

The New European Bauhaus needs to transform beauty into public good for all Europeans

The New European Bauhaus initiative of the European Commission comes at the right time. But in order to realize its potential to help European live 'beautifully, sustainably, together', the Commission needs to prioritize beauty as a European public good supported by adequate investment, maximum societal participation and a comprehensive policy framework.

For several months already, the European Commission has been working on nothing less than a new cultural movement. In September 2020, the Commission's President inaugurated the New European Bauhaus initiative, borrowing the name from the famous early 20th century Bauhaus school of architecture. The vision of the New European Bauhaus (NEB) is to align sustainability and aesthetic for Europe's green transition. NEB's motto is 'living beautifully, sustainably, together'. Who wouldn't like to?

Never before did the European Commission place beauty so high on its policy agenda. NEB can do for beauty what the European Green Deal is meant to do for climate. The European Green Deal is proposed as a European policy and legal framework designed to provide public goods such as clean air, biodiversity, climate resilience to the European citizens (and to the entire humankind as part of EU's pledge to the Paris climate agreement). Beauty can be understood as a kind of European (and global) public good too: a set of qualities and activities that provide aesthetic pleasure to our senses and enhance our well-being in many ways. Just like the European Green Deal is supposed to ensure environmental sustainability across generations, NEB can be one of the creative and cultural platforms to harness social sustainability and wellbeing. In this regard, the new Commission's initiative should transform beauty from being exclusive, exhaustible, and disposable resource into a real European public good. How can this be done?

First, this unique future-oriented initiative needs be levelled up with the existing problems and challenges. The COVID19 pandemic has had a major negative impact on arts and creative industries. At the same time, as museums, theatres and shops were closed, it became easier to recognize beauty as public good. Beauty cannot exist without public investment and it can not enhance societal wellbeing without just distribution. How can we have a true 'green recovery' without the recovery of our creative industries and cultural institutions?

Second, the Commission needs to establish social dialogues about challenges, barriers, and failures to 'living beautifully, sustainably, together'. It would be impossible to do anything about climate change without actually saying what economic, social and behavioral factors contribute to it. Similarly, there are reasons why beauty is often neglected, relegated as matter of personal taste or seen in exclusive terms as luxury goods for the rich. One important step for NEB would be to establish expansive participatory fields where citizens can say what they consider beautiful and how they would like to embellish their homes, cities, villages. In short, aspiring for beauty (and not only economic growth) should be seen as a legitimate goal for a community or city planners or elected politicians.

The truth is that aesthetics is as integral to our society as economics. Often the two go hand in hand producing long-lasting effects and very material outputs. For example, the aesthetic of modernism defined European cities in the second half of the past century because it was adaptable to the economic conditions of post-war economic growth and car-centered way of life. The aesthetic of neo-modernism that defines the majority of contemporary public and private architecture is often criticized as profit-driven, generic and soulless. Is 'soullessness' a sign of a market failure? Would contemporary architecture still look and feel soulless if citizens had better ways of having their say about how they want new developments (or renovation of the old ones) look like from the aesthetic perspective.

NEB should tap into the emergent practices of such dialogues and activism popping up all across Europe from Sweden to Brussels and Bulgaria. Thanks to the social media, volunteers and non-profits involved in recycling, sustainable renovations, reinvigoration of the crafts and heritage architecture receive a lot of support, especially, from young people. These practices redefine conventional narratives about culture, beauty, housing, tourism towards less about consumption and more about experience, learning and participation.

Finally, NEB can become a leading social platform through which Europeans to re-engage with the world on matters of beauty and sustainability. As different countries open up after lockdowns, creative industries will most likely offer a new post-COVID 19 aesthetics in fashion, urbanism, entertainment but also in product design, material use, and digital technologies. In this post-Covid 19 global ecosystem, Europe should be ready to act as a design powerhouse and a place where beauty truly is a public good.



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