# An Interplay of Aesthetically-Urban, Aesthetically-Spiritual and Social Responsibility Aspects in Urban Regeneration

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## 1 ABSTRACT

The focal point of this analysis would be an attempt to evaluate the role of beauty in architecture, for example, how and to what extent it could be related to a feeling of happiness during the urban regeneration process.

One of the hypotheses concerns the importance of beauty in architecture through its significance and influence in a spiritual way. Beauty, it seems, encompasses, as an indivisible part, the notions of happiness, fulfilment, and pleasure in the widest possible sense.

Some important historical sources approach the otherwise insufficiently researched question of beauty in a spiritual way.

It started with Thomas Aquinas, back in the 13th Century. His preliminary ideas of spiritual beauty are recomposed and transposed for our modern times by the unsurpassed author Umberto Eco. They both presented an emotional and intellectual journey towards a better understanding of a model of beauty. We could say, those references should represent a role model for all of us, thoughtful architects, advanced-thinking urbanists, and city planners. Those who need primarily to think and observe to analyze, synthesize, and find a final model through harmonizing different inputs.

We are mostly exhilarated and touched by the so-called model of moral beauty (or the opposite: shaken by moral ugliness). The public could be petrified of assertive designers and architects all the way to corrupted regime(s). They could spoil one's view, happiness, etc. through their bad models: facades without proportion or even complexes without any sense, spoil the environment, but also spoil entire streets, area and therefore destroy an image, a setting of the whole city.

Moral ugliness is somehow connected not only to general poverty but also to corrupted society. Meddling with planning rules and regulations could put decent architects out of the system and unscrupulous ones push forward.

One can speculate that Investors in societies without rules (or rules and regulations are there but not being followed) have enormous greediness for profit and will do anything to achieve their goals.

Therefore, to battle moral ugliness, or to reach happiness under the frame of beauty, or moral beauty, we have to follow important steps.

Keywords: urban regeneration, moral beauty, moral ugliness, corrupt society, responsibility

## 2 INTRODUCTION

Urban land is one of the most important sources for countries and it is planned and controlled by the government according to the laws (Cochrane, 2006: Harvey, 2012). Furthermore, the built environment presents the "frozen history of cultural transformation" and should be treated as a valuable resource. Global environmental and political change pose huge challenges for spatial planning and urban planners deal with a lot of obstacles and face numerous problems on different levels (Hartmann, Needham,2012).

During a process of urban regeneration in not sufficiently developed democracies like Serbia, mega new developments and/or reconstructions, with not enough respect for the already built environment, cultural and architectural heritage, (let's call it the "Urban chaos"), is caused by lack of law and order, and therefore, the lack of repercussions. Mostly not civilized or better to put it: the rude behaviour of some actors of the construction industry showed their bad impact. Sometimes buildings are even collapsing without needed or sufficient building permits, for example: on the 1st of November last year a failed eaves of the rail station in Novi Sad killed 15 citizens. Terrible event. Construction and design procedures were not followed. Also, it could be speculated that political affiliation produced a bad selection of morally suspicious and less talented individuals, selected by political groups and/or different interest groups.

## 2.1 Only profit-oriented urban regeneration

Wrapped in that shiny phrase "economic and urban redevelopment", only pure profit presents the most important benefit for the parties involved (Vujošević, Zeković, 2012). Since construction is one of the most lucrative branches of industry, gaining maximum profit by, for example, multiplying the same residential buildings, seems to be the constructor's only goal.

With a lack of transparency, difficult-to-track projects, etc. we suddenly wake up with a project being built up with a lack of public spaces, not enough greenery or sports and cultural facilities. In short, a massive loss to the public (Zekovic, Vujošević, 2006). There is an absence of a so-called "pyramid of responsibility".

Basic workers are not overwatched by middle managers, neither the supervisors nor the highest supervisors. Without diaries or written reports, anything could go wrong. One could speculate that the biggest weight on the scale belongs to the concentration of corruption in public offices, especially institutions dealing with urbanization. The greater amount of money is circulating, those issues will be more difficult to resolve.

So, hypothetically, if we were dealing with money laundering of so-called "grey money" or even from criminal resources (drugs, trafficking, or else), there would be hardly possible effective investigation that could lead to real success. Often, one can suspect, we could spot that some politicians and controversial businessmen proceed forward together with no regard for anyone or anything to gain more money and benefits.

We can note that corruption moved decades ago from an economically neglected Africa, all the way to Europe. This could be one of the important reasons why there is so much inequality and disharmony in the present age.

Corruption goes global. It may not be openly visible as it is in the Balkans, but the statistical facts show: That northern countries like Denmark, Finland, and Norway, rank among the least corrupt globally. Established democracy included honesty and obeying principles of order and law. Those principles have a long tradition in those countries (https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024)

Eastern Europe, on the contrary, for example, Ukraine and Moldova, or the Balkans tend to score much lower, indicating higher levels of perceived corruption. It is due to several reasons, but mostly because of the fast transformation of the political system from communism to capitalism & mercantilism, but also, consequently to a huge gap between ordinary working-class citizens, small and medium enterprises owned by families, and "new money" controversial businessmen.

In the context of corruption, Serbia has faced a significant rise in recent years. Democratic changes took place in Serbia in the 2000s. But the path onwards was very rough: political battles were influenced by the direct intervention of criminal gangs and post-war paramilitary groups. As a result, the first democratically elected Prime Minister was killed by criminal gangs of, some would say, political opponents in 2003. The autocratic regime, which has been in power now for more than 12 years, split people between Urban, urban rural, and rural inhabitants through aggressive populist media. During the expulsion and migrations of the 90's of Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia to Serbia, the inhabitants' structure changed, and a feeling of stronger nationalism took place. The most brutal civil war in Europe from the Second World War took place in ex-Yugoslavia and made an ugly impact that is still in the air.

European "Transparency International", a non-governmental organization, was founded in 1993 with the purpose of monitoring, advocating and if possible, battling general corruption.

According to them, in the Perceptions Index (CPI) 2024, Serbia scored 38 out of 100, where 0 indicates high levels of perceived corruption and 100 indicates very low levels of corruption and it is placed 105 among 180 countries (https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024). So, Serbia seems to be in the low to medium range of the index, reflecting ongoing concerns about corruption in public & urbanistic institutions, judiciary, health institutions, etc.

Key issues in Serbia related to corruption include:

(1) Public Sector Corruption: There are persistent reports of corruption within government agencies, state-owned enterprises, and law enforcement.

(2) Judicial Corruption: The judicial system is often criticized for inefficiency and lack of independence, which can contribute to corruption.

(3) Political Influence: Concerns about the influence of politics in business and public procurement processes are prevalent. Building and architecture design are strongly influenced by political affinity. Only selected architects and design studios close to the regime could obtain bigger lucrative jobs.

According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2024, many Western European countries tend to score higher (Denmark, Finland), indicating lower levels of perceived corruption. On the other hand, some Eastern European nations struggle more with corruption issues (OECD, 2024).

Initiatives include expert assessments and opinion surveys. This helps in the creation of awareness and advocacy for accountability. Transparency International (TI) encourages the signing and ratification of international and regional anticorruption conventions such as UNCAC (United Nations Convention against Corruption) and the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention. TI advises on how to assess and strengthen national integrity systems, including governance, accountability, and participation in the process of reducing opportunities for corruption. The agency calls for integrity pacts that forbid corrupt practices in public contracts. TI, as well, pushes for the establishment of solid whistleblower protection to encourage people to come forward without fear of retaliation. TI imparts training and resources to top governments, businesses, and civil society organizations around the world so that they develop their knowledge and build effective policies against corruption. But unfortunately, TI stays under the theoretical frame. There is also a document for combatting high-level corruption in Eastern Europe. (OECD, 2024).

## 3 FROM DISORDER TO MORAL UGLINESS

Back in 13th century Italy, Thomas Aquinas[1] recognized all those signals that could quite possibly be in different doses rooted in our human nature. He observed in his environment of the Middle Ages all sorts of disrespect, greed, unruliness, individual caprices, and tyranny. But, Thomas Aquinas, under all these obstacles noted, proceeds to try to observe the plain inputs as „beauty of proportion and wholeness"- the prime condition for harmony. "Splendor" was trying to reach through colours and proportion. Despite all those difficult circumstances, he tried to abandon ugliness (both moral and physical) by choosing the path of beauty, in particular, moral beauty.

For those of us, architects, with a focus on cities, his pure idea of the "arrangement of things that leads to an exact goal", could be one of the key elements to reaching true compatibility and balance. According to the initial idea, everything added by force and with no particular need and purpose is considered as excess. ("Less is more", which Loos proclaimed five centuries later).

To identify spiritual beauty, or we can say beauty in the soul of an entity, Thomas Aquinas considered the general lack of order and balance as the first element towards chaos. He was a seeker of purity.

Under the wider picture, today, life under chaos and crumbling institutions, put us from civilization down, by breaking the ancient laws from the times of the Bible. We are witnessing more and more people taking a quicker path toward success while stomping over others and that being acknowledged as a goal worthy of respect in the 21st Century. Lots of negative attributes have been raised: disorder, lack of justice, disharmony, etc.

That is why nowadays, when, and if rules are not obeyed, we do have very important doubts about the style of progress of urban regeneration, in particular concerning cultural heritage.

## 4 LEVELS OF MORAL BEAUTY (OR UGLINESS) AND HOW WE COULD DEFINE THEM THROUGH GRADES UNDER THE SCOPE OF URBAN REGENERATION:

To show practical case studies, we selected three case studies with different capital investment sizes in Belgrade, Serbia, upon which we will try to implement the first level of the most basic analysis of quality. Not to involve real names we will call them A, B, and C cases. There could be a hypothesis or a subjective view which is not easy to prove, that the mutual characteristic of all of them is that smaller or bigger corruption in the process has affected all three types of new projects.

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[1] Thomas Aquinas, 13th century philosopher and a Dominican monk (Castle near Aquino, 1225 – Fossanova 1274.), the greatest systematician of his age who adapted Aristotle's thinking for the needs of the Catholic church dogma. His life coincides with the awakening of the philosophic consciousness in Paris, Padua, and Bologna, where he lived. Quodvisum placet – the beauty is what we like – leads us with no doubt towards more subjective elements in questions of aesthetics.

So, when Umberto Eco says moral ugliness, transposed words of Tomas Aquinas from the 13th Century, we can conclude that greediness remains a human weakness from our biological beginnings. That is why both historical personalities introduce the word "moral" ugliness.

(1) MEGA project/state mega project with foreign partners

(2) MIDDLE project "Golden cage" system,big block project by foreign and local investors

(3) LOCAL project, suburb streets with small villas and gardens became a concentration of 7 floors infill buildings: as small and medium projects, by local investors

## 4.1 Mega State project with a foreign investor

Parameters to define grades of quality,unfortunately, depend among other factors, on personal subjectivity. This raises awareness and inserts a sort of relativism in these tables, but, for a primary categorisation it could be a decent start for the analysis:

| 1 | Value of location in between focal points of the city and transport facilities | 9 |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Maximum sustainability, sources: inputs of sun, wind, freshwater, and clear air | 7 |
| 3 | High architectural value as a whole (subjective) and affordability | 3 |
| 4 | High-quality residential buildings (apartments and buildings) | 4 |
| 5 | Affordability | 2 |
| 6 | Comfort: Enough greenery, public places, sports, and cultural facilities | 5 |
| 7 | Urban safety | 10 |
| 8 | Education, Culture, and entertainment nearby | 5 |
| 9 | Retail & shopping areas nearby | 10 |
| 10 | Local characteristics, integrity with context | 1 |
| | | 56 |

Table 1: 100 Points are matter maximum = (moral) beauty.

This project could tempt several observations, possibly conclusions: the project is designed as a top state project, but without transparency. Foreign architects without the implementation of local experts or public design. Therefore, the whole project started with a negative prefix. The location is the best possible, near the river Sava. The previous railway station and industrial zone were abandoned for several decades. It would not be possible without big changes in urbanistic plans, and annexes of plans. Today it is known as a most extravagant and expensive area, where only very rich people can buy apartments for EUR 10,000.- per square meter. Therefore, only a selected few can get into purchasing those, while the public can not afford it even in their dreams. So, there is no mix of different layers of population. Ghetto, although the luxury one, is already established.

Schools and sports facilities exist only in the plans. Greenery is beginning to develop; public places are refined and luxurious.

The mega luxurious shopping mall is the soul of the area, so consumerism is an important part/goal of this project. There is no, however, any link with local architecture, past or present, so the identity of the whole city is getting diminished.

It could be stated that this project represents a kind of foreign model from the Middle East, erased without any link with the continuity of local architecture and characteristics.

## 4.2 "Golden cage" system, big block project by foreign and local investors.

| 1 | Value of location in between focal points of the city and transport facilities | 7 |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Maximum sustainability, sources: sun, wind, fresh water, and clear air | 6 |
| 3 | High architectural value as a whole (subjective) and affordability | 7 |
| 4 | High building quality of residential (apartments and buildings) | 7 |
| 5 | Affordability | 4 |
| 6 | Comfort: Enough greenery, public places, sports and cultural facilities | 5 |

| 7 | Urban safety | 10 |
|---|---|---|
| 8 | Education, Culture, and entertainment nearby | 5 |
| 9 | Retail & shopping areas nearby | 6 |
| 10 | Local characteristic, integrity with context | 3 |
| | | 60 |

<div align="center">Table 2.</div>

"Golden cage" (Gated compound) is an already known system and comes originally from Latin America. Due to a huge wealth gap between citizens, the rich are hiding "intra mures", in a "closed cage" to protect themselves from the poor. Latin American system gradually moved to new Russia and Eastern European countries, with a lot of "new money "circulating, creating a new, wealthy class. Inhabitants are only allowed to enter their compound, where there usually is a nice kids' playground in the centre, and the most needed under-terrain garage is placed under the whole location.

Some side locations are used as well for construction, but it could be stated that they are too close to the traffic system. Therefore, issues of safety, security, noise pollution, etc. could be raised. (Djukic, Brajkovic, 2025). Using the perceived benefits of a broader location compensates for the absence of schools and kindergartens, culture, or sports facilities.

Architecture is vernacular and contemporary, like in every other city in the world, without any trace of integration with local architecture. Sustainable architecture is not planned, and greenery is also shared with the neighbourhood blocks. It could be argued that the quality of apartments is average, meaning too expensive, not providing value for money.

Of course, all these notions above can be put into debate, and different opinions and arguments could be put on the table, therefore creating more transparency about these projects, so the public can be better informed about them before they start.

For some reason, this is not the case. Why? Well, we can only speculate!

### 4.3 Suburb Streets, small and medium projects, by local investors

| 1 | Value of location in between focal points of the city and transport facilities | 8 |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Maximum sustainability, sources: sun, wind, fresh water, and clear air | 6 |
| 3 | High architectural value as a whole (subjective) &affordability | 5 |
| 4 | High quality of residential (apartments and buildings) | 3 |
| 5 | Value of comfort as a neighbourhood, public places | 4 |
| 6 | Enough greenery and sports facilities | 4 |
| 7 | Urban safety | 3 |
| 8 | Education, Culture, and entertainment nearby | 4 |
| 9 | Retail & shopping areas nearby | 8 |
| 10 | Local characteristics, integrity | 4 |
| | | 49 |

<div align="center">Table 3.</div>

One of the hypothetical case studies of hundreds of new infills is in the longest street in Belgrade called "Vojvode Stepe" street (7 km) in the area named Vozdovac. From the beginning, the street was a vernacular suburbia street without cultural legacy and value. The system was formed by small, modest individual houses with tiny gardens. Without high-quality buildings, in the 1960s, several, one can say, brutal, high-rise complexes were erected. In the late 1990s, it could be speculated that, allegedly, corruption showed up in local municipalities and both urbanistic institutions enabling small and medium companies to build, without regard to building rules and regulations. Excessively high buildings were allowed to be raised by local planning authorities (at least six, or seven floored rises).Investors themselves, hard to believe, designed some of the buildings, without professionals being involved, namely, architects. Surprisingly, firstly built dwellings being constructed like that, influenced what followed: balconies were constructed small, with fences full of concrete to stay cheap, and the colours used were not pleasant; green and kaki, etc.

Over time, the high street changed its profile entirely. Density became high, traffic became unsustainable. Amazingly, the population gradually got used to it. One can speculate that thanks to corruption around building works, this street became ugly and chaotic (without proportion, harmony, or beauty in general) reminding some people of the eastern way, for example in some parts of Turkey or North Greece, where poor architecture could be noted in small cities and suburbs of big cities.

## 5   CONCLUSION

The Transformative processes dealing with land use should be more sensible and responsible. Urban transformations as fundamental, multi-dimensional changes in urban land-use patterns, should be followed by establishing sustainable and democratic values, norms, procedures, and behaviours (Banzhaf et al., 2017).

One perhaps cannot be wrong by noting that not obeying rules leads to anarchy. If we look backward in history; Japanese people are real experts in rigidness and responsibility. Therefore, under that scope corruption seems unnecessary. On the contrary, in countries where corruption is high, people die working in or under unsafe constructions, like in Turkey while an earthquake took place or in Serbia, because of lousy business dealings, low level of general morality, etc. Not very different from Tomas Aquinas's "Moral ugliness" from the Middle Ages.

Each of these case studies hypothetically shares one common trend: corruption, for example, to obtain regular building permits, or fake permits, by paying different interest groups involved, being people working on building sites, or in planning commissions and public institutions, to change or amend planning rules. Ultimately, with so much cash, allegedly, certain lawyers are paid handsome fees to fight on the side of these unscrupulous investors, with the final goal always to obtain even bigger profits.

By analyzing those three (mega, medium, and small size) examples above, perhaps one can conclude that case number 3 (small case investments starting circa from the year 1990), has the biggest bad influence on the general beauty of architecture. Projects built with, in comparison, much bigger investments look generally better, at least we can say civilized, although without any value as first-grade author's architecture. Smaller investments use context and neighbourhood for sports, greenery, or education facilities nearby. That is their advantage. Nevertheless, in those cases, general urban safety is not at a high level. So, every case looks at the end of the day with approximately similar grades. Unfortunately, the level of unclean regulations to achieve more and more, (greediness) could be spotted everywhere.

The catastrophic loss of 15 lives at Novi Sad Railway station on the 1st of November 2024 was a trigger for citizens in Belgrade and Serbia to raise against deeply embedded corruption, to try to change the system, and to make a positive difference. To obtain wider democracy. The narrative about urban regeneration in Serbia without mentioning these, biggest student protests since the year 1968,wouldn't be possible. The whole picture would not make any sense. There is hope for a better future. Future with far less corruption. In arranged country.

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