

AESTHETICS AND BEAUTIFUL LIFESTYLE
Redefining the concept of aesthetics in the Built Environment

Norwina Mohd Nawawi,
Department of Architecture, Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design,
International Islamic University Malaysia, Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur,
MALAYSIA
Email: norwina19@gmail.com

Abstract

The question of aesthetic is an age long enigma in many societies with various conceptions and perceptions through philosophers of yore till the present day. Beauty, as part of aesthetics, carries along its intonation in more than just physical expressions but to experiencing life itself in the manner manifested by the Creator for mankind surpassing time. For built environment, the enigma of aesthetics can be expressed in many ways to include the integration of nature with man's handiwork to the land itself in intrigue balance; the shaping of human's life with the planning of friendly neighbourhood and efficient cities for sustainability; and the fiddling of spatial concerns with a purpose to ease Man's pursuit in submission to the Almighty. We are created in many shades, shapes, colour, culture and other diversities to provide constant enrichment to life's innovation in positive way. The perception of aesthetics into beautiful lifestyle conjures images of pure joy and exuberance in many aspects of mankind and the environment. The notion of beautiful living must be based on matter that provide joyfulness and sense of fulfilment here and the hereafter and not on trends and fleeting moments of desire. The presentation thus is not conclusive in determining the concept of aesthetic and beautiful lifestyle but merely to address the questions and opens more enquiry of its deliverance in architecture, landscape architecture, planning and other aspects of the built environment.

Keywords: aesthetics, beautiful, lifestyle, perception, built environment

INTRODUCTION

"God is Beautiful and He loves beauty," Hadith

*"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness.." John Keats (1884).*

Everyone has and had many moments of their lives experiencing the aesthetic feeling of being at ease, fulfilled, happy, with high self esteem and ever thankful for the providence that Allah had given from his endless bounty. Simplicity to sophistication, poor and riches, each has their own fair share of experience. From babies to the elderly, the concept, perception, expectation of these aesthetic feelings and expressions which we unassumingly exchange with beauty, changes as we mature through time, place and different cultural setting. The sensation from the visual experience, the ability to feel or touch, ability to taste and smell, ability to hear, talk and tell as well as these cognitive feelings stems from the inner self which we called intuition has shape our senses on what is naturally right and wrong. Man was naturally guided

a principle called value. In nature Man found wealth of information and beauty beyond description.

Much was discussed by bygone philosophers such as Plato, Socrates and Aristotle of the ancient Greece to the modern version Emanuel Kant and the likes on the concepts of aesthetic and beauty, most had gone in great length through process of reasoning what makes the object, product or circumstances of aesthetic value. Most theories expand on Man itself and how one desires, experienced and perceived. The worldview, being secular settled on Man and the Environment and forgotten the Creator that had made it all possible.

This presentation is not about answers on ‘what is aesthetic’ and ‘what is beautiful lifestyle’ from both the western and Islamic worldview. It is merely opening up a Pandora box with questions on what basis aesthetic judgement were made and what could it mean by beautiful lifestyle in our era and environment.

We will try to dwell upon the definitions of renowned philosophers in brief and savour the sweetness of truth from both perspectives-secular and Islamic, what aesthetic, beauty and lifestyle meant in our built environment. We will peep upon the past history of great beauty which acclaim as wonders of the world to simple day to day beauty of our home and country. We will seek refuge to heal the ailments of our time of whatever environment we have and hope, with awareness, passion and consciences responsibility, the true beauty will again surface to be enjoyed for the future generation.

DEFINITION AND SEMANTICS

There are many definitions, point of views and philosophical construct about aesthetic and beauty as well as those considered beautiful lifestyle. Below are selected definitions that self explained its meaning for application and practice.

Aesthetics and its Judgement

Aesthetics as defined by WikiAnswers.com (retrieved 230309), is a branch of philosophy, a species of value theory or axiology, which is the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste. Aesthetics is closely associated with the philosophy of art.

Encyclopaedia wikipedia.org (retrieved 170309) states that “Aesthetics or aesthetics (also spelled æsthetics), more broadly, scholars in the field, define aesthetics as *"critical reflection on art, culture and nature."*^{[2][3]} Aesthetics studies new ways of seeing and of perceiving the world.^[5]”

“Aesthetics is the study of beauty and taste, whether in the form of the comic, the tragic, or the sublime. The word derives from the Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning of sense perception.

Aesthetics and Art: Aesthetics is a concept not easily broken down into simpler ideas, making it difficult to explain. When we speak of something that creates an aesthetic experience, we

are usually talking about some form of art; yet the mere fact that we are discussing a work of art does not guarantee that we are also discussing aesthetics — the two are not equivalent. Not all works of art necessarily create an aesthetic experience.

Aesthetic judgments usually go beyond sensory discrimination. Judgments of beauty are sensory, emotional and intellectual all at once. Viewer interpretations of beauty possess two concepts of value: aesthetics and taste. Aesthetics is the philosophical notion of beauty. Taste is a result of education and awareness of elite cultural values; therefore taste can be learned. Taste varies according to class, cultural background, and education.” (Atheism.about.com (retrieved 230309)

Emanuel Kant states in one of his chapter "Analytic of the Beautiful" of the *Critique of Judgment* (*Encyclopaedia Wikipedia retrieved 240309*) as:”...beauty is not a property of an artwork or natural phenomenon, but is instead a consciousness of the pleasure which attends the 'free play' of the imagination and the understanding. Even though it appears that we are using reason to decide that which is beautiful, the judgment is not a cognitive judgment, ^[58] "and is consequently not logical, but aesthetical" (§ 1). A pure judgement of taste is in fact subjective insofar as it refers to the emotional response of the subject and is based upon nothing but esteem for an object itself: it is a *disinterested* pleasure, and we feel that pure judgements of taste, i.e. judgements of beauty, lay claim to universal validity (§§20–22). It is important to note that this universal validity is not derived from a determinate concept of beauty but from *common sense*. Kant also believed that a judgement of taste shares characteristics engaged in a moral judgement: both are disinterested, and we hold them to be universal.”

Hijjas (2008) in his book “*Thoughts on the theory and Language of Architecture*” states “Aesthetics is both the study of beauty and the properties of system that appeal to the senses. There are principles in aesthetics which universally accepted regardless of the cultural and geographical differences. ..Aesthetics goes beyond functional values alone, through its aesthetic dimensions; architecture expresses human values and can stimulate an enjoyment in life. Aesthetically pleasing objects lifts the spirit and excites the emotions to wonder, awe and joy”

HRH Princess Wijdan Ali. (2007) states in her essay on *Beauty and Aesthetics in Islam that*: “The term 'aesthetics' never existed in Islamic culture and traditional society did not use it or any other term that might imply the same meaning and significance. The contemporary Arabic term *jamaliya*, which is synonymous to aesthetics, is borrowed from the West and is, defined as the ‘science of beauty,’ *ilm al-jamal*. In Islam, neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet's traditions (*sunna*) refer to art. There were no treatises written expressly on Islamic aesthetics, nor were there set rules for what constituted Islamic principles in art and what did not. However, it is not difficult for Muslims to draw their own conclusions from both sources. The saying of the Prophet, "God is Beautiful and He loves beauty," can be considered to be the foundation of Muslim aesthetics. In Islam, art and faith are inseparably bound together. Within the framework of strict rules, sufficient liberty is left for the artist to arrive at creative works. As Islamic art performs a spiritual function and because of its intimate relationship to

the form and content of the Islamic revelation, whatever connection exists between it and the Islamic revelation cannot simply be on the plane of socio-political changes brought about by Islam. The answer must be found in the religion itself.”

Concept of Beauty

“The earliest Western theory of beauty can be found in the works of early Greek philosophers from the pre-Socratic period, such as Pythagoras. The Pythagorean school saw a strong connection between mathematics and beauty. In particular, they noted that objects proportioned according to the golden ratio seemed more attractive. Although style and fashion vary widely, cross-cultural research has found a variety of commonalities in people's perception of beauty. **Inner beauty** is a concept used to describe the positive aspects of something that is not physically observable. While most species use physical traits and pheromones to attract mates, some humans claim to rely on the inner beauty of their choices. Qualities including kindness, sensitivity, tenderness or compassion, creativity and intelligence have been said to be desirable since antiquity.” (en.wikipedia.org retrieved 230309)

Hijjas (2008) states in his book *“Thoughts on the theory and Language of Architecture”* Vitruvius revisited (2002) concept of beauty states: “there aren't any recipes. It is better not to look at them. It is better to practice one's craft with patience, care and attention, with passion. Better to endeavour to resolve every technical, constructional and functional problem. Better to indulge in the luxury of looking for discarding, amending and modifying the desired solution until it truly fulfils its purpose. Then and only then, if one is gifted, and with a bit of luck will the design embody what seems, albeit in its ineffability, to the best of definition of what we are trying to find, that of Saint Augustine: “Beauty is the splendour of truth”.

Hijjas (2008) states “Plato...felt that beautiful objects incorporated proportion, harmony and unity in all their constituent parts. Aristotle found that universal elements of beauty were order, symmetry and definiteness. Islamic philosophers relate and understood beauty as those linked to the creation of Allah SWT.”

Lifestyle

“In sociology, a lifestyle is the way a person lives. A lifestyle is a characteristic bundle of behaviours that makes sense to both others and oneself in a given time and place, including social relations, consumption, entertainment, and dress. The behaviours and practices within lifestyles are a mixture of habits, conventional ways of doing things, and reasoned actions. A lifestyle typically also reflects an individual's attitudes, values or worldview. Therefore, a lifestyle is a means of forging a sense of self and to create cultural symbols that resonate with personal identity.” Wikipedia retrieved 23032009)

“In public health, "lifestyle" generally means a pattern of individual practices and personal behavioural choices that are related to elevated or reduced health risk. Lifestyles are born of a multitude of causes, from childhood determinants to personality makeup to influences in the cultural, physical, economic, and political environments. Thus, efforts to encourage good

health practices should also promote environments that support them.” Encyclopaedia of Public Health

“Associated closely with particular ways of living promoted through advertising and branding, the word ‘lifestyle’ has been used increasingly widely in a design context from the 1960s onwards although the term had originally been coined in the late 1920s by the psychologist Alfred Adler to denote the ways in which childhood personality traits marked out future behaviour.” Modern Design Dictionary

Beautiful lifestyle means making the choice to live positively in a healthy environment through quality life and quality consumption. It is a lifestyle that chooses health and fitness over the decadence of drugs and liquor; casual and chic dress sense over sophistication and expensive make over and the importance of family bonding through family holidays rather than leisure.

AESTHETIC IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The above definitions on aesthetics almost always evolved around the work of Art. The built environment, for which our careers entwined, touches people and environment in more ways than one. The opportunity to present ideas and opinion through experiencing and participating in man made projects, however small or huge, is tremendous as its duration can span more than ones lifetime. Since eternity, Man has been managing the world resources for his own ends with natural know-how and guided values passing from one generation to another. Learning from life itself, living without sustaining would be detrimental to his off spring, the next generation. The concept of aesthetics then was purely conjured from man natural needs as well as how one perceived the world to be with underlying values to achieve certain gains. Man learnt from the environment the joy and sadness of circumstances through experiences. Man relies much on nature for food, for shelter, as a timekeeper, as a healer, as a thing of beauty that touches Man at his weakness and in strength, when he is smitten by the ecstasy of being in love; and when Man contemplates nature with his Creator. Man and environment are in indeed in need of one another in an eco-system that diminishes and replenish itself through continual balance development that sustains the world. That balance is delicate and beautiful.

With the degradation of the world environment through Man’s doing, physical and psychological, the underlying intrinsic values that binds humans together in humanity is loose and awaits destruction. What was the cause of this dilemma?

If indeed ‘beauty is in the eye of a beholder’ as an idiom to having ones own opinion to beauty different from others, on what basis would a universal acceptance of beauty be to the general public? How would one prioritise his or her decision to build or not to build if one politician claimed that new development will uplift the economy in replace of the history and place making of the old city as something beautiful to look forward for? What good does a good view gives to the wealth of the nation if it meant building everything anew and all man

made to what was a green field of natural forest and garden? What constitute good and bad view? What constitute ugly and beautiful development? Who has the last say?

On Landscape

Landscape design is defined by About.Com (retrieved 230309) as the art of arranging or modifying the features of a landscape, an urban area, etc., for aesthetic or practical purposes. Often divided into hardscape design and softscape design. Wikipedia (retrieved 240309) defines landscape architecture as representing a synthesis of arts, science and technical philosophies and practices that seek to care for the Earth's landscapes in a truly holistic, creative and sustainable manner. It involves the investigation and designed response to the landscape. Such noble intentions are restrained albeit cost and opportunity to gain became the basis of the actual implementation. Thence, weren't there spaces where nature is left to take its own course and human merely manages them? Remembering the times we can ran to our hearts content and be home before nightfall in open fields near home, where are they now? Where do the kids go to let out their energy? Do we need theme gardens in a foreign soil bringing alien trees and forest to ones own? Where are the herbs gardens that replenished our kitchen without going to retail shop for a shoot or two? Where are the fruit trees that once grew in our home yard where we use to learn how to climb and learn about the seasons they bear? Where are the shady trees that lined our paths and roads to give us shades and provide oxygen in the heat of the sun? Where is the little garden at schools where we learn to appreciate nature at a young age?

On City and Neighbourhood Planning

Ismawi Zen et al (2008) states in '*An Anthology of Essays on Integrating Islamic Values in the Theory and Practice of Architecture and the Built Environment*' that cities were born not only out of the act of getting together of men but that these acts were moderated by expectations that had developed into ethics and rules of transactions that governed every facet of the relationship.....Islam is a way of life..It shapes his living and working environment to achieve excellence”

A beautiful thing comes in small packages. In urban areas, keeping to short distances within walking range to shops, schools, post office, banks, markets is sheer beauty to planning quality living. The coming of cars, huge mega shops and influx of population create an outburst of living quarters, numerous roads, big and wide, tiered and fast, dividing neighbourhoods and curtailed social endeavours of Man to his next of kin. No more are cities seen as a hegemonies whole with friendly pavements connecting people through unregimented means but patchwork of individual outcry of buildings and structures towards individual recognition amidst concrete jungle where every ill thrives. Where is the beauty of the safe evening walk to a restaurant? Where would there be a naturally crooked path in the city park as short cuts? Where can there be a shady garden near your office to have your lunch breaks? When can there be a short walking distant to market to buy fresh daily supplies of vegetables and fruits for home? When can we experience a good public transport to come on time and passes through our doorstep? When can we enjoy quality time with the family

and actually experience growing up as a bliss? What is beautiful lifestyle if it means we have to plan to have all these experience elsewhere and only during the school holidays?

On Architecture

Wikipedia (retrieved 250309) defines architecture “ with a wider definition often includes the design of the total built environment, from the macro level of how a building integrates with its surrounding landscape to the micro level of architectural or construction details and, sometimes, furniture. Wider still, architecture is the activity of designing any kind of system.” The aesthetic of architecture lies on its integration from the various matrixes of needs and functions of the micro level to the synthesis of form to the surrounding landscape or cityscape at macro level. Architecture should be seen as ability to fuse itself into nature in urban or countryside and be part of its surrounding. The capitalisation and the commercialisation of architecture in the 20th century had brought about shallow concepts that the idea of being different no matter how weird and strange it is, as beautiful, interesting and innovative. On the other end of the scale, there are architecture of utility and façade architecture. Devoid of true identity of any form and uniformity vis a vis harmony the structures presents as eyesores glaring into our daily environment. We have architectural follies, sculptors and buildings that are not of any architectural merit. The very beauty of the utilitarian architecture may loss its lustre if the fundamentals of architecture as a shelter for human, as a human settlement are not kept alive through matching with its contextual as a whole. Ugly architecture or no architectural merit at all are outstanding in itself when it requires attention but otherwise left to decay with no maintenance and growing social ills as common stigma. The questions remain on who decides the type of architecture of that place? It is a theme that drives developers developing it? Is it some kind of nostalgia that foreign seeming form appearing on our soil? Is it the wish of the client to have his/her dream be made into reality brushing aside the rationale? Our cities, towns and countryside are full of this brand of aesthetic and beauty as interpreted by those who have the say and not those who are able to see beauty as contextual and natural.

In Summary

In redefining the concept of aesthetic in the built environment let us dwell upon the following excerpts again:

HRH Princess Wijdan Ali. (2007) state in her essay Beauty and Aesthetics in Islam: “For the Muslim artist, the doctrinal foundation of Islamic aesthetics lies in the following sayings of the Prophet: "God has inscribed beauty upon all things," "God desires that if you do something you perfect it," "Work is a form of worship," and "God is beautiful and He loves beauty." Hence, perfecting one's work by creating attractive and well-made objects that serve a purpose becomes a form of worship and a religious obligation easily fulfilled by the artist, through adherence to the faith and its convictions. Islamic artists were constantly searching for new ideas and techniques that could further intensify their enchantment and fascination

with embellishing the whole of life and with making the enjoyment of its beauty a consistently private action.”

Exemplars of these actions are the famous Andalusian Alhamra for whence the pinnacles of details were manifested and where beauty knows no bounds till today.

They are many facets to undertaking these tasks and many ways of approaching them in different circumstances, places, time and culture. These differences are enriching in itself and appropriate in their own local agenda. Indeed, if each of our effort would be to contribute collectively to the bigger built environment in our own small way, wherever we are, insyaAllah the effort towards beautifying the environment vis a vis healing the world through the aesthetic ascribed by the Creator and our choice in practicing beautiful lifestyle as vicegerent, would be a reality.

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