KANT ON ARCHITECTURE: BEAUTY, FUNCTION, AND MEANING

KANT SOBRE LA ARQUITECTURA: BELLEZA, FUNCIÓN Y SIGNIFICADO

PAUL GUYER
Brown University, United States

Received: December 22, 2024
Accepted: February 25, 2025
doi: https://doi.org/10.26439/limaq2025.n016.7658

There might seem to be a logical contradiction between Kant's claim that aesthetic experience and judgment are independent of concepts and disinterested, on the one hand, and yet that "adherent beauty" is conditioned by concepts of function and that all fine art expresses aesthetic ideas, on the other. However, Kant's theory of aesthetic experience as the free play of imagination and understanding resolves any logical tension among these ideas. Rather than a theoretical challenge, balancing the demands of beauty, function, and meaning is the real practical challenge of the arts—especially of architecture as an art.

architecture, concepts, content, free play, function, imagination, Kant

Podría parecer que existe una contradicción lógica entre la afirmación de Kant de que la experiencia y el juicio estéticos son independientes de los conceptos y desinteresados, por un lado, y la idea de que la "belleza adherente" está condicionada por conceptos de función y de que todo arte bello expresa ideas estéticas, por el otro. Sin embargo, la teoría kantiana de la experiencia estética como libre juego de la imaginación y el entendimiento resuelve cualquier tensión lógica entre estas nociones. Más bien, el verdadero desafío práctico de las artes consiste en equilibrar las exigencias de la forma, la función y el significado, especialmente en el caso de la arquitectura como arte.

arquitectura, concepto, contenido, libre juego, función, imaginación, Kant

ARE THERE CONFLICTS AMONG BEAUTY, FUNCTION, AND MEANING IN ARCHITECTURE?

According to Vitruvius, the goals of architecture, in the most general terms, are *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*, which I translate as "suitable construction," "functionality," and "aesthetic appeal" (Guyer, 2021, pp. 6–11). I regard construction as the means through which the other two goals are achieved—more a means to the ends of architecture than an independent goal in itself (cf. Koller, 2015). Thus, the two primary ends are functionality, on the one hand, and some sort of aesthetic appeal, on the other.

The latter has traditionally been equated with beauty, but in my opinion, the major innovation in philosophical conceptions of architecture and, in some cases, the practice of architecture since the time of Vitruvius has been the addition of the category of meaning to the goals of architecture. Presumably, the achievement of these goals should be mutually compatible in any particular work.

Kant's aesthetic theory, as presented in the *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*, the first part of his third critique—the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant, 1790/2000)—offers only brief reflections on architecture, yet seems committed to three contradictory claims:[1]

(i) All aesthetic judgment is disinterested, independent of concepts, and properly directed only to the form of perceived objects (Kant, 1790/2000, sections 1–15);

(ii) Judgments concerning the adherent beauty of some objects, including architectural works, do depend on concepts of what the object ought to be (Kant, 1790/2000, section 16).

(iii) The spirit of all beautiful art (*schöne Kunst*), including architecture, consists in the expression of aesthetic ideas—imaginative presentations of ideas of reason (moral ideas), which are themselves a kind of concept—so that judgment of such works must be responsive to those ideas (Kant, 1790/2000, section 49).

[1] All references to *Critique of the Power of Judgment* follow the section numbering of the Cambridge edition (Kant, 1790/2000), with volume and page numbers from the *Akademie* edition (Kant, 1900–), as reproduced in Kant (2000). In Kant's original text, set in German *Fraktur*, emphasis was marked using *Fettdruck* ("fat type"), and is reproduced here in boldface. Italics indicate his use of Roman type to mark foreign expressions.

Limaq n.º 16, noviembre 2025, ISSN (en línea) 2523-630X

These statements do not constitute a classical inconsistent triad—where any two propositions are inconsistent with the third—but seem to be a straightforward contradiction between (i), on the one hand, and (ii) and (iii), on the other. Claim (i) insists on the non-involvement of concepts in proper aesthetic response and judgment, whereas (ii) and (iii) together insist that some cases of aesthetic response and judgment can properly involve concepts: specifically, concepts of the intended function of objects in (ii) and concepts as the content of works of art in (iii). The case of architecture, in fact, involves both (ii) and (iii)—i.e., both *function* and *meaning*.

However, we may interpret Kant as gradually unfolding a *complex* rather than *contradictory* analysis of our responses to and judgments of works of art, including architecture—an approach that allows him to include architecture among the fine arts, despite its obviously mixed nature. Indeed, Kant's gradually unfolded theory of the aesthetic character of the fine arts—not just the visual arts, as the term "fine arts" is commonly understood today, but *les belles artes* in a broader sense—can be seen as his philosophical explanation or justification of Charles Batteux's inclusion of architecture in a "third category" of arts, "whose purpose is simultaneously to provide both utility and pleasure. These are eloquence and architecture. They arise from need and are perfected by taste. They occupy a middle ground between the two other types, providing both pleasure and utility" (Batteux, 2015, p. 2).[2]

What can be misleading is that Kant starts from the *simplest* cases of beauty—and of our pleasure in and judgment of it—such as the "free" beauty of flowers, seashells, decorative borders, and music without words. He argues that, in these simple cases, our pleasure arises from a "free play" between imagination and understanding, triggered by the "form" of such objects—namely, their spatio-temporal form, shape, melody, rhythm, and so on (Kant, 1790/2000, sections 9–13).

However, these are not the most *interesting* or *important* objects of aesthetic judgment; rather, they are *just* the simplest cases to analyze. Their analysis reveals that all genuine aesthetic response—and,

[2] Kant refers to Batteux once in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant, 1790/2000, section 33, vol. 5, p. 284). Batteux's work was certainly accessible to him—for example, in the German translation by Johann Adolf Schlegel (Batteux, 1770), published shortly before Kant began regularly discussing aesthetics in his lectures on anthropology, which commenced in 1772–1773.

correspondingly, all beauty—involves a response to the free play of our mental powers, *but there can be more complicated cases of free play, involving more than just imagination and understanding, thus involving both ordinary and pure practical reason*; that is, ordinary empirical means-end reasoning and moral reasoning. Ordinary practical reason is invoked in connection with concepts of function, as in cases of "adherent beauty" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 16), and pure practical reason in relation to aesthetic ideas (Kant, 1790/2000, section 49).

Thus, *adherent* beauty involves free play with *both* perceptual form and concepts of function. Kant is not entirely specific on this point and leaves open whether such free play with perceptual form occurs *within the space left open* by the requirements of an object's intended function, or *between the requirements of an object's intended function and its perceptual form* (Guyer, 2005a, 2005b).[3] *But adherent beauty is a genuine case of beauty*, thus forms or media of art that realize adherent beauty are nevertheless genuine forms of fine art.

In the case of fine art, spirit comes from aesthetic ideas, which are described in a way that clearly suggests free play involving the conceptual content of the work—or, alternatively, free play between its perceptual and conceptual aspects. This conception of fine art is explicitly applied to architectural works as well (Kant, 1790/2000, section 16), which Kant includes among the visual, plastic fine arts without hesitation (Kant, 1790/2000, section 51, vol. 5, p. 322).

The point is that, while there is no *logical contradiction* in any of this, there is room for *real tension or imbalance in practice.* That is, the demands of beauty, functionality, and meaningfulness *can* come into conflict in the creation of any particular work, and ensuring their integration poses a challenge for the architect.

In the case of architecture, we can identify three demands placed on the work: the demand for beauty, which for Kant is rooted in form or "design" (*Zeichnung*) (Kant, 1790/2000, sections 13–14); the demand for functionality or use—since, in architecture, "a certain **use** of the artistic object is the main thing" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 51, vol. 5, p. 322); and the demand for meaning (Kant, 1790/2000, section 49).

[3] For extended discussions of free play and the distinction between free and adherent beauty, see Guyer (2005a, 2005b).

The architect may overemphasize one or two of these demands to the detriment of the remainder. A well-known example is Peter Eisenman's *House VI*, where form—and perhaps meaning—certainly seem to overwhelm functionality, to the extent that Eisenman apparently offered to build the clients a more conventional house elsewhere on the property, one they could actually live in! (Guyer, 2021, pp. 103–104).

So, balancing these three demands is not a logical conundrum but a practical challenge for the architect, where "architect" serves as shorthand for everyone involved in planning, designing, and possibly even furnishing and decorating a structure. In other words, in modern times, this typically refers to a team, if the architect or such a team aspires to a *Gesamtkunswerk*, as in the cases of Frank Lloyd Wright or Josef Hoffmann. Although much architecture results from the work of many hands, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—despite involving multiple disciplines such as architecture proper, interior decoration, furniture design, and landscape architecture—is often perceived, or presents itself, as the work of a single creator.

Kant's theory thus describes not a *dilemma* but the *challenge* for architecture—not a logical problem but a practical one.

KANT'S THEORY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, JUDGMENT, AND ART

Kant expounds his analysis of aesthetic experience and judgment in layers, beginning with the simplest cases and gradually progressing to more complex ones. He refers to the simplest cases of aesthetic judgment—and the beauty they concern—as "free" and "pure," in contrast to more complex cases, which might be called "impure." However, this is not intended as a value judgment: Kant is not directly asserting that pure judgments of taste are more *valuable* or *important* than impure ones. On the contrary, although in some regards he does valorize the experience and judgment of natural beauty over those of artistic beauty—for example, because the latter may encourage pride of ownership and vanity (Kant, 1790/2000, sections 41–42)—he also acknowledges that complex art forms, such as theatre and drama, can present moral ideas in ways that earn our enduring attention and gratification to a greater extent than objects of mere natural beauty like flowers and seashells (Kant, 1790/2000, section 52). This analysis leads to three central points:

Beauty and form

Kant presents his *Analytic of the Beautiful* in four moments. These initially characterize the simplest case of beauty, the free beauty found in natural objects and decorative arts, and introducing more complex and more paradigmatically artistic cases in the third moment. In the first three moments, prior to his conception of adherent beauty, Kant initially connects beauty only with the perceptual, spatial, and/or temporal form of objects of taste, and, paradigmatically, with products of nature rather than of human art.

In the first moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Kant argues that aesthetic judgment is disinterested: it is not based on mere sensory gratification (which is connected to interest), nor on concepts of either practical function or moral value (Kant, 1790/2000, sections 1–5). Perhaps to highlight this disinterested quality in the pure exercise of taste—where we are free to focus on and find pleasure in form alone, disregarding other issues—Kant begins with an architectural example. The question, when contemplating a palace, is not whether I dislike vanity, disapprove of exploitation, or would rather go to a restaurant, but simply "whether the mere representation of this object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 2, vol. 5, p. 205).

My response is not supposed to be grounded in a sense-based interest (e.g., I like the taste of chocolate, and once I have tasted it, I want more) (Kant, 1790/2000, section 3), nor in the object's usefulness or moral worth (Kant, 1790/2000, sections 4–5). Nor, for that matter—although Kant does not yet make this implication explicit—should it be influenced by the presence of evil, as in the case of the palace that might be genuinely beautiful in spite of having been built through exploited labor. "One can say that among all these three kinds of satisfaction, only that of the taste for the beautiful is a disinterested and **free** satisfaction" (Kant, 1790/2000, vol. 5, p. 210). Accordingly, "taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction **without any interest**," and "the object of such a satisfaction is called **beautiful**" (Kant, 1790/2000, vol. 5, p. 211).

This argument is intended to start with an obvious, commonsense recognition, illustrated by the example, and lead to a more abstract, philosophical conclusion.

The same applies to the second moment: "That is **beautiful** which pleases universally without concepts" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 9, vol. 5, p. 219). Kant tacitly infers the phrase "without concepts" from the first moment but adds—again as a matter of common sense—that the judgment of beauty or taste claims to speak with a "universal voice." Section 6 jumps the gun, perhaps, by inferring that one does have "ground for expecting a similar pleasure of everyone," as long as one's own pleasure is disinterested—an inference that leaves out the possibility of sheer, disinterested idiosyncrasy. Sections 7–8, by contrast, argue on the basis of ordinary usage. Above all, they emphasize that while it is acceptable in ordinary discourse to say "this is agreeable *to me*" it seems ridiculous to say "this is beautiful **for me**" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 7, vol. 5, p. 212). This supports the idea that the judgment of taste *claims* to speak with a universal voice (Kant, 1790/2000, section 8, vol. 5, p. 216). However, such a claim must be sustained, that is, justified through a philosophical theory.

This is the role of Kant's theory of the free play between the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding (Kant, 1790/2000, section 9, vol. 5, p. 217): a harmonious, enlivening relation between them (Kant, 1790/2000, vol. 5, p. 219), in which a given representation is related to "cognition in general." Kant had telegraphed this explanation in the introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. There, he describes what occurs when one is confronted with a given representation of an object:

> the imagination … is unintentionally brought into accord with the understanding, as the faculty of concepts, through a given representation and a feeling of pleasure is thereby aroused, then the object must be regarded as purposive for the reflecting power of judgment. Such a judgment is an aesthetic judgment on the purposiveness of the object, which is not grounded on any available concept of the object and does not furnish one. That object the form of which (not the material aspect of its representation, as sensation) in mere reflection on it (without any intention of acquiring a concept from it) is judged as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object—with its representation this pleasure is also judged to be necessarily combined, not merely for the subject who apprehends this form but for everyone who judges at all (Kant, 1790/2000, Introduction, section VII, 5 p. 190).

Kant's strategy—later referred to as the "deduction" of judgments of taste (Kant, 1790/2000, section 38)—is to argue that the experience of beauty involves the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding, which can be presumed to be common among human beings. In this case, however, the understanding's general interest in unifying what is presented to it is satisfied without the usual intermediary of applying a determinate concept. Thus, we can judge—what we express by calling the object beautiful—that it pleasures universally, even in the absence of such a concept. Kant also attempted to explain this idea in his first draft for the introduction, where he offered a preliminary account of the experience of beauty as follows:

> the power of judgment … holds the imagination (merely in the apprehension of the object) together with the understanding … and perceives a relation of the two faculties of cognition which constitutes the subjective, merely sensitive condition of the objective use of the power of judgment in general (Kant, 1790/2000, vol. 20, pp. 223–224).

Here again, Kant appears to suggest that, in the experience of beauty, the general condition of knowledge—namely, the unification of the manifold of material presented to imagination by the senses—is achieved, but without dependence upon any determinate concept. That experience is pleasurable and, Kant supposes, also universally valid. He describes this experience using metaphors such as the two faculties of cognition mutually "enlivening" each other, being in free play with each other, and—most metaphorical of all—the imagination "schematizing without a concept" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 35, vol. 5, p. 287). The basic idea, however, is always that we take pleasure in the discovery of unity in our sensory experience, even in the absence of its usual guarantor in the form of a concept. This pleasure is somewhat like that of a surprise, except that it does not fade immediately. As Kant later clarifies in his discussion of fine art, a beautiful object is rich enough to keep the mind engaged for some indefinitely extended time.

Adherent beauty and function

Kant's next step is to argue that, again in the simplest kind of case, it is the spatial and/or temporal form of objects alone that triggers this complex response. He makes this argument in the first half of the third moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*—first with the beauty of things like flowers and seashells in mind, but then also in the case of works

of art, where it is supposed to be "drawing" or "design" (*Zeichnung*) in visual art or "composition" in the case of music, which is the proper object of taste (Kant, 1790/2000, section 14, vol. 5, p. 225).

Kant's argument, however, is a cheat—or, to put it more politely, too easy yet restrictive. He equates the condition for satisfying the goal of cognition in general, but without its usual guarantor of a concept with "subjective purposiveness in the representation" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 11, vol. 5, p. 221) or "merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 12, vol. 5, p. 222). He then, with a verbal sleight of hand, equates that with "the purposiveness of the form," apart from any "charms and emotions" (*Reiz und Rührung*), as well as any concepts. This is then spelled out in section 14 as *spatio-temporal form*, i.e., *drawing*, "outline," or "shape," "rather than the colors that illuminate the outline," in all the *bildenden Künste* (visual or pictorial arts, *including architecture*), and composition rather than "agreeable tones" (instrumentation) in the case of music (Kant, 1790/2000, vol. 5, p. 225). Even in ornaments (*parerga*), such as the frame around a picture or the drapery around a portrait bust, it is pure form rather than anything else (e.g., the gold leaf of frames) that "augments the satisfaction of taste" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 14, vol. 5, p. 226).

Kant wants to confine the proper object of taste to spatio-temporal forms because he is convinced that all humans perceive such forms in the same way. This restriction, then, preserves the "subjectively universal validity" of judgments of taste that he has asserted (Kant, 1790/2000, section 8, vol. 5, p. 215); however, he could have allowed that we find pleasing, non-conceptually determined harmonies among, for example, colors, without sacrificing his basic explanation of aesthetic response as "free play"—even if our perceptions of color may be more interpersonally variable than our perceptions of spatio-temporal form. In fact, later in the book, in his classification of the arts, when he refers to an "**art of colors**" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 51, vol. 5, p. 324), he may be doing just that.

Be that as it may, note that the "formalism" Kant introduces in section 13 of the third moment is that all of this is (supposed to be) true only to the "**pure judgment of taste**." He does not say "in all judgments of taste." On the contrary, he goes on to describe a second kind of judgment of taste: the judgment of adherent beauty, which

does "presuppose a concept of what the object ought to be," which "adheres" to such a concept, and is therefore "conditioned beauty." Yet he does not, as we might have expected, deny that it *is* a kind of beauty (Kant, 1790/2000, section 16, vol. 5, p. 229).

Kant's illustrations of his concept of adherent beauty include architectural examples. First, there is the beauty of a human being, which is constrained by a moral conception of the "purpose" of a human being—i.e., the status of a human being as an end in itself and never a mere means. Then comes the beauty of an animal under a specific description, such as a horse, but presumably of a specific breed intended for a particular use and therefore constrained by a functional conception: a racehorse, a jumper, a draft horse, etc. Finally come the architectural examples: a church, a palace, an arsenal, a garden house (Kant, 1790/2000, section 16, vol. 5, p. 230). In each of the architectural cases, the intended function of the building constrains its possible design: Kant does not spell his examples out, but we understand that a church must be suitable for its intended service, perhaps with required design features such as a cruciform floor plan, and express the "lamp of sacrifice," according to Ruskin, through its rich ornamentation; a palace must be impressive, luxurious, and have lots of rooms for receiving distinguished guests and domesticating potentially unruly nobles; an arsenal must have thick defensive walls; a garden house must have plenty of openings to admit the breezes, etc. *But in none of these cases does the intended function fully determine the form or overall look of the structure*: Kant does not say this explicitly, but this is where room is left for free play. There can be beautiful, aesthetically indifferent, or ugly churches, all of which nevertheless satisfy the requirements of the intended function; there can be handsome arsenals or boring ones, and so on. The beauty must lie in the way we can enjoy free play within the constraints imposed by the intended function of the building.

This is why the pleasure and judgment of adherent beauty are still aesthetic, still a kind of beauty, even though we might have assumed (based on section 15) that functionality would simply have been incompatible with beauty. Our original propositions (i) and (ii) are not incompatible.

Or maybe even further—although Kant certainly does not say this explicitly—in the case of adherent beauty, the free play is *between* our

concept(s) of the intended function of the building and other aspects of our perception of it. Kant does say that, in the case of adherent beauty, it is "no longer a free and pure judgment of taste" (Kant, 1790/2000, vol. 5, p. 230), but also that taste "gains by this combination of aesthetic satisfaction with the intellectual," which suggests this relationship. What he certainly does not say is that pure judgments of taste are in any way more *important or valuable* than adherent, *conditioned* judgments of taste. On the contrary, the entire faculty of the powers of representation "gains" through this combination. This suggests that, if anything, the experience and judgment of adherent beauty are actually more important in our intellectual and affective lives than those of pure beauty.

At the same time, we can see how form and function can come into tension, *although not into logical contradiction*: we might compromise the function of a building by purely aesthetic considerations—some have certainly felt that about Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, for example; I clearly feel that it would not have been convenient or secure to live in Eisenman's *House VI*. Conversely, the aesthetic dimension might be limited by too severe a demand for functionality—that, for instance, is what Ruskin thought of the Crystal Palace. However, in the twentieth-century architectural ideology—what Kenneth Frampton (2002) referred to as the "poetics of construction"—it might be thought that beauty lies entirely in (structural and programmatic) functionality.

Still, that is probably not what Louis Sullivan intended with his famous dictum that "form follows function" (Sullivan 1896, p. 408). He presumably meant something closer to what Kant meant: that functionality is a *necessary* condition of our appreciation of beautiful form, that it imposes certain constraints on the form, but that it hardly determines the building's overall appearance. Sullivan emphasized that the entrance level, the repeated office levels, and the attic level of a tall office building —in his day about twelve stories— should be clearly demarcated in order to express the functions of the different levels, but he could hardly have meant that this was *sufficient* to determine the whole appearance of the building, since no one could have claimed that the elaborate biomorphic ornamentation of Sullivan's great works contributed to their function as an office building, or a bank, or a department store (among Sullivan's other building-types). Much of the beauty of a Sullivan building lies in ornament that is *consistent* with function but hardly *determined* by it (Guyer, 2021, p. 100).

In sum, pure beauty represents a simple case of free play; adherent beauty represents a more complex case, involving free play within the limits of functionality, and potentially even between function and form. Maybe the Long Island duckling stand, in the shape of a Long Island duckling that Robert Venturi so admired, would be an example of this (Guyer, 2021, p. 104). Form, more generally beauty, and function *can* come into conflict, but they need not; there is no *logical* contradiction between them. In reconciling form and function, the architect is not solving a conceptual problem but a practical challenge.

Aesthetic Ideas and Meaning

Let us now turn to our original proposition (iii): Is there a conflict between Kant's initial claim that beauty pleases without a determinate *concept* and his claim that fine art has intellectual *content*?

Kant's theory of fine art is presented through his theory of "genius"—that is, artistic creation rather than reception. The gist of this theory is that the spirit of successful art consists in the aesthetic expression of "concepts of reason (intellectual ideas)," which are moral ideas, or ideas relevant to morality: virtue and vice, heaven and hell, etc. (Kant, 1790/2000, section 49, vol. 5, p. 314). His emphasis on the moral character of the content of art is striking, as is his initial lack of an explanation for this certitude.

However, Kant shortly does explain his position: In section 52, discussing complex or composite art forms—such as theater, which combines painting with drama, or opera, which combines those two further with music—he argues that while we may be briefly amused or pleased by forms without moral significance, in the long run, works must have some moral significance to retain our interest. Kant suggests that if art is

> aimed merely at enjoyment, which leaves behind nothing in the idea, [it] makes the spirit dull, the object by and by loathsome, and the mind, because it is aware that its disposition is contrapurposive in the judgment of reason, dissatisfied with itself and moody (Kant, 1790/2000, section 52, vol. 5, p. 316).

Kant does not mean that every decision that we make is a moral dilemma—for example, whether to serve wine or beer at a party. Rather, he means that we are moral beings, that everything we do must

be *compatible* with morality, and that whatever we invest great effort and resources into must ultimately, whether immediately or more remotely, promote the cause of morality. This is just how we are, in Kant's view, as rational as well as sensible creatures; morality is just that important to us. Perhaps we could loosen Kant's claim here and say that we are *purposive* beings; that without some *functional* significance—whether moral or otherwise—things that might briefly please us, say, because of their novelty, will not continue to do so in the absence of some form of functionality. This is just how we are: functionality is just that important to us.

Yet our enjoyment and judgment of art is still aesthetic. Thus, what we do with moral ideas in art must involve some form of free play between imagination and understanding. Kant does not use the term "free play" or any of its equivalents in the exposition of his conception of aesthetic ideas, but what he describes is clearly a case of free play:

> Now if we add to a concept a representation of the imagination that belongs to its [the concept's] presentation, but which by itself stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped by a determinate concept, hence which aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way, then in this case the imagination is creative, and sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion, that is, at the instigation of a representation it gives more to think about than can be grasped and made distinct in it (although it does, to be sure, belong to the concept of the object) (Kant, 1790/2000, section 49, vol. 5, p. 315).

What we have in the experience of art is *content* plus imagination—imagination unbounded by a determinate *concept* of how its object should look (or sound, etc.), but still relevant to the content it conveys. It is a form of unification between form and content. This is a description of free play, although free play *with* a concept rather than determined *by* a concept. For this reason, our response to art is an aesthetic response—a response to beauty, though again not to free beauty.

The concept in the case of art is not, *in general*, a concept of any straightforward function, such as providing shelter for a particular kind of activity, but rather a moral concept. If art does have a function, in Kant's view, it must be a more abstract kind: that of making an intellectual idea of morality sensible or palpable to us, and perhaps, given our own complex sensible as well as rational nature, all the more moving.

Again, we can see here how form and meaning could come into tension with each other: meaning dominating the form, limiting free play too much, or vice versa. But avoiding such domination—e.g., didacticism—is not a *logical* problem for the artist but a practical challenge.

THE CASE OF ARCHITECTURE

Finally, Kant (1790/2000) applies this model to the case of architecture. The third time he brings up the case of architecture—following his initial use of architecture in his illustration of disinterestedness (the palace not to be gaped at in section 2, vol. 5, pp. 204–205) and his second use of architectural examples in section 16, where he illustrates the concept of adherent beauty—is in the system of the fine arts he sketches in section 51. This section actually begins with the remarkable statement that:

> Beauty (whether it be beauty of nature or of art) can in general be called the **expression** of aesthetic ideas: only in beautiful art this idea must be occasioned by a concept of the object, but in beautiful nature the mere reflection on a given object, without a concept of what the object ought to be, is sufficient for arousing and communicating the idea of which that object is considered as the **expression** (Kant, 1790/2000, section 51, vol. 5, p. 320, emphasis added).

Kant does not explain his sudden inclusion of natural beauty under the theory of aesthetic ideas; perhaps we can conjecture that he is once again drawing on his morally laden conception of human psychology—supposing, in this case, that we simply read moral significance into natural beauty, even though we know perfectly well, as a matter of fact, that nature is not intrinsically morally significant. As he suggests in section 42, we tend to read moral significance even into the various colors of flowers (Kant, 1790/2000). However, what is important for our present purposes is just that Kant bases his classification of the fine arts on the assumption that the theory of aesthetic ideas is valid for all the media of fine art that he recognizes.

These fall into three main kinds: the arts of speech, the pictorial or visual (*bildende*) arts, and the arts of the play of sensations (as external sensory impressions), i.e., music and the art of colors. The latter is now allowed as a separate art—here, Kant is thinking of the *clavecin oculaire*, a keyboard instrument designed to produce a play of colors analogous

to the play of sounds produced by a musical keyboard, rather than of the use of colors to *enhance* drawing, merely to "illuminate the outline" furnished by drawing, which remains the proper object of aesthetic attention in the visual case, in order to "enliven the object in itself for sensation" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 14, vol. 5, p. 225).[4]

These three main kinds of art are analogized to "word," "gesture," and "tone" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 51, vol. 5, p. 320). The visual arts are, in turn, divided into the arts of "sensible illusion," i.e., painting, and "sensible truth," the latter of which is further subdivided into sculpture and architecture (Kant, 1790/2000, vol. 5, p. 321). Painting is an art of "sensible illusion" because it manages to depict three-dimensional figures (people, trees, buildings) on a two-dimensional surface—penciled, inked, charcoaled, or pigmented—which is clearly not three-dimensional. It may also be considered such because it can depict things that do not exist at all, such as unicorns, winged horses, and other imagined beings.

As a matter of fact, sculpture can do this too; nevertheless, it is considered an art of "sensible truth" because it at least depicts three-dimensional objects in a three-dimensional medium—although, of course, marble or bronze is not the same as flesh. Both painting and sculpture are forms of *mimesis* for Kant. Although he recognizes the existence of music without words—and therefore without any obvious content—he certainly had no inkling yet of the possibility of non-representational, abstract painting or sculpture. After all, he was writing in the eighteenth century, not the twentieth.

By contrast, architecture is not a mimetic art: it does not imitate anything but instead creates its own forms.[5] According to Kant, architecture can be defined as:

> the art of presenting, with this intention but yet at the same time in an aesthetically purposive way, concepts of things that are possible **only through art**, and whose form has as its determining ground not nature but a voluntary end. In [architecture] a certain **use** of the artistic object is the main thing, to which, as a

[4] On the *clavecin oculaire*, see Kristeller (1952). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for reminding me of this article and thereby encouraging me to make this distinction.

[5] Kant was perhaps not aware of the theory that classical architecture forms derived from the wooden "primitive hut," as proposed, for example, in Laugier (1753/1977).

> condition, the aesthetic ideas [as well as the form] are restricted. … Temples, magnificent buildings for public gatherings, as well as dwellings, triumphal arches, columns, cenotaphs, and the like erected as memorials, belong to architecture. Indeed, all domestic furnishings (the work of the carpenter and the like things for use) can be counted as belonging to [architecture], because the appropriateness of the product to a certain use is essential in a **work of architecture**." (Kant, 1790/2000, section 51, vol. 5, p. 322, emphasis added).

Kant is making at least two distinct claims here: First, architecture must satisfy its intended function above all else or as a necessary condition ("main thing"). Thus, its beauty will always be a kind of adherent beauty: a beautiful form within the parameters of —and perhaps in conversation with—the intended function of a building (the program, in architectural parlance). Second, architecture "presents concepts of things that are possible only through art." Thus, its content is, in a way, the building *itself*: works of architecture are not just temples, courthouses, dwellings, or memorials; they also *present the ideas* of their own function or building type—or something closely related to that. They function as houses but also imaginatively convey the idea of a house; they function as courthouses but look like a courthouse, and so on. Or, in an extreme case—one that Kant could hardly have had in mind—a poultry stand may look like an oversized duckling.

But then, what happens to Kant's original description of the content of art—viz, ideas of reason or moral ideas—in the case of architecture? One possible answer might be: a house does not just look like a house but conveys a more abstract idea, such as that of happy domesticity; a courthouse does not just look like a courthouse but conveys the idea of justice; a church does not just look like a church but conveys the idea of awe-inspiring divinity. These ideas form part of our moral conception of the world; our "moral habitat" as Barbara Herman has called it (Herman, 2021). Such ideas can be expressed by architecture in imaginative ways that are no more dictated by their own content than by the building's intended, determinate function. Indeed, we sometimes see courthouses that do not read to us as courthouses—for example, Morphosis's Federal Courthouse in San Francisco. This may be a source of dissatisfaction to us, or it may not. In either case, we can see how works of architecture can satisfy Kant's conception of aesthetic ideas without giving up what is essentially aesthetic: the free play of the

imagination. In this way, our original proposition (iii) can be reconciled with (i). Once again, there is no logical contradiction between (i) and (iii), but rather the actual challenge of producing great architecture.

To be sure, this proposal inevitably introduces an element of cultural and historical relativity into our response to, and judgment of, architecture: what not only functions as a house but also "looks like" a house and conveys the idea of domesticity will inevitably vary from place to place, time to time, and culture to culture. But that is not an objection to the proposal: even Kant himself recognizes that as soon as we get past the simple case of free beauty—where universal validity is most at home—relativity becomes unavoidable. Although some works may become classics, standing the test of time and serving as exemplars for future artists, they do so not as objects for sheer imitation but for inspiration.

To sum up, architects have three or even four objectives: beauty (although of course that needs to be broadly understood); functionality, which may constrain the range of possible expressions of beauty; and meaning, which may itself comprise two levels: first, conveying the function of the building; and second, through that, expressing a more abstract idea—one of reason, a moral idea, or, more generally and generously, an idea of human life and living. Of course, as I have noted throughout, these goals can come into conflict with each other, get out of balance, or get out of whack. One example is Steven Coll's early, thankfully unbuilt, project of houses designed to reflect the occupation of their intended residents (e.g., the house of the tinsmith), or various projects by Boullé. But, again, potential conflict is not the same as logical contradiction. These goals do not *necessarily* come into conflict with each other. Satisfying all these goals at once does not require solving a philosophical puzzle. Rather, avoiding conflict and finding cooperation is the aesthetic challenge of the architect. Or, to close with one of Kant's statements, "Taste, like the power of judgment in general, is the discipline … of genius, clipping its wings and making it well-behaved" (Kant, 1790/2000, section 50, vol. 5, p. 319).

REFERENCES

Batteux, C. (1770). *Einschränkung der schönen Künste auf einen einzigen Grundsatz* (J. A. Schlegel, Trans.). Weidmanns Erben und Reich.

Batteux, C. (2015). *The fine arts reduced to a single principle* (J. O. Young, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Frampton, K. (2002). *Labour, work and architecture: Collected essays on architecture and design*. Phaidon.

Guyer, P. (2005a). Free and adherent beauty: A modest proposal. In P. Guyer (Ed.), *Values of beauty: Historical essays in aesthetics* (pp. 129–140). Cambridge University Press. (Reprinted from "Free and adherent beauty: A modest proposal," 2002, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, *42*[4], 357–366, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/42.4.357)

Guyer, P. (2005b). The harmony of the faculties revisited. In P. Guyer (Ed.), *Values of beauty: Historical essays in aesthetics* (pp. 77–109). Cambridge University Press.

Guyer, P. (2021). *A philosopher looks at architecture*. Cambridge University Press.

Herman, B. (2021). *The moral habitat*. Oxford University Press.

Kant, I. (1900–). *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*. Georg Reimer.

Kant, I. (2000). *Critique of the power of judgment* (P. Guyer, Ed.; P. Guyer & E. Matthews, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1790)

Koller, S. (2015). *The birth of ethics from the spirit of tectonics*. [Doctoral dissertation, Delft University of Technology]. TU Delft Repository. https://resolver.tudelft.nl/uuid:4fa1eeed-40cc-4282-9a92-c79555aa6b35

Kristeller, P. O. (1952). The modern system of the arts: A study in the history of aesthetics (II). *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *13*(1), 17–46. https://doi.org/10.2307/2707724

Laugier, M.-A. (1977). *An essay on architecture* (W. & A. Hermann, Trans.). Hennessey & Ingalls. (Original work published 1753)

Sullivan, L. (1896). "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered.:*Lippincott's Magazine*. March, 1896. Pp. 403-9.