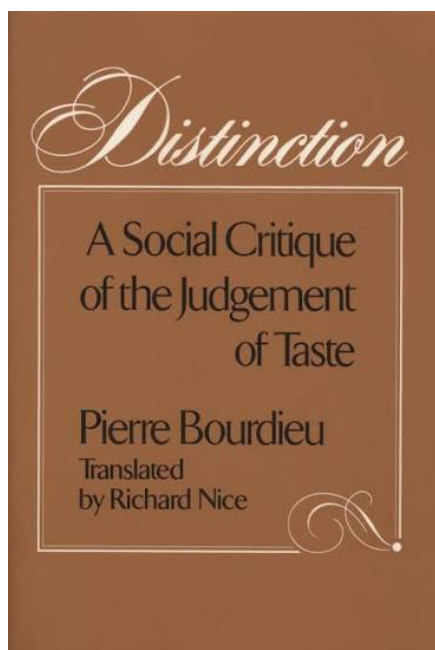


On Beauty: Books for a Contemporary Architectural Aesthetics / De la Belleza: Libros para una Estética Arquitectónica Contemporánea

Annotated Book List / Lista Bibliográfica comentada

Any contemporary discussion of beauty must begin by doubting the apparent innocence of the word. For a long time, architectural beauty could be presented as a matter of proportion, harmony, order or adequacy, grounded in the architectural object itself. Over the last fifty years, however, the most influential books on aesthetics, culture and architecture have made such confidence difficult to sustain. Beauty is understood today through object-based qualities, to some extent, but mainly through the ways in which buildings are perceived, learned, recognised, authorised, mediated, inhabited, maintained, consumed, repaired and environmentally conditioned. To ask what beauty is in contemporary architecture is therefore also to ask who has the power to define it, through which institutions, images, histories, bodies and climates.



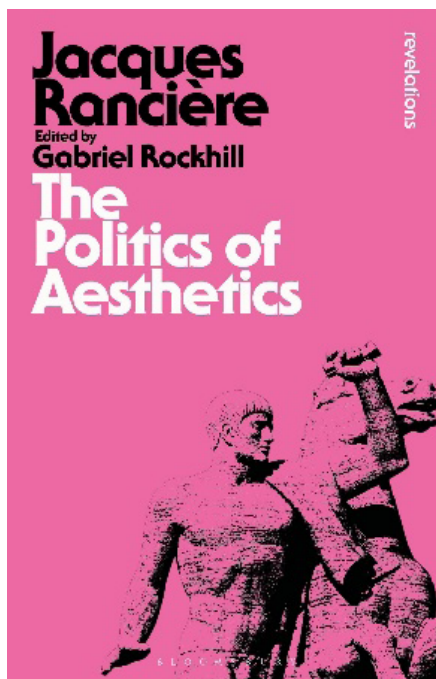
Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.

Bourdieu, Pierre.

Translated by Richard Nice.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

The unavoidable starting point is Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979). Bourdieu displaced beauty from the realm of universal judgement to that of social differentiation. Taste, in his account, is a system of learned dispositions through which class, education and cultural capital become visible. This has important consequences for architecture. The beautiful building is never only an object; it is also a social code. To admire austerity, ornament, patina, minimalism, raw concrete or domestic familiarity is to participate in a field of distinction, where judgement signals belonging to the select community of those who know what to see.



The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible.

Rancière, Jacques.

Translated by Gabriel Rockhill.

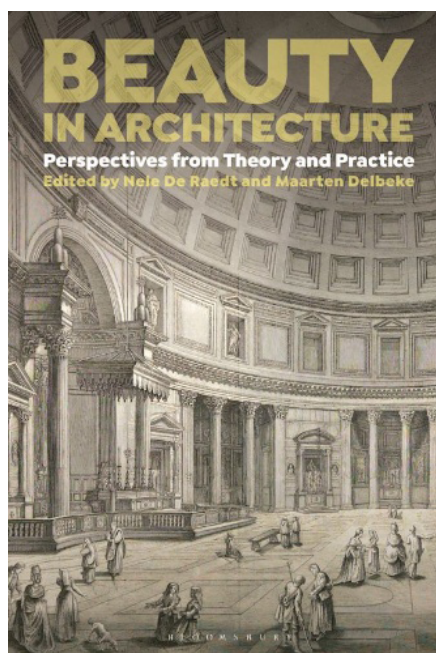
London: Continuum, 2004.

See also:

Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art.

Rancière, Jacques. / Translated by Zakir Paul. / London: Verso, 2013.

Jacques Rancière's work, especially *The Politics of Aesthetics* and *Aisthesis*, expands this problem from taste to the organisation of perception itself. For Rancière, aesthetics concerns the distribution of the sensible: the ways in which a culture decides what can be seen, said, felt and valued. This is particularly useful for understanding contemporary appeals to architectural beauty, from "Building Beautiful" policies to movements such as Architectural Uprising. These initiatives often present beauty as a shared or common value, and frequently associate it with historical, traditional or Western European architectural languages. These claims reveal the political work performed by aesthetic judgement: to define one visual tradition as beautiful is also to risk placing other forms of cultural construction, other material traditions, other climates and other publics outside the frame. From this perspective, architectural beauty is not merely a quality of buildings; it is a tool through which the political arrangement of appearances is produced, reinforced or contested.

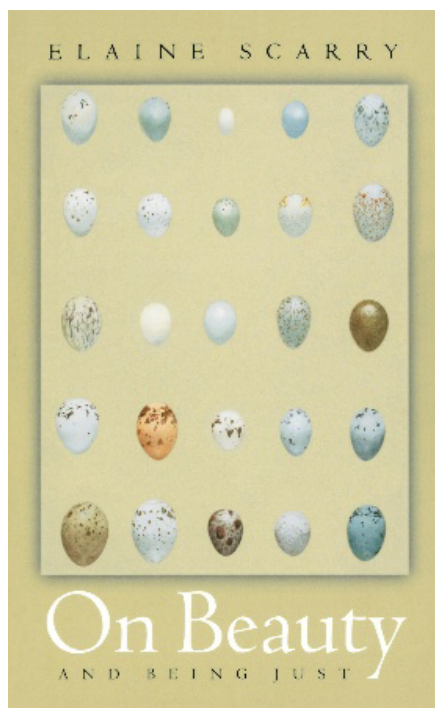


Beauty in Architecture: Perspectives from Theory and Practice.

De Raedt, Nele, and Maarten Delbeke, eds.

London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2025.

A recent architectural attempt to reopen this discussion is Nele De Raedt and Maarten Delbeke's edited volume *Beauty in Architecture: Perspectives from Theory and Practice*. The volume registers the difficulty of speaking about beauty today without forcing the term into a unified definition. The editors frame beauty as a notion suspended between public common sense, professional suspicion, Western aesthetic traditions, ideological conflict, climate concerns and demands for inclusion. In this sense, the volume confirms that beauty has returned to architectural discourse as a contested field in which questions of taste, authority, style, politics, sensory experience and justice intersect.



On Beauty and Being Just.

Scarry, Elaine.

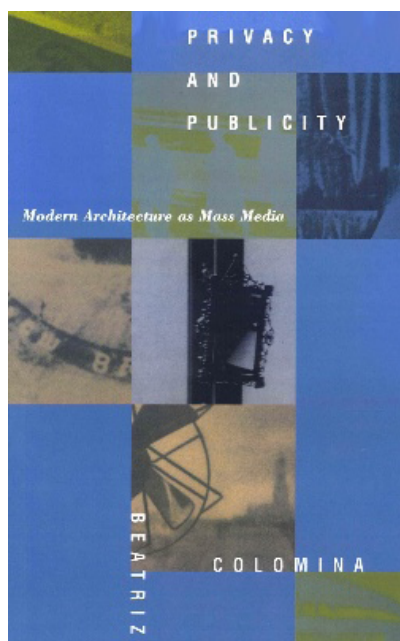
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

See also:

History of Beauty.

Eco, Umberto, ed. / Translated by Alastair McEwen. / New York: Rizzoli, 2004.

Other philosophical accounts from recent decades have attempted to recover beauty without returning to naïve formalism. Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) links beauty to attention, care and justice. Beauty, in Scarry's argument, asks to be looked at carefully, and this act of attention may train ethical responsiveness. Umberto Eco's *History of Beauty* (2004) reminds us that beauty has never had a stable definition: it is a historical archive of bodies, gods, monsters, machines, proportions, ornaments and ideals. Alexander Nehamas's *Only a Promise of Happiness* (2007) adds another nuance: beauty is not exhausted by instant judgement, it opens a relation of desire, attachment and future encounter.

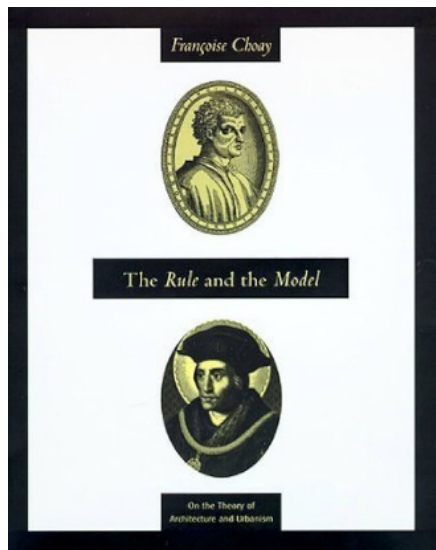


Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media.

Colomina, Beatriz.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

Architectural beauty in the age of reproduction adds a further complication: beauty is not only designed, but also circulated. Beatriz Colomina's *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (1996) shows that modern architecture produced buildings, yes, but also images, magazines, exhibitions, interiors, photographs, myths and publics. The beauty of modern architecture was constructed through publicity as much as through material form. This remains true today, perhaps more intensely. Architectural beauty is shaped by renderings, social media, biennials, awards, archives and digital circulation. Colomina allows us to understand that a building's aesthetic authority often depends on how it is framed, reproduced and consumed.



The Rule and the Model: On the Theory of Architecture and Urbanism.

Choay, Françoise.

Translated by Denise Bratton.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

See also:

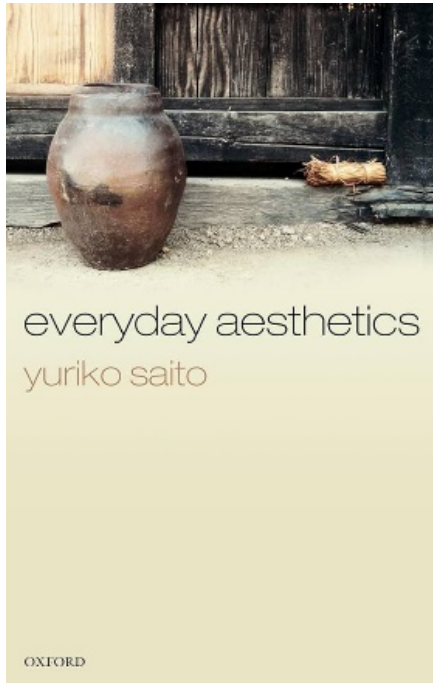
The Invention of the Historic Monument.

Choay, Françoise. / Translated by Lauren M. O'Connell. /

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Françoise Choay's work gives this mediation a deeper historical and institutional frame. *The Rule and the Model* and *The Invention of the Historic Monument* are crucial for understanding how architecture is caught between normative systems, exemplary forms and heritage value. Choay helps explain why beauty is often confused with preservation, authenticity or cultural legitimacy. In this view, we do not simply protect what is already considered beautiful; rather, what a society chooses to protect often comes to be perceived as beautiful. Protection itself is selective, and this selectivity transforms architectural beauty into a question of memory, patrimony and loss. Architectural beauty therefore concerns not only new form, but also the conditions under which the past is selected, protected and allowed to become present.

Mariam Issoufou's chapter in De Raedt and Delbeke's volume (see above), "The [In]justice of Beauty in Architecture" gives this political argument a sharper architectural and global dimension. For Issoufou, beauty is connected to dignity, belonging, well-being and the possibility of recognising oneself in the built environment. This is why unequal access to beauty becomes a question of justice. Her critique is particularly important because it separates beauty from luxury: beautiful architecture can emerge from design intelligence, cultural specificity, local materials, climate, craft and use. In this sense, Issoufou's argument expands the critique of taste beyond class distinction: beauty is also shaped by race, colonial history, global inequality and the aesthetic authority of a privileged minority.

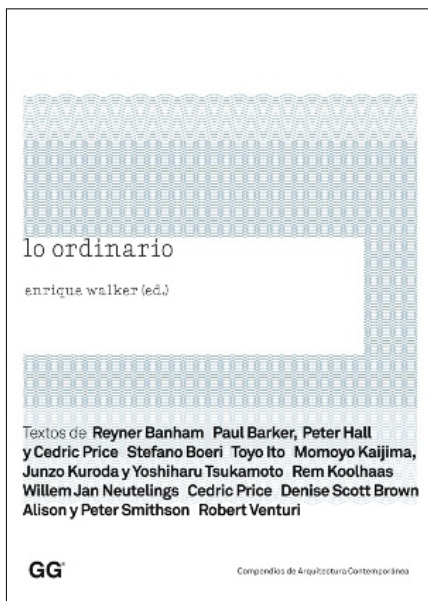


Everyday Aesthetics.

Saito, Yuriko.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Against the dominance of the canon, another important strand has shifted attention toward the everyday. Yuriko Saito's *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007) offers one of the clearest ways to understand beauty as part of ordinary life. Aesthetic experience is not limited to works of art or exceptional buildings; it is embedded in habits, gestures, weather, domestic objects, maintenance, neighbourhood rituals and repeated use. For architecture, this is essential. A balcony with laundry, a courtyard with children, a shaded bench, a repaired wall, a familiar entrance or a modest threshold may hold an ultimate form of beauty: the beauty of places where architecture most directly enters life.



Lo ordinario.

Walker, Enrique, ed.

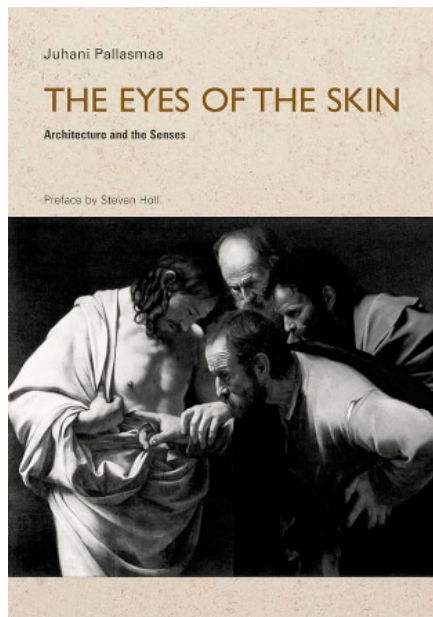
Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2010.

See also:

Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture.

Rudofsky, Bernard. / New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964.

This concern for the ordinary has architectural precedents. Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* (1964), although earlier than the fifty-year frame we have set for this annotated book list, remains indispensable because it challenged the professional canon by foregrounding anonymous, vernacular and collective forms of intelligence. Enrique Walker's *Lo ordinario* (2010) continues this line by treating the ordinary as one of architecture's most productive categories. The ordinary is not the banal opposite of beauty; it is a field where beauty appears without proclamation. It also shifts attention from authorship to appropriation, from monument to routine, from aesthetic autonomy to the intelligence of use.



The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses.

Pallasmaa, Juhani.

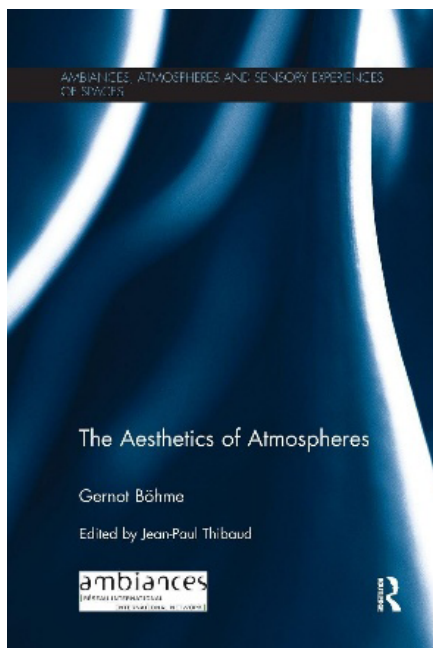
London: Academy Editions, 1996.

See also:

Atmospheres: Architectural Environments; Surrounding Objects.

Zumthor, Peter. / Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006.

A parallel tradition has defined beauty through perception, atmosphere and embodied experience. Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* (1996) criticised the dominance of vision and recovered the tactile, auditory, haptic and bodily dimensions of architectural experience. Peter Zumthor's *Atmospheres* (2006) gave this sensibility an influential architectural vocabulary: temperature, sound, material presence, intimacy, light, shadow and emotional resonance. These books matter because they redefine beauty as something that happens between body and environment. Beyond composition, beauty is a situation, a mood, a felt intensity.



The Aesthetics of Atmospheres.

Böhme, Gernot.

Edited by Jean-Paul Thibaud. London: Routledge, 2017.

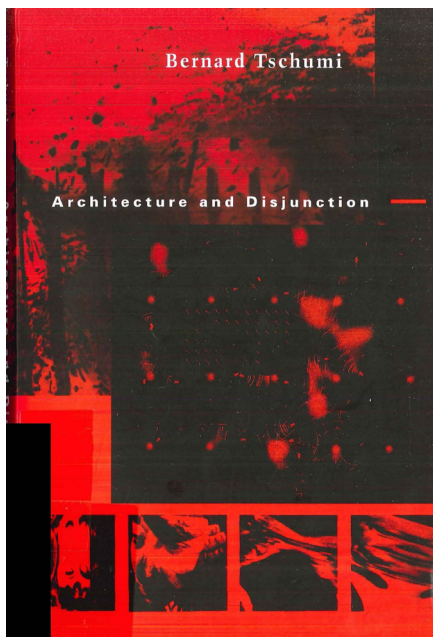
See also:

Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture.

Holl, Steven, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Alberto Pérez-Gómez.

Tokyo: A+U Publishing, 1994.

This atmospheric understanding also connects with Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres and with phenomenological accounts such as *Questions of Perception*. Together, these works help explain why contemporary architectural beauty often appears as softness, silence, lightness, mist, depth, reflection or sensory suspension. The beautiful building may be the one that produces a certain quality of air, light, sound or bodily orientation. In this sense, atmosphere is one of the most powerful contemporary definitions of beauty.



Architecture and Disjunction.

Tschumi, Bernard.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

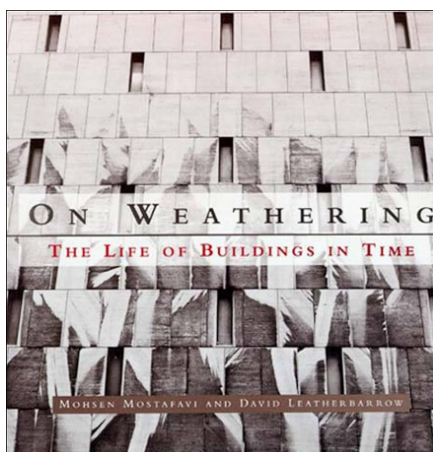
See also:

Body, Memory, and Architecture.

Bloomer, Kent C., and Charles W. Moore, with Robert J. Yudell.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Movement gives beauty another temporal dimension. A first temporal critique concerns the limits of the still photograph: architecture is perceived through approach, entry, circulation, pause, ascent, descent, detour and return. Its beauty unfolds through bodily sequence and changing perception rather than through a single privileged view. In *Body, Memory, and Architecture* (1977), Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore connect spatial experience to the body, memory and orientation, while Bernard Tschumi's *Architecture and Disjunction* (1994) introduces movement, event and programme as destabilising forces within architectural form. From this perspective, beauty is not the perfection of the still image, but the intensity of an itinerary.



On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time.

Mostafavi, Mohsen, and David Leatherbarrow.

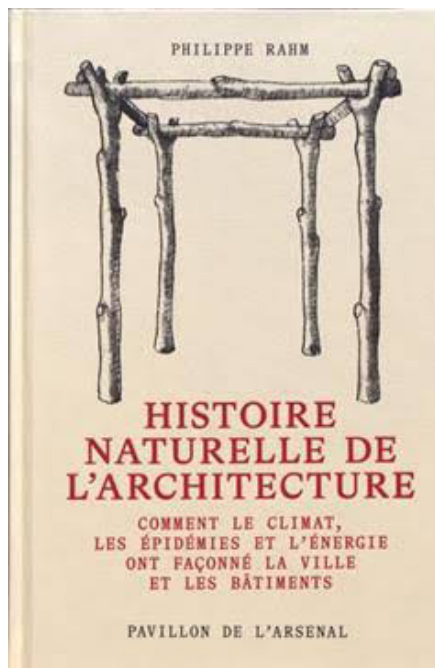
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

See also:

How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built.

Brand, Stewart. / New York: Viking, 1994.

A different temporal perspective concerns the life of buildings after completion. Architecture is exposed to weather, occupation, damage, repair, adaptation and changing forms of use. In *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (1993), Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow describe time as an active architectural agent, one that transforms surfaces, joints, colours and textures, in ways that may lead to positive appreciation. Stewart Brand's *How Buildings Learn* (1994) shifts the argument toward adaptability, showing that buildings acquire value by changing well. More recent work on reuse, including Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel's *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage* (2019), further challenges the idea of architectural beauty as pristine permanence. Beauty may instead lie in duration, adjustment, vulnerability and the capacity to take on a second life.



Histoire naturelle de l'architecture: Comment le climat, les épidémies et l'énergie ont façonné la ville et les bâtiments.

Rahm, Philippe.

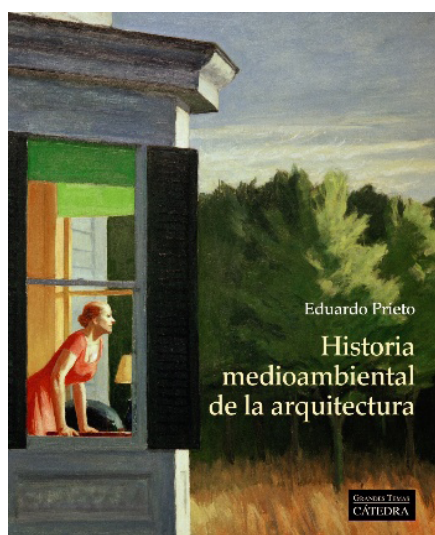
Paris: Pavillon de l'Arsenal, 2020.

See also:

Climatic Architecture.

Rahm, Philippe. / Barcelona: Actar, 2023.

The most significant recent transformation, however, is environmental. Here the question of beauty moves beyond taste, image, atmosphere and time toward climate, energy, matter and planetary consequence. Philippe Rahm's *A Natural History of Architecture* and *Climatic Architecture* are central because they propose that architecture should be understood through physical and biological forces: heat, humidity, radiation, convection, air, microbes, metabolism and comfort. In Rahm's work, beauty emerges from the invisible conditions that make space inhabitable. The beautiful is climatic before it is stylistic.

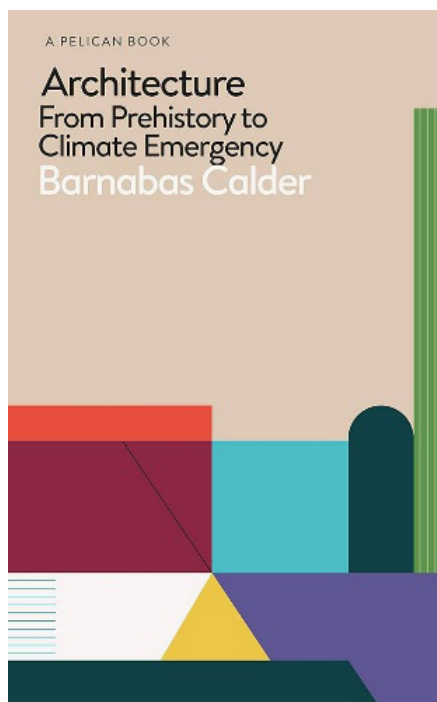


Historia medioambiental de la arquitectura.

Prieto, Eduardo.

Madrid: Cátedra, 2019.

Eduardo Prieto's *Historia medioambiental de la arquitectura* (2019) offers a broader historical counterpart to this position. Prieto reads architectural history through energy, climate, material resources and bodily experience, expanding accounts based on form, style and typology. This is decisive for a contemporary theory of beauty because it situates architectural value in the long relationship between human bodies and environmental systems. Fire, air, water, earth, comfort, shelter, scarcity and abundance all become aesthetic categories. Beauty is shaped by the ways architecture negotiates the conditions of life.



Architecture: From Prehistory to Climate Emergency.

Calder, Barnabas.

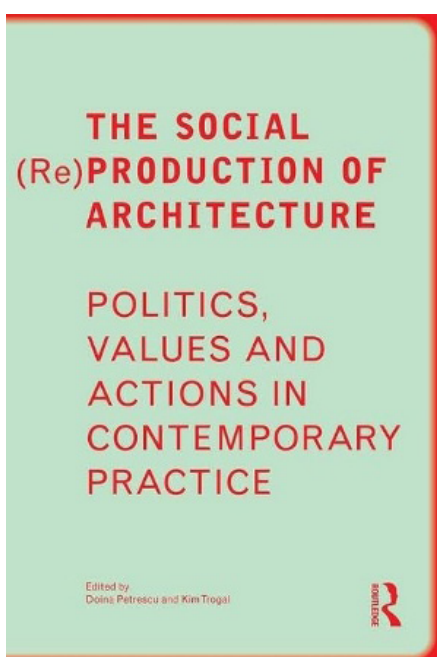
London: Pelican Books, 2021.

See also:

Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism.

Calder, Barnabas. / London: William Heinemann, 2016.

Barnabas Calder's *Architecture: From Prehistory to Climate Emergency* (2021) radicalises this environmental argument by reading architectural history through energy regimes. Buildings are material concentrations of available energy, labour, extraction and technology. This perspective gains particular force when read alongside Calder's earlier *Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism* (2016), a title that resonates strongly here. Brutalism was not self-evidently beautiful to everyone; its beauty had to be narrated through ideas of honesty, mass, social ambition, material force and historical necessity. Calder's work suggests that a similar narrative task now confronts architecture after climate emergency. If energy, durability, repair and restraint are to become aesthetic values, they need to be made culturally legible. The low-energy dwelling, the reused structure, the repaired surface or the materially frugal building may not fit inherited images of beauty, but they can become beautiful when understood through the stories of energy, care, scarcity and endurance that they embody.



The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice.

Petrescu, Doina, and Kim Trogal, eds.

London: Routledge, 2017.

See also:

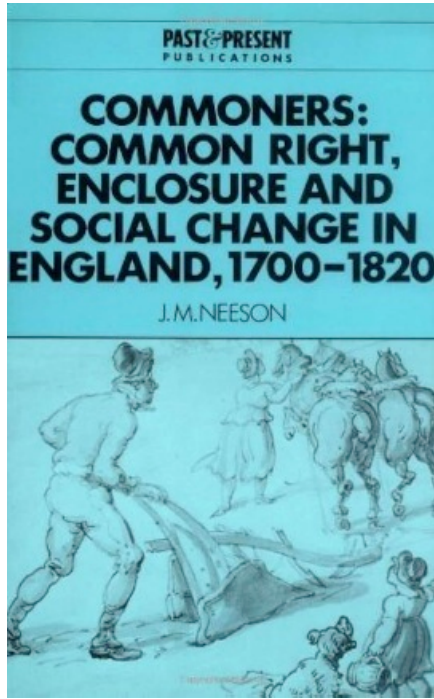
A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction.

Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein, with Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, and Shlomo Angel.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

The commons introduces another crucial dimension. Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* (1977), despite its distance from much contemporary theory, remains important because it imagines architectural beauty as collectively recognisable, usable and repeatable. More recent work such as Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal's *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture* (2017) reframes this

in explicitly political terms: architecture is produced by many agents, including architects, but also communities, users, institutions, maintenance practices, economies of care and shared infrastructures. Beauty here is the provisional result of negotiation.



Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820.

Neeson, J. M.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

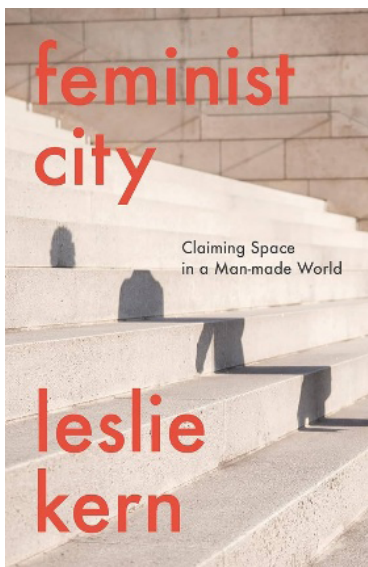
See also:

Superpowers of Ten.

Jaque, Andrés, and Office for Political Innovation.

New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2015.

J. M. Neeson's *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (1993) gives the commons a concrete historical meaning as a lived system of rights, uses, obligations, conflicts and resources. In conversations leading to this issue, Andrés Jaque has referred to Neeson's work as one of the pioneering readings on the commons. This reference gives his architectural assemblages a sharper political meaning. Architecture becomes a field in which bodies, objects, ecologies, domestic practices, technologies and publics are arranged and negotiated. Beauty emerges here as a collective arrangement. It may appear in a greenhouse, a kitchen, a shared platform, a water system, a temporary installation or a domestic ecology. The beautiful makes forms of life visible, negotiable and sustainable.

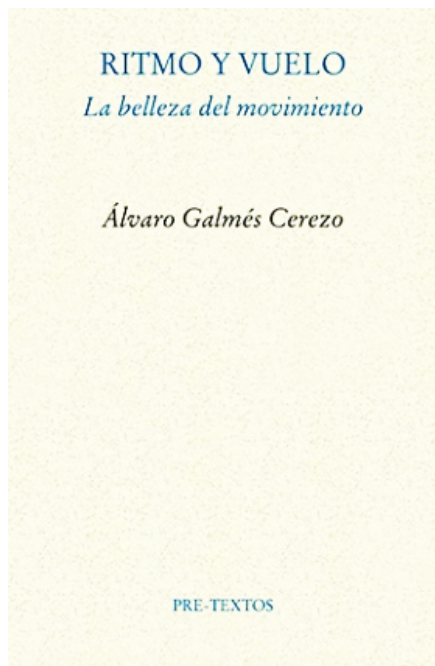


Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World.

Kern, Leslie.

London: Verso, 2020.

Feminist and spatial justice perspectives also transform the question of beauty. Leslie Kern's *Feminist City* (2020), for example, shows that space is experienced differently according to gender, care work, safety, mobility and social expectation. If beauty is linked to belonging, then it must also be linked to exclusion. A beautiful city for whom? A welcoming public space for which bodies? A comfortable interior for whose labour? These questions are essential to any contemporary theory of architectural beauty because they prevent beauty from becoming a universal mask over unequal experience.



Ritmo y vuelo: la belleza del movimiento.

Galmés Cerezo, Álvaro.
Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2025.

We close with a reference close to home. Álvaro Galmés Cerezo, a member of REIA's editorial board, has written in *Ritmo y vuelo: la belleza del movimiento* (2025) a book that deserves inclusion here not out of courtesy, but because it asks a question that remains open at the end of this itinerary: whether, after all the differences of culture, class, media, climate, gender, memory and collective practice, there might still be a shared human ground for beauty. His answer is developed through rhythm and flight, rooted in early and fundamental bodily experiences. Rhythm belongs to the first organisation of bodily life: beginning to breathe, learning to walk and speak, repeating, balancing and anticipating. Flight names the corresponding desire to escape gravity, to rise, to exceed the given weight of the world. In this sense, beauty may have one of its deepest roots in movement itself: in the rhythmic patterns through which bodies inhabit the earth, and in the recurrent dream of leaving it.

These debates establish beauty as a plural and demanding field. Beauty may be atmospheric, ordinary, climatic, collective, mediated, repaired, light, raw, excessive, restrained, ironic, situated or sublime. Across the last fifty years, books on aesthetics and architecture have expanded the category into a way of asking how architecture organises perception, value, matter, energy, memory and social life.

For this reason, "the common beauty" names a shared and conflictive question: how do different communities, bodies, histories and environments come to recognise architectural value? Who defines beauty, and through what forms of authority? How is beauty claimed through use, repair, climate, ordinary life or collective action? To revisit beauty today is to expand the field in which architecture can be judged: by the richness of the worlds it makes perceptible, habitable and shareable.

