

# 360°

Learning through buildings and places

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# It matters if it's beautiful

David Sillito, arts correspondent at the BBC, has been reporting on architecture and how it affects people for almost 20 years. He answers the question: does beauty matter?



Buildings are usually places for people to do things. If beauty lifts our spirits, makes us smile and removes some of the aggravation, then we will almost certainly do these things more successfully. But, more than that, if something has been made beautiful, it obviously matters to someone and the people allowed to use it obviously must also matter.



Far left © DSDUK. Left © Dennis Gort. Right © Nigel Young/Foster + Partners

"The uglier it is, the stronger the message: 'you don't deserve beauty; what you do is not worth very much'"

So why does beauty matter? There has been some interesting research into spelling mistakes in emails. The number of mistakes increased if the sender thought they were more important than the recipient. Grammar and spelling has become a way of measuring respect in an organisation. In a choice between a beautiful handwritten letter or a misspelt email, the words are only part of the message.

The same thing applies to beauty in buildings. It's a way of communicating what we think of the people in the building and what they do. The uglier it is, the stronger the message: 'you don't deserve beauty; what you do is not worth very much'. Perhaps this is why people cheer when bad buildings are demolished. That contempt for who they are and what they do is being blown up.

But what is beauty, and who decides? The cliché is that beauty lies only in the eye of the beholder. I disagree. Beauty is about proportion, shape and detail, but more than anything it is about care. Tastes in decoration may vary but they are a code we begin to understand from a young age. The pupils in Guildford took school more seriously because the building was not a plaything, nor did it show signs of neglect. Everyone has some understanding of craftsmanship, detail and proportion, even if they cannot put it in to words. We may not all love the style of St Paul's Cathedral or the Gherkin, but it is obvious that someone has put effort in to it: they wanted it to be beautiful; they cared about the people who use it.

Towns, then, become puzzles. Why did someone make that church beautiful? Why did someone design something that way? Who decided that those people deserved that environment?

Circle Bath is a new hospital designed by Foster and Partners. Inside, it feels like a hotel. There is a nice view, good coffee and comfortable seats. It does not feel like a hospital: it is far too hospitable. The man next to me asked where the waiting room was. He was told he was sitting in it.

I asked the surgeons who owned the building – why waste money on making something look nice? What possible use is a beautiful hospital? "The patients turn up on time," said one. "It relaxes them: they need less anaesthetic," said another.

The answers, as you can see, were remarkably hard headed. Beauty was business.

In Holland I met a traffic engineer, Hans Monderman. He wanted to make towns safer, so he took out all the safety features. The barriers, the pedestrian crossings, the traffic lights and even the kerbs – all went. What he replaced it with was a street design that was prettier. It looked like an old-fashioned market square,

Things of beauty: the new building for Christ's College in Guildford (top and centre) encourages good behaviour, while Circle Bath (opposite) relaxes its patients.

a place for civilised encounters. A fountain where the jets of water grew in size when traffic increased.

Cars slowed down, drivers became more courteous, accident rates fell. Beauty demanded respect.

Christ's College School in Guildford is a Stirling Prize-nominated example of a new school building. Is it beautiful? It is, actually, rather austere and formal. The decoration is devoid of the bright colours of many modern schools, and the finishing with its exposed brickwork is far from most people's view of pretty or beautiful. It is, though, calm, grown up and seems to exude a sense of serious purpose.

What is the biggest effect the new school building has had, I asked. "The pupils are better behaved," came the reply. I wasn't expecting that.

Talking to the pupils, there was a sense that this was a place that demanded a certain way of behaving. It is not a style they would, perhaps, choose for their bedrooms, but that is the point.

When I was at school we all assumed that the less important lessons took place in the

leaking temporary classrooms. You could feel the chatter and cheekiness rising as we walked towards them.

It's taken me a while (about 15 years of filmmaking) to realise why beauty matters.



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