

# AESTHETICS, THE UNEASY DIMENSION IN ARCHITECTURE



## CALL FOR PAPERS

International conference and annual meeting of the  
Nordic Association for Architectural Research  
in collaboration with the  
Faculty of Architecture and Fine Arts,  
Trondheim, Norway.  
25 - 27 April 2013

 **NTNU**  
Faculty of Architecture  
and fine art



*“Architects have  
inherited from modernism  
an unshakable suspicion  
of the notion of beauty.”*

Financial Times  
November 2010





To a great extent works of architecture are judged as important because of their aesthetic qualities. Most often they are published because they have spectacular aesthetic forms. Even if they also happen to be excellent technical or practical solutions to social problems, they are seldom published and acknowledge as important if they are not interesting aesthetically too.

At the same time architects are conspicuously silent about the aesthetic dimension. We seem to engage in discourse about all the other aspects of the work of architecture but are all the more silent about the aesthetic dimension; it is as if we have problems with identifying ourselves within it. What is more, we seem to be unable to lead a professional discussion about this aspect and even, perhaps, to lack a profound understanding of its role in architecture. As a consequence, we are lacking arguments that can legitimize the aesthetic dimension in concrete projects, in relation to the society and its demands. Last but not least, we are often helpless when it comes to conducting research on aesthetic questions in architecture.

In many ways the aesthetic dimension seems to be illegitimate in architecture. One interesting aspect of this, is the political and the fact that politics plays a much more important role in the aesthetic dimension than those of “firmitas” and “utilitas”. Today the aesthetic aspect appears as anti-popular, elitist and consequently as democratically problematic. There is more than one side to this. One has to do with the pedagogical efforts of the architectural avant-garde to propagate modern formal language as “good taste” which was experienced as authoritarian and as an offence against the common man. Another aspect of this, that is possibly more important in social and historical settings that differ from the contemporary Nordic one, is that aesthetics has been linked to the social elite as a leisure class. This turns aesthetics into a dimension that is cut off from societal reality. It acquires the quality of surface, of the mere appearance of reconciliation and harmony, of beautification and thereby being a deception.





Architects' troubled relation to the aesthetic dimension not only contrasts to the important role it plays in architecture. It also contrasts to its increased importance in culture. From the 1980s and onwards, popular culture in particular became increasingly aestheticized through the media generating new interest in all kinds of design – not the least interior design and the design of life style concepts. This is related to the role aesthetics played as a main driving force in economy under the heading of “experience economy”. As a consequence, aesthetic questions moved into focus in the philosophical discourse. The question was raised as to if aesthetics might form a new foundation for all kinds of knowledge, thus forming a new “prima philosophia”.

These and other phenomena require that we as architects come to grips with the aesthetic dimension in a new way.

From this follows a wide array of questions about the relation between architecture and its aesthetic dimension. We are inviting the participants to present paper related to these issues, and in particular:

### 1 The relation between art and architecture

Historically there has been a close connection between the arts, in particular pictorial arts and music, and architecture. In the 20th century this was particularly visible in the relation between the architectural avant-garde and architecture. How deep is this influence on the entanglement of art and architecture today?

### 2 How do we think and talk about the aesthetic dimension in architecture?

How important is the aesthetic dimension to the work of architecture and the efforts to produce it? Does there actually exist a genuine aesthetic dimension and rationality in architecture. How do we develop a vocabulary for this discourse? Is it possible to develop a systematic teaching of form that is in line with aesthetic understanding of architecture? If so, how do we integrate it in a pedagogic process?

### 3 The form of life and the form of architecture

"Form follows function" said the Functionalists. Function, however, is part of the behavioral culture and as such has its form, a "pattern language" as Christopher Alexander formulated it. How does the way of life in different cultures or subcultures inform the form of architecture? How does this social and cultural connection prevent formal aesthetic work with architecture from turning into empty formalism? Does the aesthetic dimension actually take care of a profound dimension of human experience that no other sectors take care of?

### 4 The contemporary cultural dimension

How does the aestheticizing of popular culture and media influence the way we think and talk about the practice architecture? One dimension of this is the role it plays as a part of the design field in the building of life styles, another the role architecture plays in the so called "experience economy".

### 5 Criticism

How do we evaluate the aesthetic quality of a work of architecture and how do we legitimize our evaluations? Is it possible to develop a kind of objective criticism, and if not, does criticism have a value at all? How should this be expressed in specific cases of building, in politics, in journalism etc?

### 6 The political dimension

How is the aesthetic aspect related to power relations such as that of affluence, class, tyranny and democracy in society? Does the work on the aesthetic dimension come into conflict with these other possibly more important aspects of human existence?

The e-mail of the conference: [aesthetics@ab.ntnu.no](mailto:aesthetics@ab.ntnu.no)  
Deadline for Abstracts; 20th Jan. 2013





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Deadline for papers. 1st of March

Conference e-mail [aesthetics@ab.ntnu.no](mailto:aesthetics@ab.ntnu.no)

Conference www. <http://www.ntnu.edu/ab/aesthetics>

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