

Speech: Transport Minister speaks at the Backing Beauty Reception

Tonight (17 July 2017) I am going to speak of the future.

Truth is an absolute. And beauty the means by which it is revealed to us in its most comprehensible form. In John Keats' words:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all / Ye know on earth, and
all ye need to know.

Through our connection with beauty, we enjoy a taste of the sublime and both an escape from and a compensation for the inevitable pains and trials of daily life.

Through beauty the common good is nurtured, for humans are spiritual creatures who need much more than their daily bread.

Our sense of place is inseparable from our sense of worth and so the places in which we live and the environment around us feeds our individual and communal well-being.

To believe that a government minister shouldn't dare to speak of beauty is to assume that beauty is beyond politics or perhaps that politics is beneath aesthetics.

It is a misconception I want to confront this evening.

Politicians, as their confidence has been eroded, have retreated to, where a less challenging, less ambitious, less thoughtful discourse prevails.

Nervous about broaching matters about which they feel they can't do much or don't want to do much, it is unsurprising that they have failed to inspire those whose everyday lives have been blighted by the ugliness of the built environment they endure.

Back in 2005, my colleague Oliver Letwin observed that:

I believe that the disappearance of beauty from the vocabulary of politics is one of the reasons why British politics today so frequently strikes people as dessicated. I believe it is one of the reasons why so many people are 'turned off' politics.

The loss Oliver described is one I have regularly encountered, both in my role as Transport Minister and in the other offices of state I have held.

Even the most obvious truth – the advocacy of the pursuit of beauty – is

regarded with either disregard or disdain.

In part, this is explained by egalitarian hostility to those who judge the taste of others – for we are encouraged to believe that all is of equal worth regardless of how brutal, ugly or crass it is.

But more than this, we have lost our faith in beauty, because we have lost our faith in ideals. As Pope Benedict lamented:

We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognise anything as definitive and has as its highest value one's own ego and one's own desires.

Yet this does not have to be so. Through beauty, our ideals and what is real can be harmonised.

Those who dare to make a case for beauty, elegance, grace or refinement are far from a public discourse brutalised by modern media and the consequent zeitgeist.

We are forced to live in too many spheres which have been colonised, in Umberto Eco's terms, by the Empire of Imbeciles.

The crass preoccupation with utility becomes imbecilic as it descends to the defence of ugliness.

No one has done more nor suffered more for his advocacy of beauty than His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales.

As long ago as 1989, he set out in 'A Vision of Britain' the defining principles of good architectural design.

In 2011, he explained again that these timeless principles fit the future:

We can't have a future without the past. There has to be a sense of timelessness, a living tradition that helps to maintain (that) sense of identity and belonging.

More recently, in December 2014, he once again made the case for the re-connection of design with the natural order. He argues:

Universal principles are expressed in the order of Nature, which can never be 'old-fashioned'... Basing designs on the timeless universal principles expressed by Nature's order enables the full scope of our humanity to be fulfilled, on the physical, communal, cultural and spiritual levels.

Perhaps the most easily grasped and so persuasive counter to the zealous

preachers of modernism is the relationship – understood for centuries but now neglected – between the simple, God-given beauty of nature and what man can do.

The essence of Prince Charles' case is that there are timeless principles of good design. Such an argument would for centuries have been regarded as a priori.

Now the wish for art to please – to inspire – has been replaced by a thirst to shock, to alarm. As Roger Scruton has said:

Without the background of a remembered faith modernism loses its conviction: it becomes routinised. For a long time now it has been assumed that ... Art must give offence, stepping out of the future fully armed against the bourgeois taste for kitsch and cliché. But the result of this is that offence becomes a cliché.

Yet, despite popular revulsion with much they have imposed upon us, those responsible – who rarely live where they have wrought havoc – viciously attack anyone who dares to articulate what most people know: that most of what's been built in my lifetime could be demolished without aesthetic cost, and so bring the seductive benefit of leaving what was there before to stand proud.

Through our appreciation of beauty, we come to terms with ourselves and others, as our senses are elevated by sensory joy.

So, understanding the relationship between the built environment and well-being, I embarked on the mission, first highlighted in [my speech last year to the Independent Transport Commission](#), to challenge the character of what passes for acceptable design in much road and rail construction of recent times.

The best is bland. The worst is hideous.

It is true, of course, that different interpretations of beauty have prevailed in different eras, but the abiding idea was once routinely accepted – that what is built should be dignified by style.

Yet for at least 50 years, too often and in too many places, utility has been regarded as sufficient by callous architects, crass planners and careless politicians.

It's not just that form has been shaped by function, but that style has been neglected altogether. Greed and convenience have subsumed aesthetics.

Nowhere is this more true than in the case of industrial wind turbines, collections of which – in true Orwellian fashion – are dubbed 'farms'.

As Energy Minister I acted to ensure that wind turbines were constructed in appropriate locations after proper consultation with local communities.

Because little could jar more with the natural world or the man-made countryside than these huge concrete monstrosities.

Consideration about the impact on landscape became a vital part of the approval process. And, mercifully, we cut the subsidies paid by taxpayers.

While some made a case against the negative impact of turbines on the environment, and a few attempted to make an aesthetic case for such identikit industrial structures, many others simply dismissed my argument as irrelevant.

They did so on the basis of the easily grasped, though utterly crass notion, that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'

Let's now, once and for all, be clear.

It is not beauty that changes but the ability of the beholder to appreciate it.

This notion that beauty is relative has been used to justify much of the ugliness imposed on our towns and cities by architects, planners and developers since the Second World War.

'Streets in the sky' were never a substitute for real streets, for homes on a human scale, in proportion and in harmony with their environment.

A home is not "a machine for living in". Ironically, these are the words, written in 1923, of the father of modern architecture Le Corbusier.

Homes are a reflection of our humanity.

As William Morris said,

Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.

Morris understood that beauty and well-being are inextricably linked.

And that a politics that is serious about people's welfare and happiness must be serious about beauty.

For the ancient Greeks, aesthetic and moral judgements were inseparable.

In the 19th century, many artists considered beauty to be the vital link between freedom and truth.

There can be once again a growing understanding of how aesthetics are a vital part of our judgement of value and worth, for people instinctively understand the connection between beauty and a wider conception of value.

You see it in the love of natural, unspoilt places and the sense of shared ownership we feel for historic buildings.

You see it in the protests against the ugly buildings that developers still attempt to foist on communities against their will.

You see it in the despair at the way so many contemporary buildings are identikit, lacking any sense of craft or character.

Built with no consideration of the past and no regard to the future.

Indeed, at the heart of modern architecture, like all modern art, is the Nietzschean idea that the past is irrelevant and that we can create our own value system.

It is not for nothing that the 'hero' of Ayn Rand's despicable book 'The Fountainhead' is an architect.

This is the second misconception I want to bury this evening, and not before time.

Much modern architecture fails precisely because it rejects those principles of design that time has taught us delight the senses.

Where modern design does succeed it is largely by accident.

Or because, where form has at least followed function, a building has a high degree of utility.

But, as Edmund Burke noted long ago in an early work on aesthetics, this is not the same as beauty.

Burke understood that there is a great deal in common in what people find beautiful. But this is not related to utility; our appreciation of beauty is an effect "previous to any knowledge of use".

In other words, we know something to be beautiful before we understand its function.

When we perceive beauty, he wrote, our "senses and the imagination captivate the soul before understanding is ready either to join with them or to oppose them".

Our perception of beauty is not rational, it stems from the unconscious; from our deepest feelings and emotions as human beings.

Sir Roger Scruton puts it perfectly. He says:

Beauty is an ultimate value – something that we pursue for its own sake, and for the pursuit of which no further reason need be given.

Beauty should therefore be compared to truth and goodness, one member of a trio of ultimate values which justify our rational inclinations.

While the solipsism of the architect may be the driving force behind the drive to render much of our public space unsightly, it is our own denial of what our senses tell us that has enabled this desecration to take place.

It is because we have become so doubtful about the ability to make valid judgements about aesthetics, and even embarrassed by those who do, that we allowed ourselves to be ridden roughshod over by those who put profit and ego above all else.

Too many remain hesitant about making aesthetic judgments.

Respublica's research has shown that people tend to focus on the details – 'less litter and rubbish', 'vandalism and graffiti', and less 'vacant and run-down buildings' as important factors in making an area more beautiful.

All these things matter, and we could do much more to address them.

But which buildings will invariably be the shabbiest, the neglected, and the most disfigured with graffiti? It will be the relatively modern buildings – those built within the past 60 years.

Daubing graffiti is a crime, but the greater criminals are those that designed the modern structures which are the daubers' canvas.

And which buildings are invariably the most-obviously treasured?

It is older buildings, shaped by vernacular style, where architects have taken care to be in harmony with the surroundings. Where craftsmen have laboured over detail.

A study by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) found that when respondents were asked to name the most beautiful buildings in Sheffield, most cited the 2 cathedrals.

This brings me to the third and final misconception that I want to challenge, that beauty belongs somehow to the past.

For it is often considered, sometimes unthinkingly, that it is no longer possible to build beautiful buildings.

This is perhaps why increasing regard is given to the beautiful places and buildings that have survived intact.

We have somehow, rather depressingly, come to believe that the supply of beauty is both finite and exhausted.

This is perhaps because people assume that it must be somehow dated or even kitsch to build according to the principles of classical architecture.

Or because they assume that beauty comes at too high a price, and must be sacrificed for the sake of utility.

Both of these conceptions are false.

When the city fathers of Birmingham, Nottingham and Manchester built great town halls in either the neoclassical or gothic revival style, they did so because they understood that these styles had endured.

They wanted to build something that would last.

And they succeeded.

The modernist library in Birmingham's Chamberlain Square has recently been demolished, just 40 years after it was built – what a pity that its replacement couldn't have been in keeping with its surroundings!

No one would seriously consider doing the same to the neoclassical town hall, or to other great public buildings of the Victorian era.

Yet, despite their appearance, these are in other respects modern buildings, built using modern construction techniques.

In historical terms, they were built yesterday.

There are no good reasons why we cannot continue to build beautiful buildings and public infrastructure.

That is what I have undertaken to achieve as a Minister of State at the Department for Transport.

To make it an uplifting experience to navigate the roads, stations and other public infrastructure in our country.

We spend so much of our time travelling – to work, to see friends and family.

We must not resign ourselves to being miserable as we get from place to place.

Fine words matter, but they matter most as the precursor to fine deeds.

So later this year, I will be setting out in detail how our roads and railway sectors go about designing schemes in a harmonious way.

I am looking at both the processes by which judgments and decisions are made as well as the principles which inform those decisions.

Earlier in the year I met Sir Peter Hendy, Chair of Network Rail, who is now, with my officials, establishing a Rail Design Advisory Panel to embed good design on the railways.

The railway network is rich with buildings and structures of aesthetic value drawn from the dawn of the railway age through to the sympathetic treatment of Kings Cross.

In recent years, however, too often function has subsumed form leaving many of our cities and towns and much of our countryside scarred.

It is my ambition that the Rail Design Advisory Panel will usher in a new

golden age of railway design.

It will mirror the design panel that I insisted upon when, as the minister responsible, I established Highways England in 2014.

This has already examined the design of a number of schemes including the A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon and the A303 Stonehenge Tunnel.

It has also looked at Highways England's general approach to a range of issues including light pollution and the design of expressways.

The panel includes organisations such as The Prince's Foundation for Building Community and the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

I have also asked both design panels to produce guidance on good design, exemplifying good practice – to shine a guiding light for practitioners.

I am pleased with the progress being made on these and they will be published in the coming months.

And I am working with the [HS2 Design Panel](#) too – their initial work is impressive.

Finally, I have established a taskforce to review motorway service areas, tasking it with improving the design and landscaping of both new and existing facilities.

In addition, it will be reviewing the scope for an expansion of local and particular provision of facilities to combat creeping corporate ubiquity.

It is my firm belief that motorway service areas should support local independent businesses, source locally produced food and be lovely places to enjoy.

Beauty at every turn, every stop.

All of these elements are critical for ensuring that good design is at the heart of all we do.

I am also determined that good design principles will not only apply to new projects but also to refurbishments and maintenance.

How we treat what is first well designed can make unsightly what was once beautiful.

As the great railway stations, bridges and tunnels of the Victorian era demonstrate, while beauty and utility are not the same, they can be made to work in harmony.

One does not have to be sacrificed for the sake of the other.

Indeed, the willful excesses of modern and post-modern architecture are often far more expensive than buildings built and designed according to classical principles.

It is our misconceptions we must now consign to the past.

And, in their place, embrace a vision of beauty.

To fill our hearts with joy.

We shall doubtless encounter carpers and critics – too difficult, too expensive, too contentious – they will say.

We will be tested in our resolve.

There can be no surrender.

We must triumph.

The future deserves nothing less.