

**THE URBAN AESTHETIC IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT:** To achieve a level of urban aesthetic involves the assemblage in urban space of structures that manifest graceful morphological coherence. To judge by the varied examples that can be listed as models of the urban aesthetic, it is essential to recognize the egos of the decision-makers, the time context, and levels of culture and technology, materials used and the social costs necessary to make these assemblages possible. Even if no financial worth can be identified for specific ensembles, awareness for this variable has to be acknowledged.

**INTRODUCTION**

A study of the urban aesthetic could appear as not immediately geographic in method or content. A study of the urban world from the aesthetic perspective would suggest a more compelling link to the world of art and architecture, more so than to geography. The aesthetic refers to the beautiful, its creation and its appreciation. Upon first thought, the aesthetic could be viewed as aspatial. In actuality, it is given spatiality as a result of the assemblage of structures that form an interrelated whole, the city. Spatial interaction of form and function create "the city's" needed internal cohesion and viability. An analysis of the beautiful in the urban landscape is more than desirable, it is an essential component of the urban realm and is at all times circumscribed by the prevailing contemporary reality. Art in the urban context as such is the outgrowth of the quest for visual enhancement of the built urban environment, individual as well as social space. As to what constitutes art, its definition has to be placed in the context of culture and time. Art, its characteristics, parameters, and its varied forms are molded and defined by practitioners, artists form a range of genres. Art and architecture as such have an explicit affinity, and it is in great part the architect's function to blend art and space in a way that renders selected building complexes "timeless" (such as Venice's San Marco). To achieve such a level of the urban aesthetic, it is essential that the urban space be endowed with an assemblage of structures that includes graceful "morphological coherence." To further understanding of the city building process, attention needs also be directed to the multiplicity of programs that can be linked to human egos, awareness of relationships and background of personages involved in shaping individual structures and physical forms, that as collectives, are termed cities. In much of pre-1790 Europe, this can be termed building from the "top down."

In the United States, this process, building from the "top down," had very little and limited opportunity to take hold. Instead, most of urban America (United States) has been built from the "bottom up." The European city-building process was orchestrated by church, nobility, and city states. In the United States, especially after 1790, urban centers were the creations and creatures of the market forces instead of a select few, an elite. The urban aesthetic emerges out of combining diverse physical and economic resources with human talents.

This study has selected aims among which the comparative perspective of the urban

aesthetic and its general spatial context occupy a prominent part. There are striking spatial attributes of the subject matter that invite comparative evaluations. How does autocratic city planning compare with city planning as practiced in a democratic context? What considerations receives the urban aesthetic in either political setting? What is the nexus between the "quality of life" and the urban aesthetic? There exists the need to trace the metamorphosis of the urban aesthetic through time to capture the consequences of technological and material changes on the urban fabric. Where and when possible, the analysis should include the interior aesthetic of built-space, notably the massive service buildings of government, public centers (civic centers), educational facilities, hotels, air terminals, rail stations, and so on. The urban aesthetic confers local identity upon urban spatial patterns, prominent buildings given landmark designations, the sum of which comprises the city or metropolis. Just as urban parks serve to enhance urban liveability, so the urban aesthetic has to be considered part of the urban totality, the urban milieu; hence it is an integral part of urban analysis.

**A PANORAMIC OVERVIEW OF THE URBAN AESTHETIC**

The urban aesthetic is a subjective consideration beyond quantification. In the context of science and quantitative analysis, the aesthetic of the urban milieu might appear to be a subjective method to assess the urban world. This seemingly non-quantitative vector has inherent quantitative attributes, namely the power to hold residents and attract tourists. In general, cities owe their origin to particular functions in a specific time context. Over time these attributes change in scope and magnitude which provoke socioeconomic changes fostering adaptive strategies insuring the economic, political, and cultural continuity of the city. Sizable infrastructure investments including aesthetic features provide incentives to carry an urban place through tense economic periods, thereby insuring its continuity. Many cities that have outlived their original economic functions turn into centers of culture and tourism (Venice, Siena, Florence, Goslar, Rothenburg/o.d.t., Ulm) thereby acquiring quantitative characteristics quite unplanned for in their architectural origin. This subjective element then, often created under the aegis of dominant personages or institutions, takes on unplanned measurable characteristics in the urban setting. Bamberg and Salzburg are examples of urban places of variable aesthetic merit that survived and out-lived successfully their original economic functions and turned into major culture centers and tourist poles. In the North American context, urban centers evolved with less constraints and more speed, with emphasis upon the practical and at most a passive concern for the aesthetic characteristics of the emerging urban landscape. Individualism and frontier democracy had different priorities than church princes and royal houses, or such as the merchant burgers of Brugge. Hence, the antecedent conditions are notably different and so are the evolving urban forms that mirror the inhabitants' activities, including local civics and culture.

Pioneers and recent immigrants were the driving force in the creation of the American city, not princes of the church or established nobility. Work, instead of wealth, was the motor that promoted the formation, spread, and expansion of the American urban system. There existed not even an urban burgerclass involved in establishing a conspicuous morphological and aesthetic presence in the evolving urban system as was the case in Lubeck, Bremen, Amsterdam, or Brugge, e.g. Simplicity and functionality dominated in the creation of the American urban building stock; not visual enhancement. This frame of reference, mind, helps to understand why radical urban transformation meets with widespread acceptance throughout much of the United States even at present. The building mix that came into existence was and remains conspicuous for its morphological simplicity and general aesthetic sterility. Population pressure stemming from rapid numerical increases and real estate speculation hastened

construction of housing stock without adequate concern for the long-term appearance of the urban fabric. The social dynamics of the emerging American city left really no room for the aesthetic as the key preoccupation focused on the functional purpose of the urban place and system. This stands in sharp contrast to the European practices of urban expansion, where street facades of city blocs adhered to height uniformity and structural cohesion, providing a sense of visual continuity and psychological comfort. Furthermore, the American milieu was imbued with a kind of frontier democracy in contrast to the authoritarian decision-making structure common in the European urban setting. Lack of qualified craftsmen to build an elaborate urban fabric, including buildings of landmark quality, and/or lack of economic support for such enterprise in the new communities led to the undistinguished results observed (see Huxtable, 1964, 38, 56). The urban pattern that emerged was molded in part in colonial Williamsburg and in time included adaptations from the British urban scene. In the American N.E. the English rowhouse became a standard fixture extending from Baltimore to Trenton. In general, the rowhouse and the urban aesthetic are antithetical. Baltimore and Philadelphia rowhouses can be dubbed red angular containers with doors and windows. Whether the search extends for models into the Society Hill section of Philadelphia or Elspeth Alley, or to Trenton, their functionality eclipsed aesthetic considerations. For the short term, a pressing need had been met, but a vision for an urban future had been missed for immediate results. This frame of mind and point of reference have been instrumental in shaping most of urban America since Jamestown-Williamsburg.

The European experience and practice of building cities evolved over time and under the patronage of politically powerful decision-makers. Expansion of trade links and resource processing infused capital into numerous European urban centers which translated into controlled urban growth. Market systems formed and trade groups identified themselves with specific buildings in select city quarters that included visual elegance pointing to the influence of financial success. In Bremen, Lubeck, Amsterdam, Brugge, Venice, Genoa and Florence, the merchant guilds became identified with specific buildings in particular sections of these cities. These in turn became cohesive assemblages that served as examples for further urban growth. Concurrently, more and more commercial and socio-cultural activities centered on and in proximity to these economic cores, re-enforcing their dominance, and not least, their influence over the cities as wholes. In Northwestern Europe, the city hall area, often shared by a cathedral or dome, became the functional core of urban life. Economic concentration was accompanied by aesthetic enhancement and focalization. Similar patterns exist in Bologna and Milan, Vienna and Dresden. In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the one-time dominance of church and royalty-nobility expressed in monumental architecture, gradually gave way to the emerging merchant-industrial classes that established their identity with architectural creations that met their respective needs as well as their notion of the contemporary urban aesthetic. Royal palaces interiorized many of the built refinements, often behind walls, while the merchants and industrialists for their part placed them at the urban core for the public to recognize.

#### DOES THE URBAN AESTHETIC HAVE A ROLE IN THE U.S. CITY?

In the United States city planning gained legal and professional status in 1916, but its impact upon the American urban aesthetic has yet to flourish. Land uses were sanitized and compatibilized. In spite of the "city beautiful" movement, standards set were minimal. Architects and urban planners could build urban models to their hearts content, while the interested decision-makers financed an urban landscape that bore scant resemblance to what

planners and architects had originally envisioned. For a short time in the late 1920s and 1930s, there emerged the Art Deco form, epitomized by the Chrysler Building (New York City), but failing to achieve critical mass. Its aesthetic merits could be considered at length provided it had gained wide acceptance. Layouts and forms in central cities in the twenties and thirties were in large measure barren of visual appeal. Returns on real estate investments, the faster the better, left little if any room for quality, the aesthetic, or the future in the urban mosaic.

The pressure for quantity continued unabated after WWII, when urban renewal in U.S. central cities culminated in dismal public housing projects and sterile suburban housing sprawl oozed over the one-time rural lands surrounding the larger cities. In the North East of the U.S., Levittown can be characterized as a trend setting development (New York Times, 17 October 1991, C). In the perspective of time, the question arises: is this an example of urban "blight" in the Lewis, Lowenthal sense (Visual, 1973) or is this a "landmark" as reported (ibid.)? If the latter should be the consensus, it would be wise to redefine "aesthetic." Mr. Zino's comments provide context for the aims of this study:

"the closest thing I've seen to a virgin house was last Friday," Mr. Zino said. "It was a little Cape. She's still got the original Tracy metal cabinets. The only thing she's done is put a little patio out back. But that's rare." (ibid.)

The canonization of the banal provides insight into the aesthetic poverty of the more recently created U.S. urban fabric. When a Levittown is viewed from the air, it looks very much like an oil palm or a rubber tree plantation, but nothing like an urban place. And then there is Edison, N.J. Edison is a place of 88,600 persons spread over 32m<sup>2</sup> (82.9 km<sup>2</sup>),

"Edison's explosive growth has made it a model of suburban sprawl, without a downtown or much in the way of true neighborhoods. Thousands of townhouses and condominium apartments in large developments sprang up in the township during the 1980s. . . The township does not have a downtown, but it is still a retail and business destination with suburban office development and shopping centers spread along Routes 1 and 27 and in the sprawling Raritan Center. . ." ("No Downtown," New York Times, 9 October 1990, 1-3).

This is a place without focus, an automobile-people dormitory suburb. Columbia, Maryland, a product of the Rouse enterprise, is another of these pseudo-suburban creations that are testimonials to the American anti-urban disposition. Barren of any aesthetic characteristics, these agglomerations also turn out to be anti-cultural enclaves that foster societal fragmentation. These village-like places are not built with a view to crystallize into a future structured city, but these are rather the creatures of investors whose sole objective is immediate substantial capital gains without long-term civic context.

In the United States, urban planning with the aid of zoning sanitized land uses, but failed to foster the urban aesthetic. Urban planners lacked the political support to be creative and visionary because their political chiefs had a capital-making agenda, not landmark quality urban ensembles. The creation of landmark quality neighborhoods did not fit the real estate developers' financial objectives. Church and "nobility" had a different perception of built-symbolism from urban developers; the former built institutions, they built for time, they created institutions--landmark quality for generations to use and admire. The criterion to mold urban

form in the U.S. was based in part on ease of access and prompt return on investments. The urban spatial order created in the post-WWII era was shaped to foster independent movement and private transport, not pedestrian flows funneled towards a cultural pole (these are rare in suburbia) or a commercial core. The urban aesthetic depends upon morphological unity, not isolated statements in the urban landscape of patron and architect.

The dearth of an urban aesthetic in the U.S. urban setting cannot be attributed solely to select interest groups that are exclusively active in the real estate sector, but in more recent times, corporate America too has lost sight of its place in the urban context. Without a national urban proctor who could command select norms for urban form, the stage was set for expediency over long-term "urbanity." It is well to remember that the individuality of the states is artfully protected by the 10th Amendment in the Bill of Rights:

"The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

Without a national urban planning agenda or program, city building responsibilities and associated objectives were vested in local authorities. Such elected or appointed officials and bureaucracies received and reviewed building plans and projects, too many of which answered immediate goals without relevant concerns for long-term needs of the urban place(s). Aside from these conditions, the car and the highway as symbiotic vectors hastened the process of urban decay as pressures mounted to find parking spaces wherever these would be as demand-driven. Large corporations, which in the past had replaced the burgerclass of good local citizens, turned indifferent to the places where they got their start, including substantial tax abatements. Numerous very large firms relocated their headquarters, weakening an already fragile urban fabric. It is well to point out that a company logo exceeds in significance a firm's identification with its headquarters building. IBM's logo is known throughout, so is Ford's, but their decision-making seats seem to be lacking symbolic value. Firms may disappear, churches and palaces appear ageless. In the U.S., the urban aesthetic is under siege then from different sectors that are actively shaping urban morphology for the long term.

Builders have to conform to fixed norms when building as predetermined in local building codes. These codes include nothing of substance relating to the urban aesthetic, but address structure and safety. Building codes and zoning ordinances often complement each other. Builders respond to these constraints with pronounced reluctance. In New York City, evasive practices even to the above are commonplace while the urban aesthetic atrophies. It is not perceived as a property value enhancement instrument. Two particularly egregious recent examples from New York City:

1. One high rise building on Broadway in the nineties exceeded its height limitations by 12 floors. This is a conspicuous zoning ordinance violation as well as a building permit infraction. The case went to court.
2. A high rise on 56th Street, between 5th and 6th Avenues, overbuilt by some 15 feet to crown the structure. Aside from giving visual offense, the crown includes metal blades that cause high pitched sound when the wind speed reaches and exceeds a certain rate. This condition extends over a large area and causes high pitched noise pollution that interferes with the

residential tranquility of a very large number of neighboring dwellers. This code transgression also landed in court.

Both of these examples illustrate how builders approach urban ordinances, as well as how they perceive the morphological fabric into which they place their investments. Spatial order and morphological coherence fall beyond their ken. The urban aesthetic under these circumstances is a homeless orphan.

In the past, large firms were identified with particular urban plans. Cincinnati, Ohio, is known as Proctor & Gamble town; Rochester, New York, is synonymous with Kodak; Pontiac, Michigan, as the car producing city; Atlanta, Georgia, is the headquarters city for Coca Cola; and Seattle, Washington, is identified with the Boeing Company. General Motors has its main offices in Detroit and its metropolitan region. In America, these firms have contributed little to the aesthetic enhancement of their headquarters cities. Since WWII, many large firms have abandoned the central city to relocate into bucolic or campus-like settings. The one-time shaky urban aesthetic of central cities was subjected to severe shock and instead of participating in the economic and population expansion of the nation, contracted in economic functions and tax base. This hastened the decay and abandonment of the central city and the formation of shopping center, malls, and highway strip retailing. The retrogression in public transit systems was paralleled with a significant expansion of highways that increased the social and cultural distances for the urban-suburban populace of the nation. In the recent past, Mobil Oil left New York City for Virginia; J. C. Penney resettled into a Dallas suburb; Union Carbide relocated to Danbury, CT; Mannville moved into the pastoral setting near Denver, Colorado; and American Airlines changed its address to Dallas from New York, to cite a few examples of headquarters shifts. Another approach to large city desertion is leasing the headquarters building. AT&T just arranged with Sony to lease its 37 floor building at 56th and Madison, New York City, with option to buy. A Japanese real estate organization took a 49% share in Rockefeller Center, New York. The Catholic Church never put the cathedral in Pisa or Venice on the block, nor did the Swedish crown make Drottningholm an available real estate commodity to date. Corporate America thus plays a significant part in shaping the spatial order of the urban systems of the country. In the process, the urban aesthetic at best withers and more likely the little that may have existed gives way to something like the FBI headquarters building in Washington, D.C., or the Carnegie Tower next to Carnegie Hall, New York City. In New York City, one real estate developer hired front-end loaders to wreck the facades of several landmark buildings on 44th Street between 7th and 6th Avenues, in order to secure building permits. This master builder ended in court, but the landmark buildings are lost. Whither the U.S. urban culture?

The ramifications of these changes leave significant imprints upon the places affected. Before discussing these, this absence of place loyalty ties directly into the existing and changing urban fabric and its aesthetic personality. This purely financial involvement with the momentary seat of headquarters helps to identify one of the root causes why large corporations build themselves structures that are functional and at best include some token aesthetic features. The Holiday Inn chain may be good for a night's rest, but that is about all one can say for its general corporate architecture in the U.S.A. In Brugge, the same firm could not repeat the American pattern, there it conforms to local norms. And that tells a great deal about the difference between the European city and its U.S.A. counterpart. Corporate America expects loyalty from its staff, but owes hardly any loyalty to the community where it resides for the moment.

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Brand loyalty, yes, community involvement in gesture only, not substance--such as architecture of quality and grace. Headquarters and regional office location is often decided by chief executive officers' or local managers' proximity to home and country club; not proximity to other business contacts or central city location. The urban landscape in the U.S.A. is a product of this asocial approach that large corporations follow, and the results are amorphous places. The Galleria in Houston comes to mind: is it designed to serve people or to store cars? And how to explain downtown Atlanta, GA, strangled by the interstate system? The emphasis in this analysis is on the aesthetic, but the reader may want to reflect on the total environmental consequences that will inexorably follow the corporate practices briefly discussed.

THE URBAN AESTHETIC IN WIDER CONTEXT

While the topic under review requires a larger canvas than a brief presentation at a conference, several topics call for further analysis. The nexus between the "quality of life" and the "urban aesthetic" is one. Another is recognition of the consequences of technological and material changes in the urban fabric. Both topics are the product of the dynamic relationships among social institutions and adaptive research and engineering changes. It is incongruous to refer to the "quality of life" and neglect the urban aesthetic when speaking at length about the former. The very concept "quality of life" is so large, potentially so inclusive, that in the context of this study it is limited to the urban habitat, its arrangement, its appearance, and liveability.

Here reference is limited to public housing. The examples in question are taken from New York and Newark in the United States, and from Vienna, Austria. In New York City, public housing has grown in magnitude but without cultivating the aesthetic on a universal scale. An exception in intent are the Taino Towers at 3rd Avenue and 122nd Street, Manhattan. These are four 36-floor structures with variable interior apartment sizes. Concrete forms, these towers project an urbane 20th Century image. Large windows and balconies reflect a liveability that most other public housing lacks. This complex stands in such conspicuous contrast to its neighbors, over which it towers, that its aesthetic merits are negated by the surrounding urban fabric. In Newark, the skyscraper public housing is largely a collection of vacated 18 and 20 floor filing cabinets awaiting demolition. Nothing, but nothing, was done for the eye or the quality of life. In contrast, the Karl Marx Houses in Heiligenstadt (Vienna), built to human scale, 8 floors, enclose park and recreation area, to give this 1600 apartment complex aesthetic presence. This complex was built 1919-1934 during the Bauhaus era. Far more attractive are the George Washington Houses (Altmannsdorf) (1927-1930) with their 1085 apartments. Here only 25% of the area was used for the structures which are walk-ups (5 floors) and gabled-like private houses. The urban aesthetic then is not confined to the burger or princely decision-makers, but Austrian government planners included it in the building design of these projects. Why this aspect has been generally neglected or overlooked in the U.S. raises difficult questions (these are beyond the scope of this study).

In some way the urban metamorphosis stemming from technological and material changes presents numerous problems. Foremost is the reliance upon more uniform building materials, resulting in greater similarity in the morphology of the massive high rises. Increased use of glass, aluminum, and steel which fostered greater uniformity in skylines around the world as 30 to 50 floor structures have become commonplace. Technology and its advances make potentially for greater diversity in building styles, but economic considerations press in the opposite direction. Hence, the urban fabric and its aesthetic can anticipate greater visual uniformity, notably less variation, and sharply reduced visual dissimilarity. In the past, building

from the "top down" resulted in large building ensembles designed to project the image of a powerful individual who treated this more as a form of monumental immortality. Much of this monumental architecture in different parts of the world presents a splendid opportunity to compare the autocratic approach to city-building with that practiced in democratic societies. Technological and material changes extend the horizons for the aesthetic attributes to be made part of the urban morphology. However, the increased participation of decision-makers and the general public, especially in the U.S., has given amortization sensitivity more weight than continuity of a city's urban morphology. Philosophy and posterity are one thing, investment and taxation muster a very different agenda. In the U.S., the urban aesthetic can be deemed the orphan of tax incentives.

THE URBAN AESTHETIC: SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS

The urban aesthetic is accorded different levels of analysis in different cultures. History and culture affect the course in which the aesthetic is included in the evolving urban morphology. In the comparative context, the resulting differences in priorities of autocratic regimes (church and/or nobility) with frontier mentality (democratic-new world regimes) driven economies is bound to reflect notable contrasts. Time and need are causes that shape the level of the aesthetic to become part of the emerging urban fabric. Early European cities tended to be centers of authority--administrative, ecclesiastical--and those in power used the aesthetic to project an image of self-enhancement to manifest superiority. New World developments were governed by need and speed. Pragmatism and capitalism relegated the aesthetic to a low level priority in the frontier city. Furthermore, the absence of demanding building codes allowed edification unconcerned with long-term outcomes for the urban system. Building from the "top down" was a drawn out process, building from the "bottom up" was swift and serviceable within a short time. In Europe, the "burger," the merchant entrepreneurs, paid for their style of building stock exemplified in Brugge, Brussels, Amsterdam, and Lubeck, to cite some examples.

In Europe, the urban aesthetic evolved over time. Ecclesiastic systems and varied royal-aristocratic orders enhanced their urban centers with creative building styles and often suitable adornments. The sum of these effects had a cumulative result. Cities such as Vienna and Prague can be cited as examples. Vienna is a city for people, as is Prague. Streets and avenues are not straight line, but bend to offer the eye varied perspectives while individual buildings gain improved exposure and present individual style to advantage. Buildings, facades are kept proportional. Replacements can be modern in style and of different building materials, but these conform to fixed height as is the case in Washington, D.C. In most U.S. urban places, the architectural styles tend to be mongrolized without civic concern for the urban personality or morphological cohesion. East Market Street, Philadelphia or Market Street, San Francisco display generations of buildings without textural unity fundamental to an effective urban aesthetic. These conditions predate the rising influence of the automobile.

Cars and shopping malls have further eroded prospects for the urban aesthetic in the United States since the 1950s. Suburban sprawl by sub-division developments has created an unurban system devoid of aesthetic features. The absence of sidewalks in many of the post-WWII suburban tracts hastened the de-pedestrianization and people were isolated from casual walking and leisurely observation of the pseudo-urban setting. Shopping malls were built with cars in mind, not people, hence ample parking space was created to attract and serve the rapidly expanding suburban populations. The malls, varying in size with surrounding service areas, became unclassic in composition and near simple stylistic uniformity. American

urbanization since WWII has been heavily car-driven, rather than people oriented. Shallowness in style and poverty of vision can be more fully appreciated from the air than on the ground. Los Angeles is "the" example.

Cities are not attractive because they are large sprawling places, but because they turn into poles of culture, administration, and production. To assume that large cities, especially American cities, are alluring, can be termed at variance with reality. Unless and until the central city retakes its commanding position, the U.S. urban economies will be suburban rather than center-city directed. The abundance of land for urban land uses and the modest land cost ratios contribute to the conditions discussed. An irony of history is that the first skyscraper did not rise in land-scarce European cities, but in Chicago at the edge of the vast prairies. What made space so precious in 1890 Chicago? The skyscraper served as a means to concentrate commercial space. In 1991 at the Galleria, Houston, Texas, the skyscraper has become the pole in the parking lot. Until Americans decide that the urban aesthetic forms an integral part of the city, it will continue to vegetate at a minimal level. American cities will continue to be unattractive, re-enforcing American anti-urban bias (White and White, 1962). The urban aesthetic is an instrument of city identification (Florence), part of the urban milieu, it is an indispensable element in the urban dynamics.

#### NOTE

No photos form part of the text. The author's collection of the requisite urban scenes are all in Kodachrome, ill-suited for transfer into black & white.

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