

# Potentially Beautiful

*by Sean Burkholder*

Beauty is often a difficult, arrogant word. It smokes cigars in the men's parlor with other words such as perfect, true and natural. They are the kinds of words that jump out in a conversation. We must wonder how someone could use these words based on the obvious limited knowledge of any one human being. The thing that is truly frightening is how much physical and financial effort is expelled in an effort to promote these purportedly universal concepts. We should begin to question just how many of our current problems are based in the never ending quest to achieve such things and how much of life we simply miss out on while blinded by this search. Let us not forget how the desire to achieve anthropomorphic perfection has historically led to cultural Darwinism and genocide. Could our current advancements in genetic mapping and programming cause us to follow this historic precedent?

Regarding beauty, let us begin by postulating that we have grounds to question it and its motives. This should not sound irrational. Think back to the last time you heard or read someone use the word beautiful. Did you completely agree? Probably not. Of course, everyone knows that beauty is a subjective thing; however, it is common practice to act as if it is not.

In the heart of Cleveland Ohio is one of the more complete Daniel Burnham urban design projects in the United States. This project, known as the "Group Plan" focused on creating civic pride and expression through the production of architectural forms that met a particular aesthetic standard. A significant portion of this project was implemented in the early 1900s and even today we still hear echoes of completing it. The Group Plan, like many undertakings placed into the "City Beautiful" movement relied on both politics and the aesthetic expression of civility and culture as the chief methods of selling it to the citizenry. Whose civility and culture you ask? In short, one has significant footing in an argument that the culture expressed in many of these projects was that of affluent white businessmen.(1) It takes grand projects to "stir men's blood" or at least open their checkbooks. As we see historic photos of enlightened Clevelanders walking around the "Mall" (the grand open space framed by neoclassic, urban administration buildings) with canes and top hats, it would appear obvious why they should be the dictators of beauty!

This process still takes place today. It is typical for the participants with the deepest pockets to make the decisions. These decisions are then sold to the masses through aesthetic, political, financial and even moral justifica-

tion. This is not to say that those decision making entities always possess ulterior motives, but we know that it does happen. Based on the power that these individuals and organizations have, and the large number of them engaged in the various decentralized systems of the city, they arguably have more to do with the overall form of the city and how it works than any urban designer or city planner. (2)

As many city cores sit over-structured and under-populated, new infrastructure is spreading into the last remaining remote locations in an effort to provide every last lot with high speed internet and digital cable. Whether good or bad, this is simply a reality that we all deal with; a reality that has to do with the citizen's quest for beauty. We could hypothesize that the search for beauty was a significant persuasive reason for those leaving the city. There were certainly many other factors at play, but this idea of beauty perhaps served as a justification for this decision. As stated before, beauty is a subjective idea, thus there is no better way to immerse oneself in beauty than to produce it all around you and to produce it yourself. The ability to do this is a tremendous advantage in suburbia as there is ample land and high levels of home ownership. Obviously these "personal" decisions on what is beautiful are highly influenced by lifestyle advertising. The illusion of freedom and self formulated beauty did a great service to suburbia.

When one observes what exists within the gray matter that surrounds the irrelevant cores of many cities, monotony and mediocrity seem to run wild. In many places throughout the United States there is a strong preference to socially homogeneous enclaves with nice landscaping and a gate at their entrance. There are even extreme examples of entire communities focused on a singular goal such as the production of olympic athletes.(3) In many cases these developments and the houses within them are seen as beautiful creations by their inhabitants, standing out against what they see as the crime-ridden, immigrant-filled tissue that surrounds them.

There has always been some level of attachment between the planned community and the natural landscape. The landscape played its own role in this issue of beauty and sprawl. The ability for one to reconnect with nature by moving to the urban fringe where the city meets the country has always been a selling point for suburbanization. If we look very generally at who produced truly urban residential development plans through history you typically find a pattern of the Le Corbusiers and the Hilberseimers, generally considered architecturally minded individuals. If however we look historically at suburban planners, you see much more focus on the landscape in that landscape architects are much more involved, Olmsted (Riverside), McHarg (The Woodlands), Halprin (Sea Ranch) among others. This is again a generalization as there are those who certainly cross this line; Landscape Architect Alfred Caldwell who played a significant role in Mies' Lafayette Park or perhaps Architect Cedric Price's Plan for the Potteries Thinkbelt region. These exceptions not withstanding, the pattern is prevalent

enough to make this an interesting point. The mental image of landscape beauty is something that weighs heavily on the decision to move out of the city, the desire to leave the harsh, modernist city behind in favor of soft, safe communities at the periphery.

This connection between beauty, the landscape and the residential dwelling has for a long while been beauty's primary role in suburbia. Commercial development has until recently been of the "strip" typology where the large amounts of available land are paved to accommodate the cars that neighboring residents are forced to drive everywhere. This aspect of the periphery is seldom seen as beautiful, unless of course you consider the vast amount of creativity this barren, ironic landscape has produced, the photography of Jeff Wall and Ed Ruscha are examples. Typically however this expansive paved wasteland has served a very utilitarian function for the highly manicured homes and residents surrounding them. Retail however has recently begun to get in on the act. The recent boom of what are termed "lifestyle centers" is an indication of this. A lifestyle center is simply a shopping mall turned inside out with all of the pedestrian circulation along faux streets. The retail stores occupy storefronts along these streets, and there is typically an anchor store at the end. It is not rare to see fake bus stations, huge fountains, outdoor cafes, street lamps with banners and a token Italian ice vendor. It is also quite standard to see an entire architecture history class of stylistic influences along one avenue; cornices, fluted columns and curtain wall glass mixed together to create a visual amalgam attempting to recreate the eclectic beauty of urban life. A good deal of this is aided by a construction material known in the trade as EIFS or Dryvit. This material makes possible the production and reproduction of architectural decorations and facades by simply carving them out of insulation and coating them with a specified finish. This method is fast, cost effective and very thermally efficient. It should also be noted that the material can be produced in almost any color or texture imaginable, so much so that the supplier can match colors to an architectural rendering. One thing that is not typically seen in one of these centers, which one does find increasingly in the urban core, is empty storefronts. Urban or not, the feeling of shopping in small-town America, something that a good portion of the visitors would likely consider beautiful, tends to be the favored theme. We need not go too far to see though this facade. The buildings may indicate some form of dynamism or heterogeneity, but the shoppers tend to look quite the same. The similarities to the main streets that line the entrances to any theme park are shocking. Most shoppers made it there because these are areas that provide a nostalgic community feeling with a strong presence of security. Many of these centers have curfews for minors in addition to a vast set of security features to make sure that the visitors feel safe enough to spend their money and buy into the vision. This cocktail of fabricated urbanity, small-town beauty and security has proven to be a highly profitable system in recent years. The vision itself is not unlike that of Burnham's, citizens walking down well designed streets, surrounded by highly control-

led architecture. The difference is the exchange of the top hat for a Talbot's bag, and the urban renewal site for the greenfield. What has been lost is the optimism in the city itself, as it would appear that the only option left is to recreate the city that never was somewhere else.

Why the focus on beauty? Because beauty sells of course! Beauty however sells in a very different way than say sex or violence would sell. As opposed to appealing to perhaps some suppressed Freudian desire, beauty convinces us that we can aspire to some universal form of greatness, and by understanding this beauty; we are acknowledging our place within a civilized society. With beauty there is no hiding, embarrassment or remorse. We can run through the streets exclaiming our appreciation and admiration of all things beautiful at the top of our voices. Has anyone stopped there in the middle of the street and considered that perhaps they have been let astray? Could beauty be used against us?

We have seen several methods where beauty has been used in some fashion to advocate for both urban or suburban projects. Although they may have been presented in a somewhat negative way, many of these agendas were, and are highly successful. The sheer permanence and vision of Burnham's projects are hard to ignore, and many are comparable in scope to Hausmann's projects for Paris or even Speer's proposals in Berlin. In suburbia, the financial gains that have been produced within peripheral communities with the help of lifestyle retail are also quite astonishing as they actually serve as the new downtowns for old communities. With this increased revenue, towns have money to better provide for their residents.

Truthfully we cannot do without beauty; for without the desire for the beautiful, our lives would seemingly be quite uninteresting and uninspiring. Art would be dry and rigid, design overly utilitarian and what would happen to all of the supermodels? We should all have the moment in the street where we take time to evaluate what is truly beautiful to us and not what we have been told is beautiful. Let us open up beauty and try to find the potential within it. Could perhaps a system or process be beautiful?

Urbanistically, instead of looking at a building, site, or region and reading it for what it is, we must instead understand it for what it has been and what it could become; we must understand its potential. We should assume that whatever we are looking at is simply something on its way to becoming something else. If we can understand this process and engage it in interesting ways, we hold in our hands an entirely new set of tools. One of these such tools is the application of complexity theory to dynamic systems like cities. Although this application has gained momentum in recent years, many have noted that Jane Jacobs made this connection over 40 years ago with her observation of the "organized complexity" of the city.<sup>(4)</sup> Steven Johnson discusses this connection between Jacobs and complexity in

his book *Emergence* which looks to outline the idea that many systems are interconnected, including cities. Johnson also dives into other areas where he sees similar interconnected networks, including the movements and interaction of agents within an ant colony, or self-stimulating software like *Sim City* or *Starlogo*. In his recent book *Cities and Complexity*, Michael Batty examines in great detail how the various methods of complexity theory can be applied to urban systems. Many systems are at play, from the obvious decentralized decision making process in many cities to the non-linear environmental implications that human occupation has. As we begin to uncover this complexity through the advancement of computer modeling and representation, we have a decision to make. With the new knowledge provided to us, we can more accurately predict possible scenarios, thus enabling us to produce things that are more resistant to the future. We can carry on with our naive assumption that the city is a stable system and produce things that reflect this way of thinking. Following historical precedent, this is a common way of utilizing technology. Our other option is to find ways of engaging this complexity and using it in creative or beneficial ways. With so many factors at play, the potential for interventions and outcomes is limitless. This freedom is something we should embrace and exploit and for the first time in history, not be frightened of. Let us begin finding and creating potential in the world around us by embracing difference, error, friction and the unknown. For even the unknown can be beautiful. We simply must open our minds to a wider identification, to a new understanding of the beauty of potentiality.

To conclude, it must be understood that every thing, every system has potential. The issue should be how these things meet their potential, or how they might in the future, as potentiality is something that is continually changing in relation to continually fluctuating circumstances. Utilizing potential is something that everyone does, every day. It happens through a series of subconscious calculations as we hypothesize future outcomes from our decisions. This process is something that could play a much larger role in the future designs of cities as they are dynamic systems with tremendous amounts of potential, a potential that is not met with the production of simplified, rational, architectural solutions. Yes, even beauty possesses a potentiality. For beauty, like a city, would be worthless without its potential

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(1) This attitude is clearly expressed by William Wilson in *The City Beautiful Movement* (John Hopkins Press, 1994) 75-77

(2) Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone, 1997) 41-43

(3) Edward Soja, "Sprawl is not what it used to be" *Post Ex Sub Dis* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2002) 85

(4) Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961, 1989) 428-433