Beauty: Lost and Found

Why is it that in this country success breeds misgiving? Why are design critics and journalists from *USAToday* to the *New York Times* given to wringing their hands over the design impact of icons like the Gehry's Guggenheim, the VWBeetle and the Imac on the object culture of the early 21st century? Case in point: Philip Nobel wrote a major critical piece that appeared in the *Sunday Times* this past November decrying what he calls the "modish redesigns—of toothbrushes or tennis shoes or kitchen utensils" that only serve to "glamorize design, solving problems of image first and problems of use—living—second." Nobel writes that "Utility not vanity should drive change…" and with classical modernist logic argues for a mode of design that proceeds from the inside out—this in a day when the inside and outside are often indistinguishable, as my colleague Ellen Lupton will prove in her exhibition *Skin: Surface and Structure in Contemporary Design* opening at Cooper-Hewitt next winter.

Why do Nobel and so many other critics I've spoken to over the past few months worry that design has become unanchored from its moral course? No doubt, the same folks feel vindicated by the current economic downturn—a just punishment for overindulgence in the softer side of design, the *unquantifiable* satisfaction that comes from the recognition of the sensual as an integral property of function?

I suspect it is a fear of beauty and its lack of strict accountability. For what made those icons I mentioned earlier famous, popular, and, yes, even sexy, was not their ostensible purpose, but that they met their purpose while affording enormous pleasure—often, but not always, a visual pleasure. Furthermore, the corollary reaction these products have inspired—the desirability of owning beauty—not possible with great works of art for most of us, but certainly possible with design—has accelerated the shopping impulse. And acquisition for the pleasure of acquisition is a privilege we in America still associate with aristocracy. The age-old conflict between capitalism and democracy, between the pursuit of happiness and justice for all, has resurfaced in the wake of what may be the greatest resurgence of design since the post war hay day of the Eames.

Buying beauty is the ultimate sin. We feel we shouldn't need to purchase pleasure. The fact that design has taken fetishistic qualities—in breeding new toothbrushes like rabbits—is decidedly noteworthy. But does it mean design has lost its bearings and embraced a vacuous formalism? Or simply that lesser lights than Frank Gehry and Jay Mays are trying to embrace a winning strategy?

Having just come from judging the ID Magazine Product and Equipment Awards I'm not at all convinced we've gone too far in the realm of style, one of beauty's pejorative aliases. Just getting the job done, meeting the need, or solving the problem strikes me as the work of engineers and builders, not designers and architects. What separates these practices in the main (and sometimes conjoins them in the rarest of unions) is the pursuit of beauty. Even the most abstract of practices—strategic design—strives for beauty, whether admissible or not—in the same way that a mathematician strives for an elegant solution.

The impulse to reassure our selves, to meet our needs with other than spiritual sustenance, is not the sole province of design—it happens equally with food, music, and dance. Murray Moss remarked to me recently that he thinks that the problem is shame—that admitting that we can fill (or attempt to fill) a sense of absence in our lives with things is somehow shameful. It is not understood to be part of the Judeo-Christian ethic that postpones pleasure in this world, in this life, which only demonstrates how large our ignorance is today about those philosophical traditions.

What I would like to do this morning is to try to frame the presentations that will follow with a kind of Cliff-notes review of canonical notions of beauty that takes into account just a few of those philosophical traditions--and ask: What is beauty? Why has it been discredited? Why is it being reexamined today? And, what does beauty afford the designer?

Throughout history, the beauty debate has tended to seesaw between two extreme poles of thought, leaving us to question to this day the extent to which beauty is objective, encoded in the object awaiting the gaze of the educated eye, or subjective—found only in the eyes of the beholder.

Designers might do well to designate Thomas Acquinas their patron saint, as he honors the physical and visual nature of beauty. Aquinas viewed the beautiful as something pleasing to apprehend, "that which pleases upon being seen" –defining it as a primarily optical experience. Indeed, like others before and after, he attempts to ascribe it identifiable characteristics: "integrity or "perfection," "proportion or harmony," and "brightness or clarity." Though he is less prescriptive and specific than earlier thinkers like Plato, who found the sphere and the serpentine line definitively and inherently beautiful, nonetheless, Aquinas maintains these properties are intrinsic and beauty is perceived to be within the object.

On the other side of the argument, more modern philosophers have tended to interpret beauty as the product of cultural conditioning or a reflection of human vanity. The 16th century French essayist Montaigne observed that Europeans, Asians, and Africans seemed to prize widely disparate physical features within distinct ethnic and racial groups. He produced a litany of stereotypical profiles to support his claim, observing, for example, that "there are nations that blacken their teeth with great care, and scorn to see white ones; elsewhere they stain them red." Writing in the 17th century, the Dutch philosopher Spinoza uncoupled beauty from truth (assumed to be a universal principle) by linking the perception of beauty to an individual's feeling of well-being. He asserted that because man "has persuaded himself that all things which exist are made for him…he must esteem that to be of surpassing worth by which he is most beneficially affected."

Later Darwin would similarly eschew universal notions of beauty, though he considered it a broadly shared condition of survival within different species. (Interestingly, evolutionary psychologists continue to test hypotheses of racially or genetically distinctions in beauty and have found more common appetites across diverse tribes and cultures than these great thinkers would have expected. I refer you to Nancy Etcoff's book *Survival of the Prettiest* for more on the subject and I look forward to hearing what light Bevil Conway will shed on the subject later today.)

In contrast, to the school of thought just briefly outlined, the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant offers a middle ground between the subjective and objective views of beauty in a compromise he called subjective universality. He described beauty as "the one and only disinterested and free delight, for with it no interest, whether of sense or reason, extorts approval." In the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgement," he says that when "we call the object beautiful we believe ourselves to be speaking with a *universal* voice, and lay claim to the concurrence of every one, whereas no private sensation would be decisive except for the observer alone and his liking." This is the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too brand of beauty that we still wrestle with today.

The implications, of course, of whether the cognition of beauty is broadly shared or so particular as to be meaningless, are vast, especially in our market-driven society. Shared or not, beauty took on a more pronounced political and socio-economic profile in the 19th and 20th centuries when beauty took a back seat. Freud, naturally, related beauty with sexual desire and the economist and social critic Torsten Veblen viewed it in light of more venal acquisitive desires.

Veblen's theory of "conspicuous waste" articulated in 1899, with its critique of the English Arts and Crafts Movement's return to hand-craftsmanship and stylistic historicism (specifically William Morris's Kelmscott Press) had to have been a forceful blow to beauty and resonates with contemporary rhetoric on the subject. Veblen admits that

> "…the honorific element [for our purposes beauty] and the element of brute efficiency are not held apart in the consumer's appreciation of commodities, the two together go to make up the unanalyzed aggregate serviceability of the goods."
> (What Tucker calls "beautility.")

However, he goes on to say that

> "….most objects alleged to be beautiful, and doing duty as such, show considerable ingenuity of design and are calculated to puzzle the beholder—to bewilder him with irrelevant suggestions and hints of the improbable—at the same time that they give evidence of an expenditure of labor in excess of what would give them their fullest efficiency for their ostensible economic end."

Indeed, he goes so far as to describe the cycle of shifting taste as triggered by "aesthetic nausea." (A far cry from contemporary Belgian designer Dries van Noten's characterization of "fashion as the state of grace we call beauty.") No doubt, Veblen's polemic, which was soon joined by the early modernists' rhetoric of strict functionalism, simultaneously damaged the notion of voluptuous beauty and promoted the limited notion of an ascetic beauty. In the twentieth century, one could argue that beauty took a vow of poverty.

Perhaps the most pithy analysis of the cause for beauty's slumber in recent history (and the case for its reawakening comes from Elaine Scarry, the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value in the English Department at Harvard. Her discussion brings us back to a first principle in any discussion of beauty: In western thought, beauty is considered as part of the transcendental trinity that includes truth and goodness. No wonder beauty is suspect, keeping company with such slippery values. But they are values nonetheless—disputed but not discarded.

As the title of her book *On Beauty and Being Just* suggests, Scarry believes that beauty mitigates our natural self-centeredness by making us more acutely alert to the world. She ascribes to the Platonic view that eros [beauty] should move us to caritas [charity], a position that I feel should be more carefully considered by designers and critics who confuse the quest for beauty with a weakness for frivolity.

I stress the word quest because it is truly a rare occurrence when we experience it. And at the risk of digressing, it might be useful share a description of the experience of beauty—I want to be clear at least about what I mean by beauty. The person who comes closest to articulating my understanding of beauty is the art critic Peter Schjeldalh. He describes it as follows:

> …an onset of beauty combines extremes of stimulation and relaxation. My mind is hyperalert. My body is at ease. Often I am aware of my shoulders coming down as unconscious muscular tension lets go. My mood soars. I have a conviction of goodness in all things. I feel everything is going to be all right. Later I am pleasantly a little tired all over, as after swimming."

For those of you who are "experience designers," take note.

Elaine Scarry, evidently concurs with the critic, as she also writes: "Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living."

Then why have we discredited this life force, this instrument of good feeling? In Scarry's analysis the demotion of beauty is linked to the rise of two modes of thought: the sublime and the political. She reminds us that at the end of the 18th century Kant further subdivided aesthetics between the sublime, which "moves" and the beautiful which "charms." If the sublime was a mountain, the beautiful was a meadow. The sublime was masculine and beauty feminine—need I say more.

On the other hand, the political argument against beauty has centered on arguments of discrimination. A case in point being the concept of eugenics, meaning "good in birth," promoted by Darwin's cousin Galton. This pseudoscience of beauty spawned a rash of "Perfect Baby" and "Fitter Family" contests at state fairs across America and fed destructive anti-semitic and anti-immigration sentiments in the 1920s. (Michael Kimmelman, New York Times 2/16/01)

Scarry observes that these two phenomena—the sublime and the political—attack beauty for completely opposite yet mutually reinforcing positions:

> "The sublime (an aesthetic of power) rejects beauty on the grounds that … not powerful enough. The political rejects beauty on the grounds that it is too powerful… we cannot free our eyes from it long enough to look at injustice." (page 85)

Her intention is to attempt to undo the damage done by these long unquestioned positions by reuniting the power of beauty with its potential for inspiring ethical fairness. She rejects the sublime as an artificial division of the world that is untenable and the accusations of unfairness on the grounds that beauty turns us away from ourselves heightening our sense of regard for other individuals and other things. And she draws evidence for her position from sources as diverse as Homer's Odessey and John Rawls' philosophy of justice.

Within Scarry's arguments for the value of beauty boils I found interesting parallels to the realm of design. She identifies three consequences of the pursuit of beauty, each of which leads to a socially beneficial and desirable result.

Her first point speaks to designers most strongly. Scarry claims that in seeking beauty we are frequently compelled to replicate it. "The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterward one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction…." In her section "Beauty prompts a copy of itself," Scarry discusses the momentum of beauty how it is shared on any number of levels from sonnets and which beget more sonnets to the popularity of museum postcards as a way of distributing the aesthetic experience. Against the backdrop of our overbreeding toothbrushes, I agree with her caution that it is a mistake to dismiss beauty because it promotes consumption and acquisitiveness since these are imperfect variations in an otherwise positive social practice of seeking beauty..

Her second argument is aimed at users, citizens and consumers of design (among whom we will also find designers). Here, Scarry argues that "beholders of beautiful things themselves become beautiful in their interior lives." (p. 88) According to that logic, we become full of sights, sounds, words, images and faces that register and remember beauty. She illustrates this point of remembrance with the tale of the near drowned Odysseus, coming upon the beautiful Nausicaa [Perhaps the inspiration for Veblen's theory of aesthetic nausea?]

I have never laid eyes on anyone like you,
neither man or woman…
I look at you and a sense of wonder takes me.

Wait,
once I saw the like in Delos--beside Apollo's
altar—
the young slip of a palm tree springing into
the light.
That vision! Just as I stood there gazing, rapt,
for hours….
so now I marvel at *you,* my lady rapt,
enthralled…

(Scarry, pages 21,22)

Beauty not only fills the mind, but it compels comparison. Just when Odysseus thinks he can admit no other sensation, he is compelled to remember another, without diminishing the first. In his case, beauty is life saving. Scarry reminds us that Augustine described beauty as a "plank amid the waves of the sea." As a design critic, I like the thought of the humble plank assuming the burden of beauty.

Her third point addresses the compact between the designer and the user that is imbedded in the beautiful object. She says, "Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness, or in the case of objects, the quasi-aliveness of our world and for entering into its protection." p. 89 (This would account for the phenomena of the Museum, the collector, the pride of we take in personalizing our homes, our bodies.) She goes further saying that "Because beauty repeatedly brings us face-to-face with our own powers to create, we know where and how to locate those powers when a situation of injustice calls on us to respond to… [what] John Rawls [calls]… 'the duty to justice.'" (p. 115) She uses the common desire for beauty in nature as a lever toward greater environmental responsibility to illustrate her point.

In each of her arguments, beauty inspires behavior: In the first case, inspiring replication, (what we might call the act of design); in the second case, affording personal growth and satisfaction (what we might call the experience of design); and in the last case, inspiring communal action (what we might call the social contract of design).

It is important to note that all three behaviors need not coexist simultaneously. For example, if we were to focus solely on the social implications of Scarry's ideal of beauty, with their implications for consensus, we might be left with a model which when applied to design actually foreclosed a dimension of beauty—difficult beauty or reconceived beauty—the beauty of a Daniel Libeskind building or a Droog chair. But she allows for these events in her discussion of the "radical decentering" that occurs in the face of beauty, the involuntary act of "ceding our ground to the thing that stands before us." (pp. 111,112) The cognition of beauty and the search for beauty are her main concerns, from them will flow social consequences of varying scale.

I would argue that in the training of designers we are dangerously close to neglecting, certainly diminishing, attention and sensitization to beauty. I am astonished at how few designers have any knowledge of the history of art—where beauty is unadulterated.

Perhaps because design as we know it is such a young profession, there is a still a lingering need for parental separation. But I think that is changing. The "end of isms," the impossibility of staying in one place ideologically and stylistically for more than five minutes, means that design has a richer field of resources from which to draw upon. Of course, on this score, I am prejudiced by my knowledge of the Cooper-Hewitt's collections which encompass artifacts from the Han dynasty to the present, made under all kinds of conditions and systems of object making, from handcraft to mass production. In those collections and elsewhere, there is an incredibly rich design DNA to be tapped if only you are willing to dig a little. You can trace the lineage of psychedelic posters through Art Nouveau textiles, which have their antecedents in sumptuously patterned silks, fittingly called "bizzares" from the early 18th century. Folding fans from the 1920s with schmaltzy paintings of animals resonate with John Galliano's fashion design. Twentieth-century aluminum office seating by Warren MacArthur echoes the bamboo lines in chairs made for Chinese export.

Of what relevance is this exercise to designers of websites, shopping malls, forklifts, headphones, sneakers, annual reports, office systems, and Palm Pilots? Why history? Why beauty? In constructing these genealogies, we are like Odysseus reexperiencing the beauty of nature in his awe of Nausicaa. Beauty begets beauty. Design is strengthened by a fully internalized understanding of the past, not just a rewarmed serving. I'm convinced that the reason we respond so strongly to certain environments, certain objects, has to do with the re-cognition of a precedent, a physical experience, an aesthetic muscle memory reawakened, if you will. The first time I stood in Borromini's Church of St. Ivo in Rome it hit me, like a ton of bricks, that Frank Gehry was playing with space to entertain and delight, just like the architects of the Baroque. It shared the same design DNA. Of course, the creation of environments is no longer the exclusive domain of architects. Designers from a variety of disciplines increasingly enjoy the privilege shaping the settings for the various tools and networks they produce. Experience design is its own discipline. To the extent that designers can imbue the situations they create with experiences that awe or surprise, that momentarily takes us outside of ourselves, they are working in the service of beauty and, as Scarry puts it, we all benefit.

And it is precisely because design is an enterprise of compromise in which beauty must be considerate as well as stunning, deferential as well as distinctive, that designers should understand its powers and lobby for its place. While we don't expect to experience beauty in design in the same abstracted way that we might in a painting by Raphael, we do look for hints that beauty was present at conception. It will be transformed just as every new combination of chromosomes yields a new combination of dominant and recessive traits, to continue the fashionable genome analogy of the day. The results will be richer, the range of associations stronger, and the catalyst to provoke more beauty in the world more active. Beauty breaks the mold, the [illegible]

For my own act of re-cognition I offer a still life by Giorgio Morandi and this amazing piece of Noritaki. The Morandi paintings in the flesh literally take my breath away. I can't say that my heart races in the same way with the sugar and creamer but nerve endings are activitated that take to the space of beauty that exists in the associations that

True beauty, rare beauty, [illegible]
design a way of creating the compromise
nature of product design in a market culture.

go back and forth between the two. That is what I hope for from knowing the nature of both art and design—they respectively leave the world and draw it back.

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