

Sustainable is beautiful



Beauty in architecture is often expensive, while sustainability should be affordable and widespread. Does this mean that aesthetics and sustainability are in conflict? Or can one integrate the other? Solutions exist. What we need is a cultural revolution.

In architecture, there are two kinds of sustainability: one simpler, smaller, and ethical in its relationship with the environment and with people; and another which is “fashionable”, used as a label in a speculative way, without an understanding of what it really means.

This is at least the experience of Mario Cucinella. The Italian architect and designer is a champion of sustainability. In 2015, he founded SOS – School of Sustainability – a multi-disciplinary post-graduate programme in Bologna. According to him, there is some confusion on the issue. “There is a market that is very ambitious in wanting to be attentive to these issues, but there is still a long way to go,” he says.

A position not far from that of another expert, Dr. Sang Lee, who teaches Architectural design and theory at the Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. “Sustainability has become a fashion on the surface, but it is misguided and therefore not very effective,” he criticizes. To address this,

He thinks Shinjiro Koizumi has a point with the advice given in 2019 by Japan’s former environment minister: “On tackling such a big-scale issue like climate change, it’s got to be fun; it’s got to be cool. It’s got to be sexy too,” he said.

In this context, EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen’s New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative assumes a different perspective. Announcing, in September 2020, her movement based on



the three pillars of **sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion**, she uttered words that have since become almost a catch-phrase: “We need to give our systemic change its own distinct aesthetics – **to match style with sustainability.**”

But aesthetics is tricky; beauty and style are in the eye of the beholder, and even on sustainability ideas are unclear, as we have seen.

So, how can we get there?

“I think what is really interesting in connecting beauty with sustainability is that it starts to demand a **shift in values**, or what we might mean by beauty. So **architecture can no longer really be considered beautiful, unless it is inherently sustainable**, and in fact regenerative,” answers Orla Murphy, who is part of the round-table group for the New European Bauhaus.

But, in practice, how can we do this? Cucinella gives the example of projects in Northern Europe that put quality of life at their core, with more green spaces and less traffic, among other things, or the fight for a pedestrianised city centre in Paris.

For buildings, he evokes the so-called “circular buildings”, whose materials are tracked and recycled. One of the projects that are exploring solutions in that sense is Houseful. One of the frontrunner buildings is the “Cambium Community Project”, situated in a former military barrack in Fehring, an Austrian municipality. At the heart of the concept is the recirculation of water and nutrients from pre-treated household wastewater.

But how does this make the building “beautiful”? Through a technology that treats waste/greywater within a vertically constructed plant-based wetland. “The underlying principle is to use specific plant species to help clean polluted water through microbiological activity,” explains Gaetano Bertino, project manager at alchemia-nova, one of Houseful’s partners. He adds: “vertECO is in itself both a sustainable and an aesthetic solution, given the presence of many plants of different types and colours.”

There are also examples from the other side of the planet, such as the Fortaleza Micro Park in Brazil, presented on June 24 at the Cité du Design in Saint Etienne, France, as one of the projects of the UNESCO Creative Cities network. In this case, degraded public lands have been converted using the concept of the naturalised park. “In these parks, explained in a video Luiz Alberto Sabia, Head of Innovation of the City of Fortaleza, where you use the natural characteristics of the land, its original topography, and materials such as wood, recycled material and natural material, you create a whole natural ambience without artificial elements.”

What is sure is that these topics are no longer just academic, and climate change is already being felt. Moreover, the EU’s dependence on Russian gas has become a liability in the current volatile geopolitical situation, and the maintenance problems in the French nuclear power plants are a grim reminder that the only way forward, besides renewables, is through energy efficiency, which the EU Commission has recently resumed in one word: sobriety. But for this, we need a shift in mentality.

For Cucinella, the NEB is a step forward: “The fact that the President puts on the table the idea that a **cultural revolution is needed** also shows how Europe has reasoned so far. It has reasoned in legislative terms, in terms of technical prescriptions, energy performance, but it never made a cultural operation”.



For Lee, the key resides in culture as well. Not only for common people, making sustainability “sexier”, but also in architects’ education. Having studied in the US and teaching now in Europe, he is in a unique position to compare the two systems: he finds that in the Anglo-American tradition, “You are educated to look up to ‘star architects’” and try to become one, meaning that the core of education is individualism, not service. But he finds that European universities are different, more egalitarian, “But then again, he comments, the problem with the **European architecture system** is that **they emphasize the function too much. The training in understanding aesthetics is lacking.**”

So, at the end of the day, how do we integrate sustainability and aesthetics? The answer comes from Cucinella: “Perhaps **the new beauty is precisely that which tells about sustainability**. So it is no longer just a value of taste or aesthetics, but precisely of content. Maybe the buildings are a little soberer, but that is because they tell the story of a circular economy, a story linked to the recycling of materials. We are slowly moving away from that orgy of the 1990s and 2000s where we did the most absurd things. In my opinion, this sustainability topic incorporates the sobriety that we so much need.”

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