This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in the Interface section of the journal *Planning Theory and Practice*.

Beauty as Violence

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In this short article I look at the recent interest in beauty in planning through the lens of violence. In the UK, concerns with urban beauty go hand in hand with a "lurch to the right" (Bielik, 2019) and the mainstreaming of right-wing politics (Mondon & Winter, 2020). This does not mean that those urban designers and planners who envisage 'beautiful' developments identify – necessarily or overtly – with right-wing politics. But when 'experts' and powerful institutions decide who and what is "highly pleasing to the sight" and of "exceptional grace, elegance, or charm in appearance" (OED, 2022), then disagreement usually means exclusion. The Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC, 2020) suggests that nothing should stop us "from building as beautiful as the Georgians and the Victorians", especially because we are "so much richer than they were?" (p. 13). In so doing, the commission not only establishes a causal link between economic and aesthetic values (see Gassner, 2020); it also reproduces Western norms of beauty and white standards. Such a statement is useful for those who see inequalities between people as natural and positive and who propagate such a perspective within or outside of mechanisms of representative democracy.

In December 2020, Donald Trump signed an executive order with which he imposed a return to the "architectural tradition derived from the forms, principles, and vocabulary of the architecture of Greek and Roman antiquity" for all federal buildings, disparaging modernist architecture as ugly and inconsistent (Kelly & Hoffman, 2020). As problematic as this order is, it is important to emphasise that architectural styles do not have explicit and consistent ties to the forces of political economy. Questions about proportions, scale, symmetry, architectural details, and materiality cannot be nailed down on the political spectrum (Trüby, 2017). While architecture is ideological and some of it is sponsored by and built for autocrats and authoritarian regimes, what defines right-wing spaces, more than anything else, is that difference is subordinated to a central vision. This also means that aesthetic

concerns are not necessarily reactionary. A radical approach to aesthetics democratises views, reaffirming that political change involves new ways of sensing the world. Such an approach brings to light who and what is marginalised in or excluded from a specific urban vision. Radical aesthetics, then, can be conceptualised as a battleground where urban struggles are played out; a field for irreducible dissensus that discloses what is (and is not) shared, common, and valued.

When this battleground is being ignored and voices are being silenced, then beauty turns violent. To unpack this claim, an extended conceptualisation of violence is required. We might understand violence as "the deliberative exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc." (OED, 2022) – a direct intervention by an actor that harms another individual, such as the killing of a person, a "'blow' […] between two parties in a heated encounter" (Butler, 2021, pp. 1f), or the smashing of a shop window. Crucially, however, urban space is not a neutral container in which violent actions take place. To critically explore not only relationships between beauty and violence but, furthermore, beauty as a type of violence, a shift from violence *in* space to violence *of* space is needed.

According to Johan Galtung (1969), "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (p. 168). Whether there is a specific actor that commits the violence (personal, direct) or not (structural, indirect), "[i]n both cases individuals may be killed or mutilated, hit or hurt in both senses of the words, and manipulated by means of stick or carrot strategies" (Galtung, 1969, p. 170). Structural violence is built into the city, for example as ongoing disinvestment or exclusionary forms of investment in marginalised and racialised neighbourhoods. Urban planning produces and reproduces violence if it does not intervene in "unequal power and consequential […] unequal life chances" (Galtung, 1969, p. 170) of different communities. When beauty's violence is being revealed, then it is usually considered as part of cultural violence. Galtung (1990) describes this type of violence as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence […] that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (p. 291). Beauty can also be a contributory cause of direct violence – for example when racial inequalities and representations of social groups create unbearable living conditions. And it can make racialised structures and racism "look, even feel right – or at least not wrong" (Galtung, 1990, p. 291).

What follows from Galtung's account is that cultural, structural, and direct violence are distinct from each other and that they are interrelated. In fascist regimes these distinctions collapse. Nazi urban planning ideas – from the gigantic redevelopment plan for Berlin that drew on nineteenth-century City Beautiful movement ideas to de-densification strategies in other cities to 'kill' the diversity of urban life – showcase how beauty can be linked to a definition of what it is to be human that creates a chain of action from segregation, to ghettoisation, to annihilation. And when Walter Benjamin (2006)

identified fascism as an aestheticisation of politics, then he emphasised how only physical destruction and death on a massive scale became spectacles that are intense enough to satisfy the political craving for socio-economic transformation without, however, changing the capitalist class structure (Gassner, 2021a). In such a regime, physical violence is not only glorified but different types of violence are inseparably tied together, resulting in an all-encompassing world of violence.

I understand Benjamin's notion of the aestheticisation of politics as a type of beautification and suggest that a distinction between aestheticisation and beautification is crucial for excavating the radical potential of the former in order to work against the authoritarian space-time that the latter produces (Gassner, 2021b). Radical aesthetics can intervene in a world of violence. What a radical aesthetic approach to current UK planning implies can be exemplified by introducing three aspects that counter the late Roger Scruton's view on the role of beauty in planning. Scruton was a key protagonist of traditional conservative views and co-chair of the BBBBC.

Beauty and harmony: For Scruton (2018), a beautiful city is a harmonious city, i.e. a city where a harmony of interests brings about visual and spatial harmony. The role of planning, according to him, is to bring back a lost harmony. In my view, such a harmony of interests does not exist and an image of harmony depoliticises the city by solidifying asymmetrical power relations. Such an image expels who and what cannot be easily incorporated in a pre-defined wholeness; or it imposes a set of norms and standards for whoever and whatever is forced to be included. When Scruton (2018) claims that judgments of beauty "are a necessary part of practical reasoning in any attempt to harmonise our activities and ways of life with those of our neighbours" (p. 9), then he advocates the violent act of integration; not the annihilation of a group of people but, nonetheless, the definition and oppression of an 'other'.

Beauty and capitalism: Scruton (2018) alleges that planning should not be "'taking charge' of what happens and where" (p. 14) as this should and will be answered by the free market. He envisages planning "as a system of side-constraints" (Scruton, 2018, p. 14) and regards beauty as a particularly important constraint due to its "centrality to home-building and therefore to establishing a *shared* environment" (p. 11). According to him, a shared environment is one where a structure fits into an existing urban fabric, which is why he is highly critical of 'iconic' buildings that "stand apart from their surroundings, islands of Ego in a sea of Us" (Scruton, 2018, p. 12). In my opinion, these buildings are not solely, not even primarily, problematic because they visually stand out but because they naturalise a non-egalitarian distribution of power and resources (Gassner, 2020). They contribute to the urban skyline as a phantasmagoria of capitalist culture: a dazzling image that abstracts from the commodified urban landscape by promoting its further commodification (Gassner, 2017). In an

inherently unjust city, both non-intervention and an intervention that does not reduce spatial injustices are violent processes.

Beauty and peace: For Scruton, an aesthetic judgement is not "an expression of individual taste" but "the expression of a community" that is "guided by a shared tradition" (Scruton, 2018, p. 10). His pacifist view of the past reduces histories to the history of the oppressor, and life worlds to 'the city'. Scruton chooses to ignore violent processes and promotes, with the help of beauty, an understanding of planning as a 'peace-keeping' endeavour. Acknowledging endemic forms of state and capitalist violence, I propose a conceptualisation of planning as an eventful practice that brings conflicts to the fore; a practice with peace as its horizon. Conflicts against violence! This slogan brings us closer to an understanding of what a radical intervention in the recent interest in beauty in planning can mean. What remains to be explored, then, are the aesthetic dimensions of these conflicts.

Disclosure Statement:

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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