaces to release volume sequentially.

2. Ordered chaos This is an ‘urban beauty principle’ according to which people like seeing a ‘pattern’ that is not ‘industrialized cereal’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg). Complex orderedness is of special importance for urban as opposed to non-urban beauty because ‘its differentiating character is diversity and vibrancy’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). As such, city-building professions should ‘reject visual monotony’ (Respondent 3, futurist & urbanist, Berlin) by designing buildings and spaces to ‘form contrasts and build up tension’ through ‘variations of color, material, envelopes, and volumes’ (Respondent 8, architect, Duesseldorf). This ‘diversity as a full complexion makes for a beautiful city as well’ (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle).

Importantly, every new development needs to ‘communicate’ with its greater ‘ensemble context’ rather than ‘radically destroy’ it (Respondent 11, architect, Zurich & Singapore), otherwise it cannot become a ‘real, true partner to the city and its fabric’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg). There needs to be ‘a good relationship between the new building and the ones in the neighborhood’ (Respondent 1, architect, New York), just like with a ‘group of friends where everybody is completely different but also has something in common’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg).

There are two other sensual qualities that city-building professionals should pay attention to in their pursuit for urban beauty.

1. Transparency People should be able to perceive a ‘sense of life’ in the city and feel connected to the outside world (Lynch, 1981). One way to achieve this is by making building façades ‘open’ and ‘interesting’ through plenty of ‘windows’, ‘balconies’, and ‘in-between layers’ filled with health-supporting actors like ‘plants’ (Respondent 11, architect, Zurich & Singapore).

2. Prospect & refuge People should have sheltered observation points from which their eyes can roam freely over social activities and natural processes. Promoting subtle visual exchange requires city-building professionals to create ‘niches or hidden places where you sit a bit uplifted’ with ‘a wide view’ over a city scene and ‘something protected in your back’ or overhead (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg).



For experiences of urban beauty to take shape, people need to be able to unfold their full potential as experience-seekers. Therefore, city-building professionals should create “an explorable world, whose vast diversities can be sought out or ignored at will” (Lynch, 1981). This means providing people with a ‘meandering experience’ where they can ‘discover something new’, ‘amble’, ‘get lost’ and put their stamp on the city (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle). Two conditions or patterns can effectively enhance people’s moving experience.

1. Mystery & enticement Elements that fall under this pattern include ‘curved roads’, ‘music coming from around the corner’, and fresh smells ‘oozing out of a bakery’, among other things (Respondent 6, architect & designer, Washington).

2. Risk & reward This pattern refers to things like ‘uneven stepping-stones’, ‘spiraling ramps’ like at New York’s Guggenheim Museum, and other slightly more challenging design elements (Ibid).

Both patterns are equally effective in creating ‘anticipation’, pushing people ‘outside their comfort zone’, and giving them ‘a dopamine rush’ (Ibid). Therefore, they allow for an unfolding construction of meaning that incites the experience of urban beauty.

4.2c Access

Access is the extent to which a variety of people, goods, settings, and information are reachable within minimum time (Lynch, 1981). Perhaps most obviously, access hinges on infrastructure, so things like public transport. But creating a commuter-friendly city is not the only prerequisite for access, there are other important points to consider.

1. Public transport connectivity Density in the city structure enhances access to experiences of urban beauty. Therefore, city-building professionals need to provide people with ‘safe, reliable mobility within a 15-minute walk or a 5-minute walk even’ (Respondent 14, head of foresight & innovation at engineering and consulting firm, Zurich). This will allow people to move seamlessly from one place to another, place them ‘within an immediate reach of a mélange of activities to engage with’, and ‘oil the rusty wheels of social interaction’ (Respondent 2, architect, Duesseldorf & Berlin).

2. Amenities The mixture of amenities that a city offers activates street life, which is conducive to the experience of urban beauty. As such, city-building professionals should heighten access to ‘cultural things’ like museums, ‘restaurants’, ‘retail shops’, ‘playgrounds’, and ‘parks’ because these meeting places create opportunities for ‘leisurely consumption’ while fostering a ‘resting culture’ that makes people stop and look more closely at their surroundings (Respondent 10, developer & investor, Cologne). Another good way to initiate lightness of social encounters and spark a cultural buzz is by repurposing and rejuvenating ‘parking lots’ and other ‘dead capital’ into ‘restaurants with outdoor seating’ and ‘micro parks’ (Respondent 6, architect & designer, Washington).

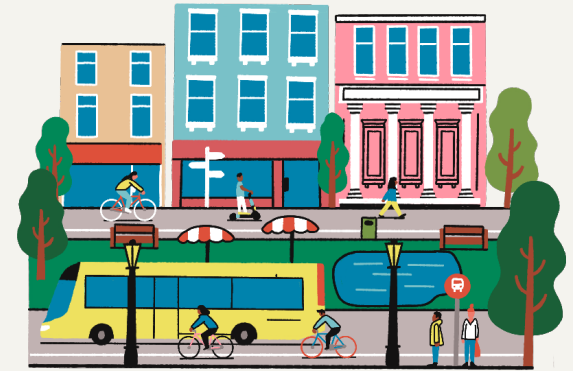
3. Natural environments Unsurprisingly, ‘the integration of and access to nature’ is paramount for the experience of urban beauty because natural environments are ‘intrinsically appealing’ and combat stressors like congestion or nuisances (Respondent 14, head of foresight & innovation at engineering and consulting firm, Zurich). As such, urban practitioners need to imbue the city fabric with ‘vegetation’, ‘sunlight’, ‘biomorphic forms’, and ‘natural materials’ like stone or wood (Respondent 6, architect & designer, Washington).

4. Information A beautiful city should bolster ‘healthy neighborhoods’ where people ‘can come together to discuss problems, have a barbecue, and sit on the sidewalk with a beer’ (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart). This convivial exchange in fixed spatial proximity encourages an unobstructed information flow that can make people more aware of what is happening in the city and changes as they occur. Thus, urban practitioners should develop a set of concrete actions for breaking down information silos and fostering active public participation.



Together yet apart: Urban beauty and utility

Before discussing the criterion of fit, which deals with the functional dimension of city planning and design, a quick note on the relation between urban beauty and utility is useful. Echoing Kant's views on beauty, respondents' accounts suggested that there are, in fact, two types of urban beauty: A purpose-based and pure one that pleases unselfishly. However, not everybody agreed on this matter.



One person reinforced the famous axiom “form follows function” when saying that ‘the most functional object is the ultimate beautiful form there is’ (Respondent 3, futurist & urbanist, Berlin). Another voiced the need to think about ‘unmotivated urban beauty’ that acts as ‘an extra effect on top of the utilitarian foundation’ (Respondent 13, architect & researcher, Edinburgh & Singapore). The example provided here was the ‘buzz of being in a market’, which is interesting in so far as it arises independently of a conceptual intent thanks to its ‘self-organizing dimension’ (Ibid). Building on this, a city experience that was neither planned nor intended but is immediately effective can be considered pure urban beauty, as it is more than a mere handmaiden of logic.

Overall, the consensus was that city-building professionals need to ‘succeed on both paths’ of form and function (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle). It should not be ‘an either-or question’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg) because pure urban beauty is ‘art without function’ (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart) and ‘pure functionality looks like a mausoleum’ (Respondent 14, head of foresight & innovation at engineering and consulting firm, Zurich). Therefore, ‘the more harmonious the interaction between the two entities, the more beautiful’ the object in question (Respondent 8, architect, Duesseldorf).

A piece of advice: City-building professionals should play a mental game of ‘ping pong’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg) when fleshing out the form of a function and vice versa because the creation of urban beauty is about ‘synthesis’ rather than ‘summing’ (Respondent 7, architect, Munich).

4.2d Fit

Fit denotes how well a city's spatial settings and temporal patterns match the customary behavior of its inhabitants (Lynch, 1981). The personal correlate of fit is competence, so the ability to do something well, adequately, and sufficiently (Lynch, 1981). Creating a 'good fit' stands and falls with city-building professionals' ability to cultivate meaningful experiences because 'there is no urban beauty' in something 'random' that is 'not coherent with the DNA of the city itself' (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg). It really is a no-brainer but still useful to remember that every development must be thoroughly thought through.

- 1. Deep dive** Any project must begin with city-building professionals 'really understanding the context that they are working in' (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). This means 'digging into layers of history, the climate, the people who live there, the changes a place has undergone, the infrastructure', etcetera (Ibid). Moreover, there needs to be a commitment to and 'acknowledgment of common visual language' (Respondent 8, architect, Duesseldorf), including 'materials that are indigenous to a city' and vernacular styles like 'traditional roof forms' (Respondent 6, architect & designer, Washington). By 'seeing themselves as a medium' and 'absorbing everything' they can from a place, city-building professionals can create buildings and spaces that are 'learned from context' and a true expression of the city from which they spring (Respondent 1, architect, New York).

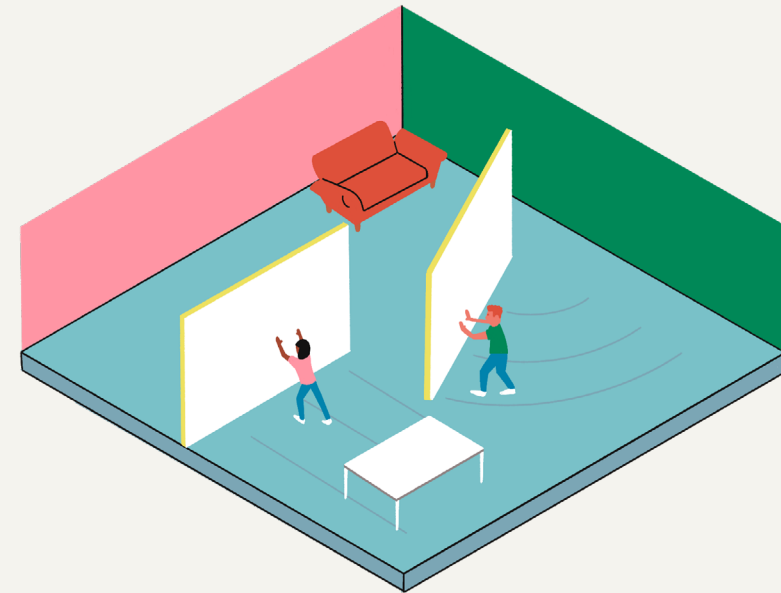
The cherry on top of these considerations is that city-building professionals have to uncover the ‘why of an intervention’ and ‘transform it into a design that transports this real, systemic meaning’ (Respondent 7, architect, Munich). For this, they need ‘big ears’ (Respondent 8, architect, Duesseldorf) with which to ‘listen very carefully to what people have to say’ about their ‘community aspirations’ and the ‘basic necessities’ of a place (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). A buy-in on behalf of the community can unfold in many ways, such as ‘interviews’, ‘Instagram surveys’, and ‘interactive mobile games’, all of which capitalize on people’s ‘expertise of daily use’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg).



“SOLVING A SPECIFIC PROBLEM WITH AN APPROPRIATE
SOLUTION IS ALREADY A FORM OF BEAUTY”

— ARMANDO DAL FABBRO, ARCHITECT

To avoid potential misfits that hamper the experience of urban beauty, city-building professionals need to champion adaptability as a design principle. This is because, similar to an organism, 'a city always continues to be and it should never stop' evolving (Respondent 7, architect, Munich). Moreover, there is ambiguity around beauty that leads to all sorts of dilemmas. What is considered 'total rubbish' today might be regarded as beautiful in the future, 'as was the case with many European medieval cities' (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart). Therefore, city-building professionals should take characteristics of temporality and adaptability into account because they can meet the changing, sometimes contradictory functional and aesthetic propensities of cities in more satisfactory ways when allowing for transformations during the life cycle of a construction. There are two strategies for coping with uncertainty and placating future generations.



1. Mixed typologies

Traditional typologies are too rigid and not permeable enough. Since ‘society changes and has other needs’ over time, ‘we have to get away from the idea that this is a school, this is a house, this is a school’, and ‘office there, commercial here, something else there’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). There should be more ‘experimentation’ with ‘intentionally temporary designs’, ‘prototypes’, and innovative ‘structural programmatic expressions’ like OMA + LMN’s ‘Seattle Central Library’ because ‘to simply rely on history to drive the future forward is a missed opportunity to bring about more urban beauty now and for the next millennium’ (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle).

Here’s two pieces of advice to keep in mind:

- ‘We should not be designing ground planes that are static’ or ‘permanent’ because buildings need to be ‘able to reiterate’, ‘morph over time’, and offer ‘a mixture of uses’ (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle) — ‘maybe it’s an office today and the museum tomorrow’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid).
- We should remember the ‘simple formula’ that ‘every place needs to offer at least 10 different things to do and, with that, at least 10 different functions’ because ‘beauty comes when many, many activities are possible’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg). Essentially, it is a question of ‘how do you create a place that has a really interesting mixture’, not just in terms of usage, but also — and perhaps by extension — with regard to ‘income groups’, ‘people of all ages’, colors, and so on (Respondent 1, architect, New York).

It is all well and good that city-building professionals overhaul typologies and design for adaptability to ensure buildings and spaces are compatible with changing societal needs and tastes for beauty. However, “perhaps the most powerful way of improving fit is to put the control of it into the hands of its immediate user” (Lynch, 1981). **Space control is the second strategy of adaptability** and will now be discussed in the next section.

4.2e Control

Stakeholders at any level should have a degree of control over the provision of urban beauty so that as many people as possible are satisfied with the final result. This is why city-building professionals need to consider people's stake in a place and their performance within it (Lynch, 1981).



Of course, 'public space needs to have a basic structure or else we have chaos', the lack and loss of control (Respondent 2, architect, Duesseldorf & Berlin). But 'next to this basic structure, there needs to be a lot of freedom for people to unfold', 'be creative', and invest their personality into a place because many 'feel restricted' when their surroundings are 'too regulated' (Ibid). **Therefore, the visual appearance of a built object and its rules of usage should not be set in stone but transformable according to context, because then people can customize their experiences and deliberately infuse them with meaning.** By 'leaving a space raw', city-building professionals can safeguard the 'appropriation effect' and 'empower people to contribute', 'take authorship', and 'co-curate something to a vision' that is of relevance to them (Respondent 1, architect, New York).

Here's an example: In a project for an urban center, Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena 'built half a building, half a building, half a building' and then 'let the tenants come in and build in the other half' (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle). By allowing for this 'personalization', he laid the groundwork for that urban beauty which is 'really in the eye of the users' (Respondent 3, futurist & urbanist, Berlin).

This shows that city-building professionals need to encourage people to 'interact directly with their environment' as raw material because purposeful user engagement helps bring about 'humanizing spaces' (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). A helpful analogy is that new developments are almost 'like a baby being born' because far from being judgeable the 'minute they enter the world', they too need time to grow and evolve to 'turn into a potentially beautiful being' (Respondent 14, head of foresight & innovation at engineering and consulting firm, Zurich).

Space control is achieved through responsibility, that is, the extent to which those in charge of a place have the motives, information, and power to exercise control over it (Lynch, 1981). In simple terms, this means making a real effort to ‘engage people and help them feel that they are part of the same building effort’ rather than just passive recipients of a project (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid).

Of course, city-building professionals are not required to ‘ask the public to co-design the physical in a direct way’, since questioning them on ‘what color on the façade they would like’ may engender style wars (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart). Instead, they should ‘introduce enthusiasm’ because ‘if you want to have people build a boat, do not tell them how to build the boat, tell them where the journey goes’ (Respondent 1, architect, New York).

To bring people on board of a project, city-building professionals need to ‘clarify their goals’ from the beginning and ‘explain the value they add’, be that during ‘roundtable discussions’, ‘workshops’, and ‘town hall meetings’ or through media outlets like ‘newspaper articles’, ‘radio programs’, and ‘films’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). By exposing their plans to public scrutiny, they can give people the chance to ‘air ideas and grievances’ that can be resolved through mediation (Respondent 14, head of foresight & innovation at engineering and consulting firm, Zurich).

An open process of communication is also conducive to ‘finding a common language around beauty that can be used, referenced, and leveraged to successfully guide a project’ towards a desired outcome (Respondent 4, architect & designer, Seattle). This can foster ‘an alignment around what urban beauty is and the incredibly positive impact it can have on our society’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). **Essentially, it all comes down to leadership, since urban beauty ‘starts with the mindset’ that city-building professionals need to internalize to excite ‘public commitment, investment, and involvement’ with a place (Respondent 10, developer & investor, Cologne).**



Responsibility is not a one-way street. Everybody has to 'show that they believe urban beauty is worth caring for' (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid) and 'stand up for their community' by 'carrying out civic duties' like 'garbage collection' or 'street sweeping' (Respondent 12, architect & researcher, Stuttgart). By placing 'plant buckets' and 'benches' outside their homes, people can 'lead by example' and 'awaken a passion for stewardship' in others. **The more helping hands, the better the chances of experiencing urban beauty.**

Responsibility-wise, two other recommendations emerged from respondents' accounts.

1. Prioritize 'leasehold over selling' (Respondent 3, futurist & urbanist, Berlin) Real estate has been 'too extractive and product-based in focus', almost as if 'you go to a mine, take out the gold, and run away with that' (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid). Thus, city-building professionals need to 'reduce property trading to a minimum' and allow communities to 'co-decide who gets some kind of lease-holding right' (Respondent 2, architect, Duesseldorf & Berlin). 'When you own something for 50 years, it becomes more than just an investment vehicle that leads to the monetization of an idea' (Ibid).

2. Finance 'improvements like nice paving, nice landscaping, and rubbish removed with more than just city and taxpayer money' (Respondent 10, developer & investor, Cologne). This could be done by 'heightening the accountability of real estate owners' in terms of 'social yield' or by 'motivating a much larger stakeholder group' to get involved (Ibid). Together, 'citizens groups', 'ecological groups', 'the architectural community', and other stakeholders can provide a stronger economic bedrock for the provision and, with that, experience of urban beauty (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid).

CONCLUSION

5.1 Key Takeaways

A treasure trove of ideas, the 'expert interviews' conducted for this Vitra-supported study brought greater clarity to how urban beauty can best be brought about. Here is a recap of the three key takeaways:

1. Urban beauty is best described as an experience of positive emotions. These emotions arise in people when city environments feel all of these things — exciting, dynamic, diverse, vibrant, interesting, inviting, welcoming, safe, caring, comfortable — and more.
2. Urban beauty is subjective in the sense that its experience hinges on the biographical factors (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) of a person and the situational context (e.g. weather, season, time of day) in which s/he interacts with a city.
3. Urban beauty is objective in the sense that its experience can flourish in conditions that are...

... vital (sustenant, safe, inclusive)

... sensible (structured, congruent, transparent, unfolding)

... accessible (compact, amenity/nature-rich, interactive)

... fitting (distinct, meaningful, adaptable)

... well-controlled (appropriable, responsible, certain).

City-building professionals need to mirror and magnify these conditions — vitality, sense, access, fit, control — in their work because they represent the cornerstones upon which a beautiful city rests. Each condition is interpretable, malleable, and transferrable as opposed to concrete, superficial, and over-generalizing. Thus, none of them stand in direct opposition to the nature of urban beauty, which is a ‘wicked problem’ that has no ‘true or false, right or wrong’ answer, only ‘good or bad’ solutions (Respondent 7, architect, Munich). Good solutions can emerge when city-building professionals use the ‘ideas bank’ generated here to influence the policy, strategies, and actions undertaken in cities. **Hopefully, this study enabled them to look afresh at the opportunities that urban beauty provides and inspired them to come up with their own ideas for beautiful city-making.**

5.2 Some final thoughts

No doubt, ‘the time is right to bring urban beauty on the agenda’ (Respondent 5, architect & urban planner, Hamburg) because COVID-19 has ‘endowed beautifulness with a whole new power’ (Respondent 1, architect, New York). Importantly, a renewed spotlight on urban beauty should not entail ‘judging something by the looks of it’ because focusing only on decorative surface quality might lead to ‘outrageously irrelevant projects’ that are ‘completely ignorant of the society in which they operate’, take ‘gentrification motors’ as an example (Respondent 3, futurist & urbanist, Berlin). Instead, urban beauty should be grasped as ‘a gift that you present to the world’ (Respondent 7, architect, Munich), one that ‘reflects our heritage’, ‘uplifts the soul’, and has ‘ripple effects’ far beyond the city (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid).

Notably, city-building professionals should ‘resist turning urban beauty into another term like liveability or sustainability’ because it is too broad and variable to be rationalized and formalized (Respondent 13, architect & researcher, Edinburgh & Singapore). The goal should neither be to benchmark urban beauty nor to ‘be prescriptive’ to architects and designers but rather to safeguard a ‘diversity of approaches’ (Respondent 9, curator & architectural academic, Madrid) and ‘keep the future open for debate’ (Respondent 3, futurist & urbanist, Berlin). Unlike other paradigms, urban beauty cannot be squeezed out of a tube like toothpaste to freshen cities up. This is precisely why beautiful city-making must remain nuanced and attentive to context.



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