Book review:

Ugliness and Judgment: On Architecture in the Public Eye

by Timothy Hyde

Princeton Architectural Press, 2019

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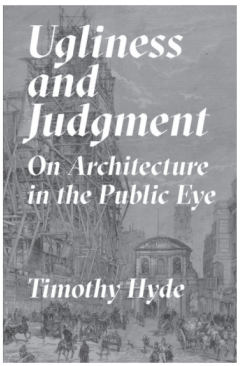

reviewed by Mark Jensen

Ugliness and Judgment is a delightful and frustrating book. Timothy Hyde's project lies at the intersection of history, architecture, aesthetics, and public policy. By focusing on Britain, or more specifically on a series of ugly moments in British architectural history, Hyde goes part of the way toward narrowing what would otherwise be an unwieldy project. His aim is to answer the question, "…how does architecture participate in societal judgment?" especially judgments of ugliness (2). Along these lines, he explains:

> …architectural ugliness must be explored not along a philosophical plane, but along the horizon that composes the difficult reality of architecture, which is not necessarily the material reality of buildings…but the realities of the norms, institutions, and standards of expectation that precede architecture. (8)

In other words, Hyde supposes that judgments of ugliness in architecture are not made from the standpoint of the dispassionate art critic, but instead from the standpoint of the people who must live, work, and play in and around the structures in question.

Organizationally, the book is divided into two

parts: (i) Stones and (ii) Persons. The three chapters that concern Stones are "Improvement," "Nuisance," and "Irritation," wherein Hyde works through a set of structures—one prominent structure per chapter—in which he explores judgments of ugliness as these judgments attach to specific types of socio-political engagement with architecture. "Improvement" concerns the architect John Woods's attempt to improve the aesthetics of the city of Bath using neo-classical elements; "Nuisance" concerns the reconstruction of Parliament with building materials that were becoming tarnished by pollution before the project was complete; and "Irritation" concerns the South Bank Arts Centre—a reviled example of 20th century brutalism in central London. Together, these three chapters present a picture of interplay between buildings, architects, clients, and the public, where this interplay includes judgments of ugliness as well as attempts by parties to respond to these judgments.

In Persons, Hyde takes up the topics of "Incongruity," "The Architect," and "The Profession." Here, he is focused primarily on the persons rather than the buildings, especially the interrelations between architects, city planners, and society at large. "Incongruity" is concerned principally with libel: criticisms of architecture in 18th and 19th century Britain were met with libel suits by the architects, which only emboldened public engagement with aesthetic judgments of the architects work. "The Profession," concerns the relationship between particular architects, e.g., Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, organizations like the Royal Institute of British Architects, and the public. "The Monarch" focuses on Prince Charles' interventions, presumptively (on his part) on behalf of the public and in rendering judgments on architectural projects that he (speaking for the people) took to be especially ugly.

The delight of the book is its engagement with very specific episodes in the history of architecture and the social and political consequences of architecture in Britain, especially London. It seems to me that when the literature and philosophy of architecture abstracts from context—and not just the context of buildings, but also the social, political, geographic, and historical contexts in which buildings are built—it quickly becomes dry, unengaging, and boring. Hyde's book avoids these interest-killing abstractions: the discussion is immersed in the details of buildings, episodes, architects, commissions, courts, etc., that serve not only to bring ugly buildings into hideous life, but also to establish the context in which their hideousness can be put on full display.

The English themselves are half of the delight, being at once both earnest and silly: earnest in their legal actions to protect buildings, in

their legal defenses of the reputation of professional architects, and in the attempt of the royals to prevent the construction of ugly buildings. They are silly in the architectural and planning choices that public officials and professionals make, in the juxtaposition of diverse architectural styles that span centuries, in the variety of social, civic, and political organizations who intervene in these affairs, and even in the names that they have given to their organizations, places and buildings: "Ugly Face Club, "Consistory Court," "Mansion House Square, "Isle of Dogs," and "No. 1 Poultry."

The delights of the book give way to a bit of a worry, which is this. It might be that the episodes in question fail to serve as paradigmatic examples or key representatives of broader trends in architecture, politics, and history. It may be instead that Britain is unique: it is characterized by a deep-seated conservative culture and it lacks an overall architectural style. When parts of London were destroyed in WWII, large-scale rebuilding was required, which put these two characteristics into conflict. As a result, it may be especially difficult to draw any overall lessons from the history of ugliness in British architecture. To be sure: Hyde is careful to point out that he is not undertaking an analysis of ugliness or ugly buildings or even judgments of ugliness as we find them in British cases. But one has a sense that Hyde is attempting to draw overarching conclusions about way ugliness shows up in public discourse. At the end of the book, he writes:

> the judgment of ugliness signals the participation of architecture in a social circumstance in which resolution is not achieved by aesthetic means; instead, the aesthetic dimension of architecture, precisely because of its insufficiency, is transferred into other instruments of social consequence. Ugliness, therefore, is the judgment of an irresolution and an insufficiency, but

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> additionally is the instantiation of that insufficiency into social technologies, into concrete processes, customs, and institutions. (184)

What he means to say, I think, is that the judgment that a building is ugly is a composite reflection of the aesthetic qualities of the building, the broader social and political context in which the building is built, and the background assumptions of the people making the judgment. But as noted above, it is far from clear that he has a sample of the size and type that would justify this judgment. Perhaps insufficiency and irresolution are features of British culture that spillover into its architecture, rather than intrinsic features of architecture itself.

Another frustrating aspect of the book, evident in the quotation above, is Hyde's prose, especially when he attempts to draw broader conclusions. He tends toward a kind of theory-speak that obfuscates the points that he wants to make. This is frustrating not only because he will scare away educated but non-technical readers interested in the concept of the 'ugly' in architecture, but also because he is clearly on the right track—despite the idiosyncratic nature of his evidence—in thinking that the judgment that a building is ugly serves multiple aesthetic, social, and political purposes. He is also right in refusing to be caught up in the ideological or reductivist games of providing *the* definition of ugly architecture and then justifying this definition through cherry-picked examples.

Admirably, Hyde instead uses his examples to demonstrate the enormous conceptual, social, and political range of the judgment of ugliness. Some clarity about the concept of ugliness emerges in the discussion of specific buildings, such as his description of the ugliness of the South Bank Arts Centre:

> …the ugliness of the South Bank Arts Centre consists of an intrusive, situated dissonance. This dissonance results not merely from infelicities of function, from a building not adequately serving its programmatic demands, or from insufficiencies of symbolic or associational legibility. It manifests from a third register of ugliness, not within the shape or material of architecture, but that consists of the relation between the architecture and the person who encounters it... (80)

As he goes on to explain, the third register is one of feeling: ugly architecture can evoke disgust, irritation, or antipathy.

This passage is as close as Hyde comes to stating succinctly that judgments of ugliness in architecture are matters of form, function, and

feeling. However, when properly qualified by individual, social, and political contexts, one will find that this is the view that he defends in the book. We might forgive Hyde's lack of concision in light of two broader truths. One is the old Aristotelian proverb that we can only expect as much precision as the subject allows. Given the range of disciplines in view, it would be a mistake to expect much here. But second, the British case, with its unique dispositions and history, invites hosts of qualifications. This is a nation-state lacking a distinctive, unique, and celebrated architectural style. Its architecture is a bit like its cuisine, but quite the opposite of its music and literature and theater. In other words, it is easier to write about Shakespeare and the Beatles than it is to write about British architecture.