Relevance and Reach: The Place of Beauty

Or, how the architectural industry can work with communities to generate social value

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- Independent public policy think tank, established in 2009

- Focus not only on identifying social / economic trends in our research, but also action government can take in response
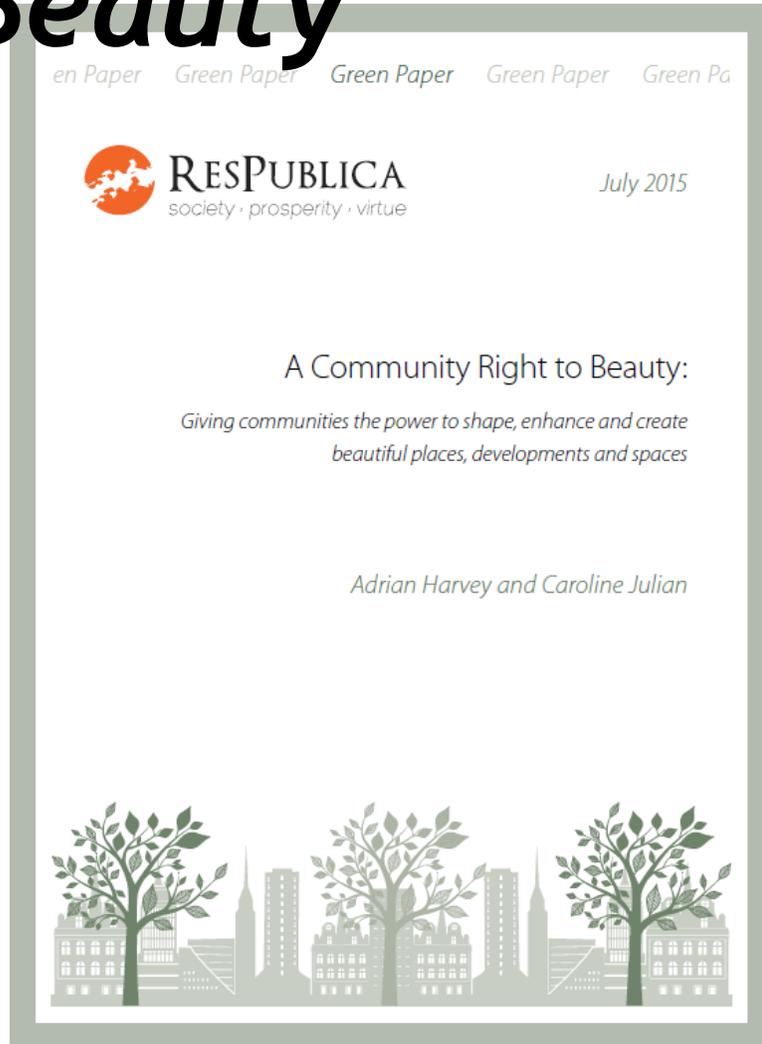
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A Community Right to Beauty

Green Paper

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July 2015

A Community Right to Beauty:

Giving communities the power to shape, enhance and create
beautiful places, developments and spaces

Adrian Harvey and Caroline Julian

Published July 2015

Full title:

A Community Right to Beauty: Giving communities the power to shape, enhance and create beautiful places, buildings and spaces

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What do we mean by CRB?

Not a single right enshrined in a constitutional document, but a series of powers enabling communities to shape their surroundings by:

- Democratically challenging new development on the grounds of visual appeal;

- Calling for or managing the improvement of derelict or unsightly buildings and spaces;

- Maintaining and improving local beautiful buildings and green spaces.

Why the focus on beauty? …

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Beauty: its relevance and reach

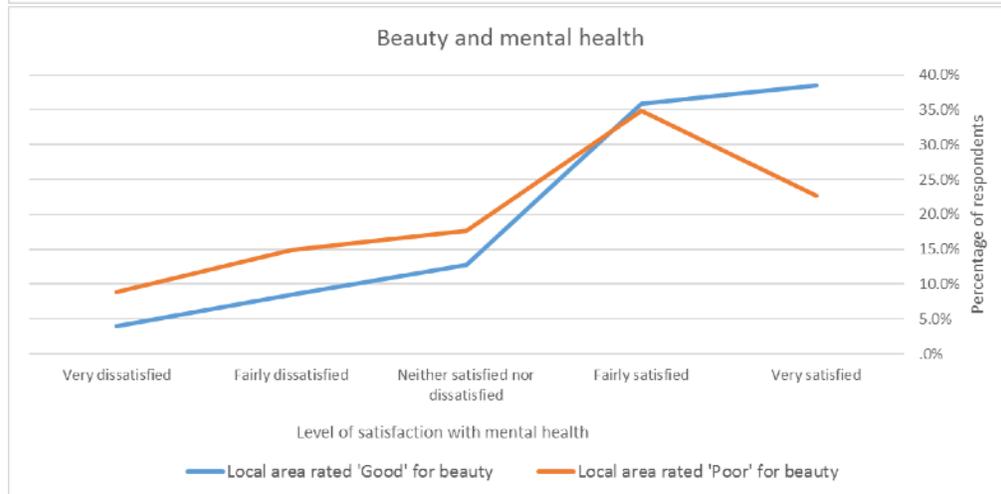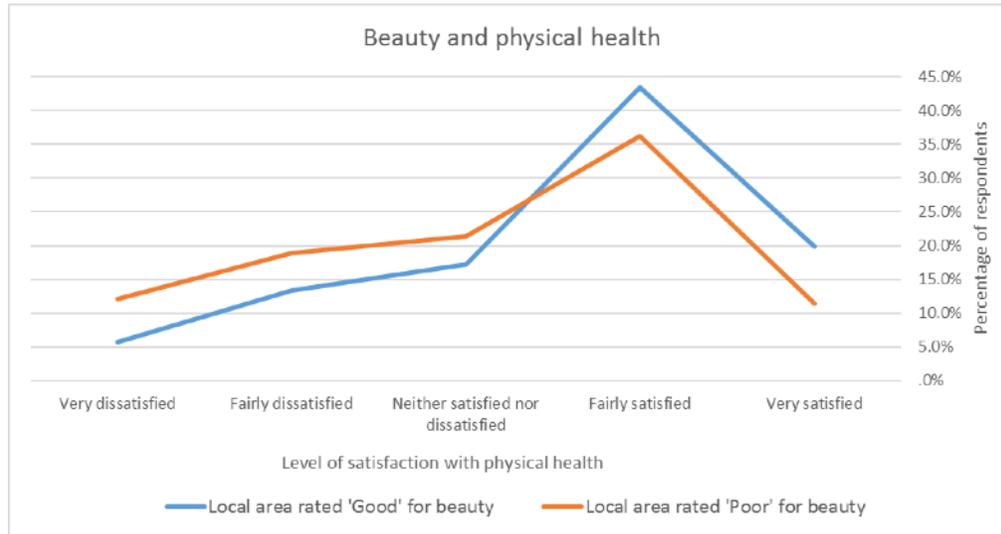People naturally seek out beauty – suggests intrinsic value.

But beauty is also associated with a range of quantifiable benefits:

- Economy
    - Richard Florida finds university graduates cite cities' aesthetic qualities among the most important factors in deciding where to live

- 'Quality of community'
    - Beauty makes people feel more satisfied with their communities, and encourages civic pride and respect for place (CABE)
    - Which in turn aids social interaction and integration

- Public health

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Beauty and physical health

Percentage of respondents

45.0%
40.0%
35.0%
30.0%
25.0%
20.0%
15.0%
10.0%
5.0%
.0%

Very dissatisfied | Fairly dissatisfied | Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied | Fairly satisfied | Very satisfied

Level of satisfaction with physical health

—— Local area rated 'Good' for beauty —— Local area rated 'Poor' for beauty

Beauty and mental health

Percentage of respondents

40.0%
35.0%
30.0%
25.0%
20.0%
15.0%
10.0%
5.0%
.0%

Very dissatisfied | Fairly dissatisfied | Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied | Fairly satisfied | Very satisfied

Level of satisfaction with mental health

—— Local area rated 'Good' for beauty —— Local area rated 'Poor' for beauty

The evidence is clear: living in more beautiful surroundings improves your mental and physical health.
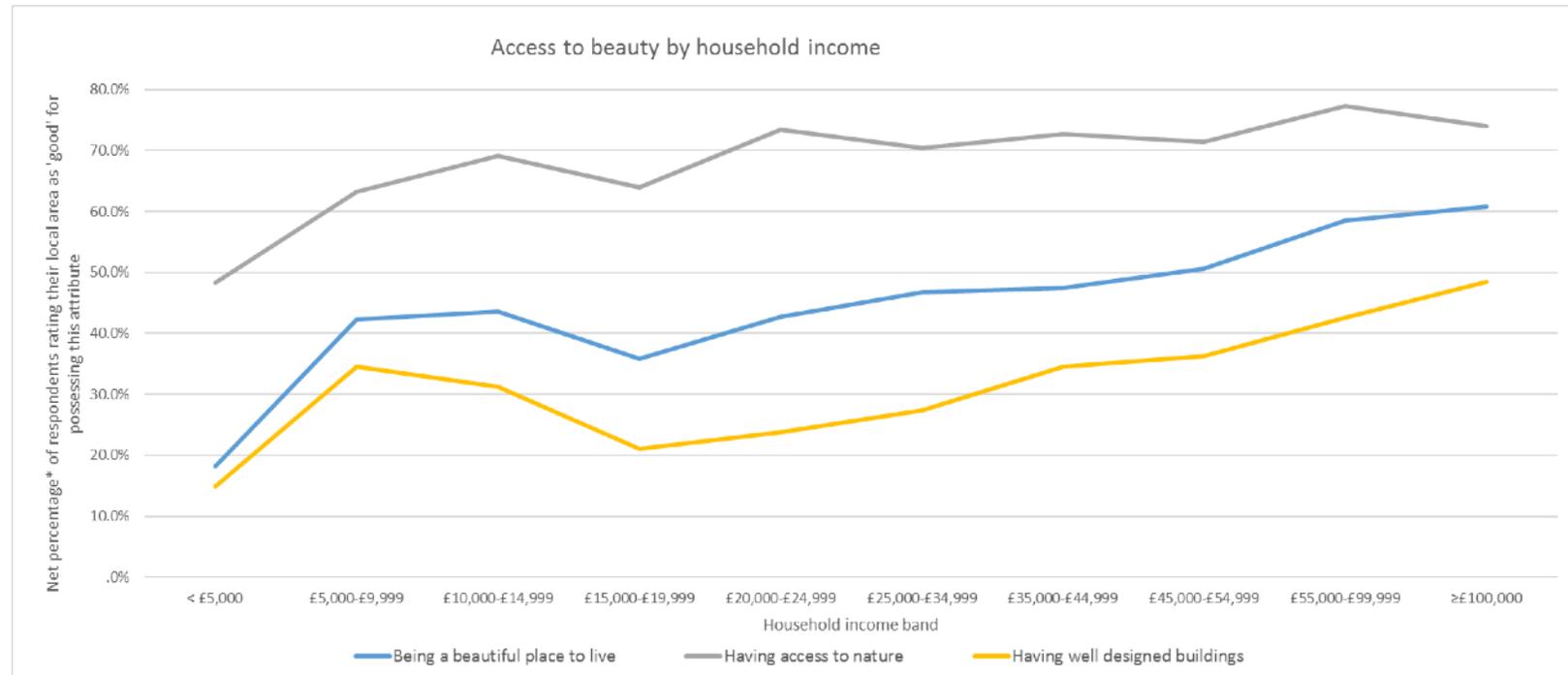
Source: *A Community Right to Beauty*

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Beauty is restricted in its distribution across society.

Higher income households can access it more easily.

We want to ensure that no citizens are excluded from its benefits in their lives.

Access to beauty by household income

— Being a beautiful place to live — Having access to nature — Having well designed buildings

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Beauty is hard for governments

We want everyone to have access to beauty;

The market doesn't supply beauty for everyone;

Surely this is a straightforward case for government intervention?

But …

- Language of 'beauty' vs. 'quality' (hard to define/quantify, snobbery …)

- Is it appropriate for Government to dictate what is 'beautiful'?

- "Better things to worry about?"

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Our solution

Let local people take charge of beauty in their area.

- *Language*
  - Familiarity with place makes people comfortable and open

- *Is it appropriate?*
  - Beauty is an emotional response, grounded in the spirit of a place
  - So who better than the local community to say what is beautiful?

- *"Better things to worry about?"*
  - Communities can give beauty the priority they want (in practice, high)
  - E.g. some communities have created a design code for their town – appetite for beauty is there

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Empowering communities

How do we make this vision a reality?

Our suggestions include:

- Local Design Advisory Panels, with representatives from local residents, developers, politicians, and architects, to outline development principles to be encouraged or formally incorporated into local planning documents;

- Design competitions to gauge the community's preferences ahead of major new development;

- Citizens' Juries or charrette processes to oversee specific controversial developments, providing local residents with support and access to professionals to enable them to come to a decision on issues such as volume and design.

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What is the architect's role?

We want communities to shape their place, in line with their own vision for its appearance and its future. But that doesn't mean they should work in isolation.

Architects should provide inspiration, showing local people what can be done in their area. "Cars, not faster horses". E.g. charrette processes as a vehicle for this.

There is a particular social responsibility to the less well-off.
Are we building places for them which we would want to live in?

More emphasis on getting young people interested in the built environment, not just as a career but as an act of citizenry, from an early age.

Language matters – say "beauty"!

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In summary …

- Beauty gains relevance and reach into people's lives through the health benefits, community-building potential, and intrinsic value it offers.

- We want to ensure this is as widely accessible as possible; we see the community as the appropriate level at which to push for this.

- Architects similarly have the potential to gain relevance and reach through the help they can offer communities to create beauty around them.

- But communities need support to ensure their ideas are both feasible but also sufficiently innovative, and to show them what can be achieved.

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