Beauty in Urban Design Governance

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By the 1990s, concepts of "good design" and "design quality" had come to replace older aesthetic criteria in judging architectural and urban designs. It is, then, somewhat startling that several recent policy documents claim that beauty is a necessary aspect of design quality. The European Union's New European Bauhaus and the UK's Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, while opposed in many ways, both suppose that the public demand and deserve beauty in the built environment.[1] Contemporary urban design governance goes beyond the statutory powers of state authorities to use "soft power" and "informal tools" to engage communities – and one such tool is beauty.

These documents largely concern more mensurable aspects of quality to do with social and environmental sustainability. For example, the New European Bauhaus, which is one of nine programs of the European Green Deal, expresses this with a Venn diagram, where coloured blobs of "Sustainable" and "Together" overlap with "Beauty" (Figure 1). Beauty is offered as something of a reward or consolation for necessary and often unpopular changes to housing density and scale, the increased cost of efficient building envelopes, and changes to culturally significant landscapes and townscapes. Sustainability and togetherness can be argued for as necessary values for the whole of a nation or community, which might come at a cost to some members. However, beauty assumes an individual aesthetic pleasure for all, one experienced in common, which brings us together.

Beauty has various and confusing definitions across the documents. It is claimed that judgments of beauty can be shown to be true, sometimes by neuro-aesthetic studies of perception, and frequently by surveys. Places that are beautiful are so because of the place attachment of a community, but somehow this attachment to a place is universally pleasing. The experience of beauty cannot be instructed, it is popular and democratic, and thus none of the policies open the questions of majoritarian taste limiting aesthetic freedom, or what to make of expertise in aesthetic judgment that is claimed by the design professions. Curiously, beauty is used in conjunction with both conservative and progressive political agendas. The now disbanded Building Better Building Beautiful Commission championed traditional building forms against the desecration of England by Modernism, while the Europeans are proud of the Bauhaus heritage. Beauty in England is a culture wars tactic, while in Europe it is strategy for capturing and disarming nativist tendencies in the member states.

In this paper we argue that some of the peculiarities of beauty and soft power in design governance can be understood using concepts in the late work of Michel Foucault.[2] He claimed that neo-liberal governance draws on marshalling two kinds of power, both with long histories. In the urban design field, these are the sovereign power of states and territories to make laws and regulations as to land use and building form, and, what the Urban Maestro program called soft power. Foucault introduces the terms "police" and "the pastorate" to explain the kind of power that is directed at individual lives with a collective effect. The 17th and 18th century meaning of "police" was of a kind of power needed at a municipal level to order market towns, and was distinct from the sovereign's power over the territory and the population as a whole. The detailed management of trades, weights and measures, sumptuary regulations, morals and the arts, and safety and security, included the splendour of public
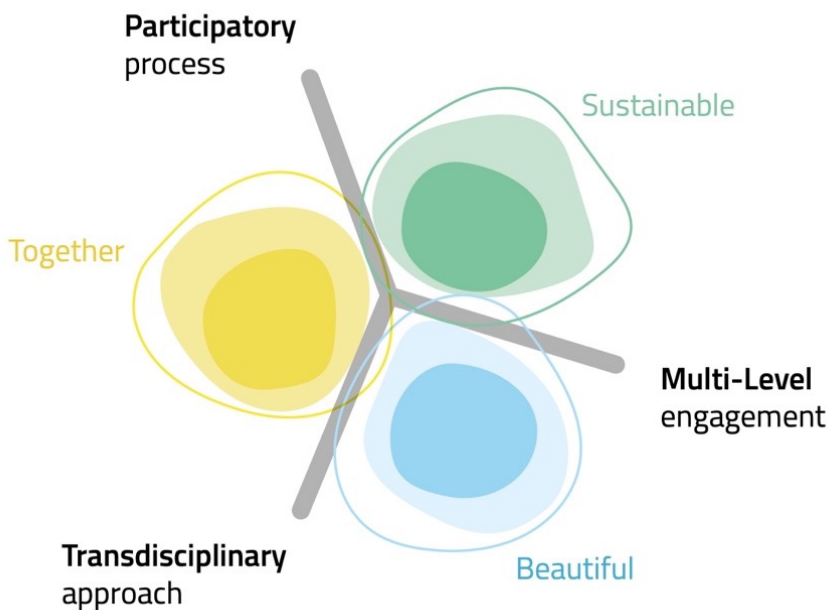
Figure 1:
European Commission. "New European Bauhaus Compass V4," 2022. (https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/get-involved/use-compass_en.)

buildings and squares. Foucault sees police as fundamentally productive. It is what makes the town a place of opportunity for each and an amenity for all. Beauty, it seems, lies at the early modern origins of urban governance and distinguishes it from statutory powers.

The pastorate is an ancient model of leadership distinct from sovereignty, wherein the shepherd leads the flock through the care for each of its members. Foucault traces this distinction through the rise of Christianity alongside the formation of the nation states and into the 20th-century concept of a welfare state. The idea of the professions – particularly the medical professions – having autonomy from the state and responsibilities for each individual in their care can tell us something about the role of design professionals in these proposals for soft power. The policy documents discussed here rely on documenting exemplary projects where an architect has shepherded communities and stakeholders to a beautiful balance of sustainability and togetherness. But the professions themselves, and the idea of autonomous expertise in matters including beauty, is nowhere to be found. We conclude with considering what soft

power and the model of the architect as shepherd mean for the design professions and the wider government of architectural expertise.

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Conference of Ministers of Culture, "Davos Declaration 2018: Towards a High-Quality Baukultur for Europe," (Switzerland: Office Fédéral de la Culture, Section Patrimoine culturel et monuments historiques, 2018); European Commission, "New European Bauhaus Compass V4," 2022: https://new-european-bauhaus.europa. eu/get-involved/use-compass_en.; Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, "Living with Beauty: Promoting Health, Well-Being and Sustainable Growth. The Report of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission," (Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, January 2020).

2.
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Michel Foucault, "Omnes Et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason,'" in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. S. McMurrin (1981); Michael Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collége De France* 1977–1978 (New York: Picador, 2007).