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TOWARDS A CULTURE OF ATTENTIVENESS

How we can use beauty to shape spaces of attentiveness

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Abstract

Context. *From cultural history we can learn the following:*
1. The central value of every ethical attitude is attentiveness or to become attentive: attentiveness towards others as a human being (Kant), attentiveness towards poor or disabled people (Christian ethics), attentiveness towards older people, towards children, animals, towards the strange (Derrida, Levinas), attentiveness towards the fine differences in cultural behaviour etc.
2. Beauty and how it appears in the world, has a strong effect on our attentiveness: one needs a lot of attentiveness to create beauty and we feel an increase in attentiveness when we discover beauty. Therefore, beauty can also be seen as a means of creating attentiveness. We can comprehend this concept walking through a medieval town or a contemporary township; by designing a beautiful surface or façade of their house people try to evoke attentiveness, respect, distance. The concept of beauty has a deep impact on our every-day-experience.
3. In the context of the Shared Space Strategy attentiveness between all traffic participants is a central element in terms of safety. The art of designing public space depends on the ability to create surroundings that support and provoke attentiveness. It is one of the central ideas of the shared space strategy that this should be done by shaping a refined high quality urban architecture (landscape) and not by regulations, signs or pictograms separating different means of transports.

Central question. *There is no doubt about the high aesthetical quality of many historical city centres (including a high level of walk ability). However, the main tasks for new designs are rarely associated with the city centres but with suburban situations (dominated by a high level of car accessibility, space consuming parking places, low level architecture and a lot of attractions (commercials, billboards). These places are only connected by competitiveness and the intention to dominate the public space. How can we implement the concept of attentiveness by beauty in such a setting?*

Methodology. *According to the cultural historic framework we described, we analysed the Shared Space Project developed for the village of Hausmannstaetten, Styria. Hausmannstaetten is a typical suburban village (2.500 inhabitants) connected to the capital of Styria, Graz (250.000 inhabitants).*

Results and main conclusion. *If we accept that demands and needs of every day users and pedestrians are more important than the needs of people passing through the village and if therefore we start a design process with a high level of participation, there are good possibilities of finding good solutions revitalising best practise examples from urban history. Realising alternative possibilities for the design of a village causes the demand of finding a good balance between the needs of attractions and a culture of attentiveness.*

TOWARDS A CULTURE OF ATTENTIVENESS

How we can use the beauty for shaping spaces of attentiveness

Introduction

Why practice attentiveness – you might ask? Attentiveness expands and sharpens our perception of the world. Attentiveness enhances our awareness. An increase in attentiveness makes our lifes more intense and richer. However, it also makes them more complex and exhausting. Why should we exhaust and exert ourselves? On the other hand: why not? For me the term „culture of attentiveness" signifies the conscious handling of possibilities resulting form our perception – from a psychological and ethical, aesthetic and pragmatic prospect. In the first part of this paper I want to give a rough sketch for a location of the concept of attentiveness in relation to the concept of beauty in terms of cultural history; the second part gives some hints about the use of attentiveness within the Shared-Space-Strategy – what are the established means to increase attentiveness? The third part gives the idea to introduce elements of beauty as a means of rising attentiveness and formulates some central questions to discuss this conception.

1. A FRAMEWORK FROM CULTURAL HISTORY: THE CENTRAL POSITION OF THE CONCEPT OF ATTENTIVENESS

Attentiveness as the most basic value in every ethical system

Every ethical system can be described as a set of values, a list of rules or the elaboration of an attitude. The values inform us about what is good or bad; the rules tell us what to do; the attitudes show us how to take our position in the world. And there is a central message in every ethical system, providing a synthesis of values, rules and attitudes. My thesis is: there is an appropriate phrasing for every ethical system using (implicit or explicit) the concept of attentiveness – as a value, as a rule, as an attitude. There is the demand for attentiveness towards others as a human being (Kant, Categorical Imperative), attentiveness towards poor or disabled people, towards friends and enemies (Christian ethics), attentiveness towards every creature (Buddhism), attentiveness towards older people, towards children, animals, towards the strange and the unknown (Derrida, Levinas), attentiveness towards the fine differences in cultural behaviour etc.

We are used to the idea that attentiveness can be useful in every situation, and we know, that there is a lot of rules that implicitly demand attentiveness. Attentiveness is a basic value and a fundamental attitude. And maybe it is also the essence of every ethical attitude, because every value or rule can be reformulated appropriately by using the concept of attentiveness. Even the modus of prohibition usually *deals* with attentiveness; if, for instance, the Christian catechism demands to disregard the sweet promises of Lucifer (from sexual passion to hateful actions, from vanity to gluttony and so on), this is not intended to numb attentiveness, but to guide it into the right direction. It calls for attentiveness; I am asked to guide my attention in the right direction therefore I need to be able to differentiate about good or bad. We are responsible for the three fundamental ways to deal with attentiveness: to increase, to control, to numb.

Attentiveness leads to an open mind and gives presence to every single moment of our life. A rise in attentiveness brings progress to our culture; and it is a basic strategy to lead an interesting, perplexing and intense fife. Also, from a psycho-technical perspective, as a moral following moral, attentiveness can clearly make a difference it stimulates and refines. The opposite would be decay, stagnation and numbness. Therefore, a culture of attentiveness is defined as an attitude in which active listening is favoured over assertion; respect over discipline, refined over the obvious, the possible over order.

1.2. Attentiveness and the concept of Beauty in terms of a philosophical psychology
It is impossible to experience beauty without an increase in attentiveness (and consequently by reaching an heightened alertness). A lot of attentiveness is needed to create beautiful things (paintings or buildings one needs a lot of attentiveness to create beautiful things (paintings or buildings, music or urban spaces) and we experience a rise in attentiveness when we discover beauty. Under the influence of a remarkable painting we feel the impulse for a second look; hearing great music, we concentrate on listening and stop all other activities. Therefore, beauty can also be seen as a means to create attentiveness. It is easy to comprehend this concept while walking through a medieval town or a contemporary township; through designing a beautiful surface or facade of their house people try to evoke attentiveness, respect, distance.

The experience of beauty has a deep impact on our every-day-experience. I try to give a short explanation in terms of philosophical psychology. What exactly is it we experience while experiencing beauty? We experience our ability to accept, to be serene and to, as Nietzsche put it: be able to approve. The deeper our awareness of the world (without excluding horror and pain) the more profound our experience of beauty will be: to be able to experience acceptance amidst disgrace (and while being

aware of the deplorable state of affairs). (This is the reason why during the era of Idealistic Aesthetics the experience of beauty was considered a post-religious experience of salvation).

What appears beautiful needs no modification. Our compulsion to change things, to improve them, the desire for them to be different ceases in the light of beauty. The compulsion „to do" disintegrates and is replaced by the ability to „let be". This is why through beauty we experience an increase in attentiveness. In the face of beauty we risk a second and a third glance. This enables quiescence that is not equal to fatigue. We notice refinement, intensity, and respect. We achieve a heightened sense of presence.

The concept of Beauty in the history of aesthetics and as a topic in urban theory
I refer to the concept of beauty in four main theoretical frameworks. In the Greek philosophy (mainly articulated by Aristotle) we see the identity of beauty and the good; we able to recognize beauty by its attractive power: what attracts us is beautiful (and an analogy: we feel the action that wants to be done, and this one is the good action). The second main theory about beauty comes from the Christian philosophy: beauty is the trace of god in the finite world. When we realize the beauty of a flower or a woman or an action – all this refers to god as the good creator and the well-disposed conductor of the world. The third theoretical issue is stated in material from the age of Renaissance, collected for example in the writings by Leon Battista Alberti. He gives what we call "aesthetics of perfection": beautiful is what you cannot change in any way without changing it for the worse. (Mühlmann 2005, 16ff) Alberti describes beauty as an attribute of architecture and an effect of fine arts. Like all theorists (philosophers, painters, architects) of his age he is not interested in an ontological theory, but in giving an instruction for creating what effects our feelings with regard to beauty. The separation between beauty in nature and in architecture and art happens during the time of idealistic aesthetics (Kant, Schiller, Hegel), collecting the question of beauty with the topics of freedom and cognition. The resulting concept of beauty in the fine arts was radicalized during the times of classical modernism and within the framework of the concept of avant-garde: beauty in art always deals with the idea of being a perfect venue for the appearance of truth; every demanding piece of modern art deals definitely with a special strategy of realism; in a substantial way nothing can be beautiful without aiming to be an authentic expression of truth. What's only beautiful, but does not articulate the truth, is sweetness or simply – kitsch. What consequences does this generate for the self-conception of modern architecture and urbanism? What is realism in architecture or city planning?

Principal and the pathos of truth appear in architecture as idea of functionalism. The quality of architecture is not generated by a beautiful appearance, but by bare usability in terms of functionalism. The effectiveness of the machine (Eco, 2004, 380ff) is the most important model to design buildings the modern way. As we know today, during the classical period of modern architecture the machine was not only a model in terms of usability, but the machine also became an important aesthetical metaphor in the design process: houses that looked like ocean liners, kitchens organized like an assembly line, towns organized for the perfect use by modern people, that means: motorists, moving fast from one part of the town to another, because the modern town is strictly divided in blocks of different functions: there are parts of the town where we sleep and rest, parts to work, parts for political representation, parts to enjoy life; the model of a clean town demands that no functions are shared within one part of the town (because this does not fit the model of the ideal of the machine). – No doubt: the modernism in architecture and city planning has caused an important recreation in our thinking about every kind of built environment. But it has also caused urban situations dominated by technical issues, the need to speed up all parts of our life and a lack of emotional quality. The ability to stay in a public space – to find situations that invite you to rest – or even the unexpected beauty of a situation imparting a feeling of security and peacefulness are no relevant design issues considered in the period of classical modernism. Beauty is an attribute of pieces of fine art, and the beauty has to be as ugly as the truth that it is expressing. The search for beauty while we design our built environment is dishonest; it is *beautification* and hides the truth (of the loneliness of the drinkers in a bar, of social conflict, of struggle for life and so on).

Figure 1, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Allegorie of good government

Regarding Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Allegorie of good government (Siena, 14th Century) we see an elaborated fantasy of an integral view on life in town. Beauty in this case is an attribute to all: to the buildings, to the public realm, to the actions, to the people, to life itself. It articulates the vision of an after life. Here you can see: the presence of beauty makes space attentive and therefore slow, ceremoniously quiet, smartly rich;

you can feel lovely action and the highest level of attentiveness. We are here, now; we can stay, we can walk. This is the experience of Beauty as the ability to say yes.

2. THE USE OF ATTENTIVENESS WITHIN THE EFFECTIVNESS OF THE SHARED SPACE CONCEPT. WHAT MEANS DO WE KNOW TO EFFECT ATTENTIVENESS?

The idea of making attentiveness work as a means of safety. Attentiveness, respect, Awareness

Shared Space is the ambition to design public space consequently as an area of social interaction. The three most important demands of the concept are: no quasi-territorial assignment of areas to specific traffic-participants; orientation by spatial and architectural shaping that raises and controls the attentiveness of every participant; active promotion of a multifunctional and mainly social use of public space. This causes a well-organized form of deregulation: instead of following rules and secured traces, there is the need to communicate for everyone.

The success of shared spaces depends on the ability of all participants to be attentive to each other – and on the ability of the special and architectonical design to support this attentiveness of all participants. Attentiveness also works as the main factor of road safety, breaking habits of misleading feelings of safety. By feeling unsafe, we are forced to be attentive and that results in a safer situation bringing up an objective situation of safety. By instinctively managing risk and potential dangers we become more active and attentive. We keep alive the so-called *safety paradox*. (Engwicht 2005, 95ff) But what do we know about spaces of attentiveness that are able to create a comfortable level of risk?

Irritation and the search for a comfortable level of risk to make situations safe (Mental Speed bumps and other ideas)

One of the most successful techniques to create attentiveness is irritation by social interruption. David Engwicht tells a lot of stories about the happy use of urban space by organizing neighbourhood festivities. Changing streets into stages for social life within the frame of weekend-festivals makes a *sustainable* change in the reception of the street for all users. Watching a festivity even for motorist is like listening to a story. Passing the festivity and watching only a small part of it is like getting only a small part of the story; therefore the storyteller in our brain wants to complete the story, and he tries to do so again and again, whenever he passes the location of the festivity that he has seen once. This is an example for the effectiveness of 'Mental speed dumps' (Engwicht 2005, 19ff).

Social interaction creates traces in urban space, and they work sustainable. This is not the case with irritation, but also with every fundamental process of re-

conquering public space through participation. Attentiveness brings back respect and finally produces awareness. The demands of those living in the space are getting more important than the demands of those just passing the space; the participation process tries to establish the valuable role model of inhabitants and guests. Participating in planning shared spaces is an important instrument to create a new balance between the social use and the traffic use of urban space, because it works as a means of awareness raising and sensitization itself. But social life actually has to take place. Urban space, well designed, tells all the stories that are possible in this space; but it will change back to a traffic-dominated space, if social life does not actually make use of its possibilities.

Beauty as a means to provoke attentiveness

Lets go back to Lorenzettis Vision of Siena to realize that it is still alive. One can watch the painting (in the main hall of the Palazzo Publico); and one can visit the building (the same Palazzo) that is represented in the painting. The difference is the history of more than 600 years. Is there a difference? – Off course, there is. What has been the authentic building for every-day-life of an ambitious political society now is a museum. This refers to the building and to the town as a whole as well. We can compare the pictures, the situation in the painting to the actual (new) situation. The dominating touristic use of the whole situation could not work without our experience (and surprise) that we can comprehend the great amount of attentiveness in every detail of the situation: attentiveness used to produce this special situation; and attentiveness caused by this situation. It is – until today – one of the most overwhelming examples of the basic influence of built environment on social behaviour. And it is one of the most convincing hypotheses that it was produced by the demand to create a beautiful situation.

How can we introduce this example from historical situations, where beauty was used successfully to provoke attention, into an actual design process concerning public space? First I want to give two primary examples how to deal with this idea; the one is refers to a redesign of public space, the other refers to a well-known project of contemporary art in public space. The first one is a street design by Hans Monderman. It uses an already existing landmark and presents it in a new way to achieve a sustainable traffic calming effect. Approaching the monument directly, everybody feels respect and the slow character of the monuments surroundings. All traffic participants are confronted with the aesthetic charisma of the neo-gothic church. Monderman confers an attentiveness-raising quality to public space by using the existing monument.

Figure 2, Street design by Hans Mondermann in Joure, Friesland

The second example is Christos project for the New York Central Park, called "The Gates" from 2004. When were we ever able to see so much brightness and exhilaration, so many smiling faces, relaxed movement, surprised impression, cheerful moods? The installation of "The Gates" really had made a difference. A fundamental idea in a perfect (temporary) design that changed our minds. The abstract form of "The Gates" had caused a special perception of beauty. The whole of Central Park had changed into a space of attentiveness.
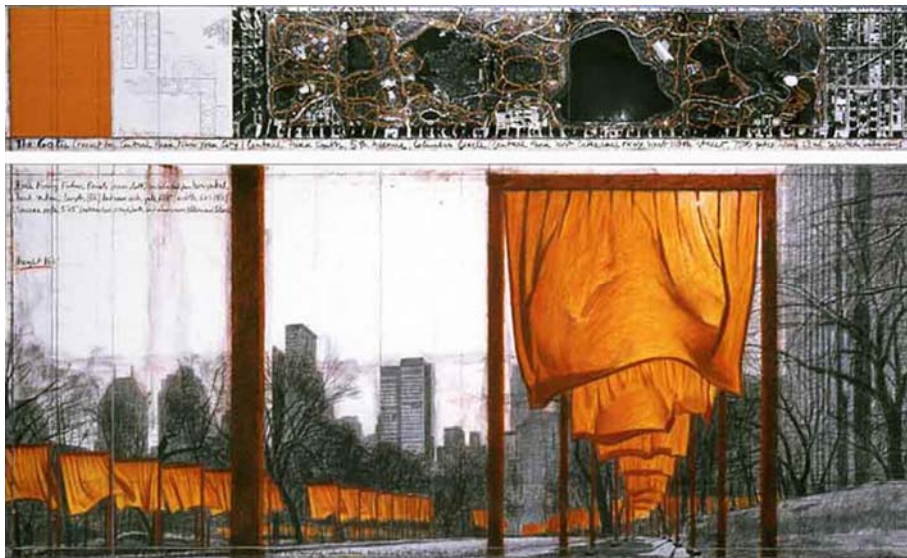
Figure 3, Christo, The Gates, New York City, 1979-2005

"The Gates" were not generated out of a functional need, they are no building and no solution to a problem; there is no symbolism, no expression of any 'message'.

Therefore it is just arts. It shows that both the idea of beauty and the idea of free art is not obsolete, but a vital, active power, opening possibilities of perception and giving valuable advice for the vision of a succeeding life.

3. SOME CENTRAL QUESTIONS FOR A FUTURE RESEARCH ON HOW BEAUTY CAN PRODUCE SPACES OF ATTENTIVENESS.

The question of transformation. Historical City Centre versus Suburban situations
How is it possible to deal with things identified as beautiful in situations that require a new design if there are no existing monuments that we could use and focus on? How is it possible to transfer, communicate and transform beauty? And are there possible dangers associated with this?

Because at least some of the known „old" towns are beautiful and permit a comfortable, socially differentiated and straightforward life – why shouldn't we use these old towns as blueprint for new ones? In that regard let me refer to a somehow problematic result of exactly that ambition in Poundsbury, Dorset. The basic idea is as clear as it is convincing. If we can analyse which kind of formal elements in old structures, that have grown with time, and that create a sense of comfort and quality of life, we experience as pleasing and beautiful it should be easy to freely combine the time-tested elements of the old in a new way. This reassembling should allow a modification due to changed functional requirements. Why should it be necessary to desperately reinvent the whole town and its elements? Curiously the search for such a *timeless way of building* itself has created districts of a strange and stiff appearance, lifeless and boring, sometimes lovely and sweet yet artificial, picturesque but often ridiculous; as a visitor you fell like in a open air museum and you see: they are have no social diversity, no social interaction, confrontation or surprise. They provide scenery for modern upper class people, envisioning themselves as poor and busy medieval craftsman. This kind of built environment does not provoke attentiveness, but supports an illusion. This vision of life does not come from presence but the past (apart from the car the inhabitants use to bring home there new TV-equipment). Real Beauty opens our mind; it doesn't need to cover-up anything.

Figure 4, Poundbury 2002-2005, New Urbanism

The examples of so called *New Urbanism* are not challenged by the demand of searching for serious expression of present life – being challenged by what becomes possible just in this moment. It is important to realize that copying what has been beautiful does not produce a lively and stimulating example of contemporary beauty. We cannot copy and transfer Beauty without loosing its attentiveness-raising power. Taking beautiful paintings (or elements of buildings, typologies and so on) from its original context makes it necessary to transform all these elements. To give a very drastic example: we cannot solve the traffic problems in a suburban situation by using the city-structure of a medieval town. Neither can we implement prefabricated elements of historian beauty in a suburban situation; often a public reproduction of Botticellis Venus is not a sign of a space of attentiveness, but a commercial for a brothel.

Figure, Venus Bar, Graz

Terror of attraction. Intensity and numbing

The characteristics of suburban situations are (a) the absence of urban, formal and social cohesion and overview planning, (b) the coexistence of commercial attractors, connected only by a competitive relationship of intensity in their single appearance, and (c) no open or social use of public space, instead many streets and parking areas made for excessive car-use. In addition quarters for housing have a restrictive (and sometimes aggressive) private character, often expressing the conflict and disconnectivity to public space in an active way: gardens hidden behind walls, fences or hedges, homes protected by non-visibility and security services.

Shopping centres, organized like little adventure parks, are fighting to attract our attention for their commercial interests. The logic of (spectacular) attraction is completely different from the mode of attraction in the concept of beauty in the philosophy of Greek Antiquity. This attraction is not a sign of beauty, but an attack on our demands, desires, hopes, and longings. It does not want our ability of attentiveness to awake and to rise, but it wants to collaborate with our subconsciousness to make us buy things we do not really need. It does not use attentiveness to lead us into the world and to make us free, but it wants to capture our mind in order to prevent us to feel and realize our true situation. When this is done systematically, we can speak about the *terror of attraction*. Commercial-psychologists and great companies spend a lot of money to learn how one can use attraction to numb attentiveness.

On the other hand, we need a lot of research for a better understanding of the different ways in which attentiveness is moving our mind. What furthers the increase in attentiveness, how can we direct attentiveness – and what numbs attentiveness.

What are the influences from our surroundings that make us wake up, be attentive, be in the present. Since the funny attack against the dogmatism of primary modernism in architecture by Robert Venturi in 1966 (Venturi 1966, 42f), we know how to learn from Las Vegas – not about beauty, but about attentiveness, attraction and about *complexity and contradiction*.

The beauty of Visibility – show what is going on. The street tells its own story
Valuable social processes that can appear in total clarity and purity without threat create their own aura of beauty. I would like to call this „beautiful visibility". There is no need to hide, conceal or protect something but it should appear as what it is, according to its intrinsic law. Then, the street (or the square) start to disclose their own story – what it was, what it is, what its supported by. Public space becomes the stage. For that reason it has to speak for itself. It isn't a neutral background, the anonymous black box; it starts to articulate what it wants for itself. Where the shape of the public space starts to communicate about the kind of life that takes place in it, it won't just take on a symbolic shape but will be a part of the social life that confers meaning to it. It won't be a representation of life – it is life, as possibility.

This design of an active background was tested in numerous versions, particularly in school surroundings. Where it is apparent that the public space is part of an area in front of the school. The beauty of playing children is even apparent if there are no children present. It is the beauty of this possibility that creates attentiveness. In that case it is unnecessary to add signs to explain to traffic participants what is obvious for them to see, feel and read.

An „intervention with beauty"
Hausmannstaetten is a little village (2.500 inhabitants) in the suburban surroundings of Graz (250.000), the capital of the province of Styria in southern Austria. The highly frequented thoroughfare destroys the quality of a stopover and rest in the public space. Life has retreated long ago, a fact that further increases the dominance of traffic. Focal points where identified in a pre-phase of the Shared Space Process: peril points, potentials of space, and possibilities of the intervention. Especially in the area in the front of a school already proved and tested strategies from the developing canon of Shared Space Projects didn't seem promising. The concrete situation there is the following: a highly frequented road, at the entrance of the village (without a clear identification of the village boundary), no high-quality building developments (family houses, hidden behind high hedges; a petrol station, a garden centre, empty buildings of rural origin), in the structure of a scattered village. The school is positioned within a tight bend of the road. It is located far away from the road that people passing in their cars only recognize the building when they've almost passed it

(a functional structure from the sixties, without any charm, but recognizable as a school). The great challenge was to make the school into a focal point, by creating an effect through beauty, irritation and the staging of a social intervention.

Brainstorming produced a starting point: the installation of a mirror, as high as a building (at least 3 meters high and 5 meters wide), on the opposite side of the road. This mirror draws the life in front of the school, that's hidden within the bend into the visibility of the street. The effect we expected ranged from uncertainty to dramatic confusion. The mirror became a huge coloured area: like a fabric of intense colours mounted in a steel frame, grand, slightly vibrating in the wind. This structure is neither a symbol nor a sign and no advertisement. But the grand area, whose beauty is revealed unexpectedly to the viewer, shows the presence of something that marks a changed situation. We hope to succeed in convincing the responsible persons in an on-site inspection that this intervention with beauty will entail that attentiveness and calmness prevail in Hausmannstaetten on a permanent basis.

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