

IN PERSPECTIVE

WINTER 2025

BEAUTY AND THE ARCHITECT



The idea that buildings should possess essential properties is often credited to Vitruvius, a first century Roman architect and engineer. In *De architectura*, his ten-volume treatise on architecture, he posits that the strength (*fermitas*), utility (*utilitas*) and beauty (*venusitas*) of built structures are the key attributes.

Although it is likely that this idea developed in more distant antiquity, it has been a fundamental architectural tenet since its first publication.

While strength and utility are largely based in technology, beauty is rooted as aesthetics in the realm of philosophy. However, it is, arguably, as important as the other two.

Maulshree Gupta, a Master of Architecture graduate and a User Experience (UX) Designer, together with fellow associates of the Canadian Museum of Architecture, has developed a display about aesthetics in architecture.

EXPLAINING AESTHETICS

Our approach recognizes both the objective and subjective bases for understanding beauty but carefully avoids the debate as to their relative merits.

The display posits that our sense of aesthetics can be deconstructed into elements, each of smaller span, which, in combination, result in our overall assessment of the attractiveness of a structure. Our conception is affected by culture, education, previous experience and many other factors. But in spite of these factors, commonalities



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emerge so that there is often general agreement on what is attractive and what is not.



The CMA's Aesthetics in Architecture display in the workshop.

The aesthetic elements selected for the display are style, symmetry, balance, colour, fluidity and context. A brief description of each is supplemented with images of buildings to exemplify the features. The expression of some of the aesthetic elements is then illustrated with the inclusion of models of two dissimilar buildings each at a 1:100 scale.

The Villa Rotonda by Andrea Palladio exemplifies a classical architectural style. It is about as symmetric as a building can be. The traditional, angular design conveys formality and elegance. Columns and statues provide detail that suggests wealth and erudition.

The subdued earthtones of its colouring create a restful atmosphere. This is complemented by manicured gardens which provide an appropriate context for the building. Although the Villa does not conform to a contemporary

idea of a residence, it was a prominent country house at the time of its construction in 1595 in Vincenza, Italy.



Model of The Villa Rotonda by Andrea Palladio.

By contrast, the Notre-Dame-du-Haut Chapel by Le Corbusier is an asymmetric modern design, yet one that is balanced. Its organic form almost seems to grow out of the ground, contextually blending with the natural landscape.

A simple two tone dark and light colour scheme complements the fluid shape of the structure. Accents are provided by vividly tinted windows and a striking abstract design on the main entrance door. The uplift of the front corner of the roof is consistent with the building's religious purpose. Located in Ronchamp, France, it has been the site of pilgrimages since its construction in 1955.



Model of the Notre-Dame-du-Haut chapel by Le Corbusier.

AN ARCHITECTURAL BEAUTY CONTEST

In spite of centuries of debate about, and investigations into, the nature of beauty, each of us develops our own aesthetic sense. In our display this is explored through an interactive application which invites participants to evaluate specific buildings with respect to their attractiveness. It is, sort of, an architectural beauty contest.

The expectation is that the display will provide a framework for an aesthetic judgement which participants may then use to form an opinion. The application tabulates results so that participants can compare their opinions with the averages of all previous results. As results accumulate it will be interesting to see if there is a convergence of opinion for some buildings and a divergence for others.



The interactive display component allows participants to express their opinions about the attractiveness of specific buildings.

Architecture is the art in which we live. Aesthetically pleasing buildings generally have a positive effect on our sense of well being and, in a workplace, can improve productivity. A general understanding of the subject will provide guidance for the development of our built environment.

- Peter Brueckner

References

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Scruton, Roger. 2013. *The Aesthetics of Architecture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.