People and places: essay seven

Beauty: value beyond measure?
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Introduction

The appreciation of beauty is a fundamental part of what it means to be human. Readers of recent research by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)\(^1\) can be in no doubt of the importance of beauty to the quality of people’s everyday lives, even if interpretations of what it means differ widely from individual to individual.

If beauty is of such value to people, it surely follows that governments should reflect this by taking it into account when designing policy – but however strongly logic points in this direction, the traditions of policy making conspire against it. In the relentless pursuit of value for taxpayers’ money, policy makers rely heavily on conventional economic tools of analysis with an emphasis on what is most easily measurable rather than what is most important.

Yet the application of hard economics and the pursuit of beauty are not such odd bedfellows. As the CABE research shows, although the concept of beauty may at first seem mysterious and indefinable, with time and effort it is possible to start drawing out firmer definitions and distinctions that make a more analytical approach feasible. The theories of cultural and economic value offer tools that, if adopted, could lead to an approach to policy that is more closely aligned with what people actually want and value.

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Do policy makers value beauty?

Public policies are built on either implicit or explicit judgements about the perceived costs and benefits of intervention. A growing emphasis on public accountability in the UK over past decades has given rise to increased expectation that any use of public money is justified on explicit grounds, giving rise to the concept of evidence-based policy making.

With a new government in the UK, targets and bureaucracy are out of fashion, replaced by decentralisation and people-powered services – but the evidence base is just as important to this vision of the state as it is to a top-down model. This much is clear from the five tools by which the Prime Minister argues ‘accountability to the people’ is achieved: choice, competition, payment by results, elections and transparency. In all cases, information, knowledge and evidence are the powers that enable these tools to work.

Targets or not, this places measurement at the heart of policy. Some forms of value created by policy, such as jobs or exports, are easier to measure than others. But there is a danger that difficult to measure benefits, such as the aesthetic, spiritual or social – all of which MORI’s research shows the public associates with beauty – are under-emphasised in policy makers’ cost-benefit calculus. This is something, ironically, that the authors of the Treasury’s Green Book guidelines for cost-benefit analysis recognise; even their application typically does not. The Green Book recommends that a range of techniques be used to elicit non-market values, even if these are subjective.

The risk of neglect from non-measurement is heightened in an environment of spending cuts. Policies that create measurable value are likely to be favoured. Those which enhance public wellbeing in ways that are less straightforward to measure may be seen as lower priority and fall victim to the spending axe.

Note that policy has always recognised the wider value of beauty in some areas of public life – this is most apparent in the protection of the natural environment or in the development of cultural quarters. But even in these cases judgements have invariably been made on an implicit basis. As well as risking poorly informed allocation of public resources, this also makes it more difficult to challenge established conceptions of what is and is not valuable to the public.

And as the CABE research demonstrates, the consideration of beauty cannot be pigeonholed in certain areas of policy – the perception of beauty, or the lack of it, is part of people’s everyday lives. If policies toward schools, housing, hospitals or transport do not take into account the idea of beauty, then something very important is missing in the way our public life is conducted.

How could we do it better? CABE’s research illustrates how multi-dimensional the public’s...

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2 In democratic societies the costs and benefits should both relate to society as a whole, though in practice those groupings with more effective voices inevitably are better represented. The political economy issues that this gives rise to are important but are not explored further in this essay.

3 John Maynard Keynes (1933), National Self-Sufficiency

4 David Cameron, ‘We will make government accountable to the people,’ speech to the Civil Service Live conference, London, 8 July 2010

5 HM Treasury The Green Book: Appraisal and Evaluation in Central Government
perceptions of beauty are. It is no surprise, therefore, that no single academic discipline has a monopoly over comprehension of its value. And there are few more challenging areas for public policy.

In looking for a way to move forward, it is possible to distinguish between two broad approaches in policy literature. These have been characterised by the Australian cultural economist David Throsby as economic value and cultural value approaches: the former being measurable by methods of welfare analysis and expressible in monetary terms; the latter being multi-dimensional, deriving from a broadly cultural discourse and having no standard unit of account.

These very different approaches can actually be complimentary, and both may play a role in creating a more sophisticated policy dialogue.

The idea of trying to capture the value of beauty goes back through human history – at least to philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who attempted to define beauty objectively in terms of certain aesthetic qualities. Recent focus has shifted to valuing culture and the arts in particular, but the basic concepts that have been developed apply equally well to broader issues around beauty and aesthetic value.

Given this long history, many possible approaches to deconstructing the value of culture and beauty have been put forward. One of the most systematic comes from Throsby, who proposes to break down cultural value into elements including aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic, authenticity and educational value.

The notion of aesthetic value is highly elusive, but CABE’s research at least indicates that people commonly value properties such as natural harmony and light in the built environment. While people have different views on the feel or look of a particular place, they appear commonly to view the investment that has gone into making a place beautiful as part of its aesthetic appeal.

Spiritual value may take different forms. In a formal religious context, an object, place or experience may have particular cultural significance to members of a group. In a secular setting it may refer instead to certain inner qualities that are shared by all humans. These two perspectives often come
together as demonstrated by CABE’s qualitative research in Sheffield where the majority of individuals – believers and non-believers – named the city’s two cathedrals as the places they find most beautiful.

An object, place or experience may have social value if it conveys a sense of connection with others, and contributes to an understanding of the nature of our society. It may also contribute to a sense of identity and place. Those surveyed and interviewed in the research clearly have notions that beauty creates a better society, for example through instilling wider values of respect in the community. It is interesting that some respondents described the bonds that exist in a population – the ‘big village’ mentality – as contributing to a sense of beauty.

The research also demonstrates that historical value embodied in an object or place gives rise to a distinct source of value in people’s minds on a number of levels. For individuals, emotional reactions to aspects of the environment that they experience as beautiful are often linked to personal memories. And it is striking that older buildings are invariably described as more beautiful than their newer counterparts. This finding, although deceptively complex, is nonetheless indicative of the deep felt values that people attach to the notion of longevity and history.

Objects, places or experiences all convey distinct meaning that we value as human beings – this is symbolic value. This is most evident in the study where individuals give deeply personal interpretations of what they see as beautiful in a place.

People place a higher priority on preserving existing places which they perceive as beautiful, than they do on constructing new ones. Authenticity value refers to the value that arises from the unique and original quality of some objects, places or experiences – these are seen as the ‘real thing’. Consistent with this is the suggestion that people place a higher priority on preserving existing places that they perceive as beautiful, than they do on constructing new ones. And we have already discussed how people talk enthusiastically about their appreciation of the hard work and investment that goes into making a place beautiful – something that, by implication, is authentic as it cannot be readily reproduced.

Finally objects, places or experiences have educational value insofar as they impart knowledge to individuals or stimulate them to attain, or even create, new knowledge. Again, in the research we see individuals identifying educational qualities in beauty, for example when a school takes pride in its appearance, it engages pupils more effectively, and in turn, the learning that results reinforces their ability to appreciate beauty.

None of these dimensions of cultural value have a common unit of account, so evaluation is especially challenging – so much so that it is often argued they cannot be formally evaluated. John Tusa (2007) writes ‘the arts can deliver ideas whose final
value cannot be predicted or quantified: to curtail them on these grounds is to deny the possibility of an unpredictable benefit.\(^\text{10}\)

But this creates the risk that policy makers undervalue cultural values and therefore make poor decisions. And while there is clearly much need for methodological innovation, CABE’s research is the latest in an increasing number of studies that demonstrates how evaluation methods are in fact available. Empirical tools, such as contextual and content analysis, ethnography, interviews and survey methods are now being used for this purpose.

These techniques are more easily applicable on a local scale, rather than national. For example, in some cases, individuals in a community may attach great social value to some feature of the built environment even if they recognise it as having low aesthetic appeal. In others, works to preserve the historical value of a heritage building may be perceived by the public as creating educational value. Planners have always had to manage such coincidences and trade-offs, but accountability requires that these trade-offs, and the public choices they give rise to, be made explicit and communicated to the public.

However, the cultural value approach is limited in that it does not solve conflict or disagreement. Because the units of measurement are not comparable, where individuals hold divergent views about what is beautiful, there is no simple way to judge whose opinions should hold sway.

An example is given in the research where a man attaches high symbolic value to a recreation area due to nostalgic childhood associations, whereas most would judge the area to have poor aesthetic value.

However, the approach does at least offer policy makers a way to systematically identify and classify the range of opinions, and to make more informed and transparent decisions, rather than just crudely counting views for and against. The advantages of this more sophisticated approach to policy making should not be underestimated, even if it does not offer simple answers.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^{10}\) John Tusa (2007), *Engaged with the Arts: Writings from the Frontline*, I B Tauris & Co Ltd.

\(^{11}\) As Glenn Parsons argues in this volume, the key issue is whether it is possible to have a debate when differences in tastes arise, something this essay argues is enabled by the analytical tools described here.
Surprisingly, perhaps, some of the most effective proponents of beauty as a consideration in public policy have been economists – not least John Maynard Keynes, quoted at the start of this essay. As a member of the Bloomsbury Group he saw his devotion to the arts and economics as two parts of a single endeavour, Keynes’s achievements not only included the framework for post-war economic policy but also the foundation of the Arts Council.

It is no coincidence that an economist was able to achieve in practice what generations of philanthropists had only dreamed of – institutionalised support for the arts. It was through economics that he was able to pose a key question which successive generations of researchers have refined and developed – what is the value of publicly supported art and how does this compare with the costs?

Seeking answers to this question means going beyond the simple concept of market pricing so beloved of economists. It requires more sophisticated measures to capture the value that people attach to goods and services not subject to the usual market forces. Examples include: existence value, when people regard the existence of an artefact, building or place to be of value to themselves or the community, even if they do not enjoy use benefits from it first-hand; option value, where people wish to have the option that some day they, or someone else, may experience the beauty of an artefact, building or place; and bequest value, when people benefit from the knowledge that a cultural asset will be passed on to future generations.

Economists have tried and tested tools for quantifying all of these values. Although applications to culture in the UK remain few and far between, a great deal of methodological progress has been made in the use of techniques such as contingent valuation and willingness-to-pay. These approaches work intuitively by trying to mimic a market for the asset or experience in question – in this case, cultural – using survey techniques to gather evidence. None of the techniques are perfect and if not carefully applied they can be subject to significant biases and inconsistencies; but properly applied, they can yield useful results that can be easily and directly fed into existing policy processes.

Providing measures of the whole panoply of economic values that can arise from art allows economics to deliver far more rounded concepts of value than is usually recognised – probably because public discourse on the cultural economy in recent years has led to a focus almost wholly on narrower commercial aspects.

The economist’s concept of value is only one prism through which beauty can be viewed; like culture in general, CABE’s research shows that the value of beauty is multi-faceted and that a wide variety of disciplines are required to understand it. Many...
people are extremely wary of attaching a monetary value to beauty and emotional response, which they do not believe can or should be reduced to pounds and pence.

But a major practical advantage in the economic approach is that it offers commensurable measures of value. As a consequence, these measures hold the unique possibility of capturing and summarising the many-faceted cultural valuations in such a way that when choices are made between spending on beauty or on other goals, the value placed on beauty is inclusive. The existence of a common unit of account means that economic approaches also lend themselves to situations where there are differences of opinion about what is beautiful. Reducing such a complex concept to simple numbers may be crude, but when a decision needs to be made amidst conflict and disagreement, it at least provides one objective way to reach an outcome.

Policy makers should employ more holistic assessments of costs and benefits when allocating public resources

To achieve a more rounded view of policy which takes concepts such as beauty into account, policy makers should employ more holistic assessments of costs and benefits when allocating public resources, using the tools of cultural economics to measure cultural and economic values arising from public interventions.

The quid pro quo is that our cultural leaders – who are in many ways guardians of beauty in public life – must shelve the notion that the value of beauty is mysterious, and accept that some form of measurement is needed to justify the use of precious public resources.

Rather than choosing between the cultural and economic value approaches, policy should make use of both methods. Research that draws on techniques, such as those employed in CABE’s work, can be used to build a framework for cultural value and to understand what matters to people. Appropriate empirical economic tools can then be used to derive measures of value that are expressible in monetary terms.

The relationship between the resulting economic value metrics and cultural value indicators should then be examined to establish how well the economic valuations indirectly capture the differing dimensions of cultural value. In cases where the economic valuations do a poor job it is especially important to articulate the cultural values as part of a supporting narrative.

A new approach to beauty in public policy

13 This combined approach was used recently to evaluate cultural and economic value generated by the National Theatre and the Tate Gallery in Hasan Bakhshi and David Throsby (2010), Culture of Innovation: An Economic Analysis of Innovation in Arts and Cultural Organisations, NESTA.
Conclusions

It is universally accepted that beauty is important to humankind. That it should form part of the process of policymaking is highly contentious. Somehow, in our desire to prove value for money, the definition of value itself has become too narrowly drawn, to the detriment of society as a whole.

This essay ends with two pleas: first, to policy makers to recognise the importance of the wider value of goods and experiences that are not captured in traditional economic indicators, such as job creation and exports – by making use of available analytical tools, this can be done in a robust way that genuinely enhances the quality of policy decisions; and secondly, to groups making the case for taxpayers’ funds to communicate the likely benefits in ways that policy makers can relate to.

Beauty may be hard to define, but the CABE research is an example of how digging deeper can reveal an extraordinarily rich set of values and opinions behind a simple statement of what is or is not beautiful. To try to measure these is not to deny any intrinsic mystery in beauty, but actually serves to enhance the human experience by promoting the understanding of beauty amongst the whole of society, helping to bring it more and more into our everyday lives.

About the author

Hasan Bakhshi is Research Fellow at ARC Centre for Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation at the Queensland University of Technology and Director of Creative Industries in the Policy and Research Unit at the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA).
Hasan Bakhshi is convinced that conventional economics misses the most important things in life. Beauty is one of these values missing from public life because of an assumption that it can’t be measured. But, he argues, cultural leaders should embrace methods for valuing goods and experiences not captured by export figures or job creation. These techniques will make beauty impossible to ignore.