The Beauty, Inside. On Architecture, the Body, and Stability

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Abstract

The 2012 Internet mini-series *The Beauty Inside* and the 2015 Korean film based upon it, *Byuti Insaideu*, illustrate some crucial philosophical questions related to the body, our relationship to objects and the way we engage space. This paper discusses some of these implications in relation to the elusive concept of *beauty* in contemporary architectural practice.

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Prologue

Where does beauty reside? Whence does it arise to strike us? Is it embedded within the works of art and architecture that we inhabit, or is it rather a sensible condition that characterizes us as human beings? Does it spawn from its maker's hand and creativity, or does it lie somewhere between the subject and the object, as if it were a particular quality of the air that surrounds us?

Beauty has perennially haunted humankind, an elusive *something* that is difficult to engage and explain: yet we cannot doubt its existence, since our personal experience is punctuated by the presence of beauty. Beauty is elusive, somehow bound to the evolution of taste, but in many cases nothing less than timeless, as admitted even by materialist thinkers (Marcuse, 1978: 67). In architecture, things become even more complicated by the performativity of buildings and spaces, by their fundamental necessity of utility, which distances them from the autonomy of art.

To make things even more inextricable, in our time there is a diffuse feeling that beauty has lost its stability: the waning of classical canons, a long-lasting process begun over a century ago, seems to have reached its fulfillment, leaving us today with an aesthetic category that is full of question marks. Beauty appears to have lost its certainty, the reliability which made it easy to elect the objects displayed in art museums. Equally, "beautiful architecture" is a concept that, instead of reassuring us, today tends to make us wary. This is from where I start: from this condition of instability, from the loss of a safe haven to which our aesthetic expectations could once be moored. Let us observe that uncertainty, trying to understand from where it derives: from our bodily engagement with the spaces that we make and inhabit, from our deep bond with objects and tools. And we will do this by looking at a modern fairy tale, a delicate parable of our relationship with the world.

What it feels like to be a shape-shifter: The Beauty Inside

There is a tiny gem hidden in the Internet: it's called *The Beauty Inside*.[11] It is a mini web series, lasting a mere 45 minutes, which in six episodes articulates a deep philosophical question: how is a person's body

1 - The series, developed by Intel and Toshiba, was directed by Drake Doremus in 2012. It is available on YouTube at https://youtu.be/UTm-c6a0NViU.

Fig. 1 - Fitting in. From *The Beauty Inside*, 2012.

Fig. 2,3 - Focusing. From *Byuti Insaideu*, 2015.

bound to identity? What would happen to an individual if s/he weren't anchored to the world by means of the body's (relative) stability?

The series' main character, Alex, wakes up each morning as a different person – or, more exactly, as the same self within a different body. Young or old, handsome or ugly, man or woman, bearing different somatic traits and speaking various languages, but always Alex. To navigate through daily life, he has amassed an extra-large wardrobe with garments for every size, including a shoe fitter and a phoropter coming with an array of lenses, incremented versions of the usual prosthetic devices we use to be normatively performant.

There is no explanation for this "condition," which Alex passively accepts, in a lifestyle that must forcedly retreat from sociality. While reveling in the classic mind-body divide, this fantasy tale posits a few fundamental questions: how is our place in society defined by our physical appearance? How does the loss of corporeal stability affect our sense of selfhood? Can love be detached from physical attraction, remaining only hinged to the beauty to be found somewhere "inside"?

The story's drama begins to unravel as Alex falls in love with Leah, who works in an antique furniture shop. While he does manage to seduce her within the timespan of a single day where he had woken up as a handsome young man, the loss of this charming appearance inhibits the unfolding of a longer relationship. Yet determined not to let go, he decides to take his chances and reveal his condition to Leah, leading to a somewhat surprising conclusion.

In 2015, Korean director Baik picked up the series' enticing storyline and developed it into a full-length film, titled *Byuti Insaideu*. While the plot is basically the same, the Korean version adds three features that extract further philosophical implications, helping us to reflect on the relationship between body, beauty, and (architectural) space.

One: Woo-jin – Alex's Korean avatar – works as a freelance furniture designer and builder. His brand's[2] main feature is that objects are custom-tailored for the buyer: each chair, desk, table is precisely crafted around the person's body, accommodating the differing proportions of legs, arms, torso etc. and the peculiarity of sitting or resting styles. As Woo-jin's

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2 - The brand's name is ALX, a tribute to the original series' character.

shape-shifting body does not afford him stability, the furniture he designs is (almost paradoxically) keenly measured upon bodies that are firm, unvarying. Far from the standardization of industrially produced furniture, these items are capable of *gearing* the individual to physical space, providing an ergonomically optimized sense of comfort.

Fig. 4 - Touching. From *The Beauty Inside*, 2012.

Two: in the American installment, Alex befriends Leah by purchasing her antique furniture pieces. As he brushes a table with his hands, he reflects:

> It's lovely, the way it's just somebody's old desk. It hasn't been changed at all. Sometimes we buy this kind of thing just to give ourselves a bit of somebody else's life. It has another chance of life with us, the mystery of people's hands touching it.

It thus seems as if some form of life was embedded in the object – in the conversation and table talk it has witnessed, in the memories that permeate it like lacquer. Yet in the Korean adaptation, the objects are new, and history plays no role in their coming to life: what matters is their ability to support action, in a pragmatic, forward-looking perspective rather than a longing for lives past. Is this a tell-tale sign of an East-West divide in our attitude towards objects?
Three: as Woo-jin's and Yi-soon (the Korean Leah) start dating, given his ever-changing appearance she is unable to recognize him each time they meet. They must thus devise a different strategy, which does

Fig. 5 - Making. From *Byuti Insaideu*, 2015.

3 - In Korea, *The Beauty Inside* has also been turned into a television series, and a Hollywood remake of the film has been announced.

4 - A further challenging film on this topic is Spike Jonze's *Her*. See also De Matteis, 2015.

not rely on sight but on a recurring gesture: Woo-jin approaches her and takes her hand, so she knows it is him in his present incarnation. The woman is blind – cognitively rather than physiologically – towards her boyfriend, whom she is unable to visually recognize, until the two bodies come in contact with each other. The gesture intentionally performed with the hand "objectifies" her, just as gaze does (Böhme, 2018: 47). Throughout both narratives, the prominence of touch – touching the furniture while appreciating or crafting it, touching one another – becomes paramount, as if to claim the greater reliability of touch over sight, its ability of stabilizing the body.

What this preamble lays out is that, despite their being delicate comedies, both versions of *The Beauty Inside*[3] offer a real cache of philosophical cogitations, ranging from the post-human body to the breaking of gender binarism, from the nature of conscience and selfhood to the relationship between body and identity, from oculocentrism to the body's latency in virtual social relations.[4] Alex/Woo-jin is a social outcast, devoid of a recognizable body upon which other subjects can affix an identity: he is thus bound to perpetually remain a stranger, frustratingly unable to reside within somebody's circle of familiarity. His space cannot be the same as that of the others, marred by a body deprived of stability. All the predicaments of the film's main character, however, are not his alone: the shape-shifter is the archetypal everyman, embodying conundrums belonging to everyone's life. Thus, as in any fairy tale, we are confronted with a moral story, with questions that must be ultimately turned towards ourselves. Therefore: how does our

own body stabilize the experience we make of the world, processing our relationship with physical things? And, finally, what is this corporeal sensation that we sometimes call *beauty*,[5] and how does it relate to the objects and artifacts that we make and use?

Stabilized bodies

Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body, immensely influential on recent architectural theory,[6] posits a stringent relationship between individual and surrounding world. This "gearing" is performed by the body proper, an entity belonging to both the subject and the environment, thus fusing the observer within the "flesh" of the world.[7] Yet what is somehow surprising in this otherwise fascinating articulation is that the body (the physical body, the *Körper*) is almost thought to be roaming the world naked, at most bearing a stick (in the case of blindness). There seems to be little space in Merleau-Ponty for the anthropology of tools and garments, of prostheses and medical devices, of the multiplicity of objects large and small – from the door-knob to the house – that constitute our landscape of dwelling. There are few places and moments in life where we entirely shed our garments – sometimes in our domestic intimacy, on nudist beaches, in the bathtub, but little more – and we are never entirely free of objects – there is always something we use, hold, sit on, or objects that shelter and contain us. All these items we wear, brandish or inhabit, support our body in its daily routines: they anchor it to the world, helping the subject navigate through life.

The Beauty Inside makes this point very clearly. Alex/Woo-jin's shape-shifting body requires additional props to be stabilized, hence the extra-large wardrobe catering to any possible corporeal configuration he may wake up in. With the support of these tools, he is never unprepared to face the outside world: the shoes help him walk, the garments protect from heat or chill, the glasses bring the visual environment into focus. These are all very practical tools, but clothes also reveal – or at least hint at – the subject's place in the social sphere, who he is and what he does, to what group he belongs. Objects thus help us establish our body's place in the world – both physically and symbolically: without them, we would "float away" due to our nakedness, imperfection and meaninglessness.

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5 - Gernot Böhme theorizes that beauty is one among many atmospheres, i.e. spatially effused feelings that corporeally engage the perceptually present subject, an "intermediary phenomenon". See Böhme, 2010: 52-53, and Böhme, 2006: 20.

6 - See, among others, Vesely, 2004; Holl et al., 2006; McCann, 2008; Pallasmaa, 2009.

7 - Merleau-Ponty's theory is mainly illustrated in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962), particularly in chapters 3 and 4.

The relationship between bodily stability and instability grounding the storyline is what makes *The Beauty Inside* relevant to architectural discourse.
In Merleau-Ponty's theory, the body is not a mere accessory: it guarantees the gearing to the phenomenal world of the human subject, an ability that is not purely functional but reaches into the existential domain. Only through a stable, performative body can we interact with the environment, allowing the phenomenal field to recede to a latent, transparent background. If this background were not to disappear, becoming irrelevant in our day-to-day business – except for the few moments when our attention brings it into focus – it would aggressively come upon us, shrieking in the acidic colors humankind has discovered through van Gogh's psychotic paintings. "What protects the sane man against delirium or hallucination", writes Merleau-Ponty (1962: 339), "is not his critical powers, but the structure of his space: objects remain before him, keeping their distance and […] touching him only with respect". But perhaps Merleau-Ponty has overlooked the fact that the body is never naked, that it is constantly held firm by objects, tools and devices, and almost perpetually housed in some artificially modified environment. Is this ever-present prosthesis or carapace of objects not of fundamental importance to the subject to guarantee sanity and protect from delirium? Alex/Woo-jin's technical apparatus seems intended to do exactly this, lest he be left naked and unprotected like a slug in the scorching sun.

Today, we know that objects are indeed a crucial element of human life, coexisting with our bodies in a relationship that is almost symbiotic.

Today, we know that objects are indeed a crucial element of human life, coexisting with our bodies in a relationship that is almost symbiotic. Tools are not just something we use to improve our daily life: our minds exist in a relation of strong engagement with the material world, both with objects (Malafouris, 2013: 77) and the surrounding environment (Jacobson, 2020: 62). Humans have evolved together with their tools, and our bond with objects is as crucial as that with the ground we walk on. To live without objects is unthinkable, and the castaway's nakedness is contrasted by weaving a loincloth and crafting a tool out of a stick. As technology evolves, tools do not lose their ontological statute as something standing between the subject and the world: a stone age hand-axe helps us to cope

with our physical environment, acting as an extension of our mind just as a digital device that serves as an external repository of memory.
Yet objects are not merely bound to the pragmatic sphere of making and doing: they readily invade the symbolic and affective domain, at times with such a force that we become obsessed with them. Accumulation of objects can provide a sense of pleasure that may reach into addiction, as in the case of Jérôme and Sylvie, the protagonists of Georges Perec's novel *Things*:

> Perhaps they were too greedy from the outset: they wanted to go too fast. The world and its things would have had to have always belonged to them, and then they could have imprinted on them myriad signs of their ownership. But they were condemned to conquest; they could become richer and richer, but there was no way they could have always been rich. They would have liked to live in comfort, amidst beauty. But they shrieked, they admired, and that was the surest proof that they were not in it, not amidst it. They lacked tradition – in perhaps the most despicable sense of the word – as well as true enjoyment, implicit and immanent, like a self-evident truth, the enjoyment which involves bodily happiness; their pleasure was cerebral (Perec, 1991: 34).

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The presence of objects in our life bleeds into the emotional sphere, and architectural artefacts make no exception. Buildings are protective, primarily meant to stabilize the body: shelter affords the fragile human a safe haven from wuthering elements and danger – real or perceived. They provide comfort and promote the unfolding of inner life. Objects thus support the body's presence in the world, delivering it from its being cast into an unruly wilderness: they are *prosthetic*, in the sense that what makes us human is the very collaboration between body and tools (Stiegler, 1998: 152). Yet we can also extend this claim to include a form of affective prosthetics, thereby meaning that our emotional life, not limited to the body's material shell, becomes embedded in the objects we use – even more so in the architectural artifacts we inhabit (De Matteis, 2021: 109-117).

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Today, the ontology of objects is a complex matter, since over the course of culture they have accumulated layer upon layer of complexity, like a snowball roll-

ing down a hill. We may appreciate objects for their use-value (what is more satisfying than a well-honed tool, such a sharp knife to cut my onions?), aesthetic dimension (the brand-new smartphone with its sleek design), symbolic power (my alma mater's cheesy sweatshirt), affective content (my late grandmother's old-fashioned dinner table). Our bond with an object can spark from one or a variety of these drivers, in ways that we usually do not take the time to consider. What all objects we seek have in common, however, is the pleasure they provide us: the desire to possess them is a potent driver of emotions. Clearly, objects can also terrify us: the handgun pointed at me (which, however, releases a surge of sense of power in the bearer's hand) or the needle about to pierce my skin (a fundamental medical device for the doctor who is treating me). Yet in any case, on one or the other side of the mirror, objects produce corporeal stirrings, aiding us in our business of touching the world, stabilizing our body and affecting our sense of presence.
If we limit our observation to architectural objects alone, these dynamics become even more evident. Hovering between the Bachelardian shell/nook/chrysalis – the receptacle of nostalgic childhood cravings and of a mysterious inner realm (Bachelard, 1969: 66) – and a carapace-like exoskeleton, a form of "second body" (Jacobson, 2009: 356), the subject's home fosters the body's stability and affective well-being, (usually) providing us with that sense of comfort grounding the very existential nature of dwelling (Zaborowski, 2005: 508). Yet even when we step outside the threshold of domestic reverie, buildings are ultimately objects that – more or less incidentally – support our bodies' going about while also influencing our affects. An airport, for example, is not merely an architecture funneling us from the ground to the realm of the sky: it is also the place where this transition is anticipated, where dreams of traveling are cultivated, anxieties of flight lulled. Its complex mechanism supports the voyager's body, controlling each movement – a strictly one-way displacement going from kiss to fly – but also each and every desire, including that irrepressible need of shopping for a new Bluetooth headphone. As our bodies are carried through the airport space, their physical mass is loaded onto an airplane, while our experience is normal-

ized and domesticated to the point that flying ends up appearing as the most ordinary thing in the world. While different in scale, buildings and hand-held tools are all conceived to empower the human subject, stabilizing (and in this case also sedating) the body's sensations and affective response.

A beauty less intense

(Architectural) objects prop and sustain our presence in the world, help us make space, announce us as beings with emotions and identity. Beyond the excesses of Capitalist consumption, in this we are not very different from our cave-dwelling forefathers, who certainly could avail themselves of far less tools but for this same reason prized them more than we love our disposable, mass-produced knick-knacks, sometimes even infusing them with magic powers. There is, however, something else pertaining to objects, something that has been haunting us since the first lines of this reflection, a sort of ghost, of ineffable shadow that retreats as soon as we try to focus our gaze on it: beauty. Beauty is a complex conundrum, and architectural beauty even more so. To speak of "beautiful architecture" today may sound outright naïve, and indeed it is a term more easily found in real-estate marketing, 21st century ladies' home journals, or political propaganda. Yet beyond the theoretical difficulties that – despite all noble attempts, from Alberti to Winckelmann – have historically made the achievement of a univocal definition of beauty a sort of philosophical unicorn, experience teaches us that a tension towards the object of our desire *does* exist, and can indeed be extremely powerful. Today, beauty is often conceptualized as "longing" (Sartwell, 2004: 10) – thus somehow overlapping with *love* or *desire* – or as "unity-in-diversity" (Diessner et al., 2018), hinting at the notion's relational qualities. After the decommissioning of normative beauty canons, based on prescriptive rules and proportions, the aesthetic field has abundantly incremented its amplitude to include beneath its umbrella objects and practices that classical art would never have deemed beautiful (Böhme, 2017: 63). Contemporary art delves deeply into the spatial, the situational and the performative domains: the isolated, frontally perceived artwork of the classical tradition is today just one out of many possibilities.

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In addition, the very experience of art has come to thematize itself: our relationship with artwork is no longer based on the binary, isolated, one-to-one subject/object divide, but on a vaster and inclusive atmospheric ensemble, where even the work's cultural "rank" alters both our corporeal sensations and critical appreciation (Griffero, 2014).

Equally, architectural beauty is a difficult conversation topic: when does an architecture acquire this label of excellence? Is it when it displays an exceptional figural quality, a superbly designed appearance, perhaps supported by the branding of a celebrity architect? Or rather when it fits unobtrusively within its given context? Does it become beautiful when it caters to the needs of communities, improving the quality of their life? Or perhaps when it guarantees that it will do no harm to the environment, and be respectful towards all forms of life? The answer remains subjective, hinged to the observer's personal position and set of values.

Such a plural conception of beauty is certainly a great democratic achievement: beauty is for anyone to possess, and no longer dictated by a canon established by some intellectualist elite. However, while aesthetic freedom at large can certainly lead to greater creativity and joyful expression, architectural beauty is a somewhat more complicated matter. Buildings are never really entirely private objects, for if the material property is clearly defined, the public space they occupy belongs to the community. Hence, normalization sets in under the form of building codes that prescribe the proper way of interacting with a wider aggregation of architectural objects. Clearly, beauty is not an issue here, rather all those aspects that can be measured and quantified, leaving no space to interpretation. We know what kind of cityscape this mechanism often produces, and there is little to be enthusiastic about. While governance tool to streamline the process and foster the achievement of better results are sometimes adopted (De Matteis, 2010), we know that *quality* is just the poor brother of *beauty*, and that a checklist of taxonomically organized items summing up to a gold label will not substitute the *je ne sais quoi* of the ineffable.

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The feeling one has is that beauty is no longer a denizen of the (architectural) world. To be clear: we

may live surrounded by beauty – after all, the privileged Western world has invested so much to expel non-beauty from its perceptual horizon, and in many places it has even achieved this goal – but the ravishing, almost heroic feeling of the poet raptured by a Grecian urn, or of the perfect work of art that can be locked inside a museum, quite obviously is a myth of the past. Beauty has become democratized: everyone can own the Mona Lisa, if s/he is content with a reproduction. The objects of desire – the objects that, as we have seen, stabilize our body and grant us a place in the world – are today no longer the unique works of artist masters, but within anyone's reach, provided that you have enough money to purchase them. Although it may be a bit cynical to equate contemporary beauty with the possession of a well-stocked wardrobe like that owned by Alex/Woo-jin, there are some obvious analogies: the sense of longing we have for that which makes us feel well, supported, comfortable, for what enriches and facilitates our lives, is an expansive corporeal feeling, a stirring that animates our body in a way that is not unlike what beauty does.[8] Although beauty cannot be measured,[9] we can perhaps imagine that the feeling afforded by the comfortable objects supporting our daily life is a form of beauty less intense, and that the corporeal sensations we experience belong to the same family.

Conclusion: the slumbering beauty of architecture

If any conclusion can be drawn from the above considerations on the essence of beauty in contemporary architecture, is that perhaps we have a problem. Let us return to Alex/Woo-jin: his life just drags on, day after day, supported and comforted by his extra-large closet. Only when he meets Leah/Yi-soon, when the longing becomes too strong to ignore, does he engage with the heroic, romantic (and somewhat comic) pursuit that is entailed by beauty, by the desire for unity. Yet design today seems more apt at making users content than at striving for the breathtaking convulsion of beauty; it seeks the bland correctness of comfort and not the destabilizing, almost painful commotion of love and longing. Is there something we have lost along the way? Has the practice of architecture given up on its ability of producing the *shock and awe* that left the subject speechless in front of the grandiosity

8 - I'm referring to Hermann Schmitz's theory of the lived body; see, among others, Schmitz, 2011 and 2019.

9 - Beauty cannot be measured, but the subject's feeling for beauty is indeed a research topic in psychology and neuroaesthetics. See Diessner et al., 2018.

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of monuments? Is the building that merely strives to support the body and provide it a place in the world perhaps the best we can expect today?

There is no univocal answer to this question, yet the feeling remains that although beauty still inhabits our buildings and cities, its intensity is today more similar to what we experience with the bland sense of comfort. When we are lucky enough, we dwell in well-stocked wardrobes, where all needs are catered to but all emotions become somehow sedated; where instability is not welcome, even when it brings in the existential turmoil of beauty.

In the final sequence of *Byuti Insaideu*, a heartbroken Woo-jin has escaped from Seoul, retreating in solitude to another country. He has left behind the restlessness of amorous struggle, finding comfort in the predictability of boredom. Yet – I apologize for the spoiler – this time it is Yi-soon who tracks him down, awakening him from his self-imposed slumber. Beauty, after all, does not depend on what your body is like, but on the longing and the desire it makes you feel, on the stirrings and sensations we become animated by: beauty is inside, and beauty doesn't let us sleep.

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