

Is there such a thing as an objectively beautiful building? Here's the science

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Credit: Marina Monroe from Pexels

Some people assume that there's a type of beauty that everyone can agree on. But did early humans really admire slender bodies the way we do today? After all, fashions come and go—there have been plenty of fads throughout history that we find hard to understand today.

The UK's deputy prime minister, Angela Rayner, recently suggested "beautiful" needs to be removed from the government's housing policy on the grounds it is too subjective. She [said in an interview](#) that "beautiful means nothing really, it means one thing to one person and another thing to another."

She isn't alone. Many people [support the notion](#), first stated by the Irish novelist Margeret Wolfe Hungerford, that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

But is this true? The current state of our knowledge on aesthetics, and specifically what we consider beautiful, is a mosaic of empirical discoveries. For more than 150 years, psychologists have run carefully controlled experiments to determine whether an attribute, such as a particular color, shape or melody is beautiful.

Some rules have emerged, but none are universal: for instance, the [golden rectangle ratio](#) in geometry, which denotes a rectangle with the height to width being 1:1.6. Although considered beautiful by some in objects such as buildings or windows, these dimensions are an uncommon choice for bathroom tiles or books.

Research has shown that our experiences of finding things visually appealing are an integral, and often unconscious, part of the way we perceive objects in the world around us. It takes [approximately 50 milliseconds](#), the blink of an eye, to reliably decide whether or not we think an object is beautiful.

Familiarity is an important factor. When something is seen or heard often, it is easier for our nervous system (our vision and hearing) to process it. And this ease [can be misattributed as beauty](#). This also explains how trends in beauty emerge—if we keep seeing and celebrating a certain type of face, it becomes familiar.

Beauty comes about in different ways, and whether something is considered beautiful can depend on attributes of the person doing the looking, such as their prior experiences, expertise and attitudes; whether it hangs in a museum or along a hospital corridor; as well as attributes of the object itself, such as its shape, color, proportions or size.

Beauty [can therefore arise from good design](#). When people deal with an easy-to-use object or interface, [they like it more](#) than hard-to-use counterparts. Easy-to-use objects often have visual characteristics such as clear balance, clarity and good contrast.

Does beauty matter in housing policy?

Discussions about beauty are a healthy state of affairs, until they start coming into discussions about housing policy.

A beautiful building can bring joy and contentment in everyday life. Beautiful, well-designed homes [can significantly enhance](#) the mental health of the inhabitants. Attractive, well-built surroundings [can reduce stress](#), increase feelings of happiness, and [contribute to a sense of peace](#) and contentment.

This may be why there's increasing evidence that taking small doses of psychedelics in a [controlled environment](#) such as a clinic, which produce [intense experiences of beauty](#), can help [treat depression](#).

A beautiful building means that someone cared to do that little bit extra. This may be meaningful to the kid growing up in [social housing](#), offering a sense of pride and belonging. Aesthetic appeal in housing and neighborhoods may lead to civic pride, where residents take collective responsibility for maintaining and improving their environment.

Pride may lead to stronger, more vibrant communities, and an idea that

came to life in modern times by the ["city beautiful movement"](#) in the US (1890–1920). "Mean streets make mean people," wrote the movement's leading theorist, Charles Mulford Robinson.

Beauty in housing [is not just about aesthetics](#); it often coincides with functionality. Good design considers the usability and comfort of spaces, ensuring that they are both beautiful and practical. This balance can improve the quality of life for residents by making spaces more efficient and pleasant to live in.

Beauty can also boost perseverance. When searching for information on a website, perseverance—the amount of time users keep searching for difficult to find information—increases when the website [is independently rated as aesthetically pleasing](#).

Similarly, when dealing with an electronic device, people [try for longer to make it work](#) if they find it aesthetically pleasing.

People are also willing to work harder [to continue viewing a face they find beautiful](#), even if it isn't accompanied with any other reward.

Beauty also demands copies of itself. Historically, in art and design, thought-to-be beautiful landscapes, faces, or vases have been copied in different forms. The act of drawing, sculpting, writing about, composing about a beautiful object is to make a copy of it.

Don't dis-invest from beauty

The subjectivity of beauty does not necessitate disinvestment from it. Beauty does mean something, even if it isn't totally objective. Attempting to bring beauty into our everyday lives, no matter that we each have a [unique perspective](#), as in the case of housing, would mean [investing in the human experience](#) for all.

So while beauty is to some extent subjective, artful design can play a crucial role in various aspects of our lives, from psychological well-being to social cohesion and even economic value. Industry giants such as Ikea and Apple have been reaping the benefits of applying this knowledge to their business model for decades.

Why build beautiful homes in the first place? Having the human experience in mind when building houses and neighborhoods, remembering the immense impact that something well designed and decorated can have is a worthwhile investment in humanity.

If removing the term beautiful from [housing policy](#) helps build more homes, then that's great. But, when it comes to actually building them—whether the term "beautiful" occurs in policy or not—it is certainly worth to consider investing in beauty.

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