
ELEGANCE

Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, Pantheon Books, 2006, pp. 321-343

1.

For the traveller who sets out from Zurich on a summer's morning on a train bound south, for the Alps, the view is initially of a rolling pastoral landscape, in which cows feast on luminously green grass and occasionally glance up at the passing carriages with sad, almost wise brown eyes. For an hour, at least, nature is at her most benevolent. It is only beyond the town of Chur that the bucolic scene gives way to something more severe. The lush grass is gradually replaced by a terrain strewn with rubble and rock. Sheer walls of granite shoot up by the side of the train, alternating with precipitous canyons, silent but for the call of eagles and the cracking of branches. Along implausibly steep mountainsides, families of pine trees cling to narrow ledges like diligent soldiers on watch. While inside the carriage, everything remains as it was in the lowlands – pictures of a lake are still neatly screwed to the wall by the door, a bottle of apple juice continues to sit undrunk on the table – outside, we have journeyed to a place which resembles one of the less hospitable moons of Jupiter.

In a valley so steep that its gelatinous walls seem never to have been warmed by the sun, a drop of hundreds of feet ends in a furious brown river clotted with stones and brambles. As the train curves around the mountainside, a view opens up along its length, revealing that, several carriages ahead, the burgundy-red locomotive has taken the unexpected decision to cross from one side of the valley to the other, a manoeuvre it proceeds to execute without so much as pausing to confer with higher authorities. It makes its way over the gap, and through a small cloud, with the brisk formality one might associate with the most routine of activities, to which prayer and worship would be at once unnecessary and theatrical supplements. What has rendered this supernatural feat possible is a bridge for which nothing in this setting has prepared us – a perfectly massive yet perfectly delicate concrete bridge, marred by not the slightest stain or impurity, which can only have been dropped from the air by the gods, for we cannot imagine that there would be anywhere in this forsaken spot for humans to rest their tools. The bridge seems unimpressed by the razor-sharp stones around it, by the childish moods of the river and the contorted, ugly grimaces of the rock-face. It stands content to reconcile the two sides of the ravine like an impartial judge, modest and willingly literal-minded about its own achievements, ashamed lest it detain our attention or attract our gratitude.

Yet the bridge testifies to how closely a certain kind of beauty is bound up with our admiration for strength, for man-made objects which can withstand the life-destroying forces of heat, cold, gravity or wind. We see beauty in thick slate roofs that challenge hailstones to do their worst, in sea defences that shrug off the waves which batter them, and in bolts, rivets, cables, beams and buttresses. We feel moved by edifices – cathedrals, sky scrapers, hangars, tunnels, pylons – which compensate for our inadequacies, our inability to cross mountains or carry cables between cities. We respond with emotion to creations which transport us across distances we could never walk, which shelter us during storms we could not weather, which pick up signals we could never hear with our own ears and which hang daintily off cliffs from which we would fall instantly to our deaths.

2.

It follows from this that the impression of beauty we derive from an architectural work may be proportionally related to the intensity of the forces against which it is pitted. The emotional power of a bridge over a swollen river, for example, is concentrated at the point where the piers meet but resist the waters which rise threateningly around them. We shudder to think of sinking our own feet into such turbulent depths and venerate the bridge's reinforced concrete for the sanguine way it deflects the currents which tyrannise it. Likewise, the heavy stone walls of a lighthouse acquire the character of a forbearing and

kindly giant during a spiteful gale which does its best to pant them down, just as in a plane passing through an electrical storm, we can feel something approaching love for the aeronautical engineers who, in quiet offices in Bristol or Toulouse, designed dark grey aluminium wings that could flex through tempests with all the grace of a swan's feathered ones. We feel as safe as we did when we were children being driven home in the early hours by our parents, lying curled up on the backseat under a blanket in our pyjamas, sensing the darkness and cold of the night through the window against which we rested our cheek. There is beauty in that which is stronger than we are.

3.

Nevertheless, because beauty is typically the result of a few qualities working in concert, it can take more to guarantee the appeal of a bridge or a house than strength alone. Both Robert Maillart's Salginatobel and Isambard Brunei's Clifton Suspension bridges are structures of strength; both attract our veneration for carrying us safely across a fatal drop – and yet Maillart's bridge is the more beautiful of the pair for the exceptionally nimble, apparently effortless way in which it carries out its duty. With its ponderous masonry and heavy steel chains, Brunei's construction has something to it of a stocky middle-aged man who hoists his trousers and loudly solicits the attention of others before making a jump between two points, whereas Maillart's bridge resembles a lithe athlete who leaps without ceremony and bows demurely to his audience before leaving the stage. Both bridges accomplish daring feats, but Maillart's possesses the added virtue of making its achievement look effortless – and because we sense it isn't, we wonder at it and admire it all the more. The bridge is endowed with a subcategory of beauty we can refer to as elegance, a quality present whenever a work of architecture succeeds in carrying out an act of resistance – holding, spanning, sheltering – with grace and economy as well as strength; when it has the modesty not to draw attention to the difficulties it has surmounted.

4.

We would not, by this measure, describe a heavy steel beam as elegant if it carried only a tabletop, nor a teacup if its sides were four centimeters thick. Michael Hopkins's canopy for Bracken House is liable to displease us because of the fuss it makes, through multiple bulky struts, of the task of holding up a few relatively light pieces of glass. There is a disproportion between the modest challenge the canopy is set and the laboured response it offers that violates the principles of elegance – just as Santiago Calatrava awes us through the economy and discreet intelligence with which his sculptures defy the pressures of gravity.

In literature, too, we admire prose in which a small and astutely arranged set of words has been constructed to carry a large consignment of ideas. 'We all have strength enough to bear the misfortunes of others,' writes La Rochefoucauld in an aphorism which transports us with an energy and exactitude comparable to that of a Maillart bridge. The Swiss engineer reduces the number of supports just as the French writer compacts into a single line what lesser minds might have taken pages to express. We delight in complexity to which genius has lent an appearance of simplicity.

5.

For us to deem a work of architecture elegant, it is hence not enough that it look simple: we must feel that the simplicity it displays has been hard won, that it flows from the resolution of a demanding technical or natural predicament. Thus we call the Shaker staircase in Pleasant Hill elegant because we know – without ever having constructed one ourselves – that a staircase is a site complexity, and that combinations of treads, risers and banisters rarely approach the sober intelligibility of the Shakers' work. We deem a modern Swiss house elegant because we note how seamlessly its windows have been joined to their concrete walls, and how neatly the usual clutter of construction has been resolved away. We admire starkly simple works that we intuit would, without immense effort, have appeared very complicated.

6.

Cardinal opportunities for elegance or its opposite lie in the way that columns are designed to hold up ceilings. Even as laypeople, we are adept at guessing the thickness that would be required safely to support a structure and esteem those columns that appear most diffident about the weight they are supporting. Whereas some varieties have broad enough shoulders but look disgruntled at having been asked to carry even a single storey, others hoist up ceilings as high as those of cathedrals without apparent strain, balancing massive weights on their narrow necks as if they were holding aloft a canopy made of linen. We welcome an appearance of lightness, or even daintiness, in the face of downward pressure – columns which seem to offer us a metaphor of how we, too, should like to stand in relation to our burdens.

Windows offer further opportunities for the expression of architectural elegance, the determinant here being the relationship between the amount of glass and the extent of the frame that supports it. When diminutive panes are clasped within heavy, unapologetically broad mountings, we are likely to feel some of the same discomfort as when too many words are being employed to say too little. By contrast, the Georgian houses of Bath charm us by the ethereal way in which the windows appear to hover over their façades.

Recognising, as their subsequent colleagues often have not, the intense beauty of the tenderly held pane, the city's eighteenth-century architects competed with each other to develop frames in which the slenderest fingers of wood could fasten around the greatest expanses of glass. Pushing at the technological boundaries, they reduced glazing bars from 38mm (in the earliest houses in Queen Square) to 29mm and eventually to a mere 16 – contributing to windows with some of the same impelling grace as a Degas ballerina, fluidly pirouetting her sylph-like body on an axis of a mere five toes.

7.

If we define elegance as arising in part from the triumph over a given architectural challenge – spanning a river, supporting a ceiling or holding glazing in place – then to the list of challenges we might add the more abstract one of neglect. We appreciate buildings that seem to have shrugged off the weight of carelessness and indifference.

Within the robust arches of Henri Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, the observant visitor will notice a series of small flowers fashioned out of wrought iron. To think these elegant is to acknowledge how unusual was the care that lay behind their creation. In a busy, often heedless world, they stand as markers of patience and generosity, of a kind of sweetness and even love: a kindness without ulterior motive. They are there for no other reason than that the architect believed they might entertain our eyes and charm our reason. They are markers of politeness, too, the impulse to go beyond what is required to discharge brute tasks – and of sacrifice as well, for it would have been easier to support the iron arches with straight-sided struts. Below, the mood may be workmanlike, and outside, in the streets always be hurry and cruelty, but up on the ceiling, in a limited realm, flowers swirl and perhaps even laugh as they wend their way around a sequence of arches. Although we belong to a species which spends an alarming amount of its time blowing things up, every now and then we are moved to add gargoyles or garlands, stars or wreaths, to our buildings for no practical reason whatever. In the finest of these flourishes, we can read signs of goodness in a material register, a form of frozen benevolence. We see in them evidence of those sides of human nature which enable us to thrive rather than simply survive. These elegant touches remind us that we are not exclusively pragmatic or sensible: we are also creatures who, with no possibility of profit or power, occasionally carve friars out of stone and mould angels onto walls. In order not to mock such details, we need a culture confident enough about its pragmatism and aggression that it can also acknowledge the contrary demands of vulnerability and play – a culture, that is, sufficiently unthreatened by weakness and decadence as to allow for visible celebrations of tenderness.