

## Three Tables, Two Languages, One Difficult Word

*On Aesthetic Judgment in Architecture*

... We are all sitting around a large table. Everyone has brought their projects to show and get feedback on. Rolls of paper and tracing paper, laptops, and notebooks are spread across the table. We are all anxious.

It is not because we think we haven't worked enough or have nothing to show. It is because our teacher's reactions to our work are so unpredictable. A project we are not at all optimistic about might seem full of potential to them. Or exactly the opposite might happen: the design we thought was our strongest, and had spent the most time developing, might seem very weak.

You don't know whether, by the time the session is over, you are going to love your project, feel confused about it, or hate it.

During the session, many aspects of the projects are discussed: function and context, legal requirements, structure, materials, climate, light, and so on. But among all of this are other kinds of statements that seem at least as consequential:

*This wall would have been better if it were aligned with that one.*

*This window is working really well here.*

*You've left no room for the façade to breathe.*

*This projection isn't big enough. It's become a bit pathetic.*

*There is no hierarchy in the plan of this floor.*

*This section is too flat.*

*Something is missing here.*

*This volume here is not working.*

... We are all sitting around a large table. Everyone has brought their projects to show and get feedback on. Rolls of paper and tracing paper, laptops, and notebooks are spread across the table. We are all anxious.

In a few minutes, *I* have to start the session. I am in my third year of architecture and have recently started helping as a teaching assistant in a first-year design studio.<sup>1</sup> My anxiety, this time, is of a different kind. When I see their projects, will I have anything to say? Will I know what should change, which ideas should be developed further, or what would be better left as it is?

The first student begins showing me their project. I listen while looking through the drawings. Sometimes I become so focused on the plans and sections, trying to understand the spaces, that I miss parts of what they are saying. At some point, I realize that I have moved beyond simply trying to understand the project. Judgments are beginning to form in my mind. Some decisions seem convincing; others don't sit right with me. They bother me.

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<sup>1</sup> These experiences took place at the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran, an informal and in fact underground university established by the Bahá'í community in response to the systematic exclusion of Bahá'í students from Iranian universities. Its particular situation and therefore its particular educational structure meant that students could also take on teaching-assistant roles while continuing their own studies.

It occurs to me that something has clearly happened between these two sides of the table. In only a few years, I had gone from being confused by my teachers' judgments of the projects to making them myself. Of course, I know more about architecture now: structure, materials, construction, dimensions, context, and the practical consequences of design decisions. But not all my judgments seemed to belong to this kind of knowledge.

And then I realize that I have started talking.

*“Look, the space you've created by putting this wall here has a really nice quality, but by extending it until it meets the other one, you've killed that feeling of space. Here in the section, it's really good that you didn't place the voids exactly on top of each other, you've created a kind of fluidity, but maybe this last one has gone a little too far to the left.”*

The same kinds of sentences that had seemed so unpredictable, and sometimes even incomprehensible, when they came from my own teachers are now forming in my mind.

And I am saying them out loud.

I feel anxious again. This time, I am not worried about whether I *will* see something to say, but about the uncertain authority of the things I *do* see. So what exactly had I learned to see? Had I simply internalized my teachers' taste, their sense of what counted as aesthetically good? Or had I developed a kind of architectural knowledge, an aesthetic sensitivity, an educated taste?

In another world, what exactly am I claiming when I make these judgments? Am I saying, *“I like this one more than the other”*, or am I saying *“this one is better than the other”*?

*“I like this better”* sounds like an expression of personal preferences. It could be said that there may be no *objectively* correct answer to whether *this one is better than the other*. Different individuals might make different judgments, and those judgments might change across cultures, generations or even across different moments in the same person's life. And this could lead us to conclude that the judgment is simply *subjective*. And calling a judgment subjective seems to very quickly turn it into a matter of personal taste.

*“This is better,”* however, seems to imply something more: the statement seems to move from a report about myself towards a claim about the work itself. In this sense, the judgment seems to reach towards objectivity. This implies that I have learned to distinguish better from worse because my taste has been educated, and that my judgment may therefore carry some authority beyond my own preference.

The difference between these two statements therefore seems to raise a question about the nature of *taste*: whether it is entirely subjective and therefore merely personal, or whether it responds to objective qualities in the work itself and therefore can be educated and carry some authority beyond individual preference.

As I continue thinking about these questions concerning the nature of taste, I realize that, through my experiences on both sides of the table at architecture school, I have entered a much older conversation. In this conversation, the question of *taste* cannot be explored separately from questions of *beauty*, *aesthetic judgment*, and *aesthetics*, since these concepts have developed in close relation to one another through a long history of philosophical discussion.

This conversation, within Western philosophy, extends back at least to ancient Greece and to the question of what *beauty* is, although these discussions were not yet gathered under the name *aesthetics*.<sup>2</sup> Plato understood *beauty* as something closely connected to the good and saw it as capable of leading the mind towards knowledge. At the same time, he remained suspicious of the imitative power of art.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle approached the question differently. He related *beauty* to order, proportion, and the organization of parts, while examining how artistic imitation can produce understanding and pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

The word *aesthetics* entered this conversation much later. In the eighteenth century, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced its modern philosophical use to name an inquiry into sensory perception and knowledge. What seems important here is that, although *beauty* was one of its central concerns, the scope of aesthetics was already broader.

During the same century, *taste* became a central way of discussing our capacity to judge *beauty*.<sup>5</sup> Hume argued that judgments of taste are grounded in individual sentiment, yet he still asked whether cultivated taste might give certain judgments greater authority.<sup>6</sup> Kant made the tension even more explicit: a judgment of taste

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek *kalon* can mean “beautiful,” “fine,” “noble,” or “admirable,” rather than corresponding exactly to modern English *beauty*. See Pappas, “Plato’s Aesthetics,” sec. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, 201c–206a, 210a–212b; *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, 595a–608b.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. I. Bywater, 4, 1448b4–19, and 7, 1450b34–1451a15; *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, 13.3, 1078a31–b6.

<sup>5</sup> Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, §116, 86–87; Dickie, *Century of Taste*, 3–5; Guyer, “18th Century German Aesthetics.”

<sup>6</sup> Hume describes the “true judge” as combining delicacy of sentiment with practice, comparison, freedom from prejudice, and good sense. Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 229–30, 234–42.

begins in subjective pleasure and cannot be proved through rules, but it still claims a validity that extends beyond the individual.<sup>7</sup>

I am not trying to reconstruct this history here, and I do not expect it simply to answer my question. If anything, it does the opposite. It makes the question more complicated, while also making me realize that the difficulty I encountered is not mine alone. And now, I return from this historical conversation to the question that brought me there. What exactly am I claiming when I say *this one is better*? The simple opposition between objectivity and subjectivity now begins to feel less secure as a way of looking at this question. Neither the nature of this judgment nor the possible grounds for its authority can be adequately understood through this opposition.

Perhaps what becomes clearer to me is that an aesthetic judgment can be discussed without necessarily being objectively provable. It may arise from a particular person and be shaped by their memories, cultural context, and accumulated experience without therefore being arbitrary, merely private, or random. When I say *this one is better*, I am not only reporting something about myself. I am also asking others to look again and consider a claim about the work.

This way of understanding the complexity of these judgments does not, of course, automatically make them trustworthy, nor does it establish their legitimacy, which was part of what I had questioned at the beginning. But it does make it more difficult for me to dismiss them as nothing more than personal taste. More than that, it makes me unwilling to abandon aesthetic judgment simply because its grounds cannot be reduced to measurable criteria. I want to know what kind of investigation might still be possible.

A few months ago, while reading *The New Science of Politics*, I came across an argument by Eric Voegelin that stayed with me. Writing about political science, he warns that “the use of method as the criterion of science abolishes theoretical relevance.”<sup>8</sup> As I understand it, when an existing method determines which questions can be taken seriously, whatever cannot be approached through that method is easily dismissed as irrelevant. But perhaps the relationship should work the other way around: the importance of a question should lead us to search for a method adequate to it.

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<sup>7</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §1, on subjective pleasure; §§6–8, on the claim to universal agreement; and §§32–33, on why judgments of taste cannot be proved through rules.

<sup>8</sup> Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 5–8; quotation at 8.

Now I find myself returning to this argument and wondering whether something similar might happen in architecture. If ~~beauty~~ is sometimes discussed less directly as part of aesthetic judgment, is it because it is considered less important, or might it also be because we are uncertain about how to investigate it?

As I write these sentences, every few minutes I lift my head from my laptop and look through the window of Café Vågal, along Kong Oscars gate towards Korskirken. I take profound pleasure in the ~~beauty~~ of this view: the church's green tower rising between the buildings; the layered roofs and repeated dormers along the pink façade; the meeting of pink, yellow, green, grey, and terracotta. Inside, dark leaves frame the view, while a warm hanging lamp and its reflection hover against the pale sky.

That pleasure does not prove that the view is objectively beautiful. Yet I cannot separate my experience of this place from my experience of its ~~beauty~~. Recognizing its ~~beauty~~ does not feel like a secondary judgment about an otherwise complete experience. It helps make the experience what it is.

If, as an architect, I am trying to shape and enrich people's experience of space, how can I set aside this dimension merely because its grounds are difficult to establish? If architectural education restricts itself to what can be easily measured or demonstrated, don't we risk reducing architecture itself?

This brings me back to what had changed between the two sides of the table. If my judgments were neither applications of objective rules nor merely expressions of personal preference, what had I learned?

I had certainly spent more time looking at architecture. I had drawn and redrawn plans and sections, visited buildings, made models, received criticism, and repeatedly seen certain decisions succeed or fail. I had also learned a language through which architecture could be discussed: proportion, hierarchy, rhythm, composition, coherence, and spatial quality. Gradually, things I had once needed someone else to point out had become visible to me.

But I am not sure how this learning happened. I do not remember being taught a rule that explained exactly when a façade becomes too busy or how far a wall can extend before it begins to damage the quality of a space. There was no formula I could apply. And yet, after enough time, I began to recognize these things, or at least to feel that I recognize them.

Michael Polanyi's concept of *tacit knowledge* offers one way of understanding this. In *The Tacit Dimension*, he writes that "we can know more than we can tell." His basic example is our ability to recognize a familiar face among many others, even

though we may be unable to identify all the individual features through which we recognize it.<sup>9</sup> Our inability to fully explain the process does not make the recognition arbitrary: we are responding to something that is actually present, and our recognition can be correct or mistaken. Recognition, skilled action, and judgment may therefore depend on knowledge accumulated through experience without that knowledge being fully available to us as explicit propositions.

Yet the analogy has its limits. The identity of a face can usually be verified through external evidence: my recognition can be shown to be right or wrong. The aesthetic quality of a space, however, cannot be verified or disproved in the same straightforward way. How, then, can I distinguish between a knowledge-based judgment that responds to something real in the architecture and a preference that I have learned to experience as truth?

This is where tacit knowledge becomes pedagogically troubling. In *Against and for Method*, Jan Silberberger identifies a recurring difficulty in architectural studios: an unreadiness to translate tacit knowledge into propositional knowledge.<sup>10</sup> When teachers' subjective and intuitive judgments remain unarticulated, students may gradually learn what is considered right without understanding the grounds, meaning, or limits of those judgments. Silberberger warns that when architectural education depends too heavily on teachers' taste and personal tacit knowledge, it risks becoming a process of acculturation in which students learn to reproduce their teachers' judgments.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps tacit knowledge helps me understand part of what I had learned as I moved from one side of the table to the other: ways of seeing and judging that I could not always fully articulate. But it does not resolve the question that troubled me. It may explain how a judgment forms, but not whether that judgment is trustworthy, fair, or pedagogically legitimate.

This leaves me in an uncomfortable position: I want to acknowledge the value of the tacit knowledge I have acquired over the years while remaining actively self-reflective about it. How can I distinguish knowledge developed through sustained architectural experience from personal or institutional values that have become so familiar that they now feel self-evident?

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<sup>9</sup> Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 4–5; the quoted formulation appears on 4, and the facial-recognition example on 4–5.

<sup>10</sup> Silberberger, "Introduction," in *Against and for Method*, 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> Silberberger, "[Reimagining the Crit](#)," in *Against and for Method*, 226.

Perhaps Rittel's idea of *objectification* offers one possible response to this concern. As Claudia Mareis explains, Rittel contrasts objectification with scientific objectivity. It does not remove values and subjective interests from planning or turn judgments into scientific facts. Instead, it means identifying the assumptions and values on which a judgment rests and making them available for discussion with others, to "successfully exchange information about the foundations of our judgement."<sup>12</sup>

With this distinction in mind, I return to some of the statements that had seemed so mysterious when I first sat at the table:

*"this wall would work better if it were aligned with that one."*

*"Is this projection big enough? It has become a bit pathetic."*

Perhaps the problem was not that these judgments had no grounds, but that their grounds remained unspoken. The alignment of the wall could be considered in relation to the spatial order it creates, the elements it connects, and the movement or view it organizes. Or the projection could be assessed in relation to the volume beside it, the hierarchy it is intended to establish, and the effect it is meant to produce.

None of these considerations would prove the judgment objectively, and another architect might still disagree. But they would locate it within the particular conditions of the project and make its grounds available for discussion. The judgment would remain context-dependent, but context dependence would provide the basis for investigating it rather than prevent such an investigation.

I take a breath and tell myself that this possibility is encouraging. Still, values learned within an institution may be difficult to recognize from inside it. Perhaps such self-reflection requires more than moving between two sides of the same pedagogical table. It may require sitting at another table altogether.

... We are all sitting around a large table. Everyone has brought the essay they are working on to share and get feedback on. Printed pages and laptops are spread across the table.

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<sup>12</sup> Horst W. Rittel, "On the Planning Crisis: System Analysis of the 'First and Second Generations,'" *Bedriftsøkonomen* 8 (1972): 394, quoted in Claudia Mareis, "[Decision-Making in the Face of Uncertainty](#)," in *Against and for Method*, 111; see 110–11 for Mareis's discussion.

This time, the table is in Norway, in Sandviken, in the library at Bergen School of Architecture (BAS). We are not discussing architectural projects but the essays we are writing.

Now we are discussing mine. The others refer to different sentences in my text and speak about how closely they relate to some of my experiences and questions.

Then, one of the students draws attention to the word *beauty*. It is clearly a word that has, if not broken her connection with the text, at least interrupted it for a moment. She says that she wonders what place *beauty* had in the architectural education I received at my previous school.

I am not supposed to respond to the feedback yet. I am only supposed to listen. But the question stays with me. Why did she react so strongly to this word? Is this entire essay not an attempt to think about aesthetic judgment and its role in architecture, and, inevitably, in architectural education? Why, then, did the word *beauty* seem so strange and out of place to her?

The question remains in my mind.

As the discussion continues, the students and tutors begin considering how reflecting on the differences between my educational experiences at BIHE and BAS might open a way of examining aesthetic judgment across different traditions of architectural education. It might also allow me to place my personal experiences within a larger and more varied context.

As I listen, I tell myself: until now, I have moved between two sides of the pedagogical table, first as a learner and then as a teaching assistant, a tutor, or a facilitator of somebody else's learning. Moving between these positions has allowed me to look at aesthetic judgment more critically and self-reflectively. Now I realize that I occupy a third position, one that might extend this critical perspective even further.

How have I experienced aesthetic judgment here at BAS? How are these judgments made and expressed? How do teachers formulate them during crits, and how do students defend their own decisions?

What happens to aesthetic judgment when it moves into a different culture, a different physical setting, and an educational institution with a different pedagogical tradition, while all of this also takes place in another language?

I must think about this more.

Towards the end of the discussion, another person returns to the word *beauty*. They express uncertainty about my use of it in several places and suggest that *aesthetics* might often be more appropriate, since the two words are not interchangeable.

The question becomes visible to me again. What am I failing to understand here? How does my understanding of this word differ from theirs?

But then I tell myself that it is probably not very complicated. I will try to be more cautious in my use of the word *beauty* and replace it with *aesthetics* wherever possible. I forget about it, and my attention returns to the larger question of how reflecting on my year at BAS might cast new light on the subject I am trying to understand.

Two days later, I am going through the feedback again. I begin with what seems to be the simplest suggestion. I open the English version of the text and begin drawing a line through each occurrence of *beauty*, intending either to remove the word or perhaps replace it with *aesthetics* later. Then I suddenly stop! I notice something curious.

In Persian, *beauty* is *zibāyi*, and *aesthetics* is *zibāyi-shenāsi*, which literally means *the study or knowledge of beauty*.

I realize that although *beauty* and *aesthetics* appear as separate words in English and often produce different associations, as they did for the others around the table, in Persian their linguistic connection is visible inside the words themselves. In their Persian forms, The word for *beauty* (*zibāyi*) stands there in its entirety inside *aesthetics* (*zibāyi-shenāsi*).

Until this moment, I had understood two separate pieces of feedback from the discussion: one about different understandings of the role of aesthetics in architecture among different pedagogical traditions, and another about my imprecise choice between the words *beauty* and *aesthetics*. Now I begin to wonder whether the second might be a small but fundamental instance of the first.

When I used the word *beauty*, I had assumed that *beauty* carried the same weight as *zibāyi* in Persian. I was translating *zibāyi* into English and expecting the word to arrive with all its associations intact: something connected not only to appearance, but also to truth, perfection, and even divine presence. During the discussion, however, I began to realize that although the two words are translations of one another, they might not occupy the same conceptual space.

Sitting at another table has not told me which of these conceptual worlds, if either, offers more possibilities for what I am trying to understand. The conversation in

English around the table at BAS carried its own inherited ways of speaking and understanding, just as the conversations I had in Persian at BIHE carried theirs. And I cannot yet tell with confidence which differences belong to language, which to culture, and which to pedagogical tradition.

But the interruption around the word ~~beauty~~ made something visible that had previously remained invisible: the language through which I understand and judge architecture is itself part of what I have learned. From the beginning of this essay I have been asking what I had learned to see; now I also have to ask how language and the conceptual spaces it carries shape both what I see and what I have learned to name it.

The interruption around the third table helps me to understand that self-reflection does not mean separating knowledge from values once and for all. Perhaps it begins when what has felt self-evident becomes strange enough to question. The third table offers me no neutral position outside language, culture, or institutional tradition. But moving between the tables gives me enough distance to ask where my judgments come from, how they could be articulated, and what authority they should be allowed to carry.

The word ~~beauty~~ therefore remains difficult, but not because it is beyond discussion. Its associations are not the same as it moves between languages and traditions. It can appear self-evident while carrying histories and values that are not shared in the same way. Moving between *zibāyi* and ~~beauty~~ has not resolved these differences, but it has made them more visible.

What I take with me, then, is neither a set of objective criteria for aesthetic judgment nor even a settled definition of what aesthetic judgment is, but a different sensibility for the judgments I make: to articulate what I see, locate each judgment within its context, examine the values or even the concepts shaping my perception, and allow myself and others to question its grounds. If I think *this is better*, I should not reduce it to *I like this better* simply because I cannot prove it objectively. But the statement should begin a conversation rather than end one.

Now, at the end of this essay, I return to the document and look again at the word ~~beauty~~. I do not remove it. I leave it crossed out but still legible. The line does not erase the word or resolve its difficulty. It keeps it present and open to discussion while making visible the moment when a word I thought I knew became a question.

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