where has aesthetics disappeared

food for thought

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I often struggle with the question – what to say to a student who presents a project in which he or she has invested effort and that is aesthetically impressive…but conceptually shallow. Or, alternatively, to someone who has clearly invested huge effort in research and planning, but the end result is boring and devoid of vision. The first few times I watched my fellow tutors – I listened to the erudite comments tossed into the space of the studio and cautiously made my own comments. But the sense of something missing always accompanied me. As I gained experience, I realized what was causing the disquiet: although this was a design school, we systematically avoided discussing aesthetics, perhaps because the issue was seen as too subjective…I thought…but why in fact is a subjective view considered invalid? After all, what is creativity if not a subjective view of reality?

Refusing to accept the "decree of silence", I decided to check and see what was happening in other schools. I went to student presentations in Jerusalem, Haifa, Rishon Lezion and Tel Aviv; I attended presentations of third, fourth and fifth year students – and found the same phenomenon at all of them, as if some tested instruction or convention had been handed down from the top.

In Jerusalem we held discussions filled with erudite quotes on "structuralism", historical accuracy", and the importance of the "de-constructivist" trend. We reviewed the renewal of the urban fabric, the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian space – but not one word about aesthetic significance.

At the College of Administration in Rishon Lezion, students are supposed to be engaged in interior design but were too busy asking "what does a building want to be". Here and there we exclaimed at "impressive results", but still no mention of the explicit word at the heart of design for years.

Presentations at TAU School of Architecture took place throughout the city. Tutors spoke about night life in "the city that never sleeps", football teams, and here and there - the connection to urban fabric. Key terms were mentioned, like "morphology", "integration", "over-design", the "significance of the proposed solution", but the term "architectural daring" was only applied in the context of particularly formal projects. One guest apologetically said, "I know it's not fashionable, but…the composition created by the structure in the space is an indication of the student's plastic talent". Guests and tutors alike silenced him, claiming he was "outdated". The conclusion was clear: design schools do not discuss aesthetics because it is passé.

Or, maybe not… maybe tutors simply don't know that aesthetics was once the aspiration of all cultural creation; and examination of contemporary buildings shows that even today, the multiple approaches to the subject of aesthetics in all areas of life points to its complexity; particularly the difficulty of locating aesthetics between the rational and the emotional. In this situation, many perceive aesthetics as a "trap to be avoided".

To make some order in this complex issue, we should distinguish between aesthetics in art and aesthetics in design. While art is primarily located in the sphere of the emotional, design focuses first and foremost on the sphere of the rational. Nonetheless, it is difficult to ignore the fact that in both spheres, visual expression is dominant. The essential difference between the two lies in the verification of its definition.

The 18th century German philosopher, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, maintained that aesthetics in art is the science of sensory consciousness characterized by a cognitive mechanism. Which means – the intuitive ability to create a uniform image through the senses without involving thought.

Due to the natural difficulty of determining whether an issue belongs in the area of the sensory or the rational, the attitude to aesthetics varies between the different approaches and, accordingly, the criteria for defining it.

Within this one can distinguish between several prevailing approaches:
The cognitive approach - whereby art has the ability to analytically illuminate reality by imitation and representation;

The emotive approach – which emphasizes the role of art in evoking emotion in the viewer;

The critical approach – which perceives the uniqueness of the work as a means to express an opinion on nature;